

Chapter Five

My personal experience of God

If God didn't pay dividends, he'd be out-of-business.
But unfortunately, the absence of God does not make the heart grow fonder.
At least, not mine.

All the theory set forth in the prior chapters now finds an embodiment in this author's own personal story. I have been thinking about God all my life, and trying to relate to him. The following are my thoughts on the subject.

There is no doubt that what we think about God has much and perhaps everything to do with the culture we are raised in and the ideas we acquire in our family and in school and society. I was raised to be a Roman Catholic, and a staunch one at that. My whole "wiring" or "computer language" which I know is that of Catholicism, and furthermore, I studied to be a priest for years and also went to theology schools, so I have a profound training in Catholic theology.

But I also studied other religions as well as Freudian psychology and other types of psychology and sociology as well as anthropology. So I am quite aware of how the human mind works, especially in regards to God.

I can say that how we *feel* about God has a lot to do with how we feel *tout court*. My moments of greatest ecstasy have come when I experienced "blessings" from God, that is, when I felt good things were happening in my life. When bad things have happened, especially life-changes for the worse, my God-sensitivity has shut down, and I have felt God as absent or far-away. The Bible calls this "God hiding his face."

And so it is very difficult if not impossible to relate to "God" without regard to our psyche. In this too "God" is hidden, apparently unreachable in himself and outside of our own thoughts and feelings and ideas. Only the faith can detach itself, so to speak, from our minds and, in utter darkness—the mystic known as Pseudo-Dionysius speaks of God as the inaccessible light which appears to us to be darkness—relate to God, believing what it will and acting, or trying to act, accordingly. The great radical mystics employ what is known as apophatic theology, ironically meaning that the best "theo-logy" ("God-talk") can only say what God is not, or better, is speechless (which is what apophatic means). In this too "God" is unique.

I have been putting God in quotes to stress that God seems unattainable to us except as a construct of our mind, and in this sense, as a human construct, it is not really “God” *tout court* that we are relating to; we are relating to *our* concept of God, and when speaking to him, we can say that we are in the first place speaking to ourselves, just as when we speak about God, we are describing our ideas about him. Though God, if He exists, is essentially the Other, outside and not of ourselves. We best know what God is not:

A startling example [of apophatic theology] can be found with theologian John Scotus Erigena (9th century): “We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because He transcends being.”¹

So a mature, self-conscious faith is aware of all this, and yet, it is a rational option of the will and the intellect. We can choose to believe, but this is not a one-time thing except in what we can suppose are rare cases, those of the saints or other very committed persons. Faith for many involves a struggle, in many ways a struggle with God, hidden and seemingly unattainable and yet, as the Qur’an says, closer to us than our jugular vein.

The idea of God is that of a Being outside of ourselves who created the universe and us and who is benevolent and has a plan for us; we instinctively turn to him in our need, and I have developed in my mind, as so many others have, the notion that God watches over us, over me. For some reason, I have a particular propensity to think about God and to “speak to him,” though, again, I am aware of the fact that it is more humanly certain that I am speaking to myself when I do this than it is that I am actually speaking to God. But if I believe in God, when I speak to myself as if I am speaking to God, I am also speaking to God, and God is “listening.”

The purpose of this speech is first and foremost to soothe myself, and to put my thoughts in order. There is no doubt that God is found mostly and primarily in quiet and peace; I personally am not inclined to try to experience God in the exalted, rapturous, overemotional style of the Pentecostals or Catholic “charismatics,” who artificially induce exaggerated emotional states which they confuse with the presence of divinity. Certainly this is in line with ancient religious practices, but it is not for me, because it tends to obfuscate the fact that God should be kept apart from our emotional states. Or should he? Perhaps different people have different ways of trying to relate to God, to experience him, and the more intellectual or less emotional should

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apophatic_theology

not look down those who are different. And yet, I very much distrust irrationality, and I find these paths to God very irrational, and therefore those who embark upon them are prone to make many and serious mistakes of judgment.

No, my approach to God is rational, although I think I know the limits of reason. My own tradition within Christianity and Catholicism is that of Thomism and of the religious order Thomas Aquinas was a member of, the Dominicans. There one must hold fast to both faith and reason. It is a theological tradition, and theology is faith seeking understanding.

Our mental state, my own in particular, determines to a large degree how I feel about God. My reason tells me perhaps a different tale. When things are going well and everything is “in order,” or seems to be, then I experience harmony and the peace, which is said to come from God. When my things are in disorder, God seems more absent and so too is “his” peace. This I have found to be the principal reason for not committing “sins”: a sin is if anything an act of disorder, something which upsets a certain harmony and feeling of well-being. This makes us experience the distance of God, as when Adam and Eve hid in the garden after committing the first sin.

