

Faith and the Impossible God

Philip Knight argues that God is impossible but that the name of God is the name of the possibility of the impossible.

If we understand what it means to describe God as transcendent we have to accept that it is impossible to write or speak about God. All anyone can do is to convey something of the history of the human experience of God – the points in history where God becomes human: where God grasps us in our frailty and ignorance leaving us to understand the encounter whatever way we can. The only difference between claiming to speak literally about God on the one hand and claiming to speak metaphorically, drawn from some feature of our human experience of God, on the other, is that the former claim fails to notice that it can only ever do the latter. In other words, separating our understanding of the divine from our human experience of the divine seems a fruitless task.

However, when we explicitly affirm the impossibility of saying anything directly about God we may, at the same time, be saying the only thing that it is possible to say directly about God. Impossibility is literally the form God takes for us. As Peter Rollins notes, with God it is always a matter of learning how not to speak of God. (Rollins, 2006). Another way of expressing this point is made by Etty Hillesum. She writes:

I find the word 'God' so primitive at times, it is only a metaphor after all, an approach to our greatest and most continuous inner adventure. I'm sure that I don't even need the word 'God', which sometimes strikes me as a ... primitive sound: a makeshift construction. (Hillesum, ET 2002 pp. 439–440)

The word 'God' is finite. Admitting she has no need of it, Etty echoes the prayer of the Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, 'God rid me of God'. This is a prayer which, as Rollins notes, 'acknowledges how the God we are in relationship with is bigger, better and different than our understanding of that God'. (Rollins, p. 19)

The idea that we can never say anything directly about God can, for some believers, be a frightening prospect because, if it is true, in the words of Rollins, that 'speaking of God is never speaking of God but only ever speaking about our understanding of God' (*ibid.*, p. 32), a question of profound doubt immediately arises in our mind: 'How do we know that our understanding of God is an understanding of anything real, rather than something we have made up?' Or, as Rollins puts this question of doubt:

... if God cannot be adequately grasped, then how can we know for sure that what is grasping us is God? (*ibid.*, p. 33)

We can't. At this point of profound doubt the instrumentality of our religious language breaks down and certainty is lost. However, this experience of not knowing is also a theological opportunity because it calls forth the decision of faith. Only in the light of extreme doubt does faith come into its true operation. Faith is not needed when certainty reigns in our heart. Doubt, it seems, is a closer relation to faith than faith is to certainty.

Over the last four months, members of my Church's study group, have been reflecting on the history of this relationship between doubt and faith within the Christian tradition. We have been guided in our discussion by the twenty radio programmes broadcast last year by Bishop Richard Holloway called *Reasonable Doubt*. Holloway makes clear that in the context of the mutual reliance of faith and doubt the concept of an impossible God (where God's presence is known only in the experience of God's absence) is not as contradictory as it may seem.

One point made by Holloway is that it is now generally accepted by philosophers that St Anselm's ontological argument leads either to the conclusion that God's existence is impossible or

that God has necessary existence (meaning: God cannot not exist). But since necessary existence is no kind of existence any of us would recognise, this is itself another way of saying that, as far as we can tell, God's existence is impossible; or, put another way, the existence of God would be the existence of the impossible.

One way of understanding this is explained by the theologian, Paul Tillich. For Tillich, God precedes the distinctions between existence and non-existence. In his book *Theology and Culture* (1959) Tillich calls the concept of the 'existence of God' 'half

blasphemous'. For God's sake, we need to get rid of this concept. Tillich goes as far as to say, 'Genuine religion without an element of atheism cannot be imagined'. (Tillich 1959 p.25)

Just think what it means to say of anything that 'it exists'. That thing would be limited in time and space, finite and dependent for its existence on something prior to it. It would be an object of manipulation which can dissolve, erode and break. It could be analysed into its constituent parts and reduced to its causal explanation either in terms of its atomic structure or efficient cause. None of this would most religious people want to say of God. To say of anything that it exists is to imply that it once did not exist and one day will cease to exist. Anything capable of existing is also capable of not existing. For God, existence is impossible. In a passage worth quoting at length Tillich writes:

If you start with the question whether God does or does not exist, you can never reach Him; and if you assert that He does exist, you can reach Him even less than if you assert that He does not exist. A God about whose existence or non-

existence you can argue is a thing beside others within the universe of existing things. And the question is quite justified whether such a thing does exist, and the answer is equally justified that it does not exist. It is regrettable that scientists believe that they have refuted religion when they rightly have shown that there is no evidence whatsoever for the assumption that such a being exists. Actually, they have not only not refuted religion, but they have done it a considerable service. They have forced it to reconsider and to restate the meaning of the tremendous word 'God'. (Tillich *ibid.*, p. 4-5)

Part of this restatement requires the recognition

that faith is born from a profound doubt which acknowledges the impossibility of 'God'.

