

Is God silent?

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The English author Thomas Hardy once described god as “the dreaming, dark, dumb Thing that turns the handle of this idle show”.¹ These words are a brilliant description of the god of many of our contemporaries. That there is or may be a god seems fairly clear; most people believe that—atheists are still pretty rare. What is not clear is that god has any connection with us, that he—or she, or it—takes an interest in us, interferes with our lives, communicates with us. In effect, god has been struck dumb.

Consider Hardy’s god. This god is without relationships. It is a thing, deliberately stripped of the personhood which makes fellowship, communion and love possible. It is dreaming: abstracted, therefore, from the world of men, high above us, on a different plane altogether. It is dark: obscure to us, and perhaps to itself, inhabiting a world of shadow and gloom.

This is a god without speech, a “dreaming, dark, dumb Thing”. Of course this is another aspect of the lack of relationships, for speech is the richest, most subtle, most enduring vehicle of human relationship that we have. To be dumb or deaf is an affliction which even more than blindness cuts you off from people. What is god really like? Who can tell? He cannot or will not communicate with us to tell us who he is.

This god is without purpose. It “turns the handle of this idle show”. Hardy allows his god power, the power to make history jangle along, but it has no more interest or purpose than is displayed in the idle turning of the handle of a mechanical device which makes puppet figures go through their trivial and fore-ordained moves. History exists, but in the hands of such a god it is, indeed, like life to Macbeth, “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”.²

Why do we think of god like this?

What has happened to make us lose touch with him? Why do we think that he is speechless? There are three elements: it is because of the way that we think, because of the way that we feel, and because of the way that we understand or identify ourselves. Thought, feeling, identity: these three, but the greatest of them is identity.

Thought

God has become dumb because of the way we think. It would be a very unusual human being not to have given some thought at least to the question of whether there is a god—or gods—and

what this divinity may be like. In some human eras, the answer seems to be plain. The very nature of the universe itself, with its grandeur, order and beauty speaks for God, even if he does not speak himself, and at least testifies to his

existence. There is no shortage of sophisticated proofs for God's existence. The god idea solves many of the puzzles of existence. Of course, this god is not the pathetic being of Hardy's words. But the god that we discover like this is not very relational either. He, too, seems somewhat remote.

In any case there are other eras—and our own is one of them—when this answer does not seem as clear and com-

elling. As infants we are inducted into a modern world-view which has drained the world of the divine. You could call it the scientific world-view, but I will not do so because there is nothing in science as such which demands it. The inexplicable can now be explained; the grandeur is a by-product of chance; the order is accidental. The world does not seem to be a place of magic and enchantment, of divinity; it is extraordinary only in that random forces have produced it. Can human beings really be expected to prove God's existence as though he is a piece of geometry? For us, nature hints at the existence of God, but it does not seem decisive. It is a tantalizing whisper, not a commanding voice.

Feeling

The death of God was announced several times in the twentieth century. There can be no defining moment when the idea of God ceased to grip and be assumed, but somehow it seems to have happened, and we have been present at the funeral. For me it is hard to go past 1st July 1916 when the Battle of the Somme exploded into its bloody, futile and protracted life. I have stood silent on the silent slopes of Pozieres, where 20,000 Australians were killed for no real military reward. You could easily think then of "the dreaming, dark, dumb, Thing, that turns the handle of this idle show". But you could choose your own catastrophe, your own slaughter of the innocents, whether Armenians,

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Rwandans, or Jews. The old idea of God has become for many of us not merely scientifically implausible, but morally implausible.

Identity

God seems so remote, thirdly, because of the way we identify or understand ourselves. There is a particular moment that social commentators are identifying as ‘the death of God’. It is the era of the 1960s. The problem here is not intellectual, a world made empty of mystery, or moral, the suffering of humanity. In fact, the mid-century was a time of the recovery of belief in God. The problem here was what you may call relational or spiritual. Our culture came to a moment when it decided that it did not wish to be governed by the law of God, that it would go its own way. If there is a God, then he is obviously in charge; he has the authority by which we should order our lives. Indeed, that is precisely what we did, in theory at least, for hundreds of years. But in the middle of the twentieth century we cast our votes for human autonomy. In doing so, we decided not to know God. We decided that we would rule the world.