There is no doubt that proximity to God, or feeling close to him, is connected to moral behavior, in most people. One can speak of psychopaths who think God is talking to them, or who think they are divine, etc., but reason tells us that they are deluded. We can also judge crusaders and modern day religious fanatics who commit acts of violence in the name of God as very mistaken. I judge the condition or state of being close to God, or rightfully feeling that one is, as one of reason and peace and doing good deeds and being a blessing to others. I think that in the presence of a truly godly person, everyone feels something special, something good, and those who do not *ipso facto* are not good themselves, or have dark areas within which need to be purified and set right.

God has been a great enabler of good things for many people, including me. And yet, relating to God, or the journey towards God, is a never-ending endeavor in which one feels one is starting from scratch many times. It is an all-enveloping mystery, to see one’s life as the unfolding of some divine plan, which if anything reveals itself only gradually and by fits and starts. It is a work in progress, continually, a struggle and a study, which means an effort.

I like most people have very vague recollections of my earliest childhood. I was raised in a Catholic country, Cuba, where religion was dominated by the traditions of the Spanish church.

This can be described as very traditional, strict Catholicism, “untainted” by Protestantism, for neither Protestantism nor anything like it made inroads in Spain, where the Inquisition was very operative. I am somewhat glad this was the case, since I am given to things and forms of being that are “purer” and more authentic, less watered down. This is in line with my temperament, which in the Jungian-inspired Myers-Briggs typologies is “judgmental”: it likes closure and definiteness, lines which are drawn, avoiding what is fuzzy or unclear. I unconsciously learned, from an early age and before I could possibly be aware of it, a very “strong” form of Catholicism, and no one, or few, can get away from the effect of this kind of osmotic influence.

One of the advantages of this type of upbringing is that this type of Catholicism –I suppose the same could be said, or the same principle applied– to many other religions– is a coherent system “tried and true,” with a long and very impressive history of true believers who can be very inspiring. One need think only of the great sixteenth-century Spanish saints, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross. This spirituality is one with the Spanish spirit, said to have been forged during its centuries-long battles with the Moors, mystically led by one of the “sons of thunder,” the Apostle Saint James, Santiago in Spanish. From the outset this spirituality urges one to be strong and fight, to *reciedumbre de espíritu*, hardiness of spirit, but *recio* also means “severe, harsh,” and that is the other side of the coin.

We construct our memories. Freud’s great contribution to the understanding of the human mind was his discovery of the unconscious, where what we don’t like, what causes us pain to remember or think about, is repressed. And what is conscious is also shaped and organized, often into a “story” that makes sense or makes use of what we actually remember or think we remember; this tends to be neater and more coherent than the reality probably was, much like a movie usually involves extensive editing of many hours of filming, which are turned into a digestible, understandable and reasonably short final product.

I like to think –and I have held fast to this memory for many years, at least since I first wrote about it in a course at Harvard Divinity School with Richard Reinhold Niebuhr titled “The Interpretation of Religious Experience”– that my earliest recollection of an experience of God, what is known as an experience of the numinous (defined by Rudolf Otto as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a tremendous mystery which frightens and attracts at the same time), occurred before a large Spanish crucifix. I recall having wandered into a sacristy as a child of three or four or maybe five in Cuba. The sacristy is where priests dress and prepare to say Mass,

and in those days of the Fifties sacristies had something of a forbidden character, of a divine precinct where one entered on tiptoes, as it were, with reverence and even awe, which is what I experienced when I came upon the large image of the crucified Jesus, bloody and grayish with the hues of *livor mortis* in the classic Spanish style. I remember it as just that, an experience of the numinous: I was on sacred ground, like Moses with the burning bush, but tremendously attracted to the sight, and, as I remember it, even more importantly, to this person. It was Jesus, divine, suffering but victorious, God almighty. This last part are words which I add now, which have become inseparable and indistinguishable from my actual memory as I would recount it were I a sworn witness in court.

There is no doubt I imbibed this type of religiosity. I remember my first communion, which also took place in Cuba, preceded by my first confession. I prepared well and seriously for these two events, although I was not a serious student. My soul, or my psyche (it is the same word in Greek) was bent toward religion. I have a melancholy nature, given to deep things and to beauty and to introspection and depression, but also capable of being greatly moved and experiencing ecstasy. This is what has made me “religious,” and I am aware that those who do not have such a temperament may find religion less attractive, and if they are to believe or be “religious,” have to approach it differently if they are to enter that world at all. And then there is the great phenomenon called the “dark night of the soul,” where even the most sensitive and religious, or actually *especially* those, are deprived of every consolation and enjoyment which comes from the faith, so that they must relate to God, if at all, only in the darkest, most disconsolate night.

