

Metaphors of “Dark Night” in the Writing of Philip Yancey

by

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Introduction

“Dark Night”, arouses the curiosity of people who are on a spiritual journey to and with God. The very words themselves evoke a sense of mystery that seeks explanation.

The perceived absent presence of God in relation to prayer has been addressed by men and women throughout the history of the church. The author of The Cloud of Unknowing¹ (14th Century) along with Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582) and Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) have become posthumous guides to generations of souls seeking deeper understanding of prayer because they wrote about prayer in terms of darkness.

Along with the aforementioned guides stands John of the Cross (1542-1591), who was born at Fontiveros, Ávila, Spain and named Juan de Yepes.² In Ascent of Mount Carmel and Dark Night of the Soul, he explored the “Dark Night” of sense and spirit.

Ecclesial and theological traditions give rise to suspicions which influence the acceptability of writing across particular Christian heritages. It is observable that some Protestant evangelical Christians view with caution authors traditionally associated with the Roman Catholic and pre-Reformation Western churches. For such people seeking Spiritual Direction it may be easier to explore the “Dark Night” initially through a respected contemporary author within their heritage.

The choice of Philip Yancey as the sympathetic author is based on the commercial popularity of his work within the broadly Protestant evangelical Christians stream.

¹ Walsh (ed), The Cloud of Unknowing

² Ibid., p. xxv

A snap shot of “Dark Night” as classically understood is provided in Part 1 of the essay. Part 2 records the contribution Yancey makes albeit that his beginning point is not prayer but suffering and disappointment with God.

PART 1

What is the “Dark Night”?

Three common understandings of the “Dark Night” are present in Christian writings.

First, there is the concept of the absence of God in what might be described as a dry period of the spiritual life. This darkness is often attributed by Directees to a lapse in the disciplines of prayer and/or Bible reading, and busyness. Sometimes Directees will attribute it to sin breaking or changing the relationship they have enjoyed with God.

Second, darkness is used as a metaphor to “...state that human concepts of God are inadequate to express God’s nature.”³

Third, as it relates to prayer the “Dark Night” is a perceived inability to pray. The reality is that in such a period the soul is being prepared for an experience of intimacy with God that is not dependent upon words, symbols or religious feeling. At such times the soul experiences a movement of God’s grace toward it, and embracing that movement makes a response of genuine prayer.

It is often the case that people experiencing this state for a long period may not recognize, or have difficulty recognizing it, though they have read about it. It is not unusual for a Directee

³ Jones, Wainwright, Yarnold (eds.), The Study of Spirituality, p.16

in this state to express deep frustration, or confusion or grief. They may reach a point where they want to give up. This third understanding is the focus of this search for metaphors.

“Dark Night” as Understood By St. John of the Cross

The “Dark Night” is expounded by St. John of the Cross in Ascent of Mount Carmel⁴. His work comprises three sections described as books. The first describes the “*Dark Night of sense, and desire, and the evils which these work in the soul.*”⁵ The second explores the “Dark Night” of the spirit as an ascending union with God by faith.⁶ The third gives instruction on how the soul is to behave with respect to the memory and the will as it moves toward union with God “...*in perfect hope and charity.*”⁷

The primary source for this exploration of the “Dark Night” is Dark Night of the Soul⁸ which is a continuation of the Ascent of Mount Carmel⁹. In similar fashion to the preceding work it is presented as two books.

“This night, which, as we say is contemplation, produces in spiritual persons two kinds of darkness or purgation, corresponding to the two parts of man’s nature - namely, the sensual and the spiritual. And thus the one night or purgation will be sensual, wherein the soul is purged according to sense, which is subdued to the spirit; and the other is a night or purgation which is spiritual, wherein the soul is purged and stripped according to the spirit, and subdued and made ready for the union of love with God.”¹⁰

Book I explores the purgation of the sensual as it relates to spiritual pleasures rather than those of the flesh. The spiritual pleasures that in being purified create the “Dark Night of the

⁴ Peers (transl.), Ascent of Mount Carmel

⁵ Ibid., p.17

⁶ Peers, Ascent of Mount Carmel, p.63

⁷ Ibid., p.211

⁸ Peers, (transl.)Dark Night of the Soul

⁹ Peers (transl.), Ascent of Mount Carmel

¹⁰ Peers, Dark Night of the Soul, p.61

sense are identified with the ‘*seven capital sins*’: pride, avarice, luxury, wrath, gluttony, envy and sloth.¹¹

Book II assumes progress of the soul from the “Dark Night of the sense” toward the Divine through a second “Dark Night”. Toward the end of Book II, St. John of the Cross draws upon the work of St. Bernard and St. Thomas¹² to interpret the “*the secret ladder*”¹³ which occurs in the second stanza of the poem “Stanzas of the Soul.”

