



Belief, the Dark Night of the Soul, and Faith

A simple reflection by J. C. Whitehouse

We know roughly what religion is: the sense of a transcendence that to some degree influences our life, our beliefs, our behaviour and our actions. It shapes our picture of the world, our relationship with other human beings, and that part of the world we can at least partially perceive and understand. In Catholic terms it is what God has revealed to us through his Incarnation in Jesus, his life and teaching, his death and resurrection, the church he founded and the presence of the Holy Spirit. That would serve as a very brief and incomplete summary introduction to what we could probably assume a believing and reasonably instructed Catholic would accept as a rough and ready description of what he has been taught or discovered for himself.

That complex of ideas, perceptions and imaginative reactions, varying widely in the degree to which it is incorporated in individual minds, understood and retained, constantly provokes questions. We could see religious belief as a statement or series of statements convincing enough to persuade some people to accept their truth. Can it be empirically tested, like a scientific theory? If it cannot, is it useless? Although many of our assumptions about our awareness of the certainty of our knowledge, judgments and feelings about other people often seem incapable of proof, we accept them as largely true. The people we know are not abstractions, and we can sense their presence, their understanding of ourselves, their realization that like them, we see, believe, assess, understand and act on our and their situation in the world. Since we are part of a shared experience we can see



Satan Tempting Christ by Jef Murray

what they like, abhor, perceive, value, and reject.

But what about religious belief? On the whole, that kind of knowledge is radically *other*, presented in different ways and acquired as instruction, handed down largely indirectly, objectively, systematically and doctrinally. The process may move forward in a relaxed, friendly and sympathetic way, but the matter and the manner both involve the presentation of objective propositions to be accepted and, as far as possible, understood. The recipient, male or female, lay or clerical, may be called upon to reflect on and analyse what is proposed, but has no role to play in the formulation of doctrine.

Assent may have been consciously and sincerely given to the propositions offered as articles of faith, but doubt creeps in. Many have been deeply troubled by it. Examples abound, and anxiety is often rife. Perhaps no life can ever escape it entirely. It

may be part of the natural situation of the reflective man and woman, surfacing briefly or present more or less continuously in the lives of those who experience it, a fact of life in the broadest sense of the word. Belief often weakens and sometimes disappears altogether. The void is as powerful a presence as belief once was, and the dark night of the soul takes over. It is not the kind of lofty experience vouchsafed exclusively, or typically, to exalted individuals. The saintly, the wicked, the severely clinically depressed and the ordinary sensual beings can all succumb to that sense of the absence or the non-existence of God. They feel that there is no relief, no escape, no refuge. “Ordinary” men and women often endure periods of severe despondency, confusion and dread bordering on despair. Even if they have enjoyed years of fairly robust faith, a profound unease and a sense of dreariness, futility and even horror may nev-

ertheless strike them down. Intelligence and determination are not sufficient to provide solace. The first manifestation often seems to be the intolerable and unbearable clarity the French existentialist Albert Camus so forcefully described in his fiction, plays, and essays, and which he called the absurd, namely the inescapable confrontation of the human desire for happiness, meaning and values in a universe totally indifferent to such longings. In its various forms, that theme runs through the whole of existentialist thought and literature.

The logical soul knows that two mutually contradictory statements cannot both be true at the same time. Either God exists or He doesn't. In the contemporary secular world, with all its perversions of morality and its mad distortions of human relationships, its recourse to the destruction of lives as a therapy, its constant wars, and all its other failings, there is plenty to suggest that God really is dead. Belief seems impossible in such a context. The more sophisticated, employing a more literary turn of phrase, use expressions like "the great poem of Christianity" because they believe that a poem is a product of the human mind and not a statement of fact. Thus, there is objectively no Trinity, no Four Last Things, no Communion of the Saints, none of those certainties which were once our religious beliefs, representing a reality we could not really comprehend but had accepted.

When we are imprisoned in the dark night of the soul, such beliefs seem empty, representing no more than something manufactured, a desired but no longer convincing mental construct, a projection of the attempt of the human mind to assuage our inner panic and neutralise our haunting sense of emptiness, futility, isolation, dreariness, and sterility. It is the epitome of darkness.

It might help to consider an example from literature, the medium that gives us an often striking picture of ourselves and our lives and helps us to see both in a new and clearer light. Graham Greene's *Monsignor Quixote*, his stimulating and perceptive novel, first published in 1982, offers a dark but perceptive meditation on the difference

between faith and belief. The eponymous old priest, who no longer knows whether he believes or not, but makes a sharp distinction between belief and faith, provides a certain relief from the gloom of the Dark Night, oddly enough by telling Sancho, his unbelieving Marxist travelling companion, about his recurring and inescapable nightmare.

The old Monsignor's unpretentious, serious and lucid analysis of his own religious state of mind is illuminating. In it he distinguishes between belief, which is a matter of intellectual judgement, and faith, which is a matter of the direct acceptance of divine truth. Simply but evocatively he suggests all his conflicting perceptions. He

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carefully points out "the shadow of disbelief" that haunts his own belief, stressing that he is "sure of nothing, not even of the existence of God", knowing that in this sense "doubt is not treachery" and maintaining that "belief dies away, like love for a woman". All this uncertainty is epitomized in the quotation that Sancho cites to him while they are in Salamanca: "there is a muffled voice, a voice of uncertainty, which whispers in the ear of the believer. Who knows? Without this uncertainty how could we live?" Ultimately the priest hopes to see men not necessarily believing but having faith, the faith that when they disbelieve tells them they must be wrong.

A Greenean paradox? Perhaps. But disbelief and uncertainty are shown as bringing blessings. Without them there would be no need for faith. The dream, or rather nightmare, that produces a "chill of despair" in *Quixote* is that in which Christ's death on the cross was not necessary and did not take place, since he was saved by a

host of angels, Mary wept for joy, and the world had no choice but to believe. The faith of the Monsignor goes beyond belief or disbelief: "He exists, I tell you. I don't just believe in Him. I touch Him". Even that faith, however, is not certainty. It is conative rather than cognitive, and is seen as such by other characters, and by the reader, when the book closes with Father Leopoldo's observations on the difficulty of distinguishing between faith and fiction and the enigma of Quixote's somnambulist Mass said with no bread or wine to consecrate. But we are left to reflect on the effects of that Mass on the celebrant himself, on his congregation and especially on the disbelieving Sancho.

We may experience such a state to varying degrees and learn from it. Even (and perhaps especially) the most devout and committed believers can be victims of it. St. John of the Cross wrote his poem and the lengthy commentary accompanying it when he had progressed beyond it; St. Paul of the Cross was apparently a sufferer for some forty-five years; St. Theresa of Lisieux told her fellow nuns that she was plunged into darkness; and Mother Theresa of Calcutta was a sufferer from 1948 to just before her death, with only brief intervals of peace, steadfastly refusing to yield. Jesus Himself, true God and true Man, like us in everything but sin, was not immune, as His words on the Cross tell us. For anyone, serenity can easily disappear. If it does, some exhausting times can be expected, and the struggle to survive in the empty desert may be deep and long. The dark night of the soul demands reserves of strength, patience and wisdom. Above all, it requires hope, trust and faith far beyond ordinary belief.

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