New Blackfriars

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Where is God Now?[1]

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Abstract

This article raises the question whether Christianity might itself, at least in part, be responsible for the modern waning of belief in God because of its New Testament teaching, unlike that of the Old Testament, that God is 'love.' After examining whether the Bible does in fact present two incompatible views of God, the article looks at some signs of how the traditional Western view of God might be changing, in response to modern sensibilities. It concludes by considering how it might still be possible to speak about the God of Christianity despite the new cultural conditions of today.

Keywords

God, love, evil, Franz Overbeck, modern world, humour

Introduction

Perhaps the most enduring aspect of the God-question has never really been the problem of God's nature, but rather the search for God's whereabouts, or the search for where God intersects with humanity. Yet with its own specific teaching about God, Christianity may well have contributed to the rise of atheism, at least in the Western world. To have entered human history proclaiming an extraordinarily hopeful and humanly attractive idea of God, may, ironically, have programmed the Christian movement for its own demise, as its ideals and the realities of human existence failed to achieve any lasting and happy coincidence. However, closer examination can reveal a more resilient notion of God within Christian thought that would permit it to keep resisting the perennial taunts of the 'problem of evil.'

[1] This article incorporates some ideas from my book, *On not understanding God* (Dublin: Columba, 1997), chap. 11.

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Has God Disappeared?

While to ask: 'Where is God now?' might at first sight appear to be a startling or at least a somewhat newfangled or modish way of approaching the God-question, it is, of course, simply an echo of a much older question, posed, for example, in the Book of Psalms. In Psalm 41 (42), we read:

> My tears have become my bread
> By night, by day,
> As I hear it said all the day long:
> 'Where is your God?' . . . .
> With cries that pierce me to the heart,
> my enemies revile me,
> saying to me all the day long:
> 'Where is your God?'

Some might nevertheless wonder about the presence of the word 'now' in the question raised, as if it suggested perhaps a chance of change in God. Could God now, therefore, possibly be somewhere different from where he was yesterday, or a thousand years ago, or a million years ago? Normally, however, in the classical Christian tradition at any rate, God is thought of as unchanging. If this tradition is true, God should still be where God always was and always will be. Answering the question would then simply be a matter of trying to describe yet again this 'eternal now.'

As regards the 'where' part of the question, that should, in principle, not be too difficult to deal with either. One might recall the story of the rabbi who promised a child a florin if he could tell him where God was. The child replied that he would give the rabbi two florins if he could tell him where God was not.[2] In short, God is everywhere, and always everywhere. So, maybe this article could end at this point, with the answer that God, who is unchanging, is everywhere, now and always.

However, as Emily Dickinson (1830–86) remarked: 'They say that God is everywhere, and yet we always think of Him as somewhat of a recluse.'[3] And there's the rub. It's all very well to say that theoretically God is omnipresent and immutable, to use the classical expressions traditionally applied to God. But if people have no longer any immediate sense of God, how far do such theological assurances take us?

[2] Related, for example, by Peter Seewald in Joseph Ratzinger, *Gott und die Welt. Glauben und Leben in unserer Zeit. Ein Gespräch mit Peter Seewald* (Munich: DVA, 2000), 90.

[3] Quoted in Joan Konner (ed.), *The Atheist's Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 21.

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Emily Dickinson made her observation in the nineteenth century. Now, in the twenty-first century, God's reclusive nature may appear to have intensified. And it's not merely because the scanning of even the outer reaches of the vast cosmos in which we find ourselves hasn't revealed any unambiguous evidence of a divine presence. Nor is it because the increased scanning of humanity's inner world in recent centuries has failed to turn up any unambiguous evidence of divinity. On the contrary, scrutiny of the wickedness that characterized so much of the twentieth century, but not only the twentieth, has led some to conclude, with Stendhal, that 'God's only excuse is that he does not exist.'[4]

In a similar vein, the German-language Jewish writer, Elias Canetti, wrote: 'There can be no Creator, simply because his grief at the fate of his creation would be inconceivable and unendurable.'[5] Canetti himself, of course, did not have to endure personally the fate of so many of his fellow-Jews in the Holocaust. He managed to find safety in England before the Second World War broke out. In that sense, perhaps the witness to the absence of God is even more powerful in the case of another twentieth-century writer, Primo Levi, who did end up in the extermination camp at Auschwitz, but survived. His is one of the most poignant voices from the last, grim century to express the challenge that evil and innocent suffering poses to any belief in a just, let alone loving, God. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, he writes:

> Like [Jean] Améry, I too entered the Lager as a non-believer, and as a non-believer I was liberated and have lived to this day; actually, the experience of the Lager with its frightful iniquity has confirmed me in my laity. It has prevented me, and still prevents me, from conceiving of any form of providence or transcendent justice.[6]

Levi's inability to countenance belief in a just providential order is unforgettably conveyed in his confession of how he resisted the temptation to pray in his place of torment. His words, which show how he kept faith with his own unbelief, are a harrowing but wonderfully human testimony to one man's sublime integrity against unimaginable odds:

> I must nevertheless admit that I experienced (and again only once) the temptation to yield, to seek refuge in prayer. This happened in the October of 1944, in the one moment in which I lucidly perceived the imminence of death. Naked and compressed among my naked

[4] Quoted by John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Collins, 1970), ix.

[5] Elias Canetti, quoted in Konner (ed.), *The Atheist's Bible*, 51.

[6] Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. R. Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989), 117. [Jean Améry, the name taken in the 1930s by the Austrian Jewish intellectual Hans Mayer, also survived the Nazi death camps and also, like Primo Levi, eventually took his own life, although apparently in Levi's case the evidence for this is not entirely clear.]

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> companions with my personal index card in hand, I was waiting to file past the 'commission' that with one glance would decide whether I should immediately go into the gas chamber or was instead strong enough to go on working. For one instant I felt the need to ask for help and asylum; then, despite my anguish, equanimity prevailed: you do not change the rules of the game at the end of the match, nor when you are losing. A prayer under these conditions would have been not only absurd (what rights could I claim? and from whom?) but blasphemous, obscene, laden with the greatest impiety of which a non-believer is capable. I rejected that temptation: I knew that otherwise were I to survive, I would have to be ashamed of it.[7]

Such a confession also gives the lie to the glib remark, found on the lips of some 'believers,' more one suspects for their own comfort than that of those in danger (if not out of resentment against those who refuse to 'toe the metaphysical line'), that 'there are no atheists in foxholes.' There clearly are, despite what some theological terrorists might say.

But equally clearly, the horrors of the twentieth century have not caused all to abandon belief in God. Is this just because of some perverse obduracy on the part of believers? Or is the refusal to abandon belief in God perhaps motivated by a fear of living in a world without God and, by extension, without order or meaning or sense or point, indeed without even the intellectual right to speak any more about the 'problem' of evil? If so, this might be a sign that the belief of the ancient Epicureans, that fear first created the gods, is still alive and well. However, rather than attempting to gauge how fearful our contemporaries may or may not be of living in a godless, senseless world, it is perhaps of more interest to ask why God now seems to be in some eclipse, to use Martin Buber's term, and to speculate on how access to God might be regained, if that's not regarded as too hubristic a project.

Is Christianity Responsible for the Ebbing of Faith in God?

Franz Overbeck (1837–1905), the radically sceptical German theologian (or 'anti-theologian' might be the more accurate term), who was Professor of New Testament and Early Church History in Basel for just over a quarter of a century from 1870 onwards, believed that Christianity was in effect the author of its own eventual demise. The reasons for this, in Overbeck's view, didn't just have to do, as one might first suspect, with the modern clash between religion and science or between religion and historical research into the emergence

[7] *Ibid*., 117–18.

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and development of the Christian religion. Rather, what Overbeck had mainly in mind, apart from such possible considerations, was a specifically Christian problem. And it had to do with the fact that Christianity had sought to promote belief in a God of love. This notion of God is now so ingrained in the Christian psyche that it almost seems a 'natural' way to conceive of God. Thus, it may be something of a surprise to realize that, as the French poet and thinker, Paul Valéry, noted, it was Christianity that first associated the word love with the name of God.[8]

In Overbeck's judgment, however, the evidence of history simply gave the lie to any such claim about the nature of God. In the long run, the terror and horror of human history proved to be too strong, too overwhelming, too unrelenting for any belief in a God of love to survive. Thus, in a spectacular demonstration of the law of unintended consequences, Christianity's teaching on the God of love was eventually, in Overbeck's view, to undermine theism and to lead the world to atheism.[9]

Clearly, Overbeck's almost Gnostic sense of a fallen world, or more exactly, of a world that is in itself fallen – in short, the view that 'Creation' and 'Fall' coincide – is incompatible with any acceptance of God, the Creator, as being also a God of love. But this is, of course, precisely what Christianity asserts about God, namely that God is the Creator and that God is love. For this reason, as early as the second century, the church resisted the views of Marcion, who taught that there were two gods, one a creator god, the demiurge, who made the world with all its woes, and the other, a God of love, whom Jesus came to reveal:

> Marcion stressed the radical nature of Christianity *vis-à-vis* Judaism. In his theology there existed a total discontinuity between the OT and the NT, between Israel and the Church, and even between the god of the OT and the Father of Jesus. Jesus came to reveal the true God, who was totally unknown up to the Incarnation. The god of the OT, the demiurge, an inferior being who created the material world and

[8] 'Le mot Amour ne s'est trouvé associé au nom de Dieu que depuis le Christ,' quoted by Agathe Valéry in the 'Introduction biographique' of the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade ed. of P. Valéry's works (vol. I, 72), as mentioned in the notes to Julien Green, 'Journal' in *Œuvres Complètes* vol. IV (Paris: Gallimard, 1975) 1680, n. 3 to p. 859. Although Valéry did not know Overbeck's writings, as far as I am aware, his judgments on theology are also quite similar to Overbeck's: see M. Henry, 'Franz Overbeck: A Review of Recent Literature (Part 1)' *Irish Theological Quarterly* 72 (2007): 391–404, at 402–03.

[9] See F. Overbeck, *Christentum und Kultur*, ed. Carl Albrecht Bernoulli (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963; orig. ed. 1919), 30–31; see also the relevant passage in the new critical edition of this work, Franz Overbeck, *Werke und Nachlass*. Band 6/1: Kirchenlexicon. Materialien. »Christentum und Kultur«, ed. Barbara von Reibnitz (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1996), 63–64.

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> ruled over it, was not exactly an evil being, but he was not good in the same sense as the God and Father of Jesus, a God of love and grace.[10]

In Overbeck's view, the Old Testament was more astute than the New Testament in not defining God as love. It thus never gave the same hostage to fortune as did the New. In this regard, it is interesting to note that when, in the Old Testament, God's name is announced, during the scene with Moses at the burning bush (Ex 3: 13–14), it turns out not to be a genuine name at all. It remains in a sense anonymous. The alleged 'name' – 'I am who I am' or 'I am who am' – in fact conceals God's identity behind a veil of mystery. It does not reveal that identity. The divine name uttered at the burning bush is only a kind of tautology. It is as if the biblical writer were saying: 'God is God,' which does not seem very illuminating, but it does leave the question of God's nature open.[11]

Are the New Testament and Old Testament Views of God Fundamentally Different?

Yet the difference between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament can be exaggerated. Early Christians certainly were convinced they had taken over the view of God to be found in the Jewish Scriptures they had inherited, which we call the Old Testament. And both Judaism and Christianity had in fact a radically different view of divinity from that to be found in the Hellenistic world of the time.

It may be natural and obvious now to conceive of God in terms of his transcendent existence in the first instance, and only subsequently to try to understand God's nature and how God and the world may be related. And yet it is actually far from obvious that this Christian (and Jewish) view of God should have become established as it did. For it was by no means the prevailing view of divinity held by the intellectually sophisticated Hellenistic world into which Christianity moved in its early years.

Against this background, it is useful to bear in mind, as Richard Tarnas notes, 'a valuable point . . . recounted by W. K. C. Guthrie: "*. . . theos*, the Greek word which we have in mind when we speak

[10] W. Ward Gasque, art. MARCION, in J. D. Douglas et al. (eds.), *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1974), 629–30, at 629.

[11] Perhaps this reserve with regard to God's identity is what Elias Canetti wished to draw attention to by asking: 'Isn't it the refusal of the name that constitutes the Bible's most important teaching, the teaching that endures?' (Elias Canetti, *Aufzeichnungen 1992–1993* [Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999], 49; in the original: 'Ist es nicht das Wichtigste, das Bleibende, was einer aus der Bibel lernt: die Verweigerung des Namens?')

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of Plato's god, has primarily a predicative force. That is to say, the Greeks did not, as Christians and Jews do, first assert the existence of God and then proceed to enumerate his attributes, saying 'God is good,' 'God is love' and so forth. Rather they were so impressed or awed by the things in life or nature remarkable either for joy or fear that they said 'this is a god' or 'that is a god.' The Christian says 'God is love,' the Greek 'Love is *theos*,' or 'a god.'"[12]

This is perhaps a rather tricky point to grasp, because Westerners at least are so used to thinking otherwise about 'God.' But the Christian viewpoint, taken over from Judaism, turns on the acceptance of a radical distinction between God and the world, whereas for the Greek or Hellenistic mind, reality did not have such a fundamental fissure. In the Greek vision of the cosmos, there was a unity between the world of the divine and the world of man. Everything – gods and the world of human beings, albeit all with their own specific nature – was part of a seamless system, ruled over implacably by Fate (*moira*).