Progress toward union, the perfect love of God, is effected by the submission of both the lower (sensual) and higher (spiritual) parts of the soul to the active presence of God. God’s active presence in both the lower and higher parts of the soul is described as light which exposes the darkness of the soul in its un-purged state.

While a Directee may be able to name the feeling of darkness it is quite frequently the case that they cannot name the paradox they are experiencing. The paradox is that they see only darkness because of the brilliance of the light of God’s presence.

St. John of the Cross offers a similitude to explain the phenomenon. Consider the sun, if you gaze at it for any length of time it becomes dark as its rays become too much for you to handle physically. Likewise he contends when the majestic luminosity of God shines in the soul it has the same effect as it purges.

The darkness is experienced as the human sense and the human spirit are transformed into perfect reflections of the Divine. As the darkness of the sense leads to the emptying of all

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.39-60

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.167-174

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.34

that is not submitted to the Divine, so, the darkness of the spirit leads to “*spiritual blessings passively infused by God.*”¹⁴

While light is the commonly used metaphor for the presence of God to the soul, fire is the metaphor used for the process of purging. St. John of the Cross draws Biblical support for this from Zechariah and 1 Peter.¹⁵ He considers purgation to be the action of God’s transformation of human beings into a perfect union of love with the Divine.

This change is effected by hardship, testing and the withdrawal of sensual dependence. He likens this dark and painful preparation to the way “*fire acts upon a log of wood in order to transform it into itself.*”¹⁶

¹⁴ Peers, Dark Night of the Soul, p.139

¹⁵ Zech. 13:9; 1Pet. 1:6-7

¹⁶ Peers, Dark Night of the Soul, p.127

Purgation of the Sense

Affective attachment to particular spiritual practices St. John of the Cross contends give rise to the seven capital sins mentioned above. Of the sin of wrath he wrote:

“...their delight and pleasure from spiritual things come to an end, they naturally become embittered, and bear that lack of sweetness which they have to suffer with bad grace...when their pleasure and delight therein come to an end, their nature is naturally vexed and disappointed, just as the child when they take it from the breast of which it was enjoying the sweetness. There is no sin in this natural vexation, when it is not permitted to indulge itself, but only imperfection, which must be purged by the aridity and severity of the Dark Night.”¹⁷

The very things or practices which create a feeling of God’s presence or favour if indulged become the source of sin. The blessings become a barrier to further growth toward union with God as they tempt the soul to rest in the pleasure, thus the need for purifying. The danger is that the sensory experience becomes a substitute for God.

Only by stripping the soul of pleasure in the affections of the disciplines can God draw the soul closer to the perfect union of love.

Purgation of the Spirit

The basic premise for the purgation of the spirit and the sense is that “*the one is never truly purged without the other, the purgation of the sense becoming effective when that of the spirit has fairly begun.*”¹⁸ Indeed St. John of the Cross states that

“...the sensual part is purified in aridity, the faculties are purified in the emptiness of their perceptions and the spirit is purified in thick darkness.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid., p.53

¹⁸ Ibid., p.96

¹⁹ Ibid., p.106

When the spirit experiences this darkness the Directee cannot find any solace in the support or instruction of his or her Director. While the Directee may indicate that perhaps the Director might know something of their situation, they believe he or she really doesn't understand. Any advice or comfort offered is deemed of little or no worth.

This darkness of spirit is not continuous, though it may last for days, months, even years. There will be intervals when the effects of purging will offer the spirit new experiences of God. There will be times when the spirit experiences deep peace and an abundance of spiritual communication with God. This is a sign of the spiritual health that is being brought about by the testing with the attendant sense of the absent presence of God - darkness.

PART 2

What metaphors of the “Dark Night” might Philip Yancey offer Protestant evangelical Christians who remain suspicious of material from Roman Catholic and Pre-Reformation Western Church sources?

While Yancey is a prolific evangelical writer his contribution to this essay comes primarily from two books: Disappointment with God and Reaching for the Invisible God. Yancey does not set out to explore the “Dark Night” in either of these books. Rather via questions provoked by suffering he provides words and phrases that name experiences similar to “Dark Night”. The exploration Yancey makes comes from a deep sense of evangelical theological orthodoxy, a bumpy relationship with the church, and scepticism of easy solutions or pious platitudes.

In Disappointment with God Yancey poses three questions. Is God unfair? Is God silent? Is God hidden?²⁰ The latter two provide meaningful metaphors for exploring relationship with God around “Dark Night” experiences.

