

The divine derrière

“We visualise and experience God’s effects, not God’s being”

IT seems that in the ever-changing world of fashion, bottoms are again tops. Dunedin fashionista Fiona Ralph urges a return to “the glory days of the 90s supermodels . . . voluptuous, healthy, womanly goddesses with big hair and beautiful curves”. Billboards of All Black Dan Carter in his underpants are designed to make young men more bottom-conscious, too.

Wellington’s *Dominion Post* recently added spice to the allure with a teaser on “divine derrieres”. Why divine, I wondered. In our secular age, what makes a derriere divine? Has divine lost its old association with the holy? Is it becoming just another word for sexy? Traditionally, cultures have attributed divinity to the best, the highest and the deepest of life’s experiences and values – those that open up a total mode of interpreting life in general and inspire people to live accordingly. The shape of a woman’s bottom is hardly a substitute for that.

As the connoisseurs of bottoms extol the attributes of this new divinity (and assess the variety for marketing purposes), they will be blissfully unaware that the Bible beat them to the divine derriere – on a rather more elevated level, naturally – by about 3000 years.

I came across the phrase in a book by American Episcopal (Anglican) bishop John Spong. He was making the case for moving beyond thinking of God as *a* being, which is the core of theism, towards a non-realist concept where God is not real in the everyday sense of the word, but is still very much “for real” in human experience.

He points to an incident in the story of the Jews’ escape from slavery in Egypt where their leader, Moses, demands to see God face to face. This is a step too far for God (conceived, of course, as a real being watching from outside the world and ready to intervene on behalf of his people whenever circumstances required).

So God suggests a compromise: if Moses will cover his eyes and hide in a cleft in a cliff, he will pass by him. Moses can then open his eyes and glimpse God’s “hindquarters”, as one translation puts it. More recent translations respectfully tone this down to “his back parts” or simply “his back”.

Taken literally, the idea of the divine derriere has nothing to commend it. Ministers would be stretched to preach a sermon on the topic. But as testimony to the allusiveness of God and of all God-talk, the incident has much to offer. As Spong says, “we visualise and experience God’s effects, not God’s being”.

In a secular world which for all practical purposes has moved beyond supernaturalism, it is less and less helpful to keep on defining God as if he were *a* being. Rather is it necessary to highlight the experience of Godness in daily life – which may be shared by many who never go near a church – and to explore that.

There’s an echo of that in a poem by New Zealander Gregory O’Brien, where he writes of “the one unknowable thing”: *It soars/ it brushes against us,/ traversing the difficult hours/ without form/ or features/ with nowhere to stand or lean.*

As this allusive, non-realist God grows in the human imagination, the theistic God of the Bible cannot but wither. That way of thinking about God was compelling over many

centuries. Clinging to it in the secular world of the West is nudging the churches steadily into irrelevance.

Hence the most urgent item on every church's agenda today should be how to make non-theistic sense out of the experiences that the Bible depicts theistically. But it is not.

As traditionally presented, the theistic God offers security, comfort, protection and rescue; the allusive, non-realist God encourages people to acknowledge the radical insecurity of life and yet face it with hope.

The theistic God laid down firm rules for living; the non-theistic God is the central symbol of community values such as respect, trust, responsibility, mutual dependence.

The theistic God is identified with love and compassion, so making love sacred; for the non-realist, says Spong, "the God who is love is slowly transformed into the love that is God".

The God of theism is *a* being; of non-theism, immersion in being itself – so you meet this God not in any after-life but by embracing life in the here and now.

None of those non-theistic experiences and emphases is new. It is the way they are explained and interpreted that is changing. They no longer depend on a theistic God.

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