

Let's talk about God for a bit. One of the most irritating characteristics of the modern mind is its lack of subtlety. You only have to look as far as sentence structure. And I'm not talking about *literature*. Even everyday business letters of a century ago had an agreeable style and euphony about them. Nowadays communications are staccato, ugly, in your face, as they say. Words and how we use them are important – because the choice of words determines what is being said. Style is inseparable from content as the body is joined to the soul. And the contents of modern minds tend to be glib. Perhaps it's the clutter of the mass media, its banality and the reckless pace at which it operates, which ensures communication and argument never gets out of the shallows.

But there is no excuse for this sort of thing: Bertrand Russell said that, if God exists, then we ought to be able to observe him. Russell actually said that the existence of God is like the existence of a tea-tray. If it's there, we ought to be able to see it. Richard Dawkins recently repeated Russell's argument. What the utterances of both men show is that they have no acquaintance with serious theology. The minds of such as St Augustine, St Anselm and St Thomas Aquinas were infinitely more subtle. Or take Dante, who knew that the human mind is complex and highly responsive to the method of teaching by allegory. The great theologians and poets of the Middle Ages were men of refinement. They were, if you like, like the glaziers of cathedral stained glass, meticulous to the point of exquisiteness. By comparison, the modern style resembles blokes merely chucking bricks through windows.

What has all this to do with God? A great deal. For God is not the caricature drawn by modern sceptics – or even by most modern theologians for that matter. Let's leave God out of it for a minute and talk about the gods of classical Greece. If you watch those entertaining old films such as *Jason and the Argonauts* or *Clash of the Titans* – with terrific special effects – you would come away with the idea that the ancient Greeks worshipped beings who resembled men and women but who were a lot bigger and more powerful and lived in such places as the top of Mount Olympus or at the bottom of the sea. But the Greeks weren't stupid. They were not crass literalists like Mr Russell and Professor Dawkins. The Greeks did not believe their gods were like men and women but writ large.

R.G. Collingwood explains what the Greeks *did* believe beautifully:

*Their habit of representing their gods in vividly realised human form was not a piece of theology, it was a piece of poetry. When they described or portrayed Aphrodite, for example, they did not think they were describing or portraying a non-natural woman who, by the exercise of something like will, but a superhuman will, brought about the various events which together make up her realm, namely the events connected with sexual reproduction. They did not think they were portraying a person who controlled or produced these events; they thought they were portraying these events themselves.*

Collingwood illuminates this point brilliantly with a particular example:

*In the Hippolytus of Euripides, a young man is cruelly done to death because he refuses to gratify the incestuous passion of his stepmother. In terms of poetry, his destruction is compassed by a quasi-human person called Aphrodite in the execution of her vengeance upon him for refusing, not then only but always, in sexual intercourse; a refusal which she regards as insulting to herself as the patron of sex. In*

*order to achieve her vengeance, this goddess deprives his stepmother first of her happiness and self-respect and then of her life, and robs his father both of wife and of son, making him his son's murderer.*

What are we to make of all this? Collingwood says.

*Simple-minded modern readers can hardly restrain their indignation; allow themselves strong language about the low morality of Greek religious ideas. But they are deceived. The story of the Hippolytus would be exactly the same if you left the goddess out. Here it is:*

*Once upon a time, there was a young man who had a horror of women. To persuade himself that there was nothing wrong with him, he devoted himself to blood sports. His mother was dead, and his father married again, a nice young woman, good looking and of good family, though there were odd stories about them... Well, as luck would have it, or perhaps it was that queer streak in her family, she fell violently in love with her stepson. She was almost dying of love when her old nurse found out about it and persuaded her to speak to the young man. He refused her with such disgust that she didn't know what to do. So she committed suicide, leaving a letter for her husband saying that it was because her stepson had made love to her. The old man believed it; so he had him murdered. The moral is that sex is a thing about which you cannot afford to make mistakes.*

Having thus fortified ourselves with a little subtlety, let us turn from the Greek gods to the God of the Bible. He is not an old man in the sky who, in William Blake's words, *farts and belches and coughs on high*. Let us look at an early vision of the true God in *The Book of Exodus*:

*The Lord appeared unto Moses in flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked and beheld the bush burned with fire but the bush was not consumed. And Moses said unto God, When I come unto the children of Israel and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me, they shall say to me, What is his name? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM. Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.*

Now when this scene was presented by Cecil B. De Mille in the 1956 film *The Ten Commandments*, with Charlton Heston as Moses, the burning bush was a terrific supernatural bonfire. But that only missed the miraculous vision and gave us a caricature, a cartoon, instead. Actually there are in Sinai bushes with vivid colours. What happened was that Moses' spiritual consciousness interpreted the apparently blazing bush as a vision of God. That doesn't mean he made it up or that the vision was not a true one. It just means that it was a true vision. God's presence was real and terrifying – something that De Mille's cartoon supernaturalism could never be. The God seen by Moses was real all right. But he was not a magician or a conjuror doing his party piece.

And the name of God is given as I AM. The true translation of the Hebrew is rather I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. This is the elusive, holy God who cannot be pinned down. The holy God who tells Moses, *Take off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the ground whereon thou standest is holy ground*. His name is so holy that the Israelites left the vowels out of it and never wrote it down. It was pronounced only once a year by the High Priest in the holy of holies on Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement. It may have been YAHWEH, from which get JEHOVAH, the name for God which *The King James Bible* translates as THE LORD. This God is real and his presence is disturbing to Moses, even terrifying. But the reality consists in the physical appearance of the scene in Sinai as interpreted by Moses' inspired spiritual consciousness.

Remember the *Old Testament* says, *No man hath seen God at any time*. Now look at the startling revelation which is the *New Testament*: *And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us*. And this Word made flesh in Jesus says, *I and the Father are one*. So when the invisible, intangible God of Moses finally wishes to let us see what he is like, he shows us a man. Not everyone understood that this Jesus was God. The Gospels say that this was hidden from the many and revealed only to the few: to those with eyes to see.

So our God is not like a tea-tray in the sky or like one of the cartoon special effects by Harry Harryhausen in *Clash of the Titans*. He is real though. But God, as apprehended by humankind, is always a combination of Divine revelation and human spiritual consciousness: a consciousness prepared by faith – faith which is the gift of God himself. This is the centre of the mystery of faith:

*Philip saith unto him, Lord, shew us the father and it sufficeth us. Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip. He that hath seen me hath seen the Father*