

Creating God

Once it was assumed that God created us. Actually, it's we who create God

AN interesting divide is opening up between people who believe that God created them, and those who prefer to say it is they who create God. So far the divide is narrow and only half-realised, but it is certain to grow wider over time.

The first of these propositions is so deep-rooted, and so much flows from it, that it comes as a jolt to realise that it is a long-lasting hangover from the science of the ancient Middle East; and as such, it is not a requirement for religious faith today.

The belief that God created human beings stems from the days when religion provided a full set of answers to the questions which people have always asked themselves about how the world came to be, and about human origins, purpose and destiny.

In the pre-scientific era the responses naturally centred on God, whose existence and power were taken for granted as part of the order of things. God was assumed to be a real being with an existence independent of this world. He (always he in those days) was holy, almighty, everlasting, but ready to intervene in this world to touch people's lives, influence the affairs of nations, even tweak the weather.

Within that world view traditional ideas of God made perfect sense, and for centuries they served people well. Anything that had no straightforward explanation could be attributed to God, from illness and earthquakes to bumper crops and victory in battle. Whatever happened, the faithful could be persuaded that it must have been the will of the God. Such ideas are not dead, but they just will not do any more. The advance of scientific knowledge and the inroads of secularisation have made that understanding of God redundant.

That is not the end of God, however, but the opportunity for a new beginning. One fruitful place to start is the idea that it is human beings who create the one who (or that which) will be God for them, not the other way round.

That is not a new concept, nor one that most churches will particularly welcome; but the more one thinks about it, the more obvious it becomes. It explains why views of God are so many and varied, ranging from the profound to the zany. None of them has any traction, however, till a person accepts a particular view, internalises it, and begins to live in light of it.

The concept a person affirms may be of a liberating and loving God, or a martinet who makes them feel perpetually guilty, or of a quixotic tyrant. It may be of a distant creator, an intimate father figure, or an abstract energy or life force. It may come to some people through the teaching of a church, to others through a quirky reading of certain Bible passages, to others again through a powerful experience of something beyond them. Some of those ideas are healthy and life-promoting, some are diabolical. Whatever, the decisive moment comes when people give their subjective assent to a particular understanding of God, develop it for themselves, and will that God to shape their lives. (The same is true, incidentally, for those who dismiss anything and everything to do with God. They create the God they don't believe in, in such a way that they feel honour-bound

to reject it. As an American preacher told a sceptic, “If I believed God was like you say he is, I'd be an atheist too.”)

It is not always obvious that what people are doing in this way amounts to creating God.

They would say they have accepted a view of God, not created it. However, assent to a view of God which others have prepared for them – even of a God they could not have created – is a kind of kitset creation. It becomes a force in their lives only when they absorb it fully and let their creative imaginations loose on it. In that sense, the God they worship is still the God they have created.

At first blush, that seems to reduce the idea of God to the realm of fantasy, and to make it so subjective that it ceases to have any general validity. Certainly those are dangers, and have been throughout history.

But to consciously and deliberately create the one who (or that which) will be God for us can also be a pivotal life-affirming experience. In future columns I shall suggest ways that help make it so.

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