

MAY 25

Dear Chris,

If I wait any longer to write about God's absence, it will seem like I am avoiding the issue; I myself will start suspecting it. I am glad I have waited, though. For we seem to have come closer on an issue that is decisive for how I think about God's absence: the nature of the relation between God and the world.

A divide between God and the world, even a separation between the two, was from the beginning your major concern with my understanding of God. I, in turn, was uneasy with what I perceived as a merger of the two, approaching even to God's dependence on humans for existence. This divergence between us was first on the list of concerns and questions in your last letter. And yet, it looks like we are not far apart. If you affirm the *ontological* divide between God and creation, then we differ largely only in language and emphasis. We are both against the separation of the two in reality. I've written a whole book arguing that God's coming to dwell in creation, to make it the home of all creatures and be at home in it, is what God created the world for. This is what happens decisively and, according to the Christian tradition, uniquely in the particu-



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larity of the human body of Jesus Christ, the fully human and fully divine One.

For me, as for many theologians, the ontological divide between God and the world does not imply separation at all; to the contrary, it makes God's most intimate union with creatures possible. Rowan Williams and our colleague Kathryn Tanner make this point powerfully. On our side of the ontological divide, if two entities want to occupy the same space, they will jostle with each other for that space. If one wins, the other will lose. Not so with God and a creature. God can be inside me without having pushed any of me out; God can irradiate me from within into a liveliness that is properly my own and yet God's doing—and a liveliness in which I both act and do not “achieve” the result. This is how Luther describes God's presence in human lives in *The Freedom of a Christian*. I see some affinity between your experience of writing poetry and such divine irradiation of the self: Something moves through you when you write; you have written your best poems, but there is “no pride” for the result. But when you describe your experience, God and you seem exclusive alternatives, as if in this process there is no room for both God and you; “something” other than you “made the poem.” At





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the level of experience, this surely feels right. But at the deeper level, this must be wrong, both in your writing of poetry and in God's coming to dwell in creatures. For Luther, as for many Christian theologians before and after him, both God and humans are active at the same time. To use an ancient metaphor, the relation between God and the self is like that of heat and an iron that has sat in fire; the iron is glowing hot on account of the source of heat outside of it, and yet the heat is also the iron's.

In Genesis, a noncompetitive kind of relation between God and humans is constitutive of our humanity itself, and not merely of our agency as humans: God breathes God's breath into Adam and thereby makes him human. Echoing the story of Adam's creation, the Psalmist says something similar of sparrows and blades of grass:

When You hide your face, they panic,  
You withdraw their breath and they perish  
and to the dust they return.  
When You send forth Your breath, they are created,  
and You renew the face of the earth.





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The presence of God in the very fabric of a creature translates existentially into a certain kind of awareness of God's presence at all times. In one of my favorite Psalms, we read:

Where can I go from Your spirit,  
And where from before You flee?  
If I soar to the heavens, You are there,  
if I bed down in Sheol—there You are.  
If I take wing with the dawn,  
if I dwell at the ends of the sea,  
there, too, Your hand leads me,  
and Your right hand seizes me.  
Should I say, “Yes, darkness will swathe me,  
and the night will be light for me,”  
darkness itself will not darken for You,  
and the night will light up like the day,  
the dark and the light will be one.

*Because* of the ontological divide, God can be closer to creatures than they are to themselves—to borrow a phrase from Augustine that strikes me as substantively a bit off but rhetorically





correct. *Because* of the ontological divide, there is existential inseparability: God is always everywhere the creature goes. All of this has bearing on the problem of God's absence.

