

AS A CHILD, I had a number of strong religious beliefs but little faith in God. There is a distinction between *belief* in a set of propositions and a *faith* which enables us to put our trust in them. I believed implicitly in the existence of God; I also believed in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the efficacy of the sacraments, the prospect of eternal damnation and the objective reality of Purgatory. I cannot say, however, that my belief in these religious opinions about the nature of ultimate reality gave me much confidence that life here on earth was good or beneficent. The Roman Catholicism of my childhood was a rather frightening creed. James Joyce got it right in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: I listened to my share of hellfire sermons. In fact Hell seemed a more potent reality than God, because it was something that I could grasp imaginatively. God, on the other hand, was a somewhat shadowy figure, defined in intellectual abstractions rather than images. When I was about eight years old, I had to memorize this catechism answer to the question, "What is God?": "God is the Supreme Spirit, Who alone exists of Himself and is infinite in all perfections." Not surprisingly, it meant little to me, and I am bound to say that it still leaves me cold. It has always seemed a singularly arid, pompous and arrogant definition. Since writing this book, however, I have come to believe that it is also incorrect.

As I grew up, I realized that there was more to religion than fear. I read the lives of the saints, the metaphysical poets, T. S. Eliot and some of the simpler writings of the mystics. I began to be moved by the beauty of the liturgy and, though God remained distant, I felt that it was possible to break through to him and that the vision would transfigure the whole of created reality. To do this I entered a religious order and, as a novice and a young nun, I learned a good deal more about the faith. I applied myself to apologetics, scripture, theology and church history. I delved

into the history of the monastic life and embarked on a minute discussion of the Rule of my own order, which we had to learn by heart. Strangely enough, God figured very little in any of this. Attention seemed focused on secondary details and the more peripheral aspects of religion. I wrestled with myself in prayer, trying to force my mind to encounter God, but he remained a stern taskmaster who observed my every infringement of the Rule, or tantalizingly absent. The more I read about the raptures of the saints, the more of a failure I felt. I was unhappily aware that what little religious experience I had, had somehow been manufactured by myself as I worked upon my own feelings and imagination. Sometimes a sense of devotion was an aesthetic response to the beauty of the Gregorian chant and the liturgy. But nothing had actually *happened* to me from a source beyond myself. I never glimpsed the God described by the prophets and mystics. Jesus Christ, about whom we talked far more than about "God," seemed a purely historical figure, inextricably embedded in late antiquity. I also began to have grave doubts about some of the doctrines of the Church. How could anybody possibly know for certain that the man Jesus had been God incarnate and what did such a belief mean? Did the New Testament really teach the elaborate—and highly self-contradictory—doctrine of the Trinity or was this, like so many other articles of the faith, a fabrication by theologians centuries after the death of Christ in Jerusalem?

Eventually, with regret, I left the religious life, and, once freed of the burden of failure and inadequacy, I felt my belief in God slip quietly away. He had never really impinged upon my life, though I had done my best to enable him to do so. Now that I no longer felt so guilty and anxious about him, he became too remote to be a reality. My interest in religion continued, however, and I made a number of television programs about the early history of Christianity and the nature of the religious experience. The more I learned about the history of religion, the more my earlier misgivings appeared justified. The doctrines that I had accepted without question as a child were indeed man-made, constructed over a long period. Science seemed to have disposed of the Creator God, and biblical scholars had proved that Jesus had

never claimed to be divine. As an epileptic, I had flashes of vision that I knew to be a mere neurological defect: had the visions and raptures of the saints also been a mere mental quirk? Increasingly, God seemed an aberration, something that the human race had outgrown.

Despite my years as a nun, I do not believe that my experience of God is unusual. My ideas about God were formed in childhood and did not keep abreast of my growing knowledge in other disciplines. I had revised simplistic childhood views of Father Christmas; I had come to a more mature understanding of the complexities of the human predicament than had been possible in kindergarten. Yet my early, confused ideas about God had not been modified or developed. People without my peculiarly religious background may also find that their notion of God was formed in infancy. Since those days, we have put away childish things and have discarded the God of our first years.

