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What Kind of God?

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‘If Jesus was God, and knew he was God, why didn’t he tell people he was God?’ This was a question which Vincent Browne asked the scripture scholar Fr Pat Rogers CP during one of his series of late-night radio dialogues several years ago. In the second part of this article I hope to offer a response to this important question. But in order to provide a background to my answer I must first suggest an answer to my own question, ‘What Kind of God?’ In writing this article I am assuming that most of those who may read it will be committed Christians, so I assume that they share with me the fundamental Christian belief that Jesus is God.

WHICH GOD?

There is a common concept of God as a power who has laid down a whole series of laws or rules and who will punish us if we do not obey them. As a Christian today I have to say that this is a false understanding of God. In fact such a concept is a pretty good description of what most economists and politicians call ‘the market’. ‘The market’ is presented as some kind of power which lays down rules that have to be obeyed – and there are terrible consequences for us all if they are not obeyed. No wonder then that Pope Francis maintains that modern society has made ‘the market’ into a god (cf. Psalm 115: ‘their idols are silver and gold’).

Like many Irish people I was given as a teenager a concept of God as a law-maker and severe judge who had made particularly strict laws about sex. This was a God who would send me straight to hell if I died after having engaged in any one of a number of what were called ‘impure actions’, some of which were almost universally practiced by most teenagers. This God would even send me to hell for having ‘impure thoughts or desires’ – and perhaps even for telling ‘dirty’ stories or jokes. This was a God who would ‘let me off the hook’ if I managed to confess these ‘sins’ before I died. As a Christian I have to say that this was a particularly damaging and quite scandalous understanding of God. And the sad

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thing is that it was preached and enforced by priests who were themselves victims of this seriously distorted notion of God.

Nowadays, most of us have either deliberately rejected this concept of God or simply let it go in practice in the way we live. But I think that a large majority of Irish adult Catholics have not really internalized any clear alternative. I'm not convinced that our preaching has encouraged them to replace it with a more authentic understanding of God. The result is that, for very many adult Irish Catholics, God remains a kind of amorphous background mystery, hardly relevant to everyday living, except when some emergency arises and the person feels the need to pray.

I think it is helpful to start by acknowledging that the word 'God' has an open-ended meaning. There are a whole variety of conceptions of God which miss out on the central kernel of the Christian understanding of God or represent serious distortions of it. So, from a Christian point of view, these are 'false gods' – idols.

HOW GET A TRUE CONCEPTION OF GOD?

What gives us the right to assume that our conception of God is the true one – or at least nearer to the truth than the others? Our answer is that, as Christians relying on modern biblical scholarship, we look to the Gospels to tell us about the teaching of Jesus on the nature of the God whom he experienced.

It would be foolish of anybody to think that they can quickly learn all that Jesus taught and stood for, simply by reading the Gospels, while assuming that they are straightforward modern-type historical documents. We need to take account of the fact that the Gospels came out of the understanding that the first Christians had of Jesus. And this was a gradually growing understanding, with various stages in which these first believers came to an ever deeper and clearer realization of who Jesus really was, of what he had been teaching, what he stood for, and what he was prepared to die for. The accounts in the synoptic Gospels of the teaching of Jesus right up to the time of his death reflect a time before his followers had any clear conception of his divinity.¹ So we must not short-circuit their accounts by imposing on them our subsequent belief in his divinity.

The process of a growing understanding of who Jesus was (and is) and of his message did not stop with the early Christians. It has continued right up to the present, and will continue into the future. So we cannot claim that our present understanding is the once-

1 For some detail about the various stages in the developing understanding of the divinity of Jesus see, for instance, pages 181-2 of Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, Doubleday.

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for-all definitively correct one. We can only say that we believe that the Holy Spirit, who was promised by Jesus, has been with the Christian community and its leaders all along and is today still inspiring the Church teaching authority, and the believing Christian community, to ensure that we will not lose the fundamental message and meaning of Jesus.

