



God of Absence / Presence

A question of who we think G-d is and how we know G-d

If we are to be trustful, one of the many gifts that de-construction and post/modernity offer us is the insight of the *either/or*, the realisation that history is a process of evolution and change and that certainty is more uncertain than we previously believed. The slash is the symbol of process, of change, either or, yes-but not quite.

The oft-quoted 'incredulity to the meta-narrative' of JF Lyotard raises the pertinent thought that any totalising vision, any presumptive Fukyaman¹ 'end of history', any grasping for certainty of clarity is probably a futile pursuit. Empires rise, empires fall, nothing stays the same. It reminds us to live in the moment and recognise the value and wisdom of the everyday experience – to value the process.

So let's take a look at the everyday and think about God, (or G-d as I prefer, for reasons that will become clear), let us ask a few questions about how we orient our journeys, and what we may expect to find.

Our everyday existence is a humdrum of waking, eating, travelling, working and relating. In the everyday it is easy to go into auto-pilot, to lose ourselves in the presence of function. Hours are lost and in this so are we. Life moves on whilst we are making 'other plans', (to borrow and twist John Lennon). G-d is also lost in these moments, or at least to *conscious* thought.

However G-d is always G-d, presence cannot be changing – but our perceptions can. G-d moves among us and we have our being in G-d rather like the air that surrounds us. Always present and yet very rarely coming up in conscious thought. The presence of G-d is like a hidden gem, a constant hum in the everyday movement of planets, angels, atoms and us. Never clear, never definable, always beyond our grasp and understanding and yet imminently close. God is the roar of rage, the argument with the fruit seller, the pay rise, the loss of job, the 12th homeless person you've passed on the journey, the delay on the train, the seat that greets your aching limbs and the friend on the phone calling 'just because...'

To ask ourselves where or who is G-d is the essence of faith. This asking opens up questions which have fewer answers. It is impossible to correctly name G-d. Between the 'G' and the 'd' is the infinite mystery that 3 letters simply cannot do justice to. G-d, whose hand stretches across universes and whose print is left in the fabric of all matter, seems infinitely un-knowable.

We live with a paradox of presence and absence. G-d being imminent and yet seemingly apart. And there is more to say, but it's a harder conversation. For in the midst of the everyday is a powerful force that asks the most profound questions of who, what, indeed 'even if' G-d is who we think.

In the blur of our everyday moments we must remind ourselves of the everyday problem of pain, which we invest so much effort trying to avoid. Pain is the final immovable irritant that reminds us that life is never as we hope. G-d is similarly never doing what we expect. It is in pain that G-d allows us to be disappointed. It is the most likely arena

¹ Francis Fukuyama, in the mid 90's, wrote influentially of 'The End of History' a vindication of the certainty that Liberal Capitalist Democracy was the final end point of history. Competing ideologies, which drive history, would eventually all lose to this one dominant ideology. Developing nations were merely on a path to this point and upon their arrival wealth prosperity and peace would become available to all. This theory has been opposed in a number of places, most notably in Walsh/Middleton – 'Truth is Stranger than it used to be' - SPCK 1995.

where faith is lost and that the certainties with which we clothe God cannot hold true. It is the gift of pain to remove G-d from ourselves. There is no joy here. No easy answers. No neat and tidy package. The edges are messy, boundaries blur. In the arena of human pain, G-d is not always the strong refuge from the tempest. Sometimes the tempest reveals itself to be G-d.

One of the principal foundations of Moot is the insistence that G-d is infinitely mysterious and yet paradoxically knowable. The incarnation at Bethlehem and everyday relations remind us that despite the unknowing – there is a rumour of strange grace that may yet beguile and seduce us.

But it is at the point of realisation, that G-d is fully mystery and embedded in the paradoxes of the universe, that we realise that G-d's Absence is as much a part of the cycles of faith as presence. Presence often is seen like the elixir of life, almost an idolatry of needing to know that we are reaching*it* - some place of significant connection. (Witness the ravenous frenzy of fundamentalist faiths thrown into the ecstasy of presence!)

God's Absence, by contrast, is full on embracing of the Void. The Void is the unknowing, the uncertainty, the not relying on our own strength or definitions. It is the leap of blind faith in trust, hope and desperation. Uncertainty and disappointment are poised to teach us and to remind us of our hunger for G-d's life giving spirit and wisdom. G-d's absence does not suggest a loss of faith, (although it's important to stress that 'Loss of Faith' is for many a natural and unavoidable and painful part of the journey of faith).

This void offers no comfort, it offers no signposts, it offers no care. The void *will* offer something though. Honesty. Brutal raw honesty that somehow reveals something of life's real concerns and desires. The honesty of the void has a strange way of *connecting* us despite it's apparent dispassion. The void brings our hearts and minds into a synchronicity with artists, poets, mystics. It brings us to a strange communion with the unknown. It takes us to a place where answers are no longer of sole importance and questions become less relevant. It's visceral invite places our bruised and suffering hands into the hands of the suffering other, the weeping, wounded and hurt of this world. We see play and laughter with a new light. We know tears. Colours come alive in ways that we could never imagine before. Pain of others is our pain. The wounded Christ, broken in Gethsemene; the god forsaken god, is our companion.

A post/modern *a/theology* of G-d is well prepared to agree that there is no God to know, that it is impossible to enclose, define or describe this impossibility. It's an absurdity. At the same time we can still acknowledge the, (roughly remembered), words of St.Peter to Jesus; 'where can we go without you Lord?'. The embrace of G-d is close despite the mystery. We know it in our children, in the pursuit of justice, in the sweet songs of ordinary lives. We may go as far as seeing that the distinctions of 'believing' or 'not believing', no longer truly hold. The process continues. We may well and truly become 'a/theist' in our pursuit of the divine.

It is the letting go of our perceptions and inventions of God that may reintroduce us to the living, impossible and yet magnetic G-d. Absence gives articulation and shape to the loss of the presence. Absence points more clearly to the presence for which we yearn. Very often more than a multitude of positive experiences.

Absence goes hand in hand with presence. It is the dark side that dares us to look fully into the face of despair and loss and to realise that G-d isn't 'there'. G-d is not anything we can name. G-d is absent and that absent draws us closely to the imminent wisdom of G-d. Presence is found anew and refreshed in the hands of Absence. Presence defines itself by absence; absence is felt as the loss of presence. Our loss is a loss that gives life. It is a loss that cedes the natural wisdom and rhythms of death and new birth emerging.

Things will never be the same. Loss is loss indeed. There is no getting around it. No talking our way through it. But this is the loss and the inevitable absence or silence of the G-d who should, (can only) be held accountable. To turn this on it's head is to realise that when all else fails there is only G-d. Finally we are in the realms of faith and trust.

To lose God is a process of great pain and great faith. To know G-d in the Absence as well as the Presence is an elusive Grace.