

THE POWER OF IMAGES

By MONICA FURLONG

I REMEMBER a fashionable agnostic couple I knew in the sixties who decorated the wall of their sitting room with victorian texts they had collected. Embellished with forget-me-nots, anemones and roses the texts issued their warnings about idle hands and lying tongues. What has remained most clearly in my mind, however, is a drawing of a huge eye accompanied by the words 'Thou God Seest Me'. This was the image of God the spy, or anyhow the victorian governess, privy to the most intimate secrets, hostile audience to the dreadful shame of being human.

It was an image of God that deserved to be mocked. Compare it with an image of God from Meister Eckhart. 'If you were to let a horse run about in a green meadow, the horse would want to pour forth its whole strength in leaping about the meadow. So too it is a joy to God to have poured out the divine nature . . . into us.'¹ God the voyeur becomes a God of exquisite grace, energy and ecstasy.

In an effort to grasp the ineffable truths of what God might be like, the best that images, our own or other people's, can do for us is to give us a glimpse or rather a glancing impression. From such impressions, lovingly collected, we have to make our own picture of God, and simultaneously we are making sense of our situation in the world. If God is a victorian governess then we know we have to be wary and fearful, if a judge then we need to mind legal niceties and worry about conviction, if a father then we may be childlike, if a mettlesome horse then we may be spontaneous, and so on. Even the most debased image carries some truth—there is a sort of 'strictness' in the way the universe is ordered that visits retribution upon us (if only in the sense that we may become ill or socially ostracized if we flout conventional wisdom), just as there is joy and spontaneity. The trick seems to be not to cling rigidly or idolatrously to particular images but to recognize when to change from one to another, in the quest for energy and creativity.

In our western culture it is both our fortune and our misfortune (a bit like the fortune and misfortune of very rich people) to live with a compost of religious experience rendered down by centuries

of christian living, a compost made of varying parts of Old and New Testament and of our traditions of holiness. The pictures of God that come to us through this sort of silting down are familiar enough—God the judge, king, ruler, chooser of Israel, God as father; Jesus as baby, teacher, shepherd, way, son, priest, king, initiator of the kingdom, broken body, raised body; Holy Spirit as wind, fire, dove, the divine wisdom.

Although the biblical images dominate our thinking about God, yet where we experience very acutely, and the experience chimes with our knowledge of God, there new images begin to arise. Eckhart idly watches a horse in a field and becomes transfixed with a vision of God's outflowing energy. Julian of Norwich watches a woman feeding her baby, or subconsciously remembers her relationship with her own mother, and 'knows' that Jesus is like a mother feeding her infant, carrying the soul to his wounded side.

John Locke would approve of this view of images.

Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? To this I answer, in one word, from experience. In that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself.²

Locke's picture of knowing the world through the senses has its own poetry and good sense, yet the overwhelming conviction of religious people is that, far from being like pieces of white paper when we are born, we arrive, like Wordsworth's child 'trailing clouds of glory', that is with prior experience and a hard to define kind of 'knowing'. Devoid of language at first, we are also devoid of one of the tools of memory; impossible to say therefore, what, if anything, we were thinking as we lay for the first time at our mother's breast or kicked inside her womb. Because religion is so often involved with a sense of eternity however, people of faith easily believe that infants carry some knowledge of the past into this world—I am not the only mother who felt when she first held her baby in her arms that she was looking upon someone as ancient as time who knew all the truths that she had lost in the course of living.

It is, I realize, a sense of eternity that moves me most profoundly whenever I feel it—in dreams, in art, in prayer, in love, in

landscape, particularly landscapes like the Australian Bush which are relatively unmodified by humans. These are some of the places where images of God are formed, or rediscovered, as they wait patiently in the seams of the mind like opals in a mine. Suddenly the opal-miner sees what he calls a 'gleam' in the half darkness—a flash of red or blue—and he knows he has struck it rich.

For most people the most accessible mine of the God-images within is their dreams. Among the discarded images of the mind, the ankle-deep rubble, are meadows, castles, seas, hills, cliffs, rivers, woods, houses, animals, or even simple colours, which reveal themselves to us as timeless, and filled with inexplicable meaning. Anything in a dream may give us that sense of total peace and satisfaction that is an oblique reference to God—the house of our childhood, the presence of a loved one, a place, a sexual encounter, swimming, flying, walking, running.