And so in my personal story, parallel in some way to that of earliest humanity, I had an experience of the numinous which marked me out as destined to be “religious” for the rest of my life. By that stage, I was hooked, forever unable to shake off thoughts of God, and of the way of looking at myself and the world which are shaped or at least highly influenced by a belief in God, as transmitted by Roman Catholicism, and more specifically, of the “Spanish” sort. Basically, it is a traditional form of Catholicism, shared really to a very large extent by most church people before Vatican Council II, with differences which would be considered minor given the big picture. In this sense, an Irish Catholic would not be very different from an Italian or Spanish or French one, although there would be many nuances if one wanted to focus on them.

This “faith” some years later became something of a bulwark in the midst of the great chaos and confusion and fighting and arguing that marked my family life while I was growing up. I could not turn to my parents; they were fighting each other, my father was no listener, and I had shut out my poor mother who was no thinker, as far as I could tell. I had no one to turn to for help in my confused plight, except God. This I did, and like so many others, experienced consolations. God paid dividends. At least with me, He was in business.

However, my character was very unstable. I had no secure emotional foundation, no fundamental sense of trust: my father was aloof, even cold when his fiery temper was not manifesting itself as it all too often did. My mother, warmth and simplicity and joy itself, I had excluded from my life at an early age, a strange and tragic decision but part of the fabric of my “family life.” I sought to escape this family, which to me, with my temperament, meant chaos and confusion, much like the abyss before creation in the Book of Genesis, only I was not God trying to order creation with his spirit; well, I was trying to do so *like God*, but being less successful than even He (remember, even God repented of having created, in Genesis 6:6-7).

My relationship with God has thus always been spotty and blotchy, almost *ab initio*, from the beginning. I say “almost” because in my earliest memories all was good, calm and peaceful, like paradise, and I guess that is why in the larger human story we remember an initial paradisiacal period, followed by a Fall. And to that garden we are all trying to get back, as Joni Mitchell wrote and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young sang. I have experienced a temporary return to this peace many times, but have struggled to make it last. In my framework, according to these religious beliefs I have described, my failure to maintain this peace better is my fault; it is first and foremost up to me to do my share, and God will do the rest. In Spanish we say *con el mazo dando y a Dios rogando*, “keep striking with the mallet (that is, keep trying and working with the large hammer) while continuing to pray to God.” But here I do not want to simplify the story too much; I want to put God on trial in this inquiry, because “it is not all my fault.”

Faith has its momentum. It gets a life of its own and orders things according to its tenets. Everything is explained according to faith by the one who has it, especially if that person is trained in theology and has had a myriad of religious experiences, including many and varied ones with people well-advanced in the ways of faith. And yet it can go dormant, hibernate, seem to just die off never to revive. Like a certain type of frog who lives in the arctic and literally freezes and stops all activity, but doesn’t die, until thawing begins after winter ends and it comes

back to life. Certain changes in the frog's body prevent damage to its cells; it is an amazing adaptive mechanism.

My faith has entered deep winters several times, and each time –or at least, this last time– it seems that it is possible it will never revive, or stay very weak and virtually meaningless and ineffective. “Faith” in this sense is basically indistinguishable from our mood, which can be happy, positive, optimistic, confident, or despondent and despairing. But in the midst of these dark moods, one can conjure up, evoke or invoke faith, and decide to believe that things can get better and that God is somehow in charge and that it is our mood and mental state that changes constantly but that it is not the whole of reality nor what determines what reality is.²

Someone once described the life of the believer in the Bible as alternations of trial and consolation, like the sweet and sour sauce which many like in the Chinese food. If it is all trial and suffering without respite, one's life becomes unbearable. Such is the lot of suicides. They tend to be depressive minds pushed over the edge by one or more final straws that break their back. Perhaps it was the diagnosis of early Parkinson's for Robin Williams. It is impossible to put oneself in someone else's place. In my journey, in this last period when I have been out of a job for many months now, I would repeat the Spanish refrain “God chokes but doesn't strangle” cynically, as not “high praise,” as something no one would put on their résumé (sardonically adding that God doesn't need to look for work). Then good things happen and the same expression takes on a different sense: God, you have tried me and are trying me, sorely, but you do give me some respite, though the journey in the dark continues, with no end in sight, with little knowledge, or none, of more than a step or two of what lies ahead. Jesus said to not worry about the morrow. That is the attitude of faith.

