

God is not beyond: Meditations of a modern believer

by [Christian Wiman](#) in the [February 24, 2009](#) issue

If you come to an idea of faith as “first of all an intellectual assent” (Thomas Merton); or if you think of it not as a state of mind at all but as “being seized by Being itself” (Paul Tillich); or if you think of faith as primarily “faithfulness to an event” (Abraham Joshua Heschel) in the past in which you or even all of humanity was, in effect, seized by Being; or if you construct some sort of “inductive faith” (Peter Berger) out of the moments of transcendence in your ordinary life; or if you feel that faith is wholly a matter of grace and thus outside of humankind’s control altogether (Karl Barth); or if you feel, as I do, that every one of these definitions has some truth in it—then you are still left with this question: Why? Why should existence be arranged so that our alienation from God is a given, and we must forever fight our way not simply toward what he is but toward the whole notion that he is? If you let go of the literal creation story as it comes down to us through Genesis, if you let go of the Garden of Eden, the intellectual apple, the whole history of humankind’s separation from God tied to the tongue of a talking snake; if you let go of these things—and who but a child could hold on to them—then you are left, paradoxically, with a child’s insistent question: Why?

Our natures—and nature itself—are not corrupt but unfinished. “All Creation groaneth and travaileth together,” says Paul, which is exactly right. But also this: all creation, including every atom of our selves, groaneth and travaileth *toward* something—not toward some ideal existence from which “sin” has irretrievably separated us, and not toward some heaven that is simply this existence times eternity. No. Faith is not faith in some state beyond change. Faith is faith *in* change. That this welter of cells entails for us great sorrow and difficulty is true. That uppercase Life requires our lowercase ones is beyond question. But there is great joy in this ongoing apocalypse as well (*apocalypse*, meaning to uncover, to reveal)—joy in reality’s abundance and prodigality, in its atomic detail and essential indestructibility, and in the deep implicit peace whose surest promise is the miraculous capacity we have—in a work of art, a gesture of love, or any of the other

ways in which we acknowledge the God who is this ever-perfecting process—to imagine it.

The greatest problem with our conception of God, and a chief barrier to our relationship with him, is temporal linearity and the extent to which our minds are imprisoned by it. Thus we can think of creation only as having happened at some infinitely distant point in the past and of all of history, human and otherwise, as having happened since. All manner of silly arguments and confusions arise from this misunderstanding, whether it's the lockjawed literalism of fundamentalists which keeps them from "believing" in evolution, or the desperate, ingenious attempts of liberal Protestants to read the biblical stories *into* evolution. But belief in God should never be based upon the limits of our vision; rather, our belief should always be a means of expanding that vision. Creation is present tense. The Fall is not a historical event in the way our births and deaths are. The Garden of Eden is not gone, though if its perfections are not latent in the living instant, if its peace is not somehow present and available in the very fury of the modern city, then the Garden is a myth, a moth-eaten fancy, a life-canceling lie.

It is no blasphemy to say that each of us creates the God who is creating us. We are facets of a work whose finished form we cannot imagine, though our imaginations, aided by grace, are the means of its completion.

So long as belief is something that withstands the assaults of reason, experience, secularization, or even simply (simply!) the slow erosion of certainty within your own heart and mind; so long as that verb accurately describes the dynamic between your belief and all that seems to threaten it, then faith is an illusion in you, a dream that weakness clings to, rather than the truest form and fruition of strength.

Pascal: "We must keep silence as far as we can and only talk to ourselves about God, whom we know to be true, and then convince ourselves that he is." This is the fundamental vanity of the intellectual Christian, the belief that faith may be forged within oneself like a little spiritual pearl, which one may then present to the world as a rare treasure. In truth this encounter never happens, for this personal pearl is not simply a currency the world will find worthless, but, when exposed to the air of actual existence, a dull, ersatz thing which you yourself do not quite recognize. Faith is forged not by the mind alone but by the mind's risky, messy encounter with the world at large. Faith is not something you have; it is something you do.

Silence is the language of faith. Action—be it church or charity, politics or poetry—is the translation. As with any translation, action is a mere echo of its original, inevitably faded and distorted, especially as it moves farther from its source. There the comparison ends, though, for while it is true that action degrades that original silence, and your moments of meditative communion with God can seem a world away from the chaotic human encounters to which those moments compel you, it is also true that without these constant translations into action, that original, sustaining silence begins to be less powerful, and then less accessible, and then finally impossible.

You continually seek something that will resolve your anxieties once and for all, will push you over into a consistent and comforting belief. You read book after book, you seek out intense experiences in nature or in conversations with people whom you respect and who seem to rest more securely in their belief than you. Sometimes it seems that gains are made, for all of these things can and do provide relief and instruction. But always the anxieties come back, are the norm from which faith deviates, if faith is even what you could call these intense but somehow vague and fleeting experiences of God. You have forgotten, or perhaps simply will not let yourself see, what true faith is, its active and outward nature (as opposed to active but inward, which is what all of those activities above are). Do not pray to be at peace in your belief. Pray that your anxieties be given peaceful outlets, that you may be the means to a peace which you yourself do not feel.

