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The Presence of God and the Presence of Persons

James Kellenberger

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To Anne

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1

Introduction

Abstract In this chapter the book’s primary theme—the structural similarity between the experience of coming into the presence of God and the experience of coming into the presence of persons—is introduced, as is the secondary theme of the structural similarity between the “death of God,” a felt loss of the reality of God and his presence, and the “death of persons,” a loss of the sense of the inherent worth of persons and their presence. A main focus of this book is on persons, and this suggests an alignment with the philosophical school of personalism. However, as this chapter makes clear, the approach of this book is significantly different from personalism in its various forms. This introductory chapter concludes with a description of the subjects and concerns of the thirteen chapters that follow.

Keywords The presence of God · The presence of persons · The structural analogy between the experience of the presence of God and the experience of the presence of persons · The death of God and the death of persons · Personalism

This book is about the presence of God and the presence of persons. The religious notion of the presence of God will be recognized by many who are acquainted with the traditions of Judaism and Christianity. The presence of persons will be less familiar. Yet the two are conceptually similar, as we will see. The two are related in that as we can speak of coming into the presence of God as is done in the Psalms, for instance in Psalm 95, so we can speak of coming into the presence of persons, although this is not a biblical notion. The first is a religious experience open to those in theistic traditions. The second is an experience open to human beings independently of religious commitment. A main thesis of this book is that the two experiences have a structural similarity that makes them analogous.¹ In the nineteenth century and later the death of God became a plangent theme. In one of its meanings it too can be experienced. Another thesis of this book is that the experience of the death of God in this sense has a mirror experience that is the death of persons.

Perhaps an initial word about the relationship between the concerns and the approach of this book and personalism is in order. Personalism is a school of philosophical and theological thought with both European and American roots that gives central importance to persons. In the past it has been suggested to me that I belong to this school. It is not clear to me, however, that this is an honor I can accept, though I too give central importance to persons, as this book's discussion will make clear.

Personalism is not a single well-defined set of principles, beliefs, and concerns. Rather it is a range of philosophical views, some metaphysical and some ethical, that relate in some way to persons and personhood (or "personality"). Cheikh Mbacke Gueye observes that "[d]efining personalism is a very difficult undertaking, if not an impossible one."²

Various personalist principles or concerns that have been or are held by personalists can be identified:

¹In an earlier book *Relationship Morality* I discussed coming into the presence of person but not coming into the presence of God and a fortiori not the structural analogy between the two.

²Cheikh Mbacke Gueye, "Introduction," in *Ethical Personalism*, ed. Cheikh Mbacke Gueye (Frankfurt, Paris, Lancaster, UK, and New Brunswick, NJ: Ontos Verlag, 2011), p. 8 [electronic resource].