

Faith, Doubt, and Darkness – Understanding the Dynamics of Belief and Doubt beyond the Fervor of Youth

Outline ...

- I. The Problem – Our misunderstanding of faith and doubt
 - II. Faith
 - Why does God seem hidden?
 - God's ineffability
 - Our consequent confusion between a failure of faith and a failure of our imagination
 - Where does our faith reside? How is God "known" but "conceptualized"
 - III. What is a "dark night of the soul"?
 - IV. Why does God give us "dark nights"?
 - V. Some practical principles to guide ourselves in faith
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I. The Problem: Our misunderstanding of faith and doubt

Examples

- Jesus on the Cross
- Mother Teresa
- Henri Nouwen on his mother's death

II. Faith ...

1) Why does God seem hidden?

- Infinity cannot be circumscribed by the finite mind.
- We lack "purity of heart"

2) God's ineffability – some images

- Carlo Carretto (*In Search of the Beyond*)
 - ✚ Child in its mother's womb
 - ✚ Two orders – stork analogy
- John of Cross – excessive light
- Jesus - God cannot be possessed – but only participated in, like breathing air.
- Thomas Keating – "fish analogy"

- 3) **Our subsequent confusion between a failure of faith and a failure of our imagination**
- 4) **Where does our faith reside? How is God “known” but “conceptualized”**
 - John 6 – Peter before Jesus
 - C. S. Lewis – God’s compulsion – *“The harshness of God is kinder than the softness of man and God’s compulsion is our liberation.”*
 - Daniel Berrigan – where our faith is at?

III. **What is a Dark Night of the Soul?**

- 1) **Biblically**
 - Jesus on the cross – “Why have you forsaken me?”
 - Book of Lamentations – Loss of “land”, “king”, and “temple”
- 2) **Definition**
 - Our felt sense of God disappears, and we feel agnostic, atheistic even
 - We can no longer imagine the existence of God.
 - We lose our concept of and sense of possession of God, as we once had - God doesn’t disappear but we can no longer sense, feel, or imagine God and God’s existence as we once did.
- 3) **Example** – Mother Teresa’s crisis happened just after her deepest possessive experience of God
- 4) **Analogy** – TV signal can no longer be picked up, the switch from analog to digital
- 5) **Characteristics of this**
 - Surprise, confusing, disconcerting, deeply painful
 - Hits when and where you least expect
 - *Therese of Lisieux
 - *Sexual abuse crisis
 - *Mother Teresa

IV. **Why does God give us Dark Nights of the Soul?**

- 1) Always a purification, a needed deepening – to purify our understanding of “land, king, and temple”
- 2) It smashes the false idols, golden calves, in our lives
- 3) Why?
 - We are always creating God in our own image and likeness and trying to possess God.
 - God never comes to us on those terms, cannot come to us on those terms, because God is beyond our faculties, imaginations, images.

V. Some Practical Principles to Draw from that for guidance for our Souls

- 1) **Expect Dark Nights of faith in life**
 - Like Jesus
 - Example of Nouwen's mother
 - Mother Teresa – you should expect she would receive this.
- 2) **Understand Dark Nights as a normal part of our faith and life's journey**
 - Consolation – desolation
 - Galilee – Jerusalem
 - Norm of Day – Norm of Night
 - Fervor – agony
- 3) **Dark nights of the soul are failure within our imagination, not in our faith**
- 4) **Dark nights of faith always call us to something deeper, to shed some false prop** – *“You will find me again when you search for me with your whole heart, whole mind, whole soul.”*
- 5) **Know that all genuine revelation, faith, experience of God, stretches us and will come to us paradoxically, as a surprise, in the stranger, in what is foreign.**
- 6) **In matters of faith, follow the deepest moral center inside of yourself; get in touch with God's compulsion:** *“What do I have to do?” “What will bring me life long-range?”*
- 7) **Be humble in the ways of God – humble in judgment, humble in language, humble in attitude. Faith is more about surrender and trust than about knowing, clarity, and certainty.**
- 8) **Our dark nights ultimately serve the world** – atheism is always a parasite off of bad theism. E.g., the sexual abuse crisis.

Nicholas Lash, in a deeply insightful essay on God and belief, suggests that the God that atheists reject is very often precisely an idol of our imaginations: *We need do no more than notice that most of our contemporaries still find it “obvious” that atheism is not only possible, but widespread and that, both intellectually and ethically, it has much to commend it. This might be plausible if being an atheist were a matter of not believing that there exists “a person without a body” who is “eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything” and is “the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe.” If, however, by “God” we mean the mystery, announced in Christ, breathing all things out of nothing into peace, then all things have to do with God in every move and fragment of their being, whether they notice this and suppose it to be so or not. Atheism, if it means deciding not to have anything to do with God, is thus self-contradictory and, if successful, self-destructive.*
