

Introduction to *How (Not) to Speak of God*

That which one writes last is read first. As such the introduction of a book is really the author's conclusion, a way of looking over the ground that has been traversed and expressing the overall trajectory of the journey. Looking over what I have written I find myself wondering once more why I have chosen the subject of God. After all, this area must be among the most difficult and dangerous of them all. So much ink has been spent in writing of God and so much blood has been spilt in the name of God that I shudder each time I think about writing on the subject. Because of this concern I have often found myself drawn to the sentiment expressed by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in the final sentence of his influential *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*,

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence¹

Time and again I have found great wisdom in this phrase and yet I have not left these pages blank. Perhaps part of the reason why I find myself unable to stay silent derives from the fact that long before I ever came across this sentiment I had become deeply involved with the evangelical charismatic movement. Here I learnt a very different type of wisdom, one that I have never been able to shake. In short it was this,

God is the one subject of whom we must never stop speaking

At first these two approaches seemed like oil and water yet I could not completely reject either. When the philosophical subtlety of the former gained power I would find myself tempted toward a mystical humanism and when the passion of the latter gained a stronger grip I started a slide in the direction of religious fundamentalism. Yet, in the midst of this tug of war, I began to feel that these positions need not be enemies. The more I reflected upon the depth of these perspectives the more I began to suspect that, far from being utterly foreign to one another, there was a way in which they could inform and enrich each other. More than this I began to suspect that such a dialogue between these two positions could not only be personally liberating but could also unleash an approach to faith that might help to revitalise the Western church.

Yet the question remained as to what this dialogue would look like, for each time I reflected on the positions I was struck by their seemingly exclusive and all-embracing nature. While Wittgenstein's God was an unbreakable secret that could not be shared, the contemporary evangelicals God was one who had broken this secrecy and thus needed to be shared.

Each time I returned to the horns of this dilemma I found myself drawn to the Christian mystics (such as Meister Eckhart), for while they did not embrace total silence they balked at the presumption of those who would seek to colonise the name 'God' with concepts. Instead of viewing the unspeakable as that which brings all language to a halt they realised the unspeakable was precisely the place where the most inspiring language began. This God whose name was above every name gave birth, not to a poverty of words, but to an excess of them. And so they wrote elegantly concerning the limits of writing and spoke eloquently about the brutality of words. By speaking with wounded words of their wounded Christ these mystics

¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* Trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2001), p89. These words were subsequently taken on by those who pioneered the growth of positivism and humanism in the latter half of the twentieth century.

helped to develop, not a distinct religious tradition, but rather a way of engaging with and understanding already existing religious traditions: seeing them as a loving response to God rather than a way of defining God.

In these often overlooked writings I discovered a way to embrace both the wisdom of those who would say that God is unspeakable, and must therefore be passed over in silence, and those who would say that God can, and must, be expressed. The union can be articulated like this,

That which we cannot speak of is the one thing about whom and to whom we must never stop speaking

For the mystic God was neither an unspeakable secret to be passed over in silence, nor a dissipated secret that had been laid bare in revelation. Rather the mystic approached God as a secret that one was compelled to share, yet which retained its secrecy.

By the late medieval period this perspective was largely drowned out by the approach of theologians such as Duns Scotus and remained on the sidelines of faith throughout modernity (I am thinking here primarily of the influence of Cartesian thought). Even today when I looked around it seemed that the mystical approach was either being ignored by the wider Christian community or viewed as a private practice to be engaged in on remote weekend retreats. The only people who seemed to be taking this subject seriously were the supposedly nihilistic postmodern philosophers. Yet the more I studied this discourse the more I returned to the view that this lost language was among the most stunning, sophisticated and simple ways of approaching faith. It became clear to me that for the Western church to prosper in the 21st century it needed to engage with this ancient language². It was in light of this that I set about writing *How (not) to speak of God*.

² It should be said that my approach to mysticism has been influenced by critiques explored in the philosophy of people such as Kant, Nietzsche, Marx, Levinas and Derrida. While such an exploration lies outside the remit of this book I ought to mention that I do not uncritically follow all the tenants of a traditionally mystical approach but rather believe that it is deepened and developed in dialogue with the above thinkers. I will deal with these issues elsewhere.