This is exactly how the Bible describes what happens, but it uses pretty strong language. “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:25). The Bible does not expect us to be able to

find God by human reason; that would only serve to make us proud, anyway. It assumes that God has made his own reality obvious to us, but that the problem lies in the receiver not the transmitter. It says that for our own reasons we have “suppressed the truth”. It puts the matter like this: “since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind, to do what ought not to be done” (Romans 1:28). When we consider the moral state of our society, the Bible’s verdict seems strangely accurate.

Of the three elements in the retreat of God, in the dumbing-down of God, strangely, the third is the one that matters most. We can argue about the scientific world-view and point to its connection with faith. The problem of human suffering, though peculiarly strong in the twentieth century, is nothing new, and God may be expected to say something profound about it in any case. But the question of who we are, of our identity, of our relationship with God, of our willingness to know him—this is the issue above all others which creates the problem of the apparently distant, uncommunicative god. Has he ceased speaking, or have we ceased listening? Have we arrived at “this dreaming, dark, dumb thing” precisely because that is what we hope that god is like? Do we actually prefer a dumb, non-interfering god?

Sometimes it is suggested that the

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intellectual problems to do with God have made belief quite impossible for twenty-first-century humans. But the truth of the matter is quite different. The triumph of the so-called scientific world-view has not led to the abolition of religion, but to the flowering of all sorts of home-made religions and spiri-

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tualities, as modern men and women try to fill the vacuum caused by the loss of God. In Sydney, our greatest religion is summed up in the famous liturgical chant of the real estate agents: location, location, location. On behalf of the god of location we are prepared to work endless hours, endanger our families and even to give up our moral scruples.

On behalf of this god things like corporate loyalty have become a vague and laughable memory. The fact is that our society is less Christian, but just as religious as ever. Is there any evidence that God is doing anything about this state of affairs?

There is. The great zoologist, Sir Alister Hardy, professor at Oxford, set up the Hardy Institute in the mid-1970s to investigate the possibility that people were having experiences of God, despite the prevailing secularism of the time. When research was conducted, the response was astonishingly positive. Though many people had nothing to

report, many others did have what they would classify as a religious experience of an authoritative and overwhelming nature. Here is one I have taken from the web-site of what is now called the Hardy Trust:³

I would like to describe in simple terms a spiritual experience I had a few weeks ago, when entering this home for the elderly, recovering from the shock of my wife's death from cancer. We had been happily married for forty-three years. This religious experience was not in the least sensational. I was in my bedroom. There was a sound of great silence and stillness and the presence of God with me hugging him in devotion and love around the waist and feeling that all is well and underneath are the everlasting arms. This is the only such experience I have ever had in my life. I know it's valid and authentic. There was only a sense of serenity and love and nothing to provoke it.

This is by no means an isolated description. I have found similar events recorded in the autobiographies of such diverse notables as Sir Kenneth Clark the art historian, Alec Guinness the actor, Vera Brittain the author and activist, General Pasha Glubb the soldier, Dean W. R. Matthews the churchman and philosopher, and C. S. Lewis the Professor of English. Here is our very

own Nobel Prize winning novelist, Patrick White, and an experience that happened to him in suburban Castle Hill during a downpour of drenching rain:

In such a downpour, a few days before Christmas 1951, White was carrying bowls of slops to a litter of wormy pups. Somewhere between the jacaranda and the old piggery he slipped in the mud. Swearing and laughing he dragged himself to his feet. "I stood in the rain, the water up to my ankles, and pouring off me as I proceeded to curse God." But how could he curse what did not exist? As he puzzled at this, he had the inkling of the presence of God. "Faith came to me."... It was the beginning of his faith and of a lifelong search for contact with the fleeting presence. This was 'the turning point'.⁴

This is fine as far as it goes, but it is tantalizing. These experiences remind us that God is not a problem to be solved, but a person to relate to. They remind us that getting to know another person is actually a gift from that person to us, an exploration based on a disclosure. It suggests that we as a society have been far too quick to assume that God is at best an absentee landlord. The recipients of such experiences may be very sure about them, but what do they mean for us? We may or may not have a similar experience. Chances are that about thirty

percent of us have had just such a private experience. But what about the rest of us who are not mystics or religious experts, or Olympians of the soul? You can't demand that religious experiences occur; you can't duplicate them or arrange for others to have one too. You may well believe that others have such experiences, but you can't believe simply because others have had such experiences. They are, by definition, a private and personal matter.

