

Views differ on how to think about God

Our generation struggles with believing in God, not that this, as Reginald Bibby states, puts God in trouble. God isn't in trouble because people stop believing or going to church.

Today God is not so much denied as ignored, though there are growing numbers of people who now profess that they no longer believe in God. Those numbers however aren't nearly as high as is commonly supposed. Atheism is still relatively rare and, as Michael Buckley says, is not a problem, but "a situation, an atmosphere, a confused history."

Of more concern, I believe, are the ways we try to think of God. On the one hand, we see a creeping fundamentalism, where our concepts and language about God are being taken ever more literally. The Bible is taken as a history book and the language surrounding God is taken at face value. On the other hand, we see a tendency to take the symbolic character of religious language to its extreme, namely, to a place where it excludes all claims to historicity and ontology (as having any reference to anything that actually exists in the real world). God then becomes just a symbol, a myth, not real in the normal sense.



Father Ron Rolheiser

In Exile

Both views are gaining popularity. Fundamentalism is appealing more and more to those who are tired of a relativism wherein everything can mean anything, and the reduction of God to a symbol (without truth claims) is attracting more and more people who, rightly, have grasped that the human mind and imagination cannot wrap themselves around the idea of God in a literal way. So what's to be said about this?

Perhaps a quote from Karl Rahner can set the stage: "We are just discovering today that one cannot picture God to oneself in an image that has been carved out of the wood of the world, ... this experience is not the genesis of atheism, but the discovery that the world is not God."

What's contained in this caption?

First, that God is ineffable. God cannot be captured in any picture inside the imagination or concept within the mind and all our language about God is, by definition, necessarily metaphor, analogy and is more inaccurate than accurate. God cannot be thought or spoken about in the way we think about and speak about anything else.

Consequently, we must be wary of taking religious language too literally. When we turn analogy into univocity (metaphor into physics) we set ourselves up for the impossible task of trying to conceptualize the infinite within finite categories. That leads to atheism because when we try to literally picture God and imagine God's existence, the imagination runs dry and we easily conclude that, because God is unthinkable, God doesn't exist. But that isn't a necessary equation. Knowing and thinking isn't the same thing. We know infinitely more than we can think.

However, with that being said, at least for Christianity, Judaism and Islam, no matter the language, God is more than simply an impersonal force, the deepest principle of life, the intelligent DNA inside of evolution, directing things. While God is not a person who can be thought of in the way we think of ourselves and other persons, God is a person in that at some deep place there is a divine mind, heart and personality that's meant to be personally related to and is meant to be the object of worship, love, affection and appeal.

God is both symbol and reality, and symbol here isn't just Harry Potter fantasy, nor, at least inside the great religions of the world, just a rich ex-

pression of the deep, archetypal structure of things.

In his autobiographical writings, Nikos Kazantzakis makes an interesting confession. Late on in life, he came to believe that Christianity happened because Mary Magdala loved Jesus so deeply that, after his death, she refused to let him die inside of her heart and began to proclaim that he was alive. Her story grabbed hold in the hearts of others and the rest is history. Christianity arose out of that love — and that lie. When Kazantzakis wrote *Zorba the Greek*, he was trying to do like Mary Magdala: give some immortality to Zorba because he loved him so deeply and thought him so exceptional. What happened?

Zorba the Greek made for a good book and great movie, but we don't measure time by Zorba's birth. Kazantzakis' wish to bestow a certain divinity and immortality on Zorba didn't exactly take off and shape history in the way the resurrection of Jesus did. Why not? Because for a religious myth to have a long-term grip on history and on the hearts of hundreds of millions of people, more than just a symbol needs to be involved. The great religions of the world have their staying power because a God who is very real, alive and personal manifested a real, physical, tangible presence within actual history.

Oblate Father Ron Rolheiser is a theologian, teacher and award-winning author. He currently serves in Toronto and Rome as the general councilor for Canada for his religious order, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

Stella Maris
Retreat and Renewal Center
130 East Genesee St., Skaneateles, NY
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