Hence, if this difference between the biblical and the Hellenistic view of reality is accepted, divinity did not have ultimate responsibility for the world, or couldn't, as it were, be blamed if things went wrong in the world, whereas for Jews and Christians, the buck stopped always with God. This makes the religion of Jews and Christians potentially much more existentially anguished than the superficially sunnier religion of the Greeks. Yet, it must not be forgotten either that Greek religion is not co-extensive with Greek culture. One thinks of the tragedians of Greece with their pervasive sense that reality is booby-trapped.

Is Christianity's View of God Changing?

Perhaps the fading of traditional Christianity in so many parts of the Western world explains why a characteristic Christian attitude – one of profound seriousness about life and its purpose – is now less visible or palpable in modern Western society. Admittedly, this is a subjective impression, which might not carry much objective weight and could be easily challenged. But for what it is worth, I could offer, as an example of the traditional attitude I have in mind, a figure like the nineteenth-century Anglican Archbishop of Dublin, Richard Whately (1787–1863), who said that the question of human happiness is 'no laughing matter.' Or even more deeply ingrained is the notion that Jesus never laughed, but is usually portrayed seriously, if not solemnly, in Western art. Or one could think of the lack of humour that marks the deep seriousness of the writings of the

[12] Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (London: Pimlico, 1996), 470.

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Spanish philosopher, of an undoubtedly Catholic background, for all his scepticism, Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936). To say nothing of the deep hatred Nietzsche rather ferociously detected in characteristically Christian figures: 'Regard the faces of great Christians! They are the faces of great haters.'[13]

Now, of course, it might be immediately objected that there are plenty of smiles and plenty of laughter in the angels and saints depicted in baroque or rococo art. But, as a general rule, Christianity hasn't historically been known for any excessive sense of humour or lightness of touch. Whereas smiling Buddhas apparently abound.

What I have referred to as the fading of Christianity could, then, be seen as reflected in the way attitudes traditionally not associated with the Christian faith begin in more recent times to make their appearance in what were formerly overwhelmingly Christian societies. Thus the American journalist, H. L. Mencken (1880–1956), defined the Creator as: 'A comedian whose audience is afraid to laugh.'[14] Or the English mathematician and process philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), noted that: 'The total absence of humour from the Bible is one of the most singular things in all literature.'[15] Or the Romanian writer, Émile Cioran (1911–95), claimed that: 'Religions, like the ideologies that have inherited their vices, are just so many crusades against humour.'[16]

Assessment of Modern Changes in Religious Sensibilities

Yet the attempts to take a more light-hearted, happier attitude to religion and to God don't quite ring true. It does still seem inappropriate to respond to human suffering by laughter, and even beneath the surface of Samuel Beckett's well-known line: 'There's nothing funnier than unhappiness,' there is surely a barely suppressed sense of outrage and sadness. Suffering does seem to be the deepest experience of which human beings are capable, and hence the experience in which the pressure of the divine is least unambiguously felt in human life. Religious experience, therefore, should perhaps be thought of as God's experience of us, rather than our experience of God, and hence life itself interpreted, in line with an ancient scriptural tradition, as a trial or a 'process.' In a letter to Laurence Housman (1865–1959),

[13] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 175.

[14] Quoted in Konner (ed.), *The Atheist's Bible*, 110 (Attributed also to Voltaire).

[15] Quoted in Konner (ed.), *The Atheist's Bible*, 113.

[16] 'Les religions, comme les idéologies qui en ont hérité les vices, se réduisent à des croisades contre l'humour,' *Aveux et anathèmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 22.