Occasionally I dream directly of God, recognizing him either because he has his back towards me or because his face is so ordinary that it is extraordinary. (I do not know it is God in the dream but I work it out with a special sense of certainty when I wake up.)

I had a dream of God on a Norfolk marsh as an immense figure turned away from me, a gigantic sower with his bag strapped to his side. What his hand sowed was frogs and fish which flopped on to the grass. 'They'll die' I said, but all of a sudden the water rose very suddenly in the dykes and flooded the field; all the fish began to swim. In another dream I was trespassing in an orchard which looked very like the garden of Eden. I met the house-owner who seemed very bored by my excuses and guilt, but who insisted on showing me an extension he had built on to his house. 'Look', he said, 'it's built in the same wood as the original.' Another dream of God was as the manager of a hotel. What impressed me about him was the care he took to get the diets of his customers exactly right—neither more nor less food than they needed and special concern for the diabetics. Gradually my eyes were drawn to a huge, and luminous, bunch of grapes that lay on the table by his right hand.

Two of these dreams came at times of crisis in my life. They assured me in their different ways that though things might feel perilous I was not going to perish, and that I would be fed. Someone or something was giving me information that I badly needed to know and that my senses by themselves could not

provide me with, perhaps because their experience was too short, being bound into time. As a medieval person I would have said that God spoke to me in these dreams. As a modern person I find it more natural to speak in terms of the unconscious having done so. Or maybe it is that I speak both languages, both the traditional christian one and the modern psychological one, finding I need both. What both have the vocabulary to describe is the human need to listen to an inner voice and allow it sovereignty—what the Eskimos, I believe, call ‘the Great Task.’ When I listen to Australian Aborigines or North American Indians talk about dreams I hear them speaking of eternity. The Aborigines speak of the Dreamtime which, if I understand them correctly, is the truth behind this world. Yet their truth is not strictly speaking ‘behind’ this world but placed, invisibly to many of us, in the very centre of material things, in the rivers and land which are the very body of their God. The North American Indian will not plough or mine the earth because it would be like outraging the body of his mother, the Indian woman will ask permission of a tree to take its roots to make baskets, of an animal to use its flesh for food, its hide for the wall of the tepee. Everything is sacred, is blessed, is the very image of God, the body of father and mother.

Christianity has selected two images of God above all others (though others are widely used, of course), as if it needs to remind itself especially of these. One image, the most widely painted and copied, is of a mother and baby in intimate embrace, an extraordinary statement of tenderness, of mutual giving and taking. The other image is of a man, Jesus, being crucified—the opposite end of the spectrum from love and bliss. Yet, say the Christians, this too is an image of God, and is one of the faces of love.

Every human being was held as a baby in some person’s arms, more commonly by their mother, and most experience at least a small share of love and care in babyhood. Every human being, in my view, knows within them from deep experience fragments of the desolation and agony Christ embodied on the cross.

What is fascinating in the first of these images is how the Virgin seems tacitly to be treated as God while doctrinally being excluded from the godhead. The veneration accorded to some Madonnas—to the Black Madonna at Montserrat, for example, or the Virgin on the Pillar at Chartres—is the veneration accorded to the divine. Recently, in the National Gallery in London, I noticed how in medieval paintings the Coronation of the Virgin was a favourite

theme, and how in every case she was painted the same size as Christ and was seated at the same level. Sitting there with their crowns on they might have been brother and sister, husband and wife, father and daughter or mother and son. What I felt I was seeing, looking with the eyes of the twentieth century, was an unconscious conviction that the female is part of the godhead. Sometimes Mary seems to be persuading God against his will into mercy and forgiveness. I remember a little romanesque church near Lourdes with a medieval carving of the Christ child sitting on his mother's lap holding the book which contains the names of the saved and the damned. Mary's hands lie over his to prevent him opening the book. It is almost as if we do not want to let ourselves know what we believe—that Mary is the gentle face of God.