Yet my study of the history of religion has revealed that human beings are spiritual animals. Indeed, there is a case for arguing that *Homo sapiens* is also *Homo religiosus*. Men and women started to worship gods as soon as they became recognizably human; they created religions at the same time as they created works of art. This was not simply because they wanted to propitiate powerful forces; these early faiths expressed the wonder and mystery that seem always to have been an essential component of the human experience of this beautiful yet terrifying world. Like art, religion has been an attempt to find meaning and value in life, despite the suffering that flesh is heir to. Like any other human activity, religion can be abused, but it seems to have been something that we have always done. It was not tacked on to a primordially secular nature by manipulative kings and priests but was natural to humanity. Indeed, our current secularism is an entirely new experiment, unprecedented in human history. We have yet to see how it will work. It is also true to say that our Western liberal humanism is not something that comes naturally to us; like an appreciation of art or poetry, it has to be cultivated. Humanism is itself a religion without God—not all religions, of course, are theistic. Our ethical secular ideal has

its own disciplines of mind and heart and gives people the means of finding faith in the ultimate meaning of human life that were once provided by the more conventional religions.

When I began to research this history of the idea and experience of God in the three related monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, I expected to find that God had simply been a projection of human needs and desires. I thought that “he” would mirror the fears and yearnings of society at each stage of its development. My predictions were not entirely unjustified, but I have been extremely surprised by some of my findings, and I wish that I had learned all this thirty years ago, when I was starting out in the religious life. It would have saved me a great deal of anxiety to hear—from eminent monotheists in all three faiths—that instead of waiting for God to descend from on high, I should deliberately create a sense of him for myself. Other rabbis, priests and Sufis would have taken me to task for assuming that God was—in any sense—a reality “out there”; they would have warned me not to expect to experience him as an objective fact that could be discovered by the ordinary process of rational thought. They would have told me that in an important sense God was a product of the creative imagination, like the poetry and music that I found so inspiring. A few highly respected monotheists would have told me quietly and firmly that God did not really exist—and yet that “he” was the most important reality in the world.

This book will not be a history of the ineffable reality of God itself, which is beyond time and change, but a history of the way men and women have perceived him from Abraham to the present day. The human idea of God has a history, since it has always meant something slightly different to each group of people who have used it at various points of time. The idea of God formed in one generation by one set of human beings could be meaningless in another. Indeed, the statement “I believe in God” has no objective meaning, as such, but like any other statement only means something in context, when proclaimed by a particular community. Consequently there is no one unchanging idea contained in the word “God”; instead, the word contains a whole

spectrum of meanings, some of which are contradictory or even mutually exclusive. Had the notion of God not had this flexibility, it would not have survived to become one of the great human ideas. When one conception of God has ceased to have meaning or relevance, it has been quietly discarded and replaced by a new theology. A fundamentalist would deny this, since fundamentalism is antihistorical: it believes that Abraham, Moses and the later prophets all experienced their God in exactly the same way as people do today. Yet if we look at our three religions, it becomes clear that there is no objective view of "God": each generation has to create the image of God that works for it. The same is true of atheism. The statement "I do not believe in God" has meant something slightly different at each period of history. The people who have been dubbed "atheists" over the years have always denied a particular conception of the divine. Is the "God" who is rejected by atheists today, the God of the patriarchs, the God of the prophets, the God of the philosophers, the God of the mystics or the God of the eighteenth-century deists? All these deities have been venerated as the God of the Bible and the Koran by Jews, Christians and Muslims at various points of their history. We shall see that they are very different from one another. Atheism has often been a transitional state: thus Jews, Christians and Muslims were all called "atheists" by their pagan contemporaries because they had adopted a revolutionary notion of divinity and transcendence. Is modern atheism a similar denial of a "God" which is no longer adequate to the problems of our time?

Despite its otherworldliness, religion is highly pragmatic. We shall see that it is far more important for a particular idea of God to *work* than for it to be logically or scientifically sound. As soon as it ceases to be effective it will be changed—sometimes for something radically different. This did not disturb most monotheists before our own day because they were quite clear that their ideas about God were not sacrosanct but could only be provisional. They were entirely man-made—they could be nothing else—and quite separate from the indescribable Reality they symbolized. Some developed quite audacious ways of emphasiz-

ing this essential distinction. One medieval mystic went so far as to say that this ultimate Reality—mistakenly called “God”—was not even mentioned in the Bible. Throughout history, men and women have experienced a dimension of the spirit that seems to transcend the mundane world. Indeed, it is an arresting characteristic of the human mind to be able to conceive concepts that go beyond it in this way. However we choose to interpret it, this human experience of transcendence has been a fact of life. Not everybody would regard it as divine: Buddhists, as we shall see, would deny that their visions and insights are derived from a supernatural source; they see them as natural to humanity. All the major religions, however, would agree that it is impossible to describe this transcendence in normal conceptual language. Monotheists have called this transcendence “God,” but they have hedged this around with important provisos. Jews, for example, are forbidden to pronounce the sacred Name of God, and Muslims must not attempt to depict the divine in visual imagery. The discipline is a reminder that the reality that we call “God” exceeds all human expression.