I am mostly in a state of faith—it is a strange phrase, “state of faith”; more common is “state of grace,” but I think that we are all always in the state of grace—but sometimes I fall out of a state of faith, often when I am struck by the absurdity of life or troubled by the rivers of tears and blood with which history, like the lacerated and pierced body of the crucified Christ, bleeds. At those times, doubt does not, as usual, just grumble under its breath against the faith that is in charge but rises up to pull faith down from its throne. Like a chimera, God then disappears into nothingness. You might think that I would feel distress at God's absence. I don't, and I don't fully understand why, given how much God means to me. I do feel distress in that state, but not over God's absence, perhaps because such distress would presume that God could and should be present and make a difference. With God gone, the “should” of God's existence and help is gone, too. In my unbelief, God is not far. God is not idle. God just isn't. My distress is a sense of cosmic motherlessness. I don't just *feel* motherless. I *am* a motherless person who would like to have had a mother but never did and never will. I am alone, with





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a friend or two, in my little boat on the open sea. The friends are mostly good company, which is something. But they are as helpless as I am against the terror of the raging sea. No God is sleeping on a cushion in our boat that is about to be swamped. Nobody I could wake up to rebuke the wind and say to the waves: "Peace! Be still!" Sometimes I wish I could be a fatalist, as was my uncle during the war in Croatia in the 1990s. When Osijek, the town in which he lived and in which I was born, was under artillery fire, he would stand on the balcony of his fourth floor apartment and observe the spectacle. If a projectile had his name on it, it would find him wherever he was.

Though it seems at times and for a while to be dead, a dethroned faith is not dead, at least in my case. Unbelief's naysaying has to keep my faith from rising up, and for my unbelief to stay alive, it needs to feed on faith. I have never come into the kind of unbelief in which the negation of God would be unnecessary, like the ideal case of atheism for Karl Marx, in which God never even comes to mind so as to become an object of negation. Dethroned faith is not entirely passive. It whispers into unbelief's ears the tales of life's possibilities and often turns doubt against itself: doubt doubting doubt. More important than this occasional self-undermining of doubt is the discovery





that I make again and again: Even when God disappears for me, I don't disappear for God; when I have no faith in God, God still has faith in me and remains faithful.

In *The Invention of Religion*, an extraordinary book about the story of Exodus, Jan Assmann suggests that after years of slavery and exploitation, the Israelites had actually forgotten God. When they “groaned under their slavery, and cried out,” they were not crying out *to* God but just crying out in pain and despair. Though not directed to God, their cry “rose up to God”: “God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.” Unbidden, God comes to the rescue, though the puzzlement remains that God showed up, according to the narrative, only after 430 years of exile and much cruel abuse.

That's my experience of God's absence and God's arrival when I am in the state of doubt. When I am in a state of faith, God's absence from me, understood literally, is ruled out. As long as I am, I know that God is present to me. If God were not, I would not be. As a believer, I use the language of absence not to designate the “departure” of the God who ought to be with me, but the failure of God to do what I think is right to expect





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God to do. I haven't done a careful study of God's "absence" in the Bible—there I go again, back to the book you are tempted to call unholy—but in many cases that's what absence means there, too. When a devout person cries to God in Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" they don't mean "Why are you not here spatially?" but "Why are you sitting on your divine hands with your mouth shut when I need you the most? Either do something or explain yourself!" Similarly, when the question appears in the mouth of the mockers in Psalm 42, "Where is your God?" they don't mean primarily "Why is God not present?" but "Why is the God whom you trust not intervening when you are crumbling under the onslaught of the enemy?" It is significant that the Gospels read Jesus's experience on the cross with the help of both of these Psalms.

Though God is never absent, I often *feel* that God is absent, most palpably, in fact, when I pray, as I mentioned earlier: The words start their journey on sound waves and quickly dissipate into airy nothingness. I know that God is not absent, but in my experience, the "space" that God should occupy is empty. I don't have a need to *feel* God's presence. I don't write this with the smugness of an enlightened theologian: We who know who God is and how God is, we know that God isn't an object in





the world and therefore cannot be felt. I am not actually sure that the inference is right, that God cannot make it that humans can feel God and that God does not feel. I always admired my mother for having a very intimate, though often difficult, friendship with God. She told me that it took her years and long hours in prayer to begin to feel God's presence and to come to hear God speak, and that even after she had learned to feel and hear God, she sometimes had to wait longingly for God to show up and, when God showed up, to hear God speak. In the times of waiting, she did not think that God was absent and could not hear her, but that God was not there *for her*. A bit like her husband, on whom she knew she could always rely but who was often emotionally unavailable to her, even when he was sitting right next to her and listening to her.