Does this mean that we're condemned to be always anxious in our belief? Insofar as our efforts are directed inward, at appeasing or pacifying our own anxieties, the answer is yes. But when we allow our anxieties to become actions, when we perform concrete things in the name of faith, then we gradually begin to find ourselves inching forward on a rope ladder of action strung high over the abyss of unbelief, and our gaze becomes focused on what is ahead of us rather than forever staring paralyzed down.

When a man's relation to the divine radically changes and his life and mind open in ways he could not have imagined, he is inclined to think of the transformation in terms of progression—from a lower consciousness to a higher one, or from benighted despair to enlightened joy. This is the first mistake. The second is his immediate desire to lift others, particularly those he loves, into this new state of awareness. But faith is not a new life in this sense; it is the old life newly seen. And the test of that sight is that it leads to connections and continuities, not to

renunciations and severances. Nothing is more poisonous, both to one's own faith and to one's relationships, than an overeager urge to proselytize, a too-avid grasp of the "truth." No doubt there is the rare Caedmon whose mute tongue is touched into song by the spirit of God, but for most of us God comes as an annihilating silence, a silence which we must endure as well as enjoy. To be sure, the injunction to evangelize is upon every believer, but there is a strict hierarchy of effective methods. "Preach the gospel at all times," said St. Francis to his followers. "If necessary, use words."

Religious despair is often a defense against boredom and the daily grind of existence. Lacking intensity in our lives, we say that we are distant from God, and then seek to make that distance into an intense experience. It is among the most difficult spiritual ailments to heal because it is usually wholly illusory. There are definitely times when we must suffer God's absence, when we are called to enter the dark night of the soul in order to pass into some new understanding of God, some deeper communion with him and with all of creation. But this is very rare, and for the most part our dark nights of the soul are, in a way that is more pathetic than tragic, wishful thinking. God is not absent. He is everywhere in the world we are too dispirited to love. To feel him—to *find* him—does not usually require that we renounce all worldly possessions and enter a monastery, or give our lives over to some cause of social justice, or create some sort of sacred art, or begin spontaneously speaking in tongues. All too often the task to which we are called is simply to show a kindness to the irritating person in the cubicle next to us, say, or touch the face of a spouse from whom we ourselves have been long absent, letting grace wake love from our intense, self-enclosed sleep.

It became easy to rekindle the flame of lonely anguish, in part because it never went wholly out. The lie in his life was not the flame but the ease with which he turned to it. Pain has its pleasures, not the least of which are its reliability, immediacy and even, in a strange way, companionability. "Without my loneliness I should be more lonely," as poet Marianne Moore says, "so I keep it."

The difference between Christianity and mysticism is not one of consciousness: much of Christian experience is mystical experience, which is to say that it is timeless and that it suggests—or, more accurately, brings to fruition—an essential unity between humankind and God. (Unity, it goes without saying, is not parity.) But Christian mysticism is not merely timeless. The great mystery of Christianity—the great mystery of Christ himself—is the way in which freedom from

time is the call of time, freedom from death the call of death. A mystical experience—and by this I mean to include those experiences of spiritual release and transcendence that are available to every single person who will prepare for and accept them—does not simply result in action, its reality is confirmed only within action. Which is to say: the very truth of a mystical experience is contingent upon the contingency to which that experience is—and I choose the word very carefully here—sacrificed.

"The reason why Catholic tradition is a tradition," writes Thomas Merton, "is because there is only one living doctrine in Christianity: there is nothing new to be discovered." A little bit of death from a thinker who brought the world so much life. The minute any human or human institution arrogates to itself a singular knowledge of God, there comes into that knowledge a kind of strychnine pride, and it is as if the most animated and vital creature were instantaneously transformed into a corpse. *Nothing new to be discovered?* Any belief that does not recognize and adapt to its own erosions rots from within. Only when doctrine itself is understood to be provisional does doctrine begin to take on a more than provisional significance. Which is to say: truth inheres not in doctrine itself but in the spirit with which it is engaged, for the spirit of God is always seeking and creating new forms.

Of course, to assert that all doctrine is provisional and in some fundamental way untenable is itself a doctrine, and as subject to sterility and vainglory as the rantings of any radio preacher bludgeoning his listeners with Leviticus. One must learn to be in unknowingness without embracing it.

Simone Weil says that "absence is the form God takes in this world," which, like every human conception of God, is at once true and untrue. It is true insofar as God does not appear to us in any form beyond the forms of the world. It is false insofar as it assumes that God is not present in the forms of the world, in ways which require a lifetime of looking and praying to recognize. Weil's genius is to give form to the feeling of lack that leads a believer to cry out that this world, however much it is loved, is not enough. Her language energizes absence, charges it—as in fact it is charged—with divine meaning and power, though the phrase also keeps those things implicit and distant. That is her weakness: she assumes that we know what form or forms God takes and therefore our perceptions of his absence are not simply accurate but, in this life, final. God's absence is an anguish every believer feels, but the problem with Weil's statement is that it stops at this anguish, not realizing that God's absence is always a call to his presence. Abundance and destitution are two

facets of the one face of God, and latent within the most complex and sophisticated theology of suffering there is—*there must be*—a simple psalm of praise.

This article is a chapter in Christian Wiman's forthcoming book My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer.