

## The long night of the soul

(Talk given by Fr Dionysios-James Higgs, who works part-time as a parish priest and part-time as a mental health nurse doing personal independent payment (PIP) assessments.)

I have deliberately changed the normal phrase of the Dark night of the soul to the long night of the soul to better reflect the experience of myself and others that I know particularly from Evangelical backgrounds that after experiencing the remoteness of God, and the irrational aspect of God, there can then be a slow distancing and separation from the church that they went to.

The term the dark night of the soul is normally used to describe the experience of not being able to draw near to God in prayer and a sense of being abandoned by God. After this experience things then can become very difficult if one is surrounded by Christians who have not gone through this and are constantly celebrating closeness to God and spiritual experiences in worship and conversations. I don't want to limit this though to the charismatic side of the evangelical church as for myself and others that may not be the main problem.

For myself and others it was the constant "God is Reason" approach and party line that can be in those churches that is the problem. God is Reason with a Capital R, was implied to signify that there is absolute truth, which is rational and intelligible, which can easily lead to a left brained overly rationalist understanding of God, faith and life. This created an atmosphere where expressing difference of understanding became difficult. Ultimately Rationality and Reason are too limiting and too simplistic for understanding God and the Spiritual life, not everything in the Spiritual life or indeed life is rational or simplistic. God commanding the sacrifice of Isaac through whom the promised people of Israel would come was not rational. Simplistic understandings of the faith and the spiritual life cease to explain the truth at a meaningful level, and can lead someone to feeling not just dispirited, but possibly cynical and ultimately disconnected. For me it was a slow Abramic "ami lo ami" - these people are not my people, experience.

One of the ways that might help describe what it was like would be to consider it in comparison and contrast to the "In the country of the blind" story by H.G. Wells. In the story a hiker comes across a valley where everyone is born blind, only the hiker can see but he is effectively rejected by the people in the valley til he can start to perceive things as they do without the use of sight. He does this and falls in love with a girl there, but the condition is that he needs to have his eyes taken out to marry her. He is about to do this when he sees the sunrise and hikes out of the valley.

For me it was different in that I did not start out in my Evangelical church situation seeing things or perceiving things any differently to anyone else. Slowly over time though I started to perceive things differently form others. One factor was that I had read the bible cover to cover many times, this may sound arrogant, but actually it was surprisingly rare in an Evangelical environment, it meant that rather than taking other peoples word for it, in the sense of what was preached, which of itself was often based on secondary source materials, commentaries and the like, I had actually studied the source material for myself.

Another factor was that by going to study Theology at a university rather than at a seminary training people for Ordination, I was exposed to a wider diversity of people with different church backgrounds, and knew that they were people of integrity and strong faith commitment. This helped to break down prejudices and an us and them mentality which was a strong culture in Evangelicalism.

Like the hiker, where this can be presumed, I had also had exposure to other cultures and countries, having myself lived in the Holy land for 2 years. And I would say that proximity to and visiting holy sites would also have had an effect on me. I had also perceived Spiritual things, I had heard the voice of God and seen the Face of Christ in a vision, I had also had visions of uncreated or spiritual light. These were not earth shattering or on the scale of those we know of in the Bible who had them, but again I had had first hand experience of them. And I remember specifically a sermon in which it was preached that experience was secondary to reason and understanding, that experience was a train carriage and the engine was reason. St Paul had all the logic and reason of his pharisaic beliefs, but it wasn't until he had a life changing experience in his encounter with Christ that his life was changed.

I never stopped loving my church or the people in it, but just came to feel increasingly different, and a growing sense of a glass ceiling, and actually a real glass ceiling in that I was stopped from taking positions of leadership within the church I went to, and discouraged from going for ordination.

Fortunately for me this coincided with my introduction and courtship with Orthodoxy. God as mystery, and the mysteries of Orthodoxy became a more meaningful way to explain things, and resonated with what I had experienced in the Spiritual life. I saw pastures new and headed for them, the hiker may have gone out of the valley the way he came, but I went out onto a new path.

