

## Updating our ideas of God

*Our concepts of God have evolved and are still evolving*

IT IS an occupational hazard for columnists that someone out there will read into a piece a meaning they never intended, even something they were careful not to say, and then attack the chimera.

So it was with a column last month that sought to distinguish between superstition and what I called “good” religion. The adjective concedes that there can be bad religion, which would include religion that takes no account of new knowledge and broader understandings as a culture evolves.

It is clear from the definition of superstition which I quoted – “a belief or practice for which there is no longer any rational basis, because it has survived from the cultural context where it could be deemed reasonable” – that bad religion can spawn superstition. And no question, some religious people are superstitious. But this column is about exploring good religion and a concept of God relevant to life in a secular world.

The very words “religion” and “God” are like red rags to a dyed-in-the-wool atheist, and more than a little suspect to agnostics. Usually those reactions stem from the way they understand the terms – which, to be fair, is the way they are still overwhelmingly used in church worship.

But a lot has happened to both concepts over the past century which neither the critics nor many traditionalist defenders may be aware of – or if they are, they rule any new interpretations out of bounds.

One correspondent, for example, saw the word “God”, missed the qualification “the best current understanding of the word ‘God’”, and found my attempt to unhitch religion from superstition “hilarious”. He protests that I “must realise that there is no more evidence for the existence of your god than there is for planetary positions influencing human lives.”

If the correspondent thinks of God as a being in his own right, existing independent of humanity and all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving – that is, as the God of theism – then I don’t argue for that God’s objective existence either. Those who have most to say about such a God are, at one extreme, fundamentalist Christians/Muslims/Jews, who need him to guarantee security, and at the other, fundamentalist atheists, who need him to stay that way so they can keep knocking him down.

But between those poles, many liberal-minded Christians are uncomfortable with that traditional concept. Some shrug their shoulders and quietly back off, but others are convinced that deep in the religious quest there is still gold to be mined, and look for new interpretations so that they can continue to use the word “God” with integrity.

Most suggestions by cutting-edge theologians move away from the idea of God as *a* being, even a personal being, towards that of an influence, energy or spirit underlying reality, impelling life forward in endless evolution. Among the more comprehensible are God as the ground of being, or underlying intelligence, or life force, or the process of the world’s creative unfolding, or nature.

Other theologians highlight the personal aspect, locating God not in a mystical heaven but in human relationships, and especially in ethical behaviour. So God is good. God is love. God is

the sum of our highest aspirations and values. God is what grips us as our ultimate concern. These virtues must make a difference to the way people live, or it is all empty verbiage. But when they are lived, they exist; and in that sense God exists today as vigorously as ever. Traditional Christians should have no problems with any of those attributes, but that is not the way they understand the “existence” of God. They need a real being, or source, to attach them to – and so do polemical atheists, because if God is not thought of as objectively real, they have nothing to fight about.

Both groups, however, should be open to the notion that concepts of God can evolve – Christians because they see that happening in the pages of their Bible, atheists because biology, anthropology and other sciences show life on Earth to be constantly evolving, generally for the better; so why not God?

My correspondent also objects to “metaphorical theology”. To which I would answer that it is a bit rich for an apparent atheist to set literalistic limits on the way the word “God” as symbol may be used – and may evolve – in our secular world.

Indeed, as modern religious thinking moves away from literalism, it must embrace metaphor to convey in our time what the old forms expressed in theirs.

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