

Defending the church's truth claims

18. Images of God

Perhaps a footnote on God may be in order.

It was an old jibe against the church that man made God in his own image. Now woman is at it. The need for an image is so overwhelming, it seems, that no amount of ridicule can stop us. But it need not be so. We have the powerful example of Islam to show us that even houses of God are not devoid of beauty merely because they have no pictures of persons in them.

The image of an old man wearing a beard in the sky, sitting unconvincingly on a cloud will take a generation or two to eradicate; but eradicate it somehow we must, for it diminishes God. No one believes in heaven any more, and, sitting about as he does, one day he is going to get in the way of an aeroplane.

As long as we think we know a lot about God, we shall always be tempted to depict him in words, or in paint, and every depiction tends to diminish him. People get mesmerised by their own rhetoric about him. I would not want to have back an old model hanging judge; but I take no comfort from words which suggest to me that God is no more than a good mate of mine.

It is considerations like these which, if you come to the conclusion that God is probably not something which an evolutionary brain can grasp, temper the sense of loss.

There is an old understanding which gave me comfort when I came across it. My quotation comes from an essay by the Reverend RT Brooks under the title "God" in a collection of essays entitled *Christian Confidence* published by the SPCK in 1970 as No. 14 in their series *SPCK theological collections* under the editorship of the Reverend Roger Tomes. The quotation is attributed (wrongly Mr Brooks tells us) to Dionysius the Areopagite, and presciently avoids the traps presented by the masculine and the feminine by referring to the neuter 'Divine Principle'.

"It is not soul, or mind, or endowed with the faculty of imagination, conjecture, reason, or understanding; nor is It any act of reason, or understanding; nor can It be described by the reason or perceived by the understanding, since It is not number, or order, or greatness, or littleness, or equality, or inequality, and since It is not immovable nor in motion, or at rest, and has no power, and is not power or light, and does not live, and is not life, nor is It personal essence, or eternity, or time; nor can It be grasped by the understanding, since It is not knowledge or truth; nor is It kingship or wisdom; nor is It one, nor is It unity, nor is It Godhead or Goodness; nor is It a Spirit, as we understand the term, since It is not Sonship or Fatherhood; nor is It any other thing such as we or any other being can have knowledge of; nor does It belong to the category of non-existence or to that of existence; nor do existent beings know It as it actually is, nor does It know them as they actually are; nor can the reason attain to It to name It or to know It; nor is It darkness, nor is It light, or error or truth; nor can any affirmation or negation apply to It; for while applying affirmations or negations to those orders of being that come next to It, we apply not unto It either affirmation or negation, inasmuch as It transcends all affirmation by being the perfect and unique Cause of all things, and transcends all negation by the pre-eminence of It's simple and absolute nature - free from every limitation and beyond them all."

RT Brooks continues: "Charles Williams finely says of this passage that it 'Soars into the great darkness, lit faintly by the very phrases it rejects' ".

And there I would have had to come to a fullstop, beset by an internal deep unease, had we not witness statements - the witness statements of the faithful about Jesus, which, it seems, may point towards a singular hypothesis.