I don't have the experiences with God that my mother had, though I wish I did. Still, looking back at my life, I don't think that God was ever absent, that God was ever not doing what God was supposed to do. Maybe that's because I have not suffered enough, not looked death in the face as you have. (But then, the seas have not always been calm for me either.) Maybe that's because I have not been fully existentially invested in people or projects to be utterly devastated when failure or loss came. (But





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then, I cannot imagine loving more some people I have lost.) Maybe that's because my expectations of God were too low to be disappointed. (But then, everything I have I experience as God's gift, and I can easily imagine God giving me more and better gifts.) Maybe some rosy spectacles are permanently fixed on my face, like the green ones everyone received before entering Oz's Emerald City. (But then, given how self-aggrandizing evil is and how horizon-defining is even its mere prospect, what exactly does it mean to give both the good and the evil their proper due in memory and attention?)

Early on in my life, it was seared into my soul that, God or no God, losses, sometimes horrendous, will come. By the time I was born my mother had given birth to four children, three of whom tragically died; a child that came into the world after me was stillborn. Our lives are not in our control, and whoever controls them rarely seems to have our best interests in mind. If I don't hold lightly things that are very dear to me, in losing them I will also lose myself, a point Kierkegaard elaborates in *Either/Or* by retelling the story of Margarete and Faust. And even before I myself am lost, without such lightness much of my love itself would be tarnished and twisted. I can never love rightly the things that I hold too tightly for the fear of losing



them, because then, while I still have them, my love will be too grasping and self-undermining. (The adverb “lightly” is inadequate, but I am not coming up with a better one. In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer struggles with the issue and opts for “detachment,” which I think is dead wrong. I am looking for a word that would signal two attitudes at the same time: “I’ll do anything for you!” and “If I were to lose you, I’d be deeply wounded but not destroyed.” My relation to the object of my love is not unmediated attachment and fusion; it is mediated in part through will. I am fumbling to express a human analogue to the divine kind of love: unconditionally invested and generous, but not dependent.)

Though I have never been able to trust the world fully, I have come to trust God, for the most part. That trust is not an inference from the trustworthiness of the world to its transcendent cause, but an existential wager on the primacy of goodness, the world’s untrustworthiness notwithstanding. I trust God even when God isn’t doing what seems reasonable to think that God should do. While insisting that God is love, unconditional and unalterable, I accept that I don’t know what it is that I have the right to expect from God. That’s what I find in the book of Job.

In an earlier letter, you wrote, tersely and powerfully as only



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you can, that the book of Job “enacts, rather than explains, the shock of God.” Some interpreters—you are among them, if I am not mistaken—think that if we read the body of the book together with its introduction and conclusion, the happy ending cushions conveniently the shock. (I leave aside here the question of whether Job’s recompense at the end is too naive, and whether Job’s first family appear in it, as you put it, simply as “collateral casualties for Job’s illumination.”) As I see it, the book has a happy ending, but with a crucial and deeply disconcerting twist. The ending seems to match the beginning, with a surplus, as if his righteousness were part of some commodity exchange: Money→Commodity [tested righteousness]→Money', where the prime stands for increased return. But that’s not quite right. For part of his illumination is the realization that the ordeal can happen again any moment despite anything he does. (I found this reading of Job’s ending first in an unpublished essay by Sameer Yadav and then later saw that Rowan Williams had suggested it in *The Tragic Imagination*.) Written with only the one ordeal in view, the book, without bookends, *is* a scream and a prayer, as you put it, or, with its bookends, might be read to offer a cheap consolation. But how would a sequel be written if the second ordeal were to happen—after Job has had all his arguments with





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God, after God has made the speech from the whirlwind, after he had seen God and acknowledged his own nonunderstanding? That's the disturbing question with which the book leaves me. It occurred to me that, perhaps, we have an answer in the way the crucifixion of Jesus is rendered in the New Testament.

After the countless ordeals of history—my own are negligible and almost beside the point—I am left with two options. I can recognize soberly that there is no God who could calm the storm, and that cursing God in misplaced anger would only implicitly affirm the existence of the One who just isn't. Or, I can make a wager on God and the primacy of goodness, while knowing that the ways of God with the world are enveloped in darkness. With Job, I embrace this second option. I trust God, notwithstanding, without expectation that God will do otherwise than God actually does and therefore without experiencing God's absence. Still, I do hope that our colleague and my good friend Keith DeRose will succeed in showing that the slaughter bench of history and God's goodness are somehow compatible, that one can actually narrate God's defeat of evil. Even if he does, the wager of trust will still be necessary. My trust is not based on the conviction that "everything happens for a reason" but, to match this worn-out phrase with another





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one, that “God knows how to write straight even on crooked lines.”

Since I am writing about trust, a digression about “faith,” to address one of your concerns in the last letter: When Luther says, in *The Freedom of a Christian*, “If you believe, you shall have all things,” a claim about faith which troubles you in this text, “believing” doesn’t mean primarily “holding some claims about God to be true,” although that is involved, too, but, above all, “entrusting your life to God.” In his *Lectures on Galatians*, Luther likens faith to the prongs on a ring that hold the diamond, which is Christ. For him, faith or believing is always an existential act and never a mere doxastic attitude. The second part of that treatise is all about love, which trust in God and holding Christ make possible. The whole treatise is about love, I think, answering the question of how one comes to love with the right kind of love.

Because I trust God, I also hope in God. Hope is trust on its tiptoes, said Charlie Moule, a Cambridge New Testament scholar of the previous generation, whom I read as a teenager. In the course of living out the wager of trust, I have come to believe, mainly under the influence of Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope*, that hope isn’t a reasonable expectation that some determinate positive goal, the





hope's object, will become reality. Instead—and this, too, comes from Luther—hope is a way of living into the future with objects of expectation themselves only vaguely and tentatively known. And lightly held, too, with a readiness to recognize as the hope's fulfillment even things that weren't explicit in expectation. In *Lectures on Romans*, Luther puts concretely what I have just stated abstractly: Hope, he writes, transfers a person “into the unknown, the hidden, and the dark shadow, so that he does not even know what he hopes for.” And then, miracle of miracles, in the arrival of that which was beforehand not known or not fully known, I recognize with joy the object of my hope! The paradigmatic case of such an arrival is the advent of Christ as the Gospels narrate it. He both fulfilled and transformed hopes. Does any of this make sense?

Before I sign off, I should comment briefly about another separation that you see in my letters, the one between humans and animals (which, some would wrongly claim, is of a piece with the separation between God and the world). I, too, reject that separation but affirm the distinction. Biologically, humans are animals; theologically, they are creatures and belong to the community of creation. I don't deny the consciousness or intelligence of other animals. How could I, given how smart my





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favorite creature, the octopus, is?! But I take it that no octopus, elephant, or pig (to name two more very smart animals) asks itself “What *should* I do?” and “Who *should* I be?” Because I ask these questions, I can read Rilke and Nietzsche, worry about my life in light of their thought, and possibly change its direction or insist that one or the other is mistaken. That is what I meant by the claim that humans are “nature that consciously relates to itself and others.”

Miroslav

PS. I would really like to know how you think about idolatry. What is it? How much do you worry about it? In a future letter I will respond to your comments about Luther’s *The Freedom of a Christian*. The worst of Luther—his frequent bitchiness—is just about the best he does in the text, I hear you saying. I feel obliged, by my respect for Luther and Marilynne Robinson, to respond to the provocation!



JUNE 12

Dear Miroslav,

I didn't know we shared an affinity for the octopus. In Sy Montgomery's book about the octopus, she describes being taken by the hand and very carefully guided to an octopus's lair as if to a home showing, then taken on a tour of the more interesting places of the reef where it lived. I'd say this is a creature that probably does ask itself "What should I do," and I wouldn't want to bet against it asking "Who should I be?" Though I still don't find those questions determinative of consciousness or selfhood, and certainly not closeness to God. At the end of her book, Montgomery says, "If I have a soul—and I think I do—I am sure the octopus has one as well."