As recent examples of our ever-deepening and expanding understanding of the message and meaning of Jesus we might think of the teaching of Vatican II about freedom of conscience, of the emphasis on human rights by recent popes, on the relatively recent Church teaching that women are fully equal to men, and on the remarkable new contributions of Pope Francis on such issues as ecology, collegiality/synodality, and the evils of clericalism.² These newly-emerging insights must be seen and accepted as intrinsic elements of the ‘message’ and what we may call the ‘legacy’ of Jesus taken in its fullest and most authentic sense.

Sadly, the process of a gradual enriching of our understanding of the teaching of Jesus down through history has also been accompanied by a process of misunderstanding and distortion. So we need the Spirit to help us correct various false conceptions of Jesus and of God, such as the notion of God as a harsh judge.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

The ancient Greek philosopher Xenophanes suggested that we have fashioned God in our own image. And this accusation was repeated by Karl Marx and is frequently made today by sceptics and atheists. I want to suggest that, oddly, there is a germ of truth in this accusation. Not that we create a God in *our own image* but that as Christians we ‘create’ our God in *the image of Jesus*. What I mean is that it is only by coming to experience and understand Jesus that we begin to know who or what God is. We come to some understanding of the mystery whom we call God by taking seriously fact that Jesus is not just ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col. 1:15), but is also the one ‘in whom the *fullness* of God was pleased to dwell’³ (Col. 1:19; emphasis added).⁴ And then we can

2 There are obvious bases in the Gospels for a rejection of clericalism (e.g. Mk 10:43-44 and Jn 13:14-17). The basis for collegiality/synodality is implicit in the NT and it is very obvious in the early centuries of Christianity, as well as in the present-day Orthodox Churches. The development of a Jesus-centred ecological theology and spirituality is a more elaborate undertaking which is beyond the scope of the present article.

3 The main Greek text does not include the words ‘of God’; but it is generally accepted that ‘the fullness’ implicitly includes the words ‘of God’; cf. Col.2:9: ‘in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form’.

4 This indicates that the Letter to the Colossians was written at a time when the divinity of Jesus was fully recognized.

go on to describe the Incarnation in the words of the Prologue to John's Gospel: 'The Word was made flesh and lived amongst us.'

The teaching of Jesus posed a strong challenge to the current view that sick people were being punished by God. The authorities found it quite shocking that Jesus insisted that poor people, the sick, the widows, foreign migrants, and tax collectors are all especially dear to God. Even more shocking was his view that God is infinitely compassionate and loving even to people who are 'undeserving' and seen as sinners. Think, for instance, of his story about the utterly non-judgmental love of the parent of 'the Prodigal Son' (Lk 15:20-24).

And all this was not just the *verbal* teaching of Jesus; it was evident in the kind of life he lived and in the way he treated people. Indeed even some of the early Christians were so shocked by the story of how he dealt with the situation in which 'a women taken in adultery' was brought to him that they omitted that story from their version of John's Gospel. Furthermore, Jesus not only lived out his vision of his Abba as an infinitely compassionate God, but he even submitted to death rather than change or tone down his message.

We see in the synoptic Gospel accounts of Jesus a person who shows us how to be fully human – empathetic, compassionate, warmly sociable, generous, courageous, willing to share his troubled feelings with his friends and ask their support, deeply prayerful, and with so many other virtues. He possessed and lived out the very qualities that we would want our God to have. And the God he experienced, and preached about, and witnessed to was just that kind of God.

It is interesting to reflect on the Gospel account of the Beatitudes. When we read 'Blessed are the poor, ... blessed are the peacemakers, etc.' we usually focus on thinking about what kind of people are 'the poor' or 'the peacemakers'. But suppose we now focus on the word 'Blessed'. What Jesus is saying is that God is the kind of being who delights in poor people and peacemakers – so much so that God is willing to shower all kinds of blessings on them.