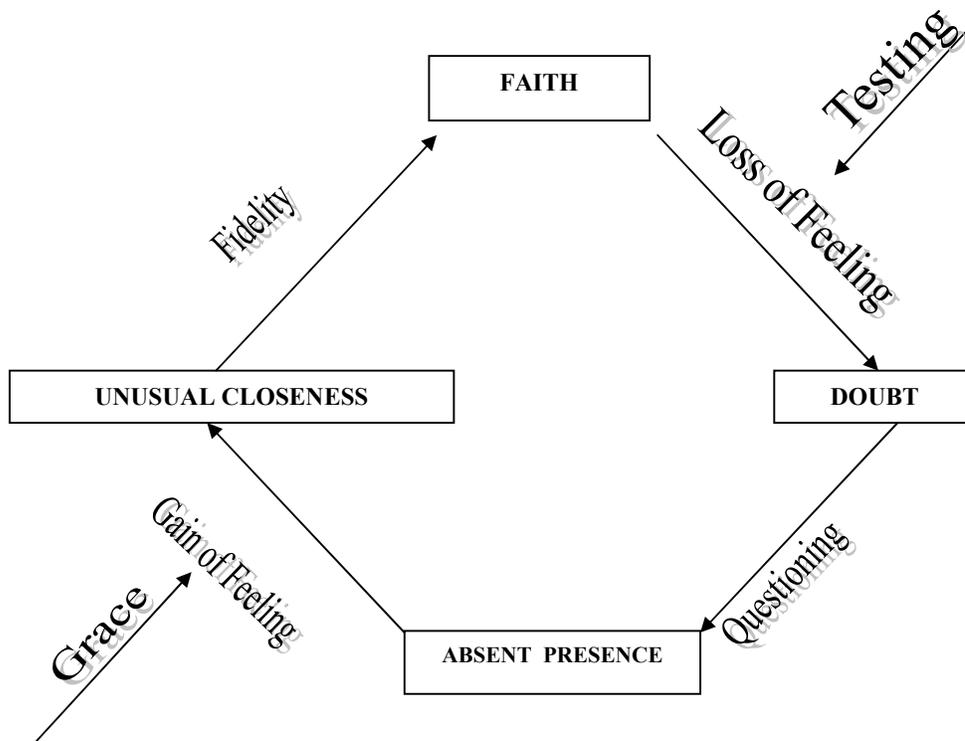
The metaphors of **SILENCE** and **HIDDEN-NESS** come from encounters with people who have earnestly sought God or who know God, and are distressed by the non-appearance of God. This loss of intimacy with God may be gradual or sudden.

A key feeling or experience that feeds the metaphors of silence and hidden-ness is doubt. Yancey suggests God uses these experiences to reconcile the twin actions of ‘loving’ and ‘being loved’. In Disappointment with God Yancey names a purpose of doubt. He declares God uses doubt to wean immature lovers of God from dependence on signs and associated

²⁰ Yancey, Disappointment with God, p.36

good feelings. This dependence on something other than God is akin to idolatry. Thus the purpose of “Dark Night” is to free people to become more fully lovers of God.

The result of such experiences Yancey calls fidelity which he defines as “*faith toughened by testing*”.²¹ In the period of testing which includes “Dark Night” believers grow beyond formulae and, “short cuts” as they contend with God.²²



Yancey hints at a process essential to spiritual development. While depicted above as a linear process in life it is more like a dance of lovers.

²¹ *Ibid*, p.209

²² *Ibid*, p.235

Doubt is a trigger for “**ABSENT PRESENCE**”²³ periods in the spiritual life. Three recurring descriptors of doubt occur in Yancey’s writings: Pain or Hurt; Bible promises that seem glaringly false; and God’s failure to act or speak.

Where or in what do these doubts originate? Yancey responds to the question about the source of these doubts in Reaching for the Invisible God. He wonders if contemporary Western Christianity is particularly affected with “absent presence” because of the romanticized notion of love which pervades it. He contrasts love marriages of the West and arranged marriages of other cultures in two questions. A Western bride or groom have to answer the question ‘Do I love the person I am about to marry?’ An arranged marriage couple have to answer the question “What kind of marriage can we build?”²⁴

If Yancey is right the question in spiritual direction for a person experiencing “Dark Night” is not “What do you feel in the relationship you have with God?’ but “What kind of relationship are you and God building?”

Yancey makes a singular reference to the “**CLOUD OF UNKNOWING**”²⁵. He declares that the unannounced arrival of the “cloud” is necessary if the promises of God’s intimate presence are to be declared. One without the other makes no sense. This period is also described as sitting with “...*headphones on desperate for some message from the other world, yearning for reassuring contact...*”²⁶ and only hearing **STATIC**.

²³ Yancey, Reaching for the Invisible God, p.243

²⁴ Ibid, p.270

²⁵ Yancey, Disappointment with God, p.232

²⁶ Yancey, Reaching for the Invisible God, p.28

The presence of God as “clear guidance”²⁷ does not necessarily encourage spiritual development. Yancey bases this on the record of the Israelites for whom revelation made every choice a matter of obedience rather than faith. This inevitably led to **WILDERNESS WANDERINGS** as failure upon failure piled up.