There are roughly 8.7 million classified species in the world. Scientists estimate that there remain 5 million that have not been discovered. Include microbes and bacteria, and that number jumps to a trillion. Who knows what these creatures at the bottom of the ocean or in the as-yet-undestroyed reaches of the forests are thinking or not thinking? Who knows what part they play in the unity of the universe? One thing is certain, though, they exist in relation to their creator before they



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have anything to do with us. (I'm watering down Rowan Williams's brilliant thoughts on this subject.) Christianity has to outgrow its notion that the universe is a theater in which we are the stars. We may very well, with nuclear war or environmental catastrophe or some insidious AI, wipe ourselves off the face of the planet. And the world will go on working, and some resilient creatures will go on with their enigmatic lives, and God will be there for and in them.

I do not understand; but I believe.

Jonquils respond with wit to the teasing breeze.

—John Berryman, “Eleven  
Addresses to the Lord”

Perhaps one thing I am coming around to saying is that it's a mistake to always read nature through scripture. The “book of nature” precedes the Good Book, after all, and we might do well to use it as a lens to clarify the latter. For instance, I have wondered (and still wonder) how you explain the crucifixion of Christ, how God could be in two places at once without being two gods. Quantum physics suggests a way of reading that





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event. Just as position and momentum split under observation, so that we can never know both at the same time, perhaps our perception of God at the moment of the crucifixion and resurrection depends upon our focus. Look one way, and God is a noun (position), crucified on Golgotha and entirely dead. Look another way and he is a verb (momentum), an unceasing energy that can wrest life from nothingness. And just as with physical reality, each manifestation of God is an absolute truth, or, if you prefer (and I do), a relative truth that we experience absolutely.

We are still some way from each other with regard to the absence of God. You see it as a perception of absence, a failure on the individual's part (if I am reading you correctly). I see it as a reality—God died on the cross, and at times in our lives, and in the life of a culture, he is equally absent. This has nothing to do with circumstance, or at least is not determined by it. I have felt close to God in the midst of great physical suffering. But we—by which I mean we modern people—are not simply “wrong” when we perceive the absolute absence of God in our time. When Bonhoeffer says we are called to live in a world without God, or when Simone Weil says that absence is the form God's presence takes for us now, or when Marilynne Robinson shows the soul's loneliness to be a natural phenomenon as real and ineluctable as





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gravity (I'm thinking of *Housekeeping*, a book that does seem to read scripture through nature)—all are expressing not a failure of consciousness but a kind of culmination. Part of God's reality is unreality, in that it is forever beyond our perception. This need not lead to despair (though Lord knows it can). "Sumptuous destitution" is the provocative phrase of Dickinson's, and all of the writers I just mentioned are attuned to the volatile goneness of God. But he is not in abeyance, so to speak, not waiting in the wings for us to turn and recognize him. God is dead. God is our salvation. God is a noun. God is a verb. But I'm not sure we can know the truth of one without knowing the truth of the other.

Which leads me to your question about idolatry. It has occurred to me—how could it not?—that my emphasis on the absence of God may be a form of idolatry.

Try to remember this: what you project  
Is what you will perceive; what you perceive  
With any passion, be it love or terror,  
May take on whims and powers of its own.

—Richard Wilbur, "Walking  
to Sleep"





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I try to be aware of this—my last book’s subtitle was, after all, “Fifty Entries Against Despair”—and try to cleave to the hope you articulate so well. (Moltmann says hope is what faith matures into.) But God’s absence has been, both in my own life and in the lives of so many famished souls of the past century and a half—too obdurate and implacable a fact to wish away as a matter of perceptual limitation.

In any event, the issue of religious idolatry is more interesting and immediate to me than other forms. Money, fame, power, the circumscription and exaltation of the self—these are the old bugbears, obvious and easily identified (but how hard to kill!). But when God himself becomes an idol, that’s when the issue becomes especially prickly and difficult to disentangle. After a talk I gave at a divinity school some years ago, a well-known theologian came up to me and offered, not kindly, to instruct me in theology so that I wouldn’t continue to disfigure God. I felt like a medical intern being reprimanded for putting the patient in danger. In the twenty years (!) that I have been writing and thinking more directly about theological concerns, I have encountered this form of intellectual idolatry often. Theology is a lot like poetry in that it requires a renewable innocence. Implicit in the most powerful and convincing theology one hears





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a whisper, *I don't know*. (It will embarrass you, but I think of you as a model in this regard.) The theologian protecting her province (and God!) from me, the conservative public figures proof-texting scripture to justify their cruelties, the liberal leaders warping the Bible to accommodate contemporary social concerns, my own inclination to make God and art one thing—idolatries, all.