When we see in the synoptics' account of Jesus the perfect human person we are seeing the nearest we can get in this life to knowing the God whom Jesus experienced, and loved, and looked to for guidance, and whom he asked for favours, and trusted implicitly – even when he was being asked to give up his preaching and healing ministry and submit to being tortured and killed. This is the God revealed by Jesus, the true Christian God, in contrast to the false god of 'the market' and to the distorted conception of God as a harsh judge which we were given in the past.

While in this life we can never fully understand the Mystery

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that is God. We cannot ‘grasp’ God and we certainly cannot control or manipulate God. We cannot bargain with God – but we can experience and live by what we call the New Covenant which is a kind of agreement and guarantee that is God’s gift to us: God will be our God and we undertake to be faithful, to trust God; but even when we fail to trust, when we are no longer faithful to our side of the New Covenant, God will still be there for us; always. And in the meantime we can look forward: ‘For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. (I Cor. 13:12)

WHY NOT?

One of the most remarkable features of the mission of Jesus was that his interest was focussed entirely not on himself but on what he was calling the Reign or Kingdom of God. And in practice the key element in that teaching was the kind of God that he experienced himself and was sharing with all who were willing to hear his message. His message was not about *himself* but about *his God*.

In fact the synoptic Gospels show clearly that Jesus maintained a careful ambiguity about his own identity – even about whether or not he was the promised Messiah. He had a good reason for maintaining this ambiguity. The current conception of the Messiah, one shared even by Jesus’ own followers, was that of a powerful military leader who would bring political liberation and glory to the Jewish nation.

I come back now to Vincent Browne’s question: why did Jesus not tell people that he was God? I have been pointing out that the focus of the teaching of Jesus was on showing who God really is, rather than on himself. This helps to explain why he did not say he was God. But there is also a more obvious answer. The behaviour and teaching of Jesus were so out of line with the accepted ‘norm’ in his society that many people, including some of his family, thought that he was ‘out of his mind’ (Mk.3:21). If he had gone further and claimed to be God, it is doubtful whether even those closest to him would have thought his claim to be credible, any more than people today would believe anybody who made such a claim.

Furthermore, there is the more controversial issue of the extent to which Jesus at that time was fully conscious that he was divine. The Gospels suggest that he had a growing self-awareness of his own identity; from his infancy he was ‘growing in wisdom and stature and grace’ (Lk. 2:52). And there are the further complications arising from the fact that the Gospels were never

intended to be factual historical accounts in the modern sense, and that the authors of the Synoptic Gospels did not explicitly affirm the divinity of the pre-Resurrection Jesus.

EVOKING

Jesus was not just *teaching* about God. His whole aim was to *evoke* in people some degree of the experience he himself had of the benevolent Mystery that he called ‘Abba’. And that kind of evoking is precisely the task taken on by each of us, his followers, as evangelizers. To get some sense of what Jesus was doing for the people of his country we can think of the kind of spiritual power exercised by people like Thérèse of Lisieux, Jean Vanier, and Pope Francis – as well as Catherine of Siena, Ignatius of Loyola, and a host of other inspired and inspiring Christians down through the centuries.

Each of these remarkably saintly people is a *magus* – a person who exercises a remarkable spiritual power, similar in nature to that of Jesus, though obviously far less potent than his. People are deeply touched by what they say or do. Their power lies not in their particular words or actions but in the inner source which animates those actions and words. This source is their own living and vivid experience of the Mystery who is the only true God. But what is truly distinctive about each of these individuals is that, following the example of Jesus, they focus their spiritual power not on themselves but outward; they help people to experience God.⁵

And of course what I am saying about these saintly people applies also to all of us who call ourselves Christians – but in varying degrees. We too are called to be saintly, to allow ourselves to be given the gift of some degree of spiritual power to influence others and draw them to God. That is the invitation and challenge we take on by being followers of Jesus. It is the challenge and invitation that is sacramentally expressed and evoked in Baptism, and is renewed and fortified each time we celebrate the Eucharist.