In any case, where do you take it? Kenneth Clark decided to take it precisely nowhere, for example. In his mind, to follow God would require too many changes in his own life, and he was unprepared to pay that price. God was not part of his identity. He illustrates precisely the spirit of our age, in which the problem of God is that we do not want him to run our lives: the problem of God is ourselves.

Another frequent feature of such experiences is that they seem to be wordless: people become aware of God; they know that he is there; they experience love. The first testimony I quoted speaks of 'a sound of great silence'. We are still dealing with the dumb friend, even if he has moved himself into the attic of our minds.

Maybe you have thought about the problem of deafness or dumbness. To be blind is to suffer a terrible affliction. To be deaf or dumb is as bad or even,

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in some ways, worse. Apart from the lack of sympathy which you may experience, it is your relationships which are made so difficult. Language, speech, the giving and receiving of words, is so precious a part of friendship, of love, of relationship. We may despise words and want more than words, but do without them and we will soon find how impoverished we are. How do we know another person? By watching them, certainly; perhaps by touching them. But there are limits to this.

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It is mainly by speaking with them, by listening to them, by words, by language. That is how they reveal their hearts to us; that is how we learn to trust them; that is how we commune. So let me ask this: What do you think we are doing

when we render God speechless? Why do you think that we may do that? What effect does it have? I may be asking, 'Is God silent?' But the real question is, 'Are we listening?'

What we need is something verbal, and we need something public, something for everyone. It's all very well to have hole-in-the-corner revelations, private insights, overwhelming experiences. But what about a big, plain word which will sit still long enough for me to look at it and come back to look at it again? What about a revelation which will speak to my intellect, to my feelings and to my identity? What about a

communication from God's side which will tell us what is on his heart, what matters to him, a communication by which we can relate?

Jesus Christ, who knew a thing or two about these matters, put the situation like this. A shepherd, he said, may have a hundred sheep. If one is lost, however, he goes after it until he finds it, and then he brings it home. God, he says, is not the great elusive; the dreaming, dark, dumb, Thing; he is not playing hide and seek with us. It is we who are the lost ones; it is God who searches and finds. He does not hide himself; he shows himself and speaks to us.

The Bible

For Jesus Christ, there was no doubt that God had spoken. Jesus had the Bible, and regarded it as the authoritative word of God. God is not remote or silent; God has spoken and his speech is recorded very publicly. Indeed, historically speaking, the words of the Bible have entered the very bloodstream of our civilization—God has inserted his speech into human history. If you want to relate to him, if you want to know what he is like, the wonder of what he has given you, and what he asks of you, go no further. No need to wait for a private experience.

It is an old book; it is a difficult book; to us it is tedious in parts until we come to see what it is on about. But it is not a book of airy ideas. It puts God into his-

tory; it puts him into the grime and dust of it all; it gives us the language we need to use if we are to get to know him personally. The closure of the Bible is one of the tragedies of contemporary culture. It deprives us of the language we need to speak about the big issues. When a catastrophe like that of September 11 occurs we find that we are without the spiritual resources we need to speak about its depths, because we have stopped reading the Bible in an adult way. But in the end, the Bible itself testifies that God has done more even than insert his words and actions into our history; he has inserted himself.

Jesus, the Christ

When, in the 1960s, we as a culture chose human autonomy over God's rule, it was precisely Jesus Christ that we were putting to one side. Who was Jesus Christ? He was either the greatest fraud in history, not worth a moment's respect; or, in this particular man, God himself has lived among us, communicating definitively with the human race. We are not discovering God, but God himself is finding us. Here is God's public speech; here is the place where he has made himself available to us; here is where he has actually settled amongst us so that we can understand him, believe him, obey him, and see him as he is. He is not the mere spokesman for God; he is the explanation of God. In Jesus, all our Christmasses come at once. Do you wish that God

would reveal himself definitively and publicly, not just for religious people and mystics but for ordinary, practical people? He has. He has come himself.

What was he like when he came? Think of how he lived. Think of the way he treated people, think of his sharpness in the face of religious humbug, think of his courage before his adversaries, think of his sternness with wayward disciples, think of his tender encouragement to those who knew their lives were in a mess. He saw with extraordinary clarity that forgiveness was the engine of recovery, no matter how far you had slipped. Of all the terms of abuse and vilification he endured, one in particular says what sort of man he was: "Look", they said, "...a friend of sinners!"⁵ Here indeed is the life that God would lead if he came among us.

