

# God

## Thinking about God in new ways

*Explorers in faith have produced some radically new perspectives on God*

GOD has been getting a fascinating press of late. In the past three decades, books have been published giving God a farewell, a history, a biography – and a future rather different from the past.

For most of Christian history, tackling the subject of God in these ways would have been unthinkable. It is hard to imagine any of them being written 100 years ago.

But the books I am referring to are serious and constructive contributions to thinking about God in new ways. Furthermore, they are written by people who have not given up on the church, though the church authorities may have given up on them.

The authors felt compelled to write them because the world has changed so much that some of the old ways are well past their use-by date; and if the notion of God is to be as pivotal in human thought and action in the future as it has been for most of recorded history, there is much rethinking to do.

The farewell to God comes in a book by Anglican priest and former Cambridge University lecturer Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (1980). Somewhat surprisingly, the title is adapted from a 14<sup>th</sup> century German mystic and Dominican theologian, Meister Eckhart: “Man’s last and highest parting occurs when, for God’s sake, he takes leave of God.” Is there nothing new under the sun?

Cupitt’s farewell, however, is not to the whole Christian tradition, but to the view within it of God as a being independent of humanity, with an objective existence and a metaphysical life of his own (some would say “her own”). Cupitt says God is not real in that sense, but is still “for real” in any genuinely religious life. That is an important distinction. Eckhart would surely have approved.

Giving God a history is another novel departure. Traditionally, God is beyond history, though the human experience of God obviously occurs within history.

Yet a former nun in England, Karen Armstrong, felt sufficiently detached to be able to describe the changing ideas and experiences of God over 4000 years, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Her book *A History of God* (1993) is an invaluable contribution both to current explorations into a new understanding of God and to inter-faith tolerance.

Even more startling is *God: A Biography* (1995), by a former American Jesuit priest turned journalist, Jack Miles. The intriguing thing here is that Miles analyses the character of God in the Hebrew scriptures – the Old Testament of the Christian Bible – not as the object of religious belief, but as a literary creation.

God, he says, is not the same at the end as at the beginning. His character changes as he tussles with himself and with the humans he has created in his image. He moves from action in the five books of Moses, to speech in the 21 books of the prophets, and in the 13 books of the Writings is simply assumed. The overall effect is of a many-sided and sometimes contradictory character, created cumulatively by a host of Jewish writers over many hundreds of years.

Closer to home is Wellington Presbyterian minister, former university professor, and one-time principal of Knox College in Dunedin, Lloyd Geering. In *Tomorrow's God* (1994), he finds a viable future for the word "God" as symbolising "the set of values and aspirations which we (subjectively) find laying a claim upon us".

People would then use the word not to refer to a supreme being in a supernatural world, but as a point of reference for their lives, a focus of meaning, a means of affirming something about themselves.

These approaches, all very different, are examples both of a widespread dissatisfaction with traditional ways of understanding God, and of the conviction that the ideas are too important to give up without a struggle. The common element is that for many people, thinking about God with integrity in the modern world demands a radically new perspective.

Of course there are countless other books by authors seeking to convince themselves and others that God cannot and will not change, and the key to a life of faith is to believe all the old things in all the old ways. The churches, in official statements and in worship, by and large endorse them.

That, it seems to me, is the major religious tragedy of our times.

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