One of the great mysteries of the christian religion—though we have partial answers—is the extent to which the Church has felt it necessary to exclude women from knowledge, power and priesthood, as well as, consciously at least, excluding the female from images of the godhead. Mary alone has carried the female image, has represented the paradox or the contradiction; officially excluded from the godhead she has been revered as divine. Mary has been a very popular image for both women and men, but as women discover themselves as less passive than Mary is made to appear in the gospels, there is a search for other female images of God. (Men still often seem to derive a great deal from the image of Mary, perhaps celibate men in particular, since Mary as mother provides a safe, that is sexually taboo, womanly image.) There seems to me something a little willed about the attempt to find them—images have a way of not coming when they are called but of emerging shyly and unexpectedly from the unconscious—yet the discovery of the female face of God would seem to be one of the ways in which the christian faith is changing.

This would not surprise Harvey Cox who says that,

the main stimulus for the renewal of Christianity today is coming not from the center but from the bottom and from the edges . . . It is coming from those places where Christians are poor, especially Latin America; from areas where they live as small minorities surrounded by non-Christian cultures, as they do in Asia; from the churches that live under political despotisms, as they do in the Communist world and in parts of South and Central America; from the American churches of blacks and poor whites; from those

women who are agonizing together over what it means to be Christian and female in a church that has perpetuated patriarchy for two millenia.³

What all of these people have in common, Cox says, is that they were pushed to the edges of Church and society into basements, kitchens, slums and colonies. This banishment left them innocent and somewhat ignorant of the patriarchal 'trip' because they were allowed no part in it, so that now they come to the process of religious image-making with a fresh version of Christianity that flies free of some of the old inhibitions.

What are the images these outsiders bring to religious sensibility? Cox suggests that, in various ways, they bring a new sense of the body and its feelings to a Christianity that is 'arid and cerebral' and a world grey with consumerism and technology. What interests him is that 'whereas religious truth was once promulgated at the top and then "trickled down" through layers of hierarchy to the local level' now the process has been upended and the new images come 'from the periphery of the modern world and from the ghettos and barrios'. Without concern about what the old guard thinks or believes, each group sets about making God in its own image—black or poor or red or female.

This suggests that in the process of acquiring self-esteem a despised group needs to feel not only God's sympathy and interest but actual identification. I need to feel God is like me before I can fully trust in her/him or in myself. Someone else's God—male, powerful, rich, white, western, whatever it may be—is of no use as an incarnational image. Only by finding God in myself can I discover who I am.

Just as I have needed sometimes to dream of God to know how to survive, so maybe a community needs to have a dream/vision of God to know how to deal with new knowledge and crises in its life. The biggest crisis in the life of our community at present is to do with the danger of nuclear holocaust; the fear of *dies irae* is so omnipresent that it is difficult to let it be fully conscious and tempting to deny it. One way, perhaps the only way, through the crisis may be to receive the image of the God of the mushroom-shaped cloud in a way that suggests a different and new kind of hope, or even a more creative form of despair. Behind such a new image is a new *fact* or set of facts which needs to be digested to create fruitful change.

This image, so far as I know, has not yet become conscious. What may be preceding it is a preoccupation with 'the void'—hence perhaps the popularity of buddhist practice nowadays in the West—an image which we may or may not consider to be a description of the face of God (the author of *The cloud of unknowing* would have thought so), but which after the intense personalism of Christianity can feel very restful. The void is an image attended by the greatest dread, the dread of death itself. It is difficult to think or talk about—only recently did I begin to pay attention to the meaning of the word 'avoid' in the language. The idea of confronting the void is strangely fascinating, hence perhaps the new interest in the eremitical life as well as in meditation; we may dread the void but some people are as drawn to its risks as Columbus was to sailing over the edge of the world. It has an obsessional attraction because it is there. Or not there.

Images continue to surround us in our life voyage, the images that come to us through sleep and art, in conversation and prayer. Sometimes I feel that we living creatures are ourselves simply similes and metaphors in the mind of God as he/she thinks/plays/dances. 'The eye with which I see God' said Eckhart, 'is the same eye with which God sees me.'⁴ Instead of being a small shamed child watched like an object by God's unforgiving eye, I am subject, part of the delight and ecstasy of the universe. This is the most baffling of the God images, one about which Christians are deeply ambivalent.

NOTES

¹ *Meditations with Meister Eckhart*, translated by Matthew Fox (Bear & Co Inc, Santa Fe).

² Locke, John: *An essay concerning human understanding*, Book Two, Ch 1.

³ Cox, Harvey: 'Religion in the secular city' in *Christian*, Summer 1986.

⁴ *Meditations with Meister Eckhart*.