

THE HIDDEN MADE VISIBLE

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I have been talking professionally about God for twenty-five years. That is a lot of God-talk, a lot of words spilled in the service of the Divine. When I started out twenty-five years ago in this chattering-about-God business, I knew pretty well exactly what it was I was talking about. I had the boundless confidence of youth and the terrible liability of a little more education than most of the people to whom I spoke. A young man who knows precisely what he means every time he opens his mouth to speak of the mysterious realities of Divinity, is a scary thing.

One of the greatest thinkers in the history of the Christian church was the thirteenth century theologian Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas said simply, "If you comprehend God, He is not God." Whenever we speak about God, about the nature of God, or the ways of God in relationship to the world and to humanity, we must admit at the outset that we do not know precisely what it is we are talking about. Our grasp of the truths we attempt to declare is imperfect.

Part of our problem is that the tool we are forced to use when we speak of holy things, is a blunt instrument. Language is at best an imprecise science. When we try to communicate even the most simple concepts, our words are often confusing, muddled and obscure. The more complex our ideas, the more difficult it is for language to be exact, clear and easily understandable.

When the ancient Hebrew prophet Habakkuk reflected upon his own experience of God, he had a wise piece of advice. The prophet wrote, “the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!” (Habakkuk 2:20) It is not that the prophet lacked faith, or had not had a profound and empowering experience of the reality of God. It is simply that the prophet understood that words are a frail container for Divinity. Words may function adequately as signposts; but if we settle down at the signpost, we will never reach our destination.

So strong has been the understanding in Christian tradition of the poverty of language and the inadequacy of human concepts, that the eighteenth century French Jesuit Jean-Pierre de Caussade actually asked God to smash all of his concepts about God. This great man of faith, prayed asking God “Oh! divine Love, hide yourself, test us, mingle, confuse and snap like threads all our ideas and systems.”¹ De Caussade did not want to worship a concept, an idea, or a system. De Caussade wanted only to abandon himself completely and unreservedly to the Divine and never allow anything to come between himself and God’s living presence.

We must sit lightly to our concepts, our formulations, our language, and our images. It is possible that certain understandings may express truth about God more closely than others. But no concept, no word, no particular theological formulation or image *is* God. The great Benedictine monastic Bede Griffiths who died in 1993 warns his readers that,

No words can ever express what God is, what is the nature of the ultimate truth. We can only use images and concepts drawn from our human experience, which always fall short of the ultimate truth.

¹ Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment To Divine Providence* trans. John Beevers (NY: Image Books, 1975), p. 96.

Our images and concepts are drawn from the material world and however much they are refined by reason, they still remain inadequate to describe what lies beyond the material world. ²

When we speak of that which “lies beyond the material world,” we are forced to use a tool that emerges from and is bound by the material realm. When we speak of God, we are attempting to express that which strains the fabric of normal human discourse. We are struggling to express the inexpressible. To speak of God is to attempt to contain a mystery, to capture the ineffable. All human language about God struggles to place into the tiny inadequate vessel of human reason, that which is vast beyond imagining. Every time we dare to speak of that hidden Presence that is the source of all creation, we must keep in mind the challenge God gave to poor long-suffering Job. God “answered Job out of the whirlwind,” demanding, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” (Job 38:1)

When I was a child of perhaps eight years old, I had a vague, ill-formed consciousness of this Mystery who speaks “out of the whirlwind.” This consciousness came to me in my earliest experiences of worship.

When I was eight the Sunday School teacher in the church I attended with my family decided I might be a less disruptive influence under the watchful eye of older male servers than I proved to be surrounded by other children in Sunday School. I was transferred to the sanctuary where I became an altar boy. For the most part the plan worked quite well. The awe of being involved in the intricate choreography of the mass was enough to keep me relatively subdued for the hour it took to get through the service. I appeared on the outside to be a

² Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*. (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate, 1982), p.101.

model server. I went about my duties with precision and care. The order and rhythm of the liturgy seemed to calm my restless nature.

I want you to join me for a moment as that small altar boy getting ready for Sunday morning mass then follow me on the journey my experience as a server launched in my spiritual life.

It is ten to eleven on a Sunday morning. The small room at the east end of the church is hushed. There are six of us, robed in floor-length white albs tied at the waist. We move silently across the black tile floor, performing our assigned tasks in preparation for weekly worship. If anyone speaks at all, it is in hushed and reverent tones.

In an adjoining alcove the priest stands apart, already vested in his elaborate gold brocade chasuble. His hands are folded under his chin; head bowed, in stillness and silence he prepares to celebrate the sacred mysteries.

I hear the gentle hiss of black charcoal being lit in preparation for burning incense before the altar. In the background, organ music comes muffled through the door. There is an air of expectancy; we are preparing for something we feel instinctively is important and special. For the next hour, no words will be wasted, no casual conversation conducted. We will stand silent before the altar of the Lord and move carefully through our assigned motions in reverence to the Divine.