I am prone in many ways to the opposite. I have a deep, inborn distrust. I test others, I am cowardly, I lack confidence. These are the characteristics of the number six on the enneagram. They were raised that way, or rather, the combination of their circumstances and their natural propensities made them that way. They are afraid to break rules or displease authority. They take sides, and tend to demonize the opponent, or those who are different. And yet there is always another side. I was raised to be just, honest, sincere. I also have a choleric temperament that in many ways balances the melancholic one. The melancholic temperament gets discouraged, loses

² The Second Letter to Timothy 2:13 says that even if we are faithless, God remains faithful, because He cannot deny Himself.

its energy, gets depressed and gives up, or wants to. The choleric is rash and fearless, takes quick action, oftentimes too quick, perseveres, finishes what he or she started. These combinations, these pairs of opposites, are very biblical, and they work in tandem. So it is with the trials and consolations of “God.”

I had a cushy job and I often felt so blessed I clapped ecstatically, or euphorically. Everything was in order, neat, all my desires, at least on many levels –on the levels I thought were *mine*, as I was not someone else with other desires and blessings and trial– were satisfied. This gave me a great feeling of gratitude and bliss. I prayed, and I felt all was good in my world. But I grew lazy and comfortable, and did not see this as clearly as I should have. I certainly took few if any real steps to correct this complacency, and then the shit hit the fan.

I was in effect fired from my job. I had been in it for fourteen years. I had a beautiful office arranged according to my tastes, in my image and likeness, and now it was gone, along with many of the books I had acquired in order to perform my job as a professor of Sacred Scripture and had to give away for lack of room. This had not been just a good job, but a vocation, what I felt I had been created to do, and which I had arrived at after many, many years of floundering and failing and searching and trying, and after much effort made late in life to finally pursue my passion and calling. My world came crashing down, and with it, immediately, as with a computer shutdown, my whole relationship to God, at least on any conscious level. It was as if the divine light had turned off, and God had totally disappeared. At best, he was behind the curtain, smirking.

I could not pray. Saints continue praying, meditating, even praising. St. John of the Cross had a famous motto which came from a vision of Christ carrying the cross (which the mystic doctor drew). Christ asks John what he wants in payment of his toils and troubles, and John answers, Lord, to suffer and be despised for your sake. This is the strong work of faith. Instead of seeking to avoid suffering and to maintain a level of comfort, which is what most humans desire and strive to do, this kind of saint runs headlong to meet the feared thing, and overcomes it. John of the Cross, with the teaching of his *nadas*, “nothings” –in order to arrive at “everything” one must seek and desire nothing– has been compared and linked to Buddhism. It is a radical approach to suffering, and it is inspiring.

It inspires me, but I would say it has had little effect. I always seek comfort and fear everything. I despair and want to give up. And yet I must say that I get enough respite and

comfort to go on a bit more, to take one or two more steps, to continue the journey with little or no feeling of triumph or success, but at least still alive. For it has come down to that, whether to live or die.

I can write about my feeling that I seem to be all alone –I certainly am socially more alone than most; I have little or no family to speak of, few close friends, and I often feel that the few close friends I have I cannot rely on anywhere near to what I would like or even think I need. I live as alone as a hermit, in some ways. And now I even feel alone from God. Yet I speak to him, conscious that I am certainly speaking to myself, but basically believing that God is listening. I complain and chide him, and challenge him and give him ultimatums:

If you don't exist, I should not care about you. If you exist but don't care about me, fine, let me be, let me decide what to do, to commit suicide or not, but don't say you will judge me, much less condemn me to eternal hellfire. Have I been so bad that there is no forgiveness? Just leave me alone, officially, since this is what you seem to have done anyway.³

This I refuse to believe. At some point, deep feelings which I have alongside of those imbibed traditional Catholic ones rise up flagrantly. These are the feelings of the unloved, of those who lacked enough affection from their earliest years, whatever “enough” may mean or be in a particular case. These types of people are rebels, they are compassionate, they suffer and feel for all others who do. They understand drug taking to alleviate pain and ward off suicide, they do feel rebellious and know that Satan is supposed to have been a rebellious angel whose enormous pride was hurt, but they do not think of themselves as evil. They see themselves as victims of circumstances, who took it as long as they could.

