

The absence of God

By [Chris Brundage](#)

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God himself, as God, does not appear in the world or in human experience. He is not the kind of being that can be present as a thing in the world. And yet, despite this **necessary absence**, he is believed to be that which gives the definitive sense to everything that does appear in the world and in experience. We first learn about the Christian God in the course of Christian living. We hear about him through preaching, we address him in prayer, and we attempt to respond to him in our actions; however, we approach him as **one who will always be absent** to us while we remain in something we now must call “our present state.”

Robert Sokolowski

Last February I preached on a text from Isaiah, using this quote about the necessary absence of God. The sermon made a distinction between what is immediately present and what is indirectly present. The creation is immediately present to us — the Creator is not. I went on to say there are certain ways we encounter traces of God, ways God is indirectly present to us. That sermon generated more responses than anything I’ve preached in a while, and it must be because I departed from the usual banalities about the presence of God and took seriously the absence of God.

The Bible affirms God’s presence. “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” (Ex. 33:14) The Bible also names God *Deus Absconditus*, the Hidden God (Is. 45:15). We hold both in tension. I am speaking less lately about the presence of God because our ordinary experience is of the absence of God. Mystical experience is different, but most of us are not mystics. It is actually freeing not to need to have dramatic experiences of the divine presence, grateful simply for the

traces of God found in nature, in human love and in religion.

Quaker writers have been teaching me about the practice of silence, which they see as a kind of sacrament of the presence of God. I am more inclined, though, to see silence as a sacrament of the absence of God. In the emptiness of silence I turn my attention to the Hidden God, whom I walk with by faith and not by sight.

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