

## Introduction

### The Author and the Book

This book is a personal exploration of the God of the Christian faith. I have written it in the hope that others may find interest and benefit in the illuminating and sometimes surprising journey that I have undertaken for myself. There must have been many occasions in my life when I have been asked, or asked myself, whether I believed in God; and I can now only image the answers I may have given at different ages. Until well into my teens I would probably have given a straightforward 'yes', for I was brought up in a quietly Christian family and I absorbed the non-conformist faith of my parents along with many other dispositions. As childhood gave way to adolescence and I began to think about religion for myself, doubts crept into my hitherto unquestioned beliefs, and by my late teens my answer would, I think, have changed: 'I don't know whether I believe in God, but probably not'. This agnostic phase did not, however, last for long, and by the time I entered the world of work, my answer to the question of whether I believed in God would have reverted to the affirmative 'yes' of my childhood.

It was to remain the answer for much of my adult life, though for many years I gave little systematic thought to what I meant by 'believing in God'. I was far too busy doing other things. God was simply there, the Rock of Ages, the eternal and immutable presence that I unthinkingly assumed him to be. I had no pressing reason to interrogate the images that I had of him, for to question the nature of God was never considered necessary in the circles in which I mostly moved. If asked, I would certainly have ruled out a bearded old man in flowing white robes who lived in the sky, but otherwise I would have fallen back on the images I had garnered from a very selective reading of the Bible and from the hymns and prayers of the non-conformist tradition in which I had grown up. By the time I was into adulthood, these familiar images had lost whatever power they may once have had to challenge or intrigue. As long as I didn't have to articulate my beliefs about God in any great detail, he could remain as a safe and unexamined backdrop to my life.

As middle age loomed, however, I found myself thinking far more seriously about the origins of these taken-for-granted images of God. I began to study the Bible more systematically and I started enquiring into the foundations of the Christian faith. I read up on the history of the Christian Church and I dipped a hesitant toe into the chaotic whirlpool of Christian theology. As I went on, I realised that the historical God of the Christian faith was far more complicated than the carefully selected and sanitised God whom I had come to know through decades of non-conformist church-going. In spite of the hundreds of sermons I must have heard, there was suddenly a great deal about him that I was picking up for the first time. I was, for example, very familiar with the stories in the early books of the Old Testament about the God (Yahweh) who had led the Hebrews out of captivity in Egypt, sheltered them on their forty-year trek through the deserts of the Sinai peninsula, and delivered them to their new home in Canaan. I had never encountered, however, the violent and temperamental God who had wreaked unconscionable havoc against the king of Egypt and his people, who had gratuitously slaughtered the Egyptian army at the Sea of Reeds, who had almost abandoned the Israelites in the desert lest he should be tempted to kill even more of them than the thousands he had already obliterated, and who had passed death sentences on Moses and Aaron because of their faithlessness to him at the waters of Meribah. This didn't seem at all like the loving God in whom I had been enjoined to place my faith.

Or again, I was very familiar with the God who had given Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai; but it was a surprise to find that I knew almost nothing about the hundreds of other laws that Yahweh had given to Moses at the same time and that carried the same weight of divine authority as the Ten. I did not know, for example, that Yahweh had approved of soldiers taking comely women who had been captured in battle as trophy wives for as long as it pleased them and then discarding them when they no longer satisfied. I was intrigued to find that it was an abomination to Yahweh for steps to be placed in front of altars lest the people should chance to see the private parts of the priests ascending them. I felt a little betrayed to discover that nobody had warned me, upon reaching adolescence, that Yahweh had sanctioned the stoning of unruly teenagers at the entrance to a town or city. I was startled to read that women who grabbed the genitals of men with whom their husbands were fighting should have their hands cut off. The puzzling question then arose of why some of God's laws were still very much in vogue while many others had slipped quietly away. Why, to take an obvious example, were the prohibitions on homosexuality still treated by many in the

Church as the unquestioned will of God while the punishments mandated for those found guilty of marital infidelity were never mentioned? What did it say about the authority of God that many of his commandments, enshrined in the scriptures of the Christian faith and available to be read in acts of Christian worship, had long since disappeared from view?