It is a dark place to seek God. It is a lonely place, and a veteran of these experiences feels at home there although it is as little a home as any; it is a real exile, which everyone is in to one extent or another, or at least realizing it to one extent or another. There all the accouterments, all the nice wrappings, are gone, and one is alone, basically believing that God is present too, but quite hidden and letting things apparently just happen and take place and move along. One's mood changes: at times one despairs and seeks escape in drink or drug, but then one realizes that whatever the situation is, even if one is going to commit suicide, it is better to be lucid, rational, calm, whatever one is going to do. Not to mention not hung over or physically totally out of

³ This, of course, is pretty much what Job says to God, speaking for humanity.

sorts. It is better to face the void with one's senses than without them; that is definite, at least for me.

Reality is strange. I have found that the most astounding thing we humans experience is paradox, the disconnection between what is and what seems, what is and what we think should be, what we expect and what happens. How things change suddenly, for the better or for the worse, and how many if not most of those who tell their stories of tragedy tell them as tales with a happy ending, as the unexpected good came out of the unimaginable bad. These are real stories, stories about people who discovered good things in tragedies. But many of them are simply stories of faith.

Christopher Reeves played Superman and was on top of the world as an actor when a horse riding accident made him a quadriplegic. He said he devoted two hours in the morning to feeling sorry for himself. This is rationality, or psychology, at work. He dealt with a tragic situation the best he could. He found a cause, stem cell research, though he was a Catholic and the Church was against it. He had a loving, beautiful wife and got lots of support from her. He tried the best he could. Thank God his exile, his suffering, was not too prolonged; he died, and I have to think he fought the good fight. Admirable.

Another man was also paralyzed after jumping in shallow water and breaking his neck. He was Spanish, and his name was Ramón Sampedro. Javier Bardem played him in the movie *Mar Adentro*, translated as "The Sea Inside," but the real meaning is "out to deep sea, in deep waters." He was in bed unable to move anything above his neck, taken care of by his peasant brother and his sister-in-law. To them, suicide or euthanasia was unacceptable; they were more than willing to sacrifice themselves for their plighted relative, but all Ramón wanted was the help he needed to end it all.

Ramón, who wrote two books, one entitled *Letters from Hell*, the other *When I Fall*, has an effect on others; as the description of the movie states, these others, because of their encounter with him, find that they are able to do what they did not think they could. The family cared for him; the brother was indignant that Ramón wanted to die when he was so loved; the sister-in-law was more open-minded to his desire to die. A woman lawyer who has a degenerative disease joins Ramón's cause to legalize euthanasia in Spain. At the end of the movie, she is in bad physical shape, but has decided to live.

Very interesting is Ramón's friend Ramona, a simple local girl who falls in love with him and wants him to live and tries to convince him to want the same. Ramón is adamant and has arranged the implements of his death and the steps to be taken in such a way that no one aider and abettor can be held legally responsible for his assisted suicide. Ramona, a traditional country person, like Ramón brother, finally comes to the decision that real love means doing what Ramón so deeply wants, and she facilitates what he has prepared: a drink of potassium cyanide which he will be able to sip through a straw. She is arrested and freed for insufficient evidence, and some years later, after the statute of limitations has run, appeared on a TV show and said she did it for love.

The movie, like so much of art, or all good art, speaks deeply to our human condition. In Spanish we say *cada cabeza es un mundo*, "every head is a world unto itself." I cannot judge Ramón Sampedro; can I think that God will be less merciful? Or are God's ways so different, so "holy" ("holy" means "separate, set apart," in effect, different from us) that the traditional teaching that he judges stands? Well, God might judge, but we cannot know how He will judge or who God has condemned, if any. And yet I judge myself, perhaps much more than I should.

St. Paul wrote that he cared not about human judgments of himself, and that he didn't even judge himself; it was God who was judge. And yet I know I have made mistakes and must at least learn from my mistakes: they have caused me and others suffering, and surely that is a good indication, usually, of what we must avoid. I have found that wanting to be in control, especially of others, is usually the path to mistakes and offenses; we should avoid this. Being kind to others is good; this is basically a self-evident truth. Now the question is, does God help us be good, and if so, how? I will try to describe how this endeavor to be "good" is related to my personal experience of God.

I think that the basic scheme of trial and consolation—found classically in the first chapter of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians—illuminates a lot of things. When we receive good things, it can be to excess; I am thinking of how I was spoiled by my father. My father's attention imparted many good experiences and traits to me, but it also planted the seeds of great arrogance and spitefulness. Many bad things came out of my character and behavior as a result of how I was brought up; good things also came, and there is the struggle: my own personal battle between the good and the evil that is in me. Everything is in tension. Our life is all struggle, with some rest, and that is never complete.

