

1

THE RENEWAL OF AN OLD ATTACK ON RELIGION

A new development is taking place in the wider culture. Those who query or reject religion are becoming more vocal in their stance against it. Weary of Christians publicly advertising their faith, a group of atheists in London in 2008 created bus posters declaring, "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." When a similar group in Chicago started up a public transport campaign, they went further and for their slogan chose: "In the beginning, man created God." According to the group's spokesman, the slogan "espouses the idea that man created God as well as all religions", and "encourages public and critical examination of the merits of religious belief".

Most recently, just before Christmas 2010, the American Atheists society commissioned a billboard to be placed on a major road leading into New York City. Above a picture of the three wise men following a star across the desert were the words "You know it's a myth".

This viewpoint is additionally being expressed in other popular ways. One internet expression of this is the

appearance of advertisements for a variety of T-shirts bearing the logo “Man created God”. On websites such as Facebook and YouTube, the same message appears in the form of music videos and graphic designs. There are also blogs and forums devoted to a discussion of the topic.

Interest in the subject has resulted in the production of self-published books dealing directly with the issue. An example of this is D. G. McLeod’s *Then Man Created God: The Truth about Believing a Lie* (2009), which is an aggressive attack on all forms of religious belief and practice. From a different field altogether, there is the novel by Steve Toltz, *A Fraction of the Whole*, which was shortlisted for the Man Booker prize. Much of this is cast in the form of down-to-earth monologues or conversations around a wide range of topics. These focus on basic human concerns, including whether or not there is a God and how ideas of God came into being. As the chief protagonist at one point in the novel remarks: “To me, it was obvious man created God in his own image. Man hasn’t the imagination to come up with a God totally unlike him.”¹

Why do we do this? We find it hard to believe that the creature that most inspires imagination, creativity, and empathy, could be one of us. Recent films reflecting on everyday events and their consequences, such as *Winged Creatures*, from the producers of other award-winning films reflecting on everyday events and their consequences, also raise questions about what motivates belief in God. Within this, the story explores how vulnerable we are to fashioning or influencing our conceptions of God according to our own needs and desires.

So, then, in various ways the possibility that God is partly or wholly a man-made affair has come back on the public agenda. In other respects, however, preliminary forms of the question have always been at hand. A prime example

occurs when some parents and religious instructors seek to encourage a religious attitude in their children. When told that God made the universe, most children simply accept what they hear. But after a time, generally between the ages of six and nine, some unexpectedly ask: "If God made everything, then who made God?" This is a good place to begin our investigation.

Who made God?

This question shows that a child is beginning to wonder about one of the big questions of life. In asking it they are not really querying whether God exists. They are simply trying to work out how similar or different God is to everything else in their world – particularly those who are older than them. Since these are the only categories they have for understanding God, it's a perfectly natural question. The answer a child usually gets runs something like this: "God is not the same as us. He wasn't made by anyone else. He has just always been there."

For most children such an answer is enough – for the time being. It satisfies their curiosity about God. But occasionally they will want to take the question a stage further. Phillip Adams, a popular Australian journalist and broadcaster, was one example. His father was a minister and his mother was also a devout Christian. One day he asked them: "If everything began from something else, then who began God?" On hearing the conventional answer to his question, he decided that such a being was highly unlikely. This was the start of his journey into atheism.

As the children of believing parents grow up, they learn that the answer given to their question echoed the opening

words in the Bible. After God created heaven and earth, states Genesis, he “created Man in his own image”. As a child’s understanding of God develops, especially if it is more than a second-hand belief, many come to the conclusion that their original question was inadequate. Others, for various reasons, might begin to doubt whether they can ever know for certain if God exists, or simply give up belief in God altogether, dismissing it as a childish fantasy.

In some cases the question “Who made God?” then comes back on the scene in a new form. An example of this thought process is evident in the physicist Stephen Hawking’s best-selling book on time. In it, he reflects on what it was that started the universe. “Does it need a creator”, he asks, “and if so ... who created him?”² So complex are the issues involved, Hawking concludes, that the question has no credible answer. In this matter we have no alternative but to live on the far edge of uncertainty, indeed improbability.