I sensed, when I shared in that service, that I was joining in the important adult business of offering devotion to the invisible One who stood remote in unapproachable majesty and glory. This was not a place for childish antics or

disruptive pranks. This was a place for serious behaviour, a place of reverence and respect. Being of a precocious nature, I saw myself fitting well into this rigorous adult world. I knew God was watching our performance and that God was pleased with our actions. What we were doing was good for God.

But was it good for me?

There would be years when I would answer that question with a confident “No.” There would be years when I came to believe that the God of smoke, bells, vestments, and elaborate ritual was a remote and distant deity with no interest in or relevance to my life. Those were fearful years, scarred by insecurity and uncertainty. During those years I sought a different God. I longed for a God who would travel with me as my buddy, who would make my world safe, predictable and tidy. I had little room for the messy business of mystery. I wanted a God who would tame the unruly nature of my rebellious spirit and make life run smoothly. I wanted a God who would respond reassuringly in predictable ways when trouble arose.

It did not take long for this cosy vision of God to be shaken. My Buddy seemed to let me down as often as he fulfilled my demands. I saw a beautiful baby die. I stood with a young woman after the suicide of her fiancé. I saw violent abusive people rewarded with accolades. I felt the personal sting of attacks from the godly righteous in my life. The safe, understandable God who worked according to my plans seemed to be crumbling before my eyes.

I began to believe I must abandon the whole enterprise of God. God came to lack credibility in my eyes. God’s warranty had failed and I thought perhaps I would like my money back. God seemed to be not big enough to contain the

life I had begun to experience. The God I had contrived in my tidy theological textbooks could not embrace the reality I experienced every day. I needed a God able to encompass the vastness of mystery, the wonder of beauty, and the terrible brokenness of tragedy and human failure.

As the complexities of life caught up with me, I came to realize that I needed a God who would not run away scared when I cried out with the Psalmist, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” (Psalm 22:1) I needed a God big enough to be present in the midst of the striking evidence and experience of God’s absence.

I came close to joining the ranks of those who seem to have given up on God altogether.

But something would not let me go. Somewhere deep in my being I sensed perhaps there could be a vision of God big enough to embrace the confusion, complexities, and pain of life as I had come to know them.

I recalled the Holy Week liturgies of my childhood. I remembered the sombre Maundy Thursday procession to the back of the church carrying the Bread of God’s presence to repose through the dark hours of the night before Good Friday. I remembered the stark barrenness of the church on the day of crucifixion. I saw again the veil of the holy tabernacle pulled back and the door that was always closed in honour of God’s presence, hanging open to reveal the awful emptiness of God’s absence.

I knew this was a God who could embrace the world of God's own absence. This was a God who had entered into the agony of all the suffering I had ever seen and would redeem the brokenness with tenderness and love.

The God of the empty tabernacle is a God I cannot sum up in a few easy words. The Good Friday God who died on a cross became the Easter Sunday God who could blast aside the stone rolled across the tomb of my life and who would never be contained by anything I might ever think or conceive.

The God I rediscovered was big enough to hear my fears and not turn away. The God I came to see in Jesus is a God who could look clearly and honestly at the chaos of my life and, in place of judgment, return love and compassion. This was a God who entered into the world fully enough to understand the brokenness of life and to heal the wounds of all creation. This was a God who did not need to turn away in face of the mess we humans had made of our lives and of all creation. This was a God who came in the darkness of the whirlwind and remained to hear the empty cry of my aching heart.

What we need to understand here is that my journey was not a journey from faith that ended in cynicism or doubt. It was a journey from the secure land of "knowing" to the adventurous terrain of faith. It was a journey in which I opened to a deeper reality within myself than any I had ever imagined could exist. I came to see that knowing meant more than understanding. Knowing meant something much deeper than rational apprehension, or conceptualization. Knowing meant entering into the mystery and being embraced and held by the Reality hidden in the darkness of all that I could not grasp.

The book that finally helped me make this shift is an old English spiritual classic from the late fourteenth century. It is called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It was written, appropriately by an anonymous author, whose identity has defied all attempts to bring it to light. He remains hidden in the obscure darkness of a long-ago time.

The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* suggests that, as he writes, “of God Himself no man can think.”³ That is, God cannot be grasped or contained within the narrow confines of human reason. If the author had stopped with this stark statement, he would not have penned the inspired classic that has nourished Christians for generations. But he did not stop by merely drawing the limits of the human intellectual capacity. He went on to declare,

I would therefore leave all those things of which I can think and choose for my love that thing of which I cannot think. And why is this so? He may be well loved, but he may not be thought of. He may be reached and held close by means of love, but by means of thought never.⁴

The author of *The Cloud* is asking us to open to the possibility that there may be another way of knowing. There may be another level or dimension of reality deeper than human reason. We cannot think our way into this deeper dimension of the human experience. It is entered by way of negation. We must, he tells us, “leave all those things of which I can think,” and move to a different place within ourselves. It is not that thinking is wrong or bad. Thinking has its place. When you have a reasonable problem to solve, it is good to use reason to seek a reasonable solution. But the deeper realities of life are not amenable to our rational faculties. God functions in a realm of being that transcends all the normal routine human faculties.