Now some of this could have been put down to or analysed as me becoming a post-evangelical, a reaction on the intellectual side to the false certainties of fundamentalism,<sup>1</sup> and also a reaction on the cultural side to the middle class club<sup>2</sup> prevalent in so many Evangelical churches. I could make use of the stages set out in Tomlinson's book "the post evangelical" of stages of growth from 1:- self obsessed, the child like state, to the maturing states of 2: - Conformist, and then 3: Individualist.<sup>3</sup> But it does not explain a move for me from a conformist church of Evangelical type, to a church of greater conformity of belief and practice found in Orthodoxy.

Also now on reflection I would see it as a much older problem in Western church life than just recent times. Within my ministry as an Orthodox priest I am still in contact with two others who went through similar times and experiences to myself, but did not become Orthodox, but have also now had contact with four others, one actually from the same church I went to and three others from similar type churches, two of whom have become Orthodox.

I was reflecting on these things when I went to speak to Fr John McGuckin and I asked him if anyone in Orthodoxy, in the Fathers, or more recently writes about the Dark night of the soul. He said that there was not and that in the East it would be termed as spiritual aridity, and would be handled differently so that for instance if you were in a monastery you would just be given a different job, so as to take the persons mind of it. He did sympathise that pastorally there is a need to help those from the West with such things.

I am pleased to say that I have now found someone. The Dark night of the soul is mentioned in Fr Andrew Louth's book "The origins of Christian Mystical Tradition." He notes that the word mystical became wrenched from the traditional meaning where it was identical with the sacramental. He notes its rise as a challenge to the power of the priesthood in medieval times so that individual mystical experience could claim equivalent power to that held by the priesthood.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Tomlinson The Post-Evangelical p.26

<sup>2</sup> D. Tomlinson The Post-Evangelical p.40

<sup>3</sup> D. Tomlinson The Post-Evangelical p.48

There was a flourishing of mystical literature with such figures as St Catherine of Sienna, St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila who had conflict with the institutional church.<sup>4</sup>

I take a lot of solace from that, that it is not just a recent phenomenon in the West for conflict between personal experience and the institutional church.

Fr Andrew notes there was a difference in the East where the same genre of literature did not emerge noting a contrast between the whole style of Patristic writing with that of the late medieval and Renaissance literature, in Patristic writing personal language is rare, and that for the Fathers truth was to be found in Scripture, and that appeal to experience convincing for most Westerners did not have the same importance for them.<sup>5</sup>

However I also think that the defence of Hesychasm in the 1300's in the East created a different culture, so that the defense of interior life and inward experience meant that Hesychast doctrine became part of the doctrine of the Orthodox church. Therefore Orthodoxy expects interior struggle, maturation in the Spiritual life, and union with God that does not have to make appeal to the senses or rationality, which creates a very different atmosphere.

Also central to Orthodoxy is Theosis or deification, participating in the Divine life and becoming increasingly Christ like. This means that change is expected, maturity in the Spiritual life is expected. Also spiritual struggle is expected. It is also not exclusive, "if you would you could become all flame",<sup>6</sup> is an offer set out to everyone, it is not the preserve of mystics, or monks. This creates a very different church culture in general.

So what help can I be as an Orthodox priest? One of the first things is that I can deeply sympathise and empathise with those going through similar experiences or situations. Having taken the bold step of leaving the Evangelical church, I do have the integrity of having lead by example. I am also fortunate in that I can hand on heart say that I am in a better position now and am happier and more comfortable.

I might be expected to be upset that others do not follow. In a general sense I am, I do think that Orthodoxy is the best church, and wish that others could find their home there. When it comes to individual situations though things vary. Sometimes I am just happy to be a watering hole, for those who find themselves in the spiritual wilderness I am happy just to have a heart to heart conversation with them. By being in a church in one place I can be found or contacted by others, sometimes all that others need is to validate their feelings and experience. They then continue on their spiritual journey wherever it may lead. Some people I can signpost further into Orthodoxy.

But I also find that some people do not really want to move on. I will not deny it, that that saddens me. Self pity and that kind of pride and hesitancy, are one of the things I find hardest particularly in nursing where I encounter it more often than as a priest. I meet many people with severe anxiety who have nothing to be anxious about, others with fibro-myalgia, with no physical cause of pain, those with personality disorders with no form of psychiatric illness.