Other scientists add to this discussion by raising the question of whether humanity, specifically its brain, created God, arguing that the way people are neurologically wired may determine whether they believe in such a being or not.³

Several of the so-called “New Atheists” are more definite. According to the biologist Richard Dawkins, the beauty and intricacy of the universe make it quite understandable that people should wonder if it comes from the work of a “Grand Designer”. But since such a creator would have to be at least as complex as the universe itself, the problem is only pushed further back. It automatically raises the question “Who, or What, created God?”⁴ The cultural critic Sam Harris regards God as fiction and agrees that attempts to prove his existence cannot answer why the causal chain has to stop with God. Why shouldn’t it just go on for ever?⁵ For the scientist Daniel Dennett, God is a childish myth that has become an adult

delusion, rather like Santa Claus.⁶ This makes the query “Who made God?” less an exploratory question about God’s nature and more a basic premise of his impossibility.

I will assess these claims later. Instead we first turn to those who take this approach a step further. What for the most part is only mentioned in passing by the thinkers mentioned above is explored in a more overt way by other figures from the past.

Who made God up?

Many who become agnostics or atheists are content to simply raise objections to traditional views of God and to provide arguments for a more humanist approach to life. For the most part, the writers mentioned above all regard human understanding and experience alone as the source of values and goals to live by. If occasionally these writers ask how belief in God arises in the first place, they do not explore this in any significant way. For example, though Richard Dawkins identifies “wish fulfilment” – what we would like rather than what is actually the case – as a basic feature of all religious systems, he does not explore this any further. Why should the wish that God be there take the particular forms that it does? How could so many people down through the centuries come to believe in someone who does not exist? While many have accepted the existence of imaginary beings like fairies, ghosts, and vampires, the majority generally quietly and gradually outgrow such beliefs.

One of the New Atheists who raises this issue briefly is André Comte Sponville. He asks what it is that people wish for more than anything else. Leaving aside our baser desires, he says what we wish for most is:

... first, not to die, not completely, not irreversibly; second, to be united with the loved ones we have lost; third, for justice and peace to triumph; finally, and most important, to be loved. Now, what does religion tell us – and the Christian religion in particular? That we shall not die, or not really; that we shall rise from the dead and thus be reunited with the loved ones we have lost; that justice and peace will prevail in the end; and, finally, that we are already the object of infinite love. Who could ask for more? No one, of course! This is what makes religion so very suspicious, it is too good to be true!...⁷

But it is precisely the thought that Christianity's ideas are too good to be true, he says, that makes it improbable and gives us every reason to suspect it springs from our own wishes.

Taking the next step, Christopher Hitchens suggests that "God did not create man in his own image. Evidently it was the other way round..."⁸ But in his treatment he only gives this passing attention. More substantially Michael Onfray links this with earlier philosophical critiques of religion, arguing that God is a fictional product of our projections:

Man creates God in their own inverted image. Mortal, finite, limited, suffering from all these constraints, haunted by the desire for completeness, human beings invent a power endowed with precisely the opposite characteristics ... at whose feet they kneel and finally prostrate themselves. I am mortal, but God is immortal. I am finite, but God is infinite. I am limited, but God knows no limits. I do not know everything, but God is omniscient. I cannot do everything, but God is omnipotent. I

*am not blessed with the gift of ubiquity, but God is omnipresent. I was created, but God is uncreated. I am weak, but God is the Almighty. I am on earth, but God is in heaven. I am imperfect, but God is perfect. I am nothing, but God is everything, and so on. Religion thus ... proposes the creation of an imaginary world falsely invested with truth.*⁹

The first writer I came across who advocated this view was one who helped put it on the public agenda in a previous generation. As a young man, Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) was quite interested in discussions about the origin of the universe. Initially he accepted the idea that there had to be an original cause of everything that exists, behind which it was impossible to go. Then:

*... one day, at the age of eighteen, I read John Stuart Mill's Autobiography, and I there found this sentence: "My father taught me that the question, Who made me? cannot be answered, since it immediately suggests the further question, Who made God?" That very simple sentence showed me, as I still think, the fallacy in the argument of the First Cause ... It is exactly of the same nature as the Indian's view, that the world rested upon an elephant and the elephant rested upon a tortoise; and when they said, "How about the tortoise?" the Indian said, "Suppose we change the subject" ... The idea that things must have a beginning is really due to the poverty of our imagination.*¹⁰

How then did belief in God come into existence? According to Russell, religion is mainly based upon fear. Negatively it

arose from our terror of the unknown and positively from our desire to have a cosmic elder brother to help us in our troubles. The earliest gods created by our primitive ancestors were primarily characterized by power. Later, as their moral awareness grew, our ancestors preferred gods who reflected higher ideals. Instead of it being the case that “God created man in his own image”, on the contrary “*Man* created God in *his* own image”! We are not personal because he is personal and has imprinted us with something of his nature. Rather we conceive him as personal because we imagine him to be something like us and have imprinted on him something of our own higher nature.

According to Russell this took place slowly over a long period of time. The gods pictured by the Greeks and Romans were a halfway house in this development. While they embodied some higher ideals, they also demonstrated some typical human flaws. In some ways they were similar to humans but operated on a larger scale. For Russell, the genius of the Jewish and Christian view was that it replaced the idea of a pantheon of deities with belief in one superior, universal God, characterized by love as well as power. This view influenced other religions such as Islam and continues to resound today in the universal claims of various ideologies.¹¹

The downside of this all-embracing, perfect, and powerful “make-believe” divinity, argues Russell, is that it becomes an even more seductive crutch on which we can lean. We displace our yearnings, hopes, and goals onto him and look to him to overcome our uncertainties, challenges, and limitations. God becomes a kind of cosmic “Superman” through whom we hope to aspire to our potential and deal with our failures. This is illusory, for ultimately he prevents us making real progress in both areas. Only when we draw

upon the strength that comes from within us and each other, and are willing to grow up and take responsibility for our individual and corporate lives, can this take place.¹²

We find a similar view reappearing today, with some new features, in the cultural anthropologist Stewart Elliott Guthrie's picturesquely entitled work *Faces in the Clouds*. He builds his approach to religion on humanity's need for a certain kind of understanding rather than for a certain kind of experience or meaning. With this he notes that a common feature of all religions is "communication with humanlike, yet nonhuman, beings through some form of symbolic action ... Humanlike models persist because they identify and account for the crucial component of the world: humans and their activities and effects."¹³

This means that anthropomorphic ways of describing and talking about the gods – describing their character and activities in terms drawn from human experience – is quite plausible and reasonable, even if on reflection it is mistaken.

Who made God over?

Even though a majority of people today grow up with little exposure to religion, most still develop some idea of God. This happens whether their attitude towards God is negative, positive, or just indifferent. As a result, when such people use the word "God" they often understand it in different, sometimes contradictory, ways. This is not only between adherents of different religions but even within the same one. Think of disagreements between Catholics and Protestants, not only in their doctrines and practices but also in some respects their views of God. While both believe that

God is loving and holy, merciful and righteous, forgiving and wrathful, the emphasis they place on these, the immediacy of their relationship to God, and the way these work out in people's lives, varies. Sometimes members of both denominations suggest that some of these differences derive from the intrusion of human ideas into understanding the divine.

Consider the difference between what is described as progressive and traditional Christian views of God. Adherents of the former view argue that traditional depictions of God are more fixated on his holiness and justice than on his love and mercy. This is due, they believe, to the legacy of ancient and medieval elements in Christianity that our modern understanding and sensibilities feel to be inadequate. The idea that God required satisfaction for offences committed against him sprang from less humane ideas than are acceptable today. It should be replaced by a stronger emphasis on his unconditional love and forgiveness.

Or consider the difference between more mystically and rationally theologically oriented believers. The former reject a too rigidly defined view of God in favour of a more intimately experiential or transcendent one. The ex-nun Karen Armstrong, author of the best-selling book *A History of God*, is a representative of this view. The Jewish God, who began as one of several deities worshipped by the Israelites, was originally a savage, partisan god of war. It was only as a result of some profound national experiences that he evolved into the unique, almighty transcendent being proclaimed by the prophets. This God met the new psychological needs of the people of Israel and in this the Jewish faith was no different from any other. Indeed Armstrong goes as far as to say that "when they attributed their own human feelings and experiences to Yahweh, the prophets were in an important

sense creating God in their own image ... As long as this projection does not become an end in itself, it can be useful and beneficial."¹⁴

To avoid becoming obsolete, Armstrong says, all religions change and develop, and each generation has to create its image of God. For her, the strength of this personal idea of God, as of subsequent Christian and Islamic developments, is the way it establishes the dignity of the individual and also a more humane society. Its weakness is that it can too easily become an idolatrous projection of humanity's hopes and fears. We are prone to picture God in terms that are too purely personal at the expense of his cosmic character. It is only a more contemplative approach to the divine that can escape this dilemma, and it is no accident that this developed in all three monotheistic religions, as the Jewish Kabbalah, Christian Mystics, and Sufi movement within Islam testify.

Ordinary believers are also likely to add to or take away from whatever understanding of God they inherit from their upbringing, denomination, tradition, or scriptures. All are susceptible to adding something of their individual impressions or understanding of God to these. All are vulnerable to viewing God in ways they would prefer him to be like. They might do this because they would like God to respond to particular hopes they have, benefits they desire, or consequences they want to avoid.

A good example of this comes from the early life of the well-known author C. S. Lewis (1898–1963). In his autobiography he talks about the role of religion in his upbringing and recalls his reaction to the unexpected death of his mother. Although he was not brought up in a vitally religious way, he was taught to dutifully say his prayers and attend church. But in his ninth year his mother was diagnosed with cancer.

When her case was pronounced hopeless I remembered what I had been taught; that prayers offered in faith would be granted. I accordingly set myself to produce by willpower a firm belief that my prayers for her recovery would be successful; and, as I thought, I achieved it. When nevertheless she died I shifted my ground and worked myself into a belief that there would be a miracle. The interesting thing is that my disappointment produced no results beyond itself ... I think the belief into which I had hypnotised myself was itself too irreligious for its failure to cause any religious revolution. I had approached God, or my idea of God, without love, without awe, even without fear. He was, in my mental picture of this miracle, to appear neither as Saviour nor as Judge, but merely as a magician ... It never crossed my mind that the tremendous contact I had solicited should have any consequences beyond restoring the status quo. I imagine that a "faith" of this kind is often generated in children.¹⁵

Interestingly, our tendency to foist our own ideas onto God now appears to have scientific support. An Australian–American survey entitled “Creating God in One’s Own Image”, recently published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, sought to discover how believers determine the will of God on important topics. Using surveys, psychological manipulation, and brain imaging, they conducted seven studies. Four of these surveyed participants’ views on such controversial issues as abortion and the death penalty. They were also asked about what some famous people and God himself believed. The psychologists then altered participants’

views slightly with various techniques, such as writing and delivering a speech on a topic from a particular viewpoint in front of a video camera. The final study involved taking brain images of believers as they thought about their own beliefs versus those of God or another person. The team found that many of the same brain regions became active when people thought about their own views and God's views, but that different areas lit up when contemplating the mental states of other people.

From their research the team concluded that people subconsciously projected their own attitudes to controversial issues onto God. When their views changed slightly, they thought that God's views had shifted too. Thus: "Manipulating people's own beliefs affected their estimates of God's beliefs more than it affected estimates of other people's beliefs."¹⁶

Though participants believed that God wanted them to act as if they were a kind of living moral compass, unlike an actual compass inferences about God's beliefs may instead have pointed people further in whatever direction they were already facing. However, although people's perceptions of God's attitudes on an issue could be "nudged" slightly, there did seem to be limits as to how radically people would change their views.

Is there any way out of our tendency to impose, however unconsciously, our all-too-human ideas onto our view of God? The main answer given to this is that human beings should acknowledge the need for God to reveal himself to them rather than develop their own understanding of God. I shall return to the merits of this answer later but here it must be acknowledged that it does not *absolutely* escape the problem. The simple reason for this is that those who take their stand based on the Scripture do not all agree on what

it says about God's nature and activity. Those who take the Bible seriously can still differ on the scope of God's grace, the role of God's influence on human freewill, and how to view God's power in everyday affairs. In other words, their images of God differ. So, by itself, an appeal to divine authority of this kind does not answer all the questions.

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The upshot of all this is that the question of whether God created us or whether we created God does not equate with a neat division between those who acknowledge God and those who do not. Both, whether as a basis for unbelief or one of faith, are vulnerable to picturing God in human terms. The issue remains one that both have to grapple with. In order to work out how much human beings have played a part in inventing and portraying God, the best way forward is initially to look backwards. When did the view that humankind created God arise? Who first thought of it? Where did this take place? Why did it surface? What was its impact? As we will see, answering these questions leads us to some interesting, and ultimately surprising, discoveries.