Then think of his words. Here is the one who gave us the sermon on the mount, the world's greatest speech, and a set of unforgettable parables, for starters. There is beauty in these words, there is humour, there is irony and sarcasm, there is persuasive authority. There is the brilliant, unforgettable metaphor; there are majestic words, there are words of obscurity; there are words that tease and irritate, that call for a totality of commitment which we sense is boundless; there are words of consolation and strength; there are polemical words which almost take your breath away with their sharp-

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ness. There are words and phrases that have actually entered and shaped a thousand languages—the Good Samaritan, the prodigal son, the fatted calf, the Pharisee, the signs of the times, the eye of the needle, hypocrite, love of your neighbour. Indeed, Jesus said that you could build your whole life on his words and that they would never let you down. In fact, they transform lives every day, here and now.

I recently heard a mainland Chinese student speak about coming to know God, coming to relate to God. He was asked, what difference did it make to his life. Without hesitation he said: “I have stopped hating Japanese people”. How does it happen that words spoken so long ago should continue to have such power today? I believe that it is because they have as their inner strength the One

who uttered them. He spoke the words, he lived the words, he died the words. In the end, they turn out to be words about him, words that reveal him to us, words which give us access to him, words

through which he takes charge of us. Jesus is not merely a great teacher; he is a great Lord, and his words are not just the peak of human achievement—here are the words which God would speak should he come among us.

What of his death? Napoleon Bonaparte is reputed to have said: “if Socrates lived and died like a philosopher,

Jesus lived and died like a god!” He is the God who understands suffering from the inside. Do you suffer—do you carry about your private griefs like a burden? When God came among us he did not spare himself; he took on the pain, especially the pain of sin and guilt. He looks into your soul and sees what is needed for your good health. What of his resurrection? By this God says that we are not living in a closed world with an endless iron chain of cause and effect; we are living in a world in which there is hope from beyond. What lies ahead are not the shadows, and the dissolution of the mind and body into an eternity without consciousness, but the possibility of a new life of relationships far surpassing the old. The Bible calls it “going home”.

Sydney is enough to make you weep. Our physical beauty and our spiritual ugliness go side by side. It does us no good to inquire into the greed and corruption which have been with us from the moment that the First Fleet arrived. When Philip moved from Botany Bay to Port Jackson, it was location, location, location. The guardians he brought with him were little better than the ones they guarded. To this day, the deals that are done in our beautiful buildings are not meant to be for the good of others, but for ourselves. They are meant to give us advantage now so that we can enjoy the good life. And yet Sydney is the city which chose to begin the new millennium with “Eternity” emblazoned on the Sydney Harbour Bridge. We who live for today, with so much to enjoy here

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and now, were reminded that it will all be over with extraordinary rapidity, that eternity is just around the corner, that the big questions cannot be endlessly deferred. Eternity seems like a threatening, empty concept, a future with no human face to bid us welcome.

But the message of that totally 'Sydney' person, Arthur Stace, the metho drinker whose life was utterly transformed by Jesus, was this: Eternity is not empty: there is someone there. There is a human face to welcome us: it is the face of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who has become man. He and his words and his life and his death and his resurrection answer the really big questions: not what the dollar may be next week; not how many galaxies there are; not who will win the Cup; not whether UFOs are for real; not whether your child will get into her university course. These are trivial matters. He tells you who you are, who God is, what your life means, how you should live it, where you can get forgiveness and what is going to happen when you die. He is God and he reveals the answers to the fundamental questions of your existence.

God's silence

Is God silent? Is he dark and dumb? Of course not. He reveals himself in and through his creation. To many he gives experiences which remind them of him. But, more important than any such things, he has himself visited us; he has inserted himself into the history of our race; he has spoken to us and his words stand on the public record of the Bible. The whole Bible is his word to us and it is freely available. He is not silent—but are we listening? That is the real question. ❧

This is the text (with minor changes) of the inaugural Bruce Smith lecture, given at NSW Parliament House on 5th November 2001. Dr Peter Jensen is the Archbishop of Sydney.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Thomas Hardy, 'The Dynasts', Part 3, in *The Works of Thomas Hardy in Prose and Verse*, Verse Volume 2, Macmillan, London, 1913, p. 254.
- 2 *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V.
- 3 www.alisterhardytrust.org.uk
- 4 David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1991, pp. 281-2.
- 5 For example, Matthew 11:19.