I also find though that there are Christians who fear pain of being church members, they can fear the crass comments others can make, bigoted stances and inept wielding of authority that can go on. I do not know of an answer other than "man up". But I am increasingly reminded of the

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<sup>4</sup> A. Louth. The Origins of Christian Mystical Tradition p.210 (in the 2006 afterword)

<sup>5</sup> A. Louth. The Origins of Christian Mystical Tradition p. 177-8

<sup>6</sup> B. Ward. Sayings of the Desert Fathers. (p. xxi in the foreword).

question Christ asked of: "do you want to be healed?" there are so many people I meet who love their pain, love their conditions, love their sense of suffering, and new identity it can give them.

So I am in favour of change, of movement or growth. Growth is a very important factor, I had found that my growth had been actively stifled in the Evangelical church. That said I am not in favour of quick change, to leave one church in favour of Orthodoxy, or just to leave a church should not be fast or flighty, I have seen many come and go from Orthodoxy through not having counted the cost of purchasing another field, the selling of what you already have to risk purchasing something better,<sup>7</sup> but it should be a considered change, but also not overly hesitant. Life is too short.

(Some further comment and reflections based on questions and answers I gave after delivering the above talk, and an important comment made by Metropolitan Kalistos).

I was asked how things are now in terms of whether I still experience spiritual experience's or spiritual aridity. I answered (and will also more fully explain how I see things now) that most of my time is spent in aridity but I no longer see it as arid. I remember reading a book by Wilbur Smith in my youth,<sup>8</sup> in part of the story a woman is washed up on a beach and spends a couple of days on it and is starving as she cannot find anything to eat. She meets a couple of Pygmy people who start digging up various animals from the sand that she can eat, and after a while she learns to know where to look for them for herself. So what had appeared to her as arid and lifeless actually was not. For myself after becoming Orthodox I thought I had no spiritual experience for four years, then I started to realise that out of the corner of my eye or from my minds eye I could see that figures within Icons were moving or animated, not to the extent that figures move around in the Harry Potter books, but they were vibrant as if a real life person was there. So what had appeared to me to be arid was in fact populated with life and I had just had to attune to it. Learning about spiritual experience can be about learning another language.

Also I see that some things can only be achieved through aridity. Being in one place for a long time is helpful. In the church I previously went to in Shropshire, one man stopped coming after his wife died and then after about 9 years he started coming again. That kind of answered prayer can only be achieved by aridity so I am no longer fearful of it.

In fact I can actually be more fearful of Spiritual experiences than aridity. Early on as a priest in my current church I was worried by the low attendance at one of the Lenten services, I was thinking about it when I had a vision of black figures kneeling on the floor in the church. Well this worried me further! I thought is this a vision of the future where I was no longer a priest and did not know how to interpret it. I talked about it with my Spiritual father and he said if it causes you to worry then just put it out of your mind and try and forget about it. Well the next year it happened again (It was not deja-vu but a very similar set of circumstances). this time though I was able to reflect on it and realise that it was a mystical vision of others being invisibly present praying with us. On a recent pilgrimage to the holy land I met a monk who had met others from my church and had been praying for it every day for 10 years, so now after the second time I was more at ease and able to make that connection I had learned the language of the vision.

The comment that Metropolitan Kalistos made was to the effect that as Orthodox we aim for experience of God in a continual often low key way rather than seek experiences. Experiences can be misleading and they might not always be from God.

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 13:44.

<sup>8</sup> I cannot remember the title now

I would validate this in that I have had some spiritual experiences that were not really going anywhere. For a while I was able to perceive what the weather would be the following week, as a parish priest I had no need for this faculty or facility. It can be very useful to an Abbot or Abbess to direct others in their tasks for planting things or the gardening required in a monastery grounds, but is not generally needed in a parish setting, so I did not mind when such experiences stopped.

Also some experience might not be one thing or the other in terms of what is spiritual or what might be considered normal. Childbirth for instance is a spiritual experience but it might be a fraught, painful and worrisome occasion. In the forementioned conversation with Fr John McGuckin he talked about Elder Cleopas (of Romania) who said that to divide things into a natural world and a spiritual world is a false distinction, all of life and the cosmos and the visible and invisible Creation is Spiritual. And so I aim to see the spiritual in everyday events and occurrence's.