This will not be a history in the usual sense, since the idea of God has not evolved from one point and progressed in a linear fashion to a final conception. Scientific notions work like that, but the ideas of art and religion do not. Just as there are only a given number of themes in love poetry, so too people have kept saying the same things about God over and over again. Indeed, we shall find a striking similarity in Jewish, Christian and Muslim ideas of the divine. Even though Jews and Muslims both find the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation almost blasphemous, they have produced their own versions of these controversial theologies. Each expression of these universal themes is slightly different, however, showing the ingenuity and inventiveness of the human imagination as it struggles to express its sense of “God.”

Because this is such a big subject, I have deliberately confined myself to the One God worshipped by Jews, Christians and Muslims, though I have occasionally considered pagan, Hindu and Buddhist conceptions of ultimate reality to make a monotheistic

point clearer. It seems that the idea of God is remarkably close to ideas in religions that developed quite independently. Whatever conclusions we reach about the reality of God, the history of this idea must tell us something important about the human mind and the nature of our aspiration. Despite the secular tenor of much Western society, the idea of God still affects the lives of millions of people. Recent surveys have shown that ninety-nine percent of Americans say that they believe in God: the question is which "God" of the many on offer do they subscribe to?

Theology often comes across as dull and abstract, but the history of God has been passionate and intense. Unlike some other conceptions of the ultimate, it was originally attended by agonizing struggle and stress. The prophets of Israel experienced their God as a physical pain that wrenched their every limb and filled them with rage and elation. The reality that they called God was often experienced by monotheists in a state of extremity: we shall read of mountaintops, darkness, desolation, crucifixion and terror. The Western experience of God seemed particularly traumatic. What was the reason for this inherent strain? Other monotheists spoke of light and transfiguration. They used very daring imagery to express the complexity of the reality they experienced, which went far beyond the orthodox theology. There has recently been a revived interest in mythology, which may indicate a widespread desire for a more imaginative expression of religious truth. The work of the late American scholar Joseph Campbell has become extremely popular: he has explored the perennial mythology of mankind, linking ancient myths with those still current in traditional societies. It is often assumed that the three God-religions are devoid of mythology and poetic symbolism. Yet, although monotheists originally rejected the myths of their pagan neighbors, these often crept back into the faith at a later date. Mystics have seen God incarnated in a woman, for example. Others reverently speak of God's sexuality and have introduced a female element into the divine.

This brings me to a difficult point. Because this God began as a specifically male deity, monotheists have usually referred to it as "he." In recent years, feminists have understandably objected

to this. Since I shall be recording the thoughts and insights of people who called God “he,” I have used the conventional masculine terminology, except when “it” has been more appropriate. Yet it is perhaps worth mentioning that the masculine tenor of God-talk is particularly problematic in English. In Hebrew, Arabic and French, however, grammatical gender gives theological discourse a sort of sexual counterpoint and dialectic, which provides a balance that is often lacking in English. Thus in Arabic *al-Lah* (the supreme name for God) is grammatically masculine, but the word for the divine and inscrutable essence of God—*al-Dhat*—is feminine.

All talk about God staggers under impossible difficulties. Yet monotheists have all been very positive about language at the same time as they have denied its capacity to express the transcendent reality. The God of Jews, Christians and Muslims is a God who—in some sense—speaks. His Word is crucial in all three faiths. The Word of God has shaped the history of our culture. We have to decide whether the word “God” has any meaning for us today.

Note: Since I am looking at the history of God from the Jewish and the Muslim as well as the Christian perspective, the terms “BC” and “AD,” which are conventionally used in the West, are not appropriate. I have therefore had recourse to the alternatives “BCE” (Before the Common Era) and “CE” (Common Era).