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a younger brother of the poet A. E. Housman, of February-March 1898, Oscar Wilde wrote: 'I quite hold with you on all you say about the relation of human suffering to art; as art is the most intense mode of expression, so suffering is the most real mode of life, the one for which we are all ultimately created.'[17] Earlier in the nineteenth century, in his work, *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, Goethe had said of Christianity that it had revealed to mankind 'the divine depth of suffering.'[18]

In that sense, the short poem by the Australian poet, Les Murray (b. 1938), seems somehow truer to the human condition than the humorous one-liners of wisecrackers. In his short poem, *The Knockdown Question*, for example, a poem that also hints at the more-than-human dimensions of the problem of suffering and evil and of any possible 'solution' to it, Les Murray takes up the question identified earlier as the one lying close to the heart of modern atheism, and thus of belief too:

> Why does God not spare the innocent?
>
> The answer to that is not in
> the same world as the question
> so you would shrink from me
> in terror if I could answer it.[19]

The Principle of Analogy

To take up Overbeck's point again, therefore, about the ultimate consequences of Christianity's description of God as love—was, and is, Christianity reckless in defining God as love? Would it not be better for Christianity to hedge its bets, so to speak, and not try to reveal too much about God's nature or identity? Would it not be safer for Christianity to stress simply the unknowability of God (as in the Prologue to John's Gospel: 'No one has ever seen God' [Jn 1: 18]), without going into any further, almost inevitably compromising, detail?

Maybe so, but surely to say nothing about God, to retreat to a position of describing God as the German aphorist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742–99) somewhat sardonically did, as simply 'personified incomprehensibility,'[20] is hardly an adequate response to the

[17] In *More Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 167.

[18] Quoted in Karl Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1978), 37 ['die göttliche Tiefe des Leidens'].

[19] From *Poems the Size of Photographs* (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002), 67.

[20] 'After all, is our idea of God anything more than personified incomprehensibility?' (*The Reflections of Lichtenberg*, trans. Norman Alliston, 87, quoted in *A Dictionary of*

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need to present a credible God. Such a strategy may mean that no existential or intellectual hostages are given to fortune. But at what cost? A God, who is only a vast abstraction, will soon cease to be credible. If there is no real connection between divinity and humanity, then divinity becomes meaningless and hence irrelevant to human existence. Christianity has in fact privileged the reality of love as being where that connection is most vitally and least compromisingly to be located—despite the inevitable perils this move has always tended to court and will no doubt continue to court in the future.

But from the point of view of Catholic theology, at any rate, to describe God as love cannot be done without also taking into account the analogical nature of all language relating to God. Human language – and what other language have we? – cannot be applied univocally to God. We can see this more clearly perhaps from the example of another word often applied to God: the word 'power,' as in *The Magnificat*: 'The Almighty works marvels for me. Holy his name.' If we think of Lord Acton's dictum: 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,' we might well be inclined to ask, with the Canadian journalist, George Daacon: 'Where does that leave God?'[21] Is God absolutely corrupt?

Clearly, were that the case, Christianity would no longer be a credible religion. The reality of such a religion's corrupt god might have to be acknowledged, if incontrovertible evidence of his existence could be produced, but such a god could hardly be described as 'love.' Nor could he be adored or loved by human beings. The idea of analogy, however, offers a possible way of transcending this dilemma. For it acknowledges that, in any comparison of human and divine attributes, dissimilarity is believed to outweigh any similarity. This important general principle of Catholic theology was officially enunciated at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), where it was asserted: 'For between creator and creature there can be noted no similarity so great that a greater dissimilarity cannot be seen between them.'[22] To ignore the importance of the claim to 'greater dissimilarity' between Creator and creature that Catholic teaching makes, is fatal.

Yet there is a recurrent temptation, as Piers Paul Read has put it, 'to forget that we are made in [God's] image and likeness, not God in ours.'[23] In other words, we tend to, or wish to, forget that there is no compellingly clear, direct intellectual or imaginative route from us to God. Immanuel Kant reiterated this point perhaps most

Philosophical Quotations, ed. A. J. Ayer and Jane O'Grady [Oxford: Blackwell, 1994], 256).

[21] Quoted in Konner (ed.), *The Atheist's Bible*, 57.

[22] *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Volume I, ed. Norman P. Tanner, S.J. (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 231–32.

[23] Piers Paul Read, *Hell and Other Destinations* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006), 60.

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influentially in modern times. But long before Kant, the entire scriptural witness teaches that God's ways are not our ways, that God transcends human understanding. Thus, while there has to be some recognizable point of contact between God and us for religion to be possible, at the same time it is foolhardy to take terms familiar to us from everyday experience, such as 'love' or 'power,' and apply them directly, without any modification or qualification, to God.

