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God’s Absence is Not Nothing:

Thinking the Ab-solute Otherwise

By

Ashley Gay

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Division of Religion

Theological Studies

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M.A., Andover Newton Theological School, 2011

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Abstract

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The discourse of God’s absence alters both (1) the mission and manner of our thinking about God, and (2) our conceptions of holiness as separation. The holy as ‘set apart’ cannot be distinguished as an object present to possessive thinking, nor an object presented to others as absolute truth. Therefore, holiness—as conceived in discussions of God’s absence or absolution—does not legitimate separation as invulnerability. Correspondingly the designation of God as “absolute” must be read apophatically as “ab-solute” to mark what *ab-*sence does to theological thinking. In conversation with philosophers and theologians, this dissertation argues that the ab-soluteness of the holy critiques our claims of:

* Abstraction—as if God were an essence, accessed only in one’s rejection of mortality (Rosenzweig)
* Univocality—as if God were a calculation, universally accepted and adequate to our thinking (Heidegger)
* Ideology—as if God were an idea that could be digested, possessed, or forced, for our satisfaction (Weil)
* Totality—as if God were preserved by negating the transcendence of beings, or by evoking the neutrality of Being (Levinas)
* Purity—as if God were the basis for false dichotomies (Lacoste)
* Ultimacy—as if God’s unambiguous reality rendered us capable of unambiguously representing God (Tillich)

These are *illusory* modes for any thinking the holy. God’s holiness, as ab-solute, withdraws from these illusions; however, God’s *elusive* absence is not their negation, nor sheer nothingness. Because the holy’s ab-solution is neither reducible to God’s presence to thought, nor adequated to our thinking of absence, it forges another mode for thinking: the *allusive*. The allusive mode thinks the way in which God’s absence takes on a certain presence in our encounters with alterity. These encounters with alterity—whether poetic, aesthetic, ethical, liturgical, or symbolic—allude to the God that both eludes and refigures the desire for relationship. Holiness thus becomes the possibility to host what eludes thinking, even as this ab-solution entices thought into its most rigorous patience and humility. God’s absence is not nothing. It is rather the gift of an expansive evacuation that opens thought, not to security or satisfaction, but to love.

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I would like to first thank the poet, and unwitting theologian, Christian Wiman. We met on a few occasions at Andover Newton Theological School—more noteworthy to me than to him, no doubt. On a more recent occasion, I met him in *[His]* *Bright Abyss*. There he suggests that one’s “expressions of regret about [the] inability to rest in God” can have a “tinge of self-satisfaction, even self-exaltation to them.”[[1]](#footnote-1) He notices:

There is nothing more difficult to outgrow than anxieties that have become useful to us, whether as explanations for a life that never quite finds its true force or direction, or as fuel for ambition, or as a kind of reflexive secular religion that, paradoxically, unites us with others in a shared sense of complete isolation: you feel at home in the world only by never feeling at home in the world.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Thank you*,* to Christian Wiman, for reminding that dissatisfaction and restlessness do not, in themselves, allow thinking to become more like love. My mind often flexes at each opportunity to note a distinction, an exception, an exclusion, a contrary; but he has pointed me toward a possibility I had nearly forsaken: community without totality.

To the community of the International Churches of Christ, who taught me—as a child—a love for scripture’s proclamation, if not inadvertently an awareness of its abuses.

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2. Ibid., 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)