I watch the Big Cat Diary on the Animal Planet TV channel. Lions and leopards and cheetahs prey on the kind, harmless gazelles. But when they catch their prey, they do not immediately eat; they look around, for their success in the catch is immediately followed by concern for other predators or scavengers seeking to get a piece of the action. Humans, too, when they have success experience the envy of others, and even their desire to harm. The whole experience of life seems to be that of this tension: rest cannot be absolute, except perhaps when we die, and what happens then we do not know. But in this life, we must be prepared to struggle, as loathe as we may be to do so. It is even a struggle to commit suicide, it is hard to die, and we are not even sure of what will follow.

This paradox, this built-in tension of opposites, I have found to be perhaps the most salient thing in life. God is hidden, yet the Qur'an says He is closer to us than our jugular vein. Maybe that is just a "nice thought," but the idea has worked for many. I cannot shake it off, even though my picture of the whole thing is anything but rosy. Especially after when I thought I had finally arrived at "rosy" it all collapsed stupendously overnight.

As long as we are alive, we are learning and acquiring tools which we can use to improve. This can be seen as a decision we can make, just as we can say that this "learning through suffering" is a course we want to drop out of, it is too hard. I had this experience as a sophomore in college at the University of Miami. I was in a history course with a very demanding and intimidating professor. When the first quiz came, I thought I did so badly that I dropped out. I ran into his teaching assistant a bit later, and he asked where I had been, and I told him I had dropped out. He said that I had done the best job on the quiz, which was graded on a curve, and so I had gotten an A. It should have been a lesson better learned, as I quit many things I probably never should have, but it is a lesson I still remember.

God has been like that throughout my life, playing hide and seek. It seems that this tension is the only way to grow. The Bible is a great big library full of the lessons of a most remarkable people, the Jews. I think even the New Testament is all Jewish, not in the sense that its writers rejected Jesus as Messiah—quite the opposite of course, but a Jew is often said to be required to reject Jesus as a heretic, much as most Christians reject "heretics"—but in the sense that they are Jewish in their thinking and religious foundations. The Letter to the Hebrews speaks about the unpleasant suffering that "divine correction" brings, but pointing out that it produces a

“sweet fruit of righteousness” afterwards (Hebrews 12:5-12). According to this document, even Jesus learned “obedience” through what he suffered, and was thus “perfected” (Hebrews 5:8-9).

But even Jesus met his cruel fate “kicking and screaming,” as Hebrews says in the prior verse 7. Life is so messy. Why does God allow it, even command it, to be so messy? Does his medicine not run the risk of killing the patient? “The operation was a success; unfortunately, the patient died.” Here too the believer can see just another aspect, perhaps the most arduous one, of the struggle which characterizes human life, as it does animal life. The Judeo-Christian faith provides tools, makes them available, to understand the “whole thing” in the context of biblical history, the story of a remarkable people who overcame seemingly impossible odds and survived. All, for the Christian, telescoped or summarized, encapsulated and embodied, in the life of one Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. He kept his faith and is now victorious, Christians believe.

After that “primal” experience of the numinous which I related above, when I came to be before a large realistic image of the crucified Christ, and my devout first communion, I do not recall any special moments when I felt the presence of God, although I turned to him in prayer when I felt desolate during the many times my parents fought. I even became “ritualistically religious” and celebrated Mass in Latin before school, a Jesuit prep school I attended for junior high. Then in my late teens I started taking LSD, and had almost twenty “bad trips,” “bummers,” when I became quite paranoid and experienced an intense struggle within myself between what can be described as God and the devil, a struggle for my soul. This was connected to my sexual ambivalence: I experienced homosexual and heterosexual attractions which were taboo for me, and the guilt and other deep unresolved psychological, even Oedipal, conflicts resulted in gross psychic projections and acute episodes of paranoid schizophrenia which are more fully described in my as yet unpublished book *Jacob's Struggle. A Survival Saga*. The upshot of these trips was my first great religious conversion, which led to my entry into the Dominican Order in Mexico to study to be a priest, at the age of twenty.

This conversion took place when I was nineteen. I mention this because it is halfway to the age of thirty-eight, and in my biblically-inspired view of my life, thirty-eight years is the period of seemingly useless wandering and going around in circles in the desert of exile which is said to be the time Israel spent in the wilderness according to Deuteronomy 2:14. It is also the period that the paralytic spent just lying there beside the healing pool before Jesus got him off his

ass in chapter five of the Gospel of John. I had another great religious conversion at the age of thirty-eight which is when I began to be aware of the action, or the presence, of God in my life.

