

How we create God

Our secular world has four major aids at hand to help in creating God

EVERYONE who has a concept of God has come to it out of their own life experience. That is why no two people's concepts are identical, though there will be many similarities arising out of common cultural and religious traditions.

In an earlier column I suggested that when people internalise a view of God so that it becomes a force in their lives, they have in effect created who or what will be God for them.

Some object that that reduces God to a figment of the imagination. Others say it makes the idea of God so subjective that they cannot see how it can serve any useful purpose. Some will dismiss anything that does not have the authority of the Bible or a church to reassure them. Others will reject anything that does.

The point here is not whether any idea of God is as good as any other – that is clearly not so – but that people are increasingly claiming the autonomy to make up their own minds. That has to be a good thing, since the socially assumed or imposed religion of past generations has made it almost impossible for some people to see what a positive force faith can be.

What has not withered away is a sense of the spiritual, however vaguely defined. The question for secular people is how to get in touch with that sense and cultivate it to enlarge and enhance their experience of life. How, in short, do they create God for themselves?

For those whose roots are in the Christian West, there are four powerful aids to creating God in a way that will be worthy of the name.

The first, perhaps surprisingly, is the secular culture itself. Religious experience must be real and rooted in the world to hand. For those who take the secular culture seriously, that dispenses at a stroke with speculation about the supernatural, heaven, the devil, the after-life and so much else of the mental furniture that was part of Christianity in the past (and for many, still is). For all practical purposes, this world is all there is, and it is through life in this world that we shall experience all that we shall ever know of God.

A second element in creating God is other people. If people are going to fulfil their potential, they need others to help them do it. For alongside the western emphasis on the importance of the individual is the equally important fact that identity and character are formed through a kaleidoscope of relationships, which mould people in a variety of ways. Especially significant are the close, determinant relationships that free them to be self-giving. Again and again, it is in the electric spaces between man and man, man and woman, woman and woman that the essential spark of Godness is to be found.

Those aids are in the present. The third lies in our past, for in every aspect of life the present can be understood only in terms of the cultural heritage from which it grows. This is especially true in matters of religion; and since in western countries the formative

influence has been the Judaeo-Christian tradition, it is both natural and fruitful to continue to quarry there.

But the quarrying must now be done in an appropriately secular way. The Bible is to be valued not as the indelible words of God, but as the record of more than 2000 years of people's responses to what they sensed of God's actions and purposes, in accordance with the way they understood God in their day.

Those responses are many and varied, and are often at odds with each other. What is consistent in both the Old and New Testaments, however, is the way people struggled to think through their life and times in the light of the God to whom they had given their allegiance, and made subjective, and so created for themselves.

In this way their God became for them the ultimate reality, the steady centre, decisive for the way they thought, lived and viewed the world. For Christians this reaches a climax in the life and teachings of Jesus, his crucifixion, and the conviction of his early followers that that was not the end but a new beginning.

That process of engagement is the fourth essential ingredient in creating God for the third millennium. The way to honest faith is the same in a secular age as it has been in every other age: to engage with one's faith tradition while refusing to be bound by past formulas, and to engage with the day-to-day events of the world while refusing to be submerged by them.

It can be scary. But the upside makes the risk worth taking.

February 22, 2005

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