There is, however, a price to be paid for accepting the analogical nature of the language of theology. For to claim that 'God is love,' and to acknowledge that to do so is to speak about God analogically, means also conceding that what 'love' is for us, may not be what 'love' is for God. Hence what appears incompatible with 'love' for us, may not be so in God's eyes. This is, admittedly, a risky assertion, one that could easily be misunderstood. It could suggest that God is entirely arbitrary—a dangerous idea, though one that is not without its defenders in Christian tradition, and indeed not without a foothold in the Bible itself. The image, for instance, of the difference between the 'pot' and the 'potter,' found in the prophet Isaiah and echoed by St Paul,[24] highlights the gulf that, for Scripture, lies between God and humanity, or between the supernatural and the natural, to use language that has now fallen on hard times. For, as Piers Paul Read noted in an essay on St Margaret Clitherow: 'The supernatural does sometimes seem unnatural.'[25]

It is the gulf between the divine and the human, excluding as it seems to do the validity of all humanly contrived solutions to the problem of suffering, that perhaps more than anything else brings the intractable nature of Christian theology's fundamental problem into sharp focus. How, to state the problem directly, is one to understand a God who out of love could have created such a world as ours, complete with its, 'intolerable shirt of flame/Which human power cannot remove'?[26] To this question there appears to be no intellectual answer either in the Old Testament or in the New. The Book of Job, for example, whatever else it may be, is not a work that provides a credible answer to the problem of innocent human suffering. Far from it.[27] Nor does the New Testament offer any intellectually sustainable answer to this problem. What it does offer is the story of how God in Christ, out of love, took the experience of innocent suffering into his own life and went beyond it. And the crucified Christ is, for Christian faith, the only unambiguous icon of the living God.

[24] See Is 29: 16, and 45: 9; and Rom 9: 20–21.

[25] *Hell and Other Destinations*, 238.

[26] T. S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding IV' (the fourth of *The Four Quartets*).

[27] In a letter to Lady Robert Cecil, dated 12 November 1922, Virginia Woolf wrote, 'I read the Book of Job last night – I don't think God comes well out of it' (source: http://www.hielema.ca/essays/job.html).

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The scandal of the cross, to use St Paul's celebrated expression, not surprisingly continues to scandalize right down to our own day, and continues to be rejected as scandalous by those who find Christianity a bloodthirsty and even sadistic religion.

Tentative Conclusion: God and Suffering are Reconcilable

In purely intellectual terms (if there be such), for Catholic theology at least, the question of the 'why' of a suffering creation sponsored by a loving God becomes potentially less disconcerting if we accept that the term 'love' cannot be applied univocally or unequivocally to God—in other words, if we accept the reliability of the principle of analogy in speaking about God. Just as we cannot see the goodness of Creation in any unalloyed sense – Genesis portrays God alone as enjoying that prerogative – so we cannot see the meaning of divine love with the eyes of the flesh, but only with the eyes of faith.

'Whoever believes in God's presence in the world,' writes Leszek Kolakowski, 'has to admit that empirically His presence is ambiguous. Clearly, there would be no need of faith if the course of world affairs followed directly and unmistakably the norms of justice; this would mean that we live in Paradise . . . . Life in exile is bound to be ambiguous, God's signs are never clear, trusting Him is inevitably to defy the limits of natural knowledge.'[28]

What makes such trust inevitable is the ambiguous nature of our own human condition, where light and dark are always conjoined in that 'uneasy inseparability,'[29] so appositely expressed by Racine in Phèdre's paradoxical description of her incestuous love for Hippolyte as 'une flamme si noire.' It is a question, not so much of the 'dark night,' as of the 'dark light' of human loves striving to connect with the ultimate love Christianity identifies as God. The suffering of life can give us some inkling about what that divine love must be, if God was willing to take such a risk, involving such pain and anguish, in creating this world where there is not just occasional ecstasy, but wholesale agony. However, if God can 'justify' his risk, and 'redeem' his creation – and Christian faith believes he can, indeed that he has – then, that can only be if he is also beyond Creation and hence beyond human understanding—except analogically, for what that's worth. In that sense, God can give the peace that surpasses all understanding, but only because he is the giver, not the needy recipient, of redemption.

[28] Leszek Kolakowski, *Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 49.

[29] I owe this stimulating phrase, as also the reference to *Phèdre*, to my friend, John Campbell.

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Hence, perhaps the 'humorists' — those who intuit a joyful outcome to human destiny — do then have the last word, beyond the 'cries and whispers' of human history. Not for reasons we can understand, still less engineer, but nevertheless in a way that includes and doesn't turn a blind eye to the reality of human experience, the 'humorists' have a theologically correct hunch, it seems to me, that, in the end, to speak with Julian of Norwich (*c*. 1342–*c*. 1420): 'Sin is behovely, but all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.'

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