DISCOVERING THE TRUE GOD

Missionaries who have worked with very remote tribal people tell us that on some occasions they have met up with a clan or tribe who have never heard of Jesus; but when they were given the Gospels they recognized there the God whom they have worshipped and whom they have longed to know more fully.

5 This is the kind of spiritual power which is misdirected and misused by charismatic visionary false prophets who gather disciples around them and then abuse them and lead them astray – as has been done quite recently by would-be spiritual leaders in Peru and in Sicily.

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Could something similar happen in the case of some lonely spiritual ‘searcher’, perhaps somebody who has grown up in an atheistic family with no interest in religion and who has known little or nothing about Jesus? A real encounter between a Christian and such a searcher could be a grace-filled moment for both. The Christian might be challenged and invited to find more room in his or her faith for the uncertainty, the not-knowing, the questioning, and the silence of the sceptical ‘searcher’.

The ‘searcher’, on the other hand, might find the Jesus of the Gospels to be the ideal human, and indeed a person who seems to have a certain superhuman quality, deriving from the fact that he is clearly in touch with, and is drawing on, a mysterious transcendent power which he calls Abba, God. This might lead on to a conversion experience in which the ‘searcher’ is led to faith both in Jesus and in the being whom he calls his God.⁶ He or she might come to accept the Christian belief that Jesus is the one ‘in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell’ (Col. 1:19), and therefore the Word of God incarnate.

PERSONAL CHOICE

We ‘cradle Catholics’ may not go through any such remarkable recognition experience or any dramatic conversion. From childhood we have been in touch with Jesus and with God, and perhaps even with the Holy Spirit. But we cannot become Christians by a process of osmosis. At some point we must make a personal choice. We must choose to be followers of Jesus and to be led by him, and by the Holy Spirit whom he promised to give us, to a living experience of the God whom he experienced and revealed.

This choice may come first through a Spirit-inspired reading of the Gospels, where we discover the real Jesus and, through him, the real God. However, it may also happen that this process is reversed. In some privileged moments we humans, whether or not we call ourselves Christians, may get glimpses of the true God as we are ‘taken out of ourselves’ while we gaze at a sunset, or at a mother nursing her infant, or at the face of an old person; or we may feel overwhelmed by grace and love when we find ourselves forgiven by God or by some human for an action by us which had seemed so outrageous that it was unforgivable.

These are moments in which we realize why the English language needs the word ‘awe’ to give some hint in words of what has been happening to us at the level of experience. It may only

6 Of course our Christian faith tells us that this kind of conversion to Jesus and to God can only come about through the entirely gratuitous work of the Spirit who was promised by Jesus to his followers (Jn. 16:7-15). An account of the role of the Spirit in this process is beyond the scope of this article.

be later that we discover a link between such experiences and the Jesus of the Gospels. And it may be that many of us never make this connection. Nevertheless, Christian theology tells us that these experiences are glimpses of the God whom Jesus experienced – even if we never get round to relating them explicitly to the Jesus of the Gospels.

SHARING

A Christian may sometimes have an experience of Jesus so profound that it can only be adequately expressed through a combination of terms such as ‘seeing’ ‘hearing’ and ‘touching’. Such a deep experience may lead the person to reach out to others in the inspiring words of the author of the first epistle of John:

Something which has existed from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched: the Word, who is life – this is what we are speaking of. That life was made visible: we have seen it and we are giving our testimony, telling you about the eternal life which was with the Father and has been made visible to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you too may be in communion with us, as we are in communion with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing this to you to make our own joy complete (1 John 1:1-3).

Open-to-the Spirit. The Holy Spirit never gives up on the human heart but works unceasingly to bring it in harmony with the plan of God. No matter how distracted or pained your heart is, God constantly calls you to freedom and healing. The most important dimension in the journey of healing and peace is an openness on our behalf to allow the Spirit to work.

– ÉAMONN P. BOURKE, *Mercy in All Things*. (Dublin: Veritas), p. 37.