

Drawing God with narrow strokes

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

The God many atheists reject "is not God as he really is at all," said Father Roger McGrath, director of evangelization for the Diocese of Camden, N.J.

Many atheists draw God in narrow strokes of the pen, Father McGrath thinks. They paint him as "a petty God, a scorekeeper and punisher."

Other times atheists cast God in a "distortion of a father image" and reject it, Father McGrath said, adding "I'd have no part of such a God either."

The Camden priest said that he is called on occasionally to help people as they struggle with questions about God. He indicated that it is not uncommon for Catholics to flirt with atheism.

Frequently it happens when a person is confronted for the first time personally with the presence of evil, he said.

The priest gave two instances: A student who rejected God after the death of a best friend; a man who questioned the goodness of God because of the suffering his mother endured before dying.

In those sorts of situations, Father McGrath said, people may well respond by concluding an-

grily: "There can't possibly be a good God who allows such terrible things to happen!"

Father McGrath takes such comments seriously, since atheists often throw the existence of evil in the face of believers as the reason for rejecting a divine being.

Asked how he handles that situation, Father McGrath explained that first he tries to get individuals "to deal with their grief

pen — but that doesn't mean we must conclude that God can't exist, he said firmly.

He added that, in his experience, people who confront such questions often become fuller believers in the long run. The experience of trauma, of suffering, often gives people an expanded notion of God, he thinks. At other times "grappling with questions can bring people back"

is non-existent.

Father McGrath also observed that people can be atheists because they "don't see where God makes a difference."

He referred to views of the famous Austrian psychologist Karl Jung on the spiritual journey. Jung was convinced that people spent roughly 40 years on what he called the "external journey," involved with matters outside themselves, Father McGrath said.

For Jung, many people only turn to religious matters when they are older, often after they reach a few deadends. Then, the priest continued, individuals may become willing to start what Jung termed "the inward journey."

It's at this point that people may be willing to entertain the existence of God. They begin to recognize that "life is not limited to us — it has an origin and an end beyond this life that's God," Father McGrath said.

It is difficult to describe God adequately, Father McGrath explained. God defies our human attempts to portray him, the priest said. He's always larger than we can imagine.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

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and anger." Only then are they in any condition to examine the possibility that their image of God might be flawed. The priest points out that God doesn't plan the tragedies that occur in life.

Often, Father McGrath said, the next step is to try and get the person to recognize that human beings are imperfect and so is the world we live in. Evil things hap-

pen — but that doesn't mean we must conclude that God can't exist, he said.

Some people become atheists, Father McGrath thinks, because they buy into the view that God is nothing more than a projection of human qualities. Stated in the 19th century by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, this view presents God as a "superhuman," the priest said. Then people conclude that God

Early Christians were the true 'unbelievers'

By John J. Castelot
NC News Service

Atheism as people describe it today was basically unknown among people of biblical times. Even the pagans were intensely religious in their own way.

A world without God was simply unthinkable. Living close to nature, many ancient peoples were caught up in its recurring cycles. They stood in admiration of it, sometimes in fear. They reacted to God in the same ways they reacted to nature — with admiration and fear.

Many people identified nature with God and tried to control it through various religious rites.

The Israelites did not go this far. God may have controlled nature. But for them God was distinct from nature — totally other.

God may have made the sun to shine and the rains to fall. But neither the sun nor the rain were God. They were God's creatures.

The author of Psalm 8 gives

prayerful expression to this attitude of the Israelites:

"O Lord, Our Lord,
"how glorious is your name
over all the earth!

"You have exalted your majesty above the heavens...

"When I behold your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
"the moon and the stars which
you set in place —

"What is man that you should
be mindful of him,
"or the son of man that you
should care for him?"

It is true that after the Israelites entered the Promised Land they were strongly attracted to the nature worship and fertility cults of their neighbors. But they learned that this kind of infidelity brought disaster in its train.

Yet even here, the Israelites were not denying God's existence. They were simply putting other gods in place of the God who had chosen them.

Even pagan Rome was thoroughly religious. Paradoxically, the Romans called the Chris-

tians atheists.

Why? Because the Christians refused to worship the Roman gods. In the Roman Empire, these gods were so much a part of life that rejection of them was regarded as suspiciously unpatriotic. In fact, it was high treason.

The author of the New Testament book of Revelation wrote to the churches of Asia Minor precisely to persuade them not to compromise their beliefs just to "get along" in society.

But the social situation did pose a problem. The trade guilds — ancient versions of our labor unions — all had their patron gods and goddesses. Was the early Christian expected to hand in his union card and risk financial and social ruin just to maintain his Christian integrity? For the author of Revelation, there was no choice.

Oh, there was some atheism in Israel. The author of Psalm 14 could write: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"

But this was not our modern atheism. It was not a denial of God's existence. It was a practical atheism.

This sort of atheism took the position that God was uninterested in human affairs. If God did not care what people did, then they had carte blanche to do as they pleased.

And there were those who had other problems with God, like Job. The author of the Old Testament book of Job struggled with the question of whether God was fair and just. He was struggling with the mystery of evil and suffering.

The problem of evil is a real problem for people. In the Old Testament, Qoheleth, also known as Ecclesiastes, had problems all along the line over God. But neither Job nor Ecclesiastes tried to solve their problems by denying God's existence.

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