Even as a Dominican living religious life as a friar with “simple” (temporary) vows, I do not recall any particular moments when I felt God particularly present. Perhaps it is just bad memory. My first startling experience of God’s presence took place in my apartment in Cambridge, MA, towards the end of my first year of law school. The psychological circumstances were possibly dubious: I had just come out of a three week period of drug use and was emerging from depression and being in a daze. I was starting to feel good and experienced a certain euphoria and the “harmony of all creation.” This good feeling seems to have suddenly reified or otherwise “created” an oppressive presence which I could only interpret as being God. I was aware of Freudian projection and paranoia, and seriously considered for a moment that I was going out of my mind, but I was not that out of control and rejected that possibility. I decided –I made a judgment– that it was God who had entered the room in a palpable, frightening manner, which gave way to the thought that such a powerful, weighty being could not be evil, for if it were, it would have crushed me.⁴ No, this Being was not playing with me, he was visiting me, for my good. I went to confession the next day and, although my newly found “religion” after leaving the Dominicans and embarking on a path that I wanted to be atheistic did not last very long (I did not keep all my good resolutions made at the time), I have since thought to myself that it would be hard, even impossible, to doubt that God exists after that experience. But I have indeed had my doubts subsequent to it.

My second great conversion in 1991 at the age of thirty-eight did not include any particular sensation of God’s presence, I mean in any remarkable, deep way. I felt God was working in me, but most of it or all of it was in the nature of moral reform and not ecstatic experiences. Oh, I did have some of these a few years before, but I think they were induced by mere human happiness at the thought that I would return to the Dominicans and to the life that I originally was destined for and gave up. This turned out to be an unrealistic dream. I do not consider these quite subjective states as serious candidates for a feeling that God was present and working, beyond what can normally be felt.

⁴ Interestingly, the Hebrew word for “glory” and “honor” (*kavod*, applied often to God) means in the first place to “have weight, be weighty.”

For a discussion of when I felt God was obviously –at least to me– acting, I have to move forward to 1994, when I had left a second religious order, this time the Discalced Carmelites, or more exactly, had been asked to leave because I ‘lacked the vocation’. I was despondent at first, but upon returning to Miami from Spain, where I had suffered a lot while with these Carmelites and gone through a veritable dark night of the soul, I felt I had landed on my feet. It seemed that the experience, begun in some way at the age of thirty-eight with the second conversion which led me to the Carmelites, had finally produced good fruits: I had matured past a “critical point,” my years of wandering aimlessly in professions I did not like or felt called to were finally over, and I was on my way to better things. I felt God was acting for my salvation; that was a thought I had and felt strongly, that God, the higher Power, wanted my good, obviously, and that good things were finally going to happen. And they did.

I had gone through a lot. I had spent fifteen months in the Dominican Republic living in very poor circumstances: great heat with no fans (ac was unthinkable), mosquitoes and mosquito nets, little or no running water, great dust, out in the countryside with little to do except study, and that I did with amazing passion (Greek and the Bible). Then on to Spain, where conditions were in my view luxurious, or at least extremely rich with culture and history, in the magical city of Toledo, and in Madrid, studying at the seminary, but where I was badly treated by my superior and humiliated at every turn. I was not welcome, and this was extremely painful, and I was finally dismissed, but now back in Miami everything was coming together marvelously.

I got a good job as an attorney and had an exciting life and was making money. It was not my calling, but after two years, I was inspired to finally pursue my vocation, the study and teaching of Sacred Scripture. I went to Rome to study the Bible, and this was an unimaginable dream come true.

The circumstances were surreal, in the sense of “above what is real.” I as usual, after a period of euphoria about being an attorney in a nice office making decent money –the “dream” I had had when I went to law school, but which was just that, a dream in the evanescent sense, and not something real, as I had no real vocation to be an attorney– was miserable in my job and felt that my career as an attorney was on shaky grounds. Suddenly, a beautiful and brilliant woman friend, whom I had met in Rome seven years before when she was studying there at the Gregorian University, came to visit me. She was my confidant and muse, and as she perused my notebooks of biblical translations I had made from the Greek and Hebrew, she exclaimed that the

study of Scripture was my passion, and suggested I go to Rome to get a degree in it. Shortly after I met her, I had written to her expressing my desire to lead the kind of life she led in Rome, but she had told me then to consider carefully whether it was not just a whim born out of frustration rather than a real plan. Now she was inspiring me to do it!