Consequently, the American theologian, John D Caputo (who is indebted to the philosophy of Jacques Derrida), is clear that religious faith is nothing less than a passion for what he calls the 'incognitos of the impossible'. These include the impossibilities of 'justice', of 'gift', of 'forgiveness', and of 'hospitality'. (Caputo, 2007 p.58)



Here is an example of what Caputo means: Law is the instrument of justice. The only way justice is fulfilled on Earth is through the law. But law is also a compromise of competing interests and never quite the embodiment of justice. Justice always runs ahead of law, calling upon it from somewhere unknown to update itself. It is impossible to say what this impossible justice is because when we try, all we come up with is more talk about law, which fails to stretch to cover what we want to say about justice. Law attempts to implement justice but justice transcends law. The desire for justice is more than the desire for the law but law is the best we can do at any given

time. Nevertheless, the desire for justice keeps law from historical ossification and drives us toward its better, but never final, implementation. The impossibility of justice is the beginning of its implementation not a conclusion about the futility of the endeavour to realise it.

Equally, for Caputo, a true gift is impossible since it is always caught up in an economy of exchange. Even the joy at having given without thought of return is itself a return. However, that we might strive toward justice or the pure gift makes their distorted manifestation in human law and donation possible. Like justice and gift, forgiveness and hospitality also call to us from beyond what exists to what might be but is not yet possible. It is in this sense that the impossible is the condition of the possibility of justice, giving, forgiving and hospitality. In relation to forgiveness Caputo states it in this way:

The only thing that can be truly forgiven is the unforgivable; the only condition under which true forgiveness is possible is when forgiveness is impossible. ... the unaccountable excess of forgiveness is felt when we forgive precisely those who ... are not sorry, do not repent, and do not intend to mend their ways. That is, genuine forgiveness is offered unconditionally ... exactly the way Jesus prayed for forgiveness of the Roman soldiers. (Caputo *ibid.*, p. 73 and 74)

In an earlier article, 'The Experience of God and the Axiology of the Impossible' (in M. Wrathall, 2003), Caputo had already referred to faith, hope and love as among 'the incognitos of the impossible'. Faith is most needed where faith seems impossible; where doubt seems to be the only logical response but faith is lived out despite the odds against it. Here, the impossibility of God's existence is the very condition by which faith in God, as opposed to certainty about God, is made possible. Hope is most needed where hope seems impossible; where descent into hopelessness seems the only option but where hope is kept alive nonetheless. Here, the impossibility of God's kingdom on Earth provides the vision which inspires the hope for its coming.

Out of the impossible, faith endures and hope springs. Love is most needed where the face of the unloveable is before us, where the impossi-

bility of love becomes the condition of the possibility of this unconditional gift. For Caputo, such impossibilities are most clearly shown in the living icon of the impossible God recounted in the Gospels, in particular, in the narratives of Jesus' passion. The name of God, Caputo concludes, is the name of the possibility of the impossible; 'the impossible is where we look for God.' (*ibid.*, p. 141) With this last sentiment, Don Cupitt is in complete agreement when he writes:

I begin to suspect that in the new, emergent worldview the whole realm of 'the impossible' corresponds approximately to what the Supernatural realm was in the old worldview. (Cupitt 2007 p. 88)

Without the impossible there could be no faith, hope or love: no action of giving or forgiving; no offer of hospitality or call for justice. The impossibility of God is literally the grace through which these gifts, which come from we know not where, become possible. For God, Jesus tells us through St Matthew (19:26), everything is possible. This includes, thank God, the impossible. Sin, which is always possible, both as a general condition and a personal failing, distances us (me) from the impossible, making the renewal sought in confession an ever-present need because it is all too easy for us (me) to do what is merely possible and so avoid the absolute demands of the impossible giving of love, the impossible act of forgiveness, the impossible offer of hospitality and the impossible call of justice.

References

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