*Every* statement about God is provisional (including this one). On our last walk we talked some of Gianni Vattimo and his theory that nihilism is the ultimate expression of Christ's life and message. I find this more provocative and helpful than you do, though I do think "nihilism" is the wrong word (love survives in Vattimo's schema), and I don't really think that nihilism is the final fruition of Christ and his message, because there is no "final" fruition to be had. But to think of Christ as the "great unmasker," as Vattimo puts it, to think of his life as God's complete assent to the incarnation, that is, to be completely material—might not this be seen as a development of Bonhoeffer's ideas of a religionless Christianity? Bonhoeffer didn't want to do away with the church—he was an orthodox Lutheran pastor, for goodness' sake. It was *metaphysics* that Bonhoeffer wanted to be freed from—in essence, it was that wholly internal movement





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of “faith” that Luther described and demanded. As Bonhoeffer writes,

God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The god who is with us is the god who forsakes us. The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, *the only way*, in which he is with us and helps us. (Italics mine!)

Sometimes I wonder, Miroslav, if my very obsession with God is an idol, if life is not meant to be this single-minded chase. Maybe grace, for some, is God forgotten.

But that’s not the note I want to end on. No, I have had two experiences recently that make all this *thought* about God seem like so much guff. Or do they actually confirm it? You be the judge.

Last week I went to New York for a few days to reconnect with an old friend, who flew in from Chicago. We have both had tempests in our lives of late, and we are both deeply committed





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to God, so our conversations were focused and stimulating and consoling. One afternoon we were seated at a café on the Upper West Side discussing, coincidentally, Bonhoeffer and his ideas about Christ. A homeless man kept edging up to the table trying to catch our eyes. I thought from the way my friend was positioned he couldn't see the man and, not wanting to interrupt the conversation, I kept my eyes scrupulously unfocused. The man edged this way and that before finally giving up and moving on. "Talking of Jesus while ignoring a beggar," my friend said immediately. I was so shocked that he was aware of the man that I lied and said I hadn't noticed him. How suddenly and wholly the vileness of our natures can make itself felt, saturating our selves like a drop of ink in clear water. Even telling the story here I shift to the general (*our!*), when what I felt at the moment (and have felt intensely since) was deep shame that extended to every limit of my being. And stopped there. I didn't include my friend; my self-saturation wouldn't let me. That man was *exactly* what Bonhoeffer meant by religionless Christianity—God in the world as not-God, Christ's life in us (or not) as love for others, not a whiff of metaphysics to it—and what Vattimo means by the persistence and possibility of love. I memorized the books and failed the test.





Then this: I had a follow-up PET scan in Boston a few days ago. For PET scans you are strapped onto a table so you won't move at all during the procedure. I often fall sound asleep (and sometimes twitch disastrously) but this time spent every minute in prayer. I prayed first for that man in New York and for forgiveness (which, of course, I had already done), and then I found myself praying for people in my life, sliding from one to another almost will-lessly, and then I found myself (again, I felt guided) simply praying without words, alert to God's presence—inextricable from his rational absence—in the whirring machine, the technician's voice, my own illuminated cells. Before God and with God we live without God? That sounds about right.

Chris

PS. I wasn't dismissing Luther's work in toto. I don't know it well enough to have a meaningful opinion about it. I was simply questioning the *literary* achievement of *The Freedom of a Christian* and only because Marilynne rates it so highly. (I assume she was reading it in English.) Luther would no doubt say that the



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whole question is, given the stakes and circumstances, irrelevant. And he would be right.

(By the way, I do realize that Luther was stressing the existential component in faith and not some doxastic alignment. *That* is what I am lamenting, that this internal action, which after all these centuries remains obscure—what, exactly, does it mean to “love” God? what does this internal assent *look like?*—has acquired such primacy and consequence in our lives. It does not feel like “freedom” to me.)