I did go to Rome, and those were heady days, as I told myself: I had enough money to embark on the adventure, although I had no idea of how long it would last. I looked desperately for housing, and all doors were shut almost violently in my face. A Jesuit whom my friend had asked to help me did not, facilely dismissing my desire with the ironic expression “God is the God of losers,” offering little or no consolation as he implied I was a loser. I returned home empty-handed, quite dejected and wondering if the God who had seemingly inspired such a wonderful dream –to study His Word and then teach it– had been fooling with me, giving me a taste of glory before dumping me on the ground.

A Dominican from my Mexico days was a professor of canon law in Rome, and throughout our many years of friendship, when I had expressed either a desire to return to the Dominicans or to study theology, had always told me to keep my day job and think of theology merely as a hobby, not as a way to earn a living. Sound advice which I myself had followed, unwisely, as I could have gone to divinity school at Harvard instead of to law school way back when and could now be a tenured professor. I called the priest in Mexico, where he was for the summer vacation before returning to Rome to teach, and this time he said that if I had been admitted to the Gregorian and housing was my only problem, to go, that everything would be resolved. I took this as a sign from above; the man’s advice had changed, and he too was encouraging me to pursue this dream.

I did return to Rome and did get excellent housing cheap; the Dominican had found me a place. I got to live my dream. I spent three years in Rome and finished my doctorate. It was not all easy or fun; I had most difficult moments, but one thing was very different: I was doing what I loved and felt I had been born to do, created and destined by God for this purpose. My passion and love carried the day and overcame all difficulties, sooner rather than later. It was an amazing healing and integrating experience, although it involved struggle the whole way. I got a “license” in theology (a bit higher than a master’s), but for the doctorate, I had run out of money, and had to do all the paperwork and procedures to get my new university to participate in the student loan

program, so that I could then apply for a student loan myself. This was accomplished, again seemingly at the last minute, and I finished the work for my doctorate in just one year.

I returned to Miami and got two part time jobs teaching the Bible, at the University of Miami and at the Catholic regional seminary for Florida a bit to the north. After a year, the seminary hired me full time. I had accomplished my dream: I was no longer a miserable attorney but a very happy professor of Scripture at the master's level. I began my full time job with a new car and a new apartment, and paid off my student loan quickly. I was in hog heaven.

After a few years, when I had become more integrated as a person and had experienced more continuous happiness than I ever had had, I sought some counseling and, in an introspective period of my life, began perusing my mother's letters to me when I was a Dominican in Mexico, as well as my letters to her; my mother had died thirty years before, but she had kept all my letters and I had kept hers, and now I could read and compare them. I discovered, or rediscovered as a middle-age man, the mother I had shut out so many years before, and I also realized to an extent never fathomed before how cold I had been to her, and how loving she was. This led to an uncanny feeling of her presence as being in the glory of God, in an abyss of love and bliss, into which I was given the chance to plunge for a bit, some ten days actually, in which I experienced closeness to God as if back in my mother's womb, but renewed and mature, a sort of return to paradise: it doesn't get any better than that. It was a marvelous, healing and integrating experience, and it changed my life in some ways. But almost ten years later, a new pharaoh came to the seminary, did not renew my yearly contract, and I was plunged into my darkest depression and sense of utter hopelessness.

My spiritual computer shutdown. Perhaps its antivirus software was defective, or its capacity insufficient, or the operator lazy or incompetent or rebellious, but a shutdown there was. All my beautiful thoughts and feelings about God, all the many memories of so many things "we had done together" vanished overnight, completely deleted, becoming something belonging to a distant, far away past no longer available or palpable. And I am still not out of this rut, which has led me to question God and the whole God-thing, which is a principal reason I am writing this book or long essay. The process of writing it, as happened with *Jacob's Struggle*, has helped me to clarify many things and to take positions, not artificially or by dint of force, but naturally, as my thoughts take shape and my mind and spirit work these things out. I have a feeling about where I stand, but there are missing parts, unintegrated thoughts and decisions, or incompatible

ones to which I am still attached. But it seems the momentum is there to resolution. The problem, however, is that for me resolution requires a measure of personal success and financial stability, and these are still nowhere in sight, and may never be. At my stage of spiritual development – and I can't say that my views are unreasonable or wrong– God must show his face and do something. Or let it be declared that he is of little use. I think I have put the ball on his court. Let's see what happens.

If God didn't pay dividends, he'd be out-of-business.
But unfortunately, the absence of God does not make the heart grow fonder.
At least, not mine.