The Hiddenness of God

2003 Conference of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain

In a society that is close to expunging talk about God, it was apposite that the Catholic Theological Association should choose the theme of 'The Hiddenness of God' for its 2003 conference. Certainly there are not too many sightings of God in British society whether Isaiah is right that, 'Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel' or whether we have driven him out ourselves as Nicholas Boyle suggests. It seems then the Israelites had a similar problem to us: where is God? is he hiding himself? For Second Isaiah the experience of abandonment was exile to a far country, while we experience a different kind of spiritual exile, at home but far from God. Of course, in Christianity the ultimate symbol of abandonment is the cross where God appears utterly withdrawn and the victim forsaken. But the *Deus absconditus* who hides himself in the depths of a man, has become the *Deus revelatus* in the moment of resurrection.

In the opening paper, John McDade has used J S Bach as a model for how we might discover something hidden, where he summarises Helga Thöne's thesis that Bach's solo violin music encloses scarcely heard chorales of specific liturgical significance (at the conference we were able to hear an example of this). He moves on to Pascal who, in his letters of spiritual advice to Charlotte de Roannez, offers a sort-of Boyle's Law of God's hiddenness: 'the more God discloses himself, the more hidden God becomes'. From Pascal he moves to Levinas' specifically Jewish challenge to Christianity as a religion that offers too easy a way of dealing with evil: 'A world in which forgiveness is omnipotent is inhuman'.

Jonathan Gorsky continues the theme of God's hiddenness in the Jewish tradition, not so much in scriptural texts as we might have expected, but in the various approaches of the more modern Hasidim and in the reflections of Elie Wiesel on what the shoah means for our understanding of God as a God who withdraws when most needed.

In Islam 'the veil' has become a potent metaphor of hiddenness and presence. Tim Winter explores sexual metaphors in the poetry of Islam to show how hiding behind a veil may preserve the identity and attraction of the one hidden, so that the observer (or reader) is drawn

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towards a moment of revelation. The Ka'ba may only be bricks and mortar but under the black veil 'it is the symbol of the pre-existence of God'; just as, behind the curtain, the Jerusalem temple housed the unapproachable presence of God.

This collection also includes a number of historical studies. Robert Murray draws on many years of reflection to comment on some homiletic poems of St Ephrem from fourth-century Syria (a neglected centre of early Christianity). Cecily Boulding considers her fellow Dominican, St Catherine of Siena and what it might mean to know God 'mystically' or to have an 'infused knowledge'. Sarah Boss offers a substantial paper on that fascinating but culturally challenging thirteenth-century Mallorcan theologian, Ramon Llull. Here the question of whether God hides himself in creation is discussed and whether the despoliation of nature keeps us distant from God. We are told that 'the nature of created beings [reveals] God to anyone who perceives them in the right way'. This 'depends entirely on the spiritual condition of the one who is perceiving the creation'.

Lawrence Moonan gives a careful philosophical analysis of the criteria necessary for something to be hidden, especially when it is God who is said to be hidden, and he applies this to a difficulty he has with one aspect of Karl Barth.

Finally, Nicholas Boyle takes no hostages in suggesting that God has disappeared from English cultural life, gradually driven out by a crass post-Reformation mercantilism that worships other gods. 'England' (and lately 'Eng-er-land'), cut off from the rest of Europe, brought an all-knowing subjectivity to replace God as a framework for our social lives. Appropriately we end with James Bond (on film for us to see at the conference) finishing off his foe, no longer "for England" but for himself – a self-obsessed careerist fulfilling his own desires – with even England collapsing into the nihilism of 'global consumerism'.

The conference itself included a number of short presentations, as well as a literary exploration of God in morality by Nicholas Peter Harvey and a slide presentation of images of incarnation in Christianity by Eamon Duffy, both of which brought a vigorous response from the audience, but neither available for publication. However, what we do have here (if I may be allowed a personal word) is a quite outstanding collection of scholarly, yet accessible and relevant, theological presentations.

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