³ Anonymous. *The Cloud of Unknowing*. trans. Ira Progoff (NY: Dell Publishing, 1957), p. 72.

⁴ *ibid.*

Our problem is that we tend to be locked into a one-dimensional world. There is a lovely story that has become newly popular recently thanks to the influence of the Disney Corporation. It is the story of four children who discover an enchanted land beyond the world to which they are normally accustomed. Lucy is the first of the four Pevensie children to enter Narnia. When she returns and reports to her siblings that she has been in a snowy land and spoken with a fawn, they understandably question her sanity. Peter and Susan, the eldest of the four children, go to the only responsible adult available and report to him the wild stories their younger sister has been telling. The professor, to Peter's and Susan's great bewilderment, seems to believe that there might be something true in Lucy's tale.

Finally, Peter challenges the old man demanding, “‘But do you really mean, sir, that there could be other worlds – all over the place, just round the corner – like that?’ ‘Nothing is more probable,’ said the Professor, taking off his spectacles and beginning to polish them.”⁵ In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lewis is asking us to take off our spectacles and polish them. He is asking us to see the possibility of dimensions of reality that we have been previously unwilling, or unable, to imagine. He is asking us to embrace the possibility of a universe like that Paul the Apostle inhabited in which he could, as he says in II Corinthians “be caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows.” (II Corinthians 12:2)

Our problem is that our view of the world does not always allow for dimensions beyond those that are apprehended by the senses. When the professor is describing to Peter and Susan the house in which they find the

⁵ C.S. Lewis. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: Puffin Books, 1950), p. 49.

wardrobe that has given Lucy access to Narnia, he says, “I should warn you that this is a very strange house, and even I know very little about it.”⁶ Lewis describes the house as “the sort of house that you never come to the end of, and it was full of unexpected places.”

This is the universe we inhabit, a universe in which there are “three steps down and five steps up, and then a kind of little upstairs hall and a door that led out on to a balcony, and then a whole series of rooms that led into each other and were lined with books – most of them very old books and some bigger than a Bible in a church.” But it is not this book-lined room with all the gathered wisdom of the ages that gives access to Narnia. Lewis understood that, ultimately, all of that must be left behind and the children must move on to “a room that was quite empty except for one big wardrobe.”

Here is the entry point into that other dimension of being. But, here is the very place Peter sums up contemporary wisdom on these other realms of existence by announcing, “Nothing there!” at which point, “they all trooped out again – all except Lucy. She stayed behind because she thought it would be worth while trying the door of the wardrobe.” And of course it is Lucy who finds that the wardrobe opens into a whole new realm of existence.

In Christian tradition, the cross of Christ is the portal into other realms of being. When Jesus had left behind all human dignity, had surrendered all human power, knowledge, and understanding, he “cried out again with a loud voice and breathed his last.” Then, Matthew tells us, “At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.” (Matthew 27:50, 51) The material realm was breached by the nonmaterial. The curtain in the

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 48

physical world was torn open and for a moment in Christ the realm of the Spirit was physically manifest. All of the mystery and unknowing of the human condition was opened and transformed. The deepest secrets of the universe were announced in Christ for the world to behold. The darkness of unknowing was pushed aside. Human language was transcended.

God talk has come to an end. A homeland has been established in the hidden cloud of God's eternal love.

As John the Gospel writer tells it, in Christ "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) The hidden became for a moment visible. The secret was revealed in time. If we will open our hearts to the movement of eternal love, this same hiddenness will become visible in our beings, and be seen by us throughout the world. Jesus opens the way to a whole new perception of life. He is the wardrobe into another realm. He opens the way to a kind of parallel universe in which knowing takes place in a dimension deeper than we have ever imagined.

That small boy of eight who experienced a vague luminous sense of mystery in his silent preparations for worship as an altar boy has taken a long journey from that first faltering sense of the Divine. But he has come around full circle. As an adult he now discovers the presence of the Divine deep in the inner sanctuary of his own heart. And the instrument that opens to him that place of mysterious light is not endless talk, but silence. So, after twenty-five years of chattering about God, all the words come to an end.

On December 6, 1273 near the end of his life, Thomas Aquinas had a profound experience of God during mass. He never wrote again. Looking back on all the words he had spilled in honour of God, the great doctor of the church said, “All that I have written seems to me like straw compared to what has now been revealed to me.” It is at the extremities of human language that we encounter Truth. It is in the darkness of human knowing that we know God’s abiding presence. It is in the silence that the One True Word is spoken. It is in silence that the One True Word is heard.

And so, I invite you now for a moment to let go of all the words. Sit here and know the presence of Love who speaks to you in the hidden darkness of your inner being.