In Soul Survivor Yancey re-tells some of G.K. Chesterton’s journey to faith in Jesus as he searched around the philosophical questions of the “Problem of Pain” and its opposite the “Problem of Pleasure”. Chesterton’s period of dark searching prior to conversion or in the process of conversion is assigned the metaphor of **LONG ODYSSEY**.²⁸ While the metaphor is set in the period of conversion it might be helpful for a Directee experiencing “Dark Night” later in the Christian pilgrimage.

A series of metaphors gather around “**HIDDEN-NESS**”.²⁹ The prophets of the Hebrew Testament complain loudly of God’s hidden-ness. Noticeably God didn’t argue the point. Instead God frequently agreed and gave an explanation for remaining distant. Is God’s absence and silence a resounding ‘Yes’ to our question, “Have you hidden yourself?”

Isaac Newton conducted an experiment staring at an image of the sun in a mirror. The brightness burned his retina. In order to recover his sight he hid from the sun for three days, even so the spot would not fade from his vision. He experienced the **TEMPORARY BLINDNESS**³⁰ of unfiltered sunlight. As he pondered this experience he commented:

“I used all means to divert my imagination from the sun, but if I thought upon him I presently saw his picture though I was in the dark.”

²⁷ Yancey, Disappointment with God, p.46

²⁸ Yancey, Soul Survivor, p.52

²⁹ Yancey, Disappointment with God, p.90

³⁰ Ibid., p.74

Yancey in accepting the reality and certainty of periods of “**DARKNESS**”³¹ makes a wonderfully almost tautological statement:

“Faith can survive periods of darkness but only if we cling to it in the midst of darkness.”

Other metaphors in this group include: **INVISIBLE**, **INDIFFERENT** and **ABSENTEE**³²; **ABANDONMENT** and **DERELICTION**³³; **DARK VOID**³⁴.

One of the most arresting metaphors Yancey introduces is “**FOG**”³⁵. His comments on this metaphor occur in the context of his discussion of fidelity. He grounds the metaphor in the contrast he finds between Psalm 22 and Psalm 23. Psalm 23 is reassuring and filled with promises that child-like faith accepts willingly. Psalm 22 is deeper and contains mystery. This deeper tested faith comes from learning that trust always takes the follower of Jesus beyond what they know or have previously experienced. It always involves going beyond the edge of the fog - entering the fog and believing God reigns in that place.

Two other metaphors which readily associate with “fog” are given when Yancey considers contexts in which faith matures. The faith that God values grows best when “...*everything FUZZES OVER...*”³⁶ and when a “...**DENSE GREY MIST** *obscures any sign of God’s concern.*”³⁷

³¹ Yancey, Reaching for an Invisible God, p.91

³² Ibid, p.65

³³ Ibid, p.31

³⁴ Ibid, p.211

³⁵ Yancey, Disappointment with God, p.207

³⁶ Ibid., p. 204

³⁷ Ibid., p.206

Conclusion

Philip Yancey does not set out to explore or discover metaphors of the “Dark Night”. However his work around the themes of hurting, disappointment and doubt give Spiritual Directors, Directees and others metaphors to explore the perceived absence of God.

Perhaps the best way to end this search for a bridge to classical “Dark Night” for suspicious Protestant evangelical Christians is to place two quotes side by side, one from Philip Yancey and one from a 20th Century Roman Catholic priest and lecturer whom he respected.

“Are the darkness and dryness of my prayer signs of God’s absence, or are they signs of a presence deeper and wider than my senses can contain? Is the death of my prayer the end of my intimacy with God or the beginning of a new communion beyond words, emotions, and bodily sensations?”³⁸

“So which is it, fullness or dryness, light or darkness, victory or failure? If pressed to answer, I would suggest, “Both.” ...A relationship with an invisible God will always include uncertainty and variability.”³⁹

Yancey shares the metaphor of “**DARKNESS**” and “**DRYNESS**”⁴⁰ with Henri Nouwen. Thus they both use the same metaphors as they seek to describe the experience of “Dark Night” or “Absent Presence” on the spiritual journey. Surely, the parallel reflections affirm the common dealings of God which transcend human suspicion.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., p.187

⁴⁰ Yancey, Reaching for an Invisible God, p.186

LIST of METAPHORS for the “Dark Night”

Silence

Darkness

Hidden-ness

Abandonment

Absent Presence

Dereliction

Cloud of Unknowing

Dark Void

Static

Fog

Wilderness Wanderings

Fuzzes Over

Long Odyssey

Dense Grey Mist

Temporary Blindness

Dryness

Invisible God

Indifferent God

Absentee God

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