Questions continued to intrude when my inquisitiveness moved on to the New Testament and I found myself struggling to understand the relationship between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New. How could the blood-thirsty Yahweh of the Pentateuch possibly be the same God whom Jesus had called his father? The conventional answer – that Jesus was revealing a truer and more complete face of God than people had been allowed to see in earlier times – raised even more questions. If Yahweh was *not* in fact the tyrant he is often portrayed as being in the early books of the Old Testament, why did he reveal himself in such a misleading way? Why did Jesus unreservedly commend the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob if the scriptural portrayal of him was so inaccurate? And why were these apparently false revelations included in the Christian Bible? These difficulties were compounded by the fact that for Christians, Jesus was not just the one who revealed a more acceptable face of God but God himself. Jesus *was* God. Yet it stretched my imagination almost to breaking point to believe that the micro-managing God of Mount Sinai, who had issued hundreds of laws to Moses about everything from the proper disposal of human excrement to safety in the building of houses, was the same God who had become incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. Where did this astonishing idea come from?

The creeds that I had been dutifully reciting for many years raised yet more questions as my voyage of discovery progressed. The Nicene Creed, for example, went out of its way to emphasise that Jesus had been ‘begotten and not made’. In saying the Creed I was declaring my belief that this was true, but I had never given so much as a passing thought to either the meaning or the origins of such a puzzling assertion. What was the difference between Jesus being ‘begotten’ and being ‘made’, and why was it of such overwhelming importance that it had become a creedal tenet of the Christian faith? As far as I could see, the New Testament was silent on the matter, and I could not recall ever having heard a sermon in which the distinction had been explained. I had, therefore, to face the challenging question of whether I was being entirely honest with myself in believing something that I had never taken the trouble to understand.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity was another central plank of the

Christian faith that seemed to raise searching questions in the light of my new discoveries about God. I was familiar with the Church's orthodox teaching that God was a single and indivisible being made up of three entirely separate persons. I understood, too, that there were occasions when it was necessary to emphasise the one-ness of God (to defend Christianity from the charge of polytheism) and other occasions when it was equally necessary to emphasise the separateness of the three persons (to avoid the possibility that the Father and the Holy Spirit had died with Jesus on the cross). Yet the origins of this Trinitarian doctrine were entirely unknown to me. It is true that the New Testament speaks of a Father, a Son, a Word, and a Holy Spirit, but I could find no biblical authority for the full-blooded doctrine of the Trinity enshrined in the Nicene Creed. If not from the Bible, for example, where did the idea come from that Jesus had been 'begotten' and not 'made'? And why did the Word (which, according to the prologue to John's gospel, had been with God from the beginning of time and which dominated many of the theological debates of the early Christian Church) find no place in the Creed? When was the Word ejected from the formula, and why?



The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus was yet another cornerstone of Christian belief that needed to be rethought. I had been familiar from an early age with the words from the famous Good Friday hymn: 'There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin; he only could unlock the gates of heaven and let us in'; but I had never thought to ask who had locked the gates in the first place and why God had needed the human sacrifice of Jesus before he was able to open them again. I could, moreover, find little in the New Testament to explain how the death of one man at a particular time and place in history had 'paid the price of sin' for all eternity. The synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are almost entirely silent on the matter. John's gospel hints at an answer that invokes the Jewish ritual of the sacrificial lamb; and St Paul's letters introduce the novel but difficult idea that people's sins are forgiven and their place in heaven assured as they die symbolically with Jesus and rise with him again. By the end of the first thousand years of the Christian faith, further explanations had appeared on the scene that seemed to have no biblical authority at all. A number of theologians had, for example, explained the death of Jesus as a ransom paid for the return of sinful man to the forgiving arms of God; but they differed as to who had paid the ransom and to whom it had been paid. Some argued that the ransom had been paid by God to the devil, others that

it had been paid by Jesus to God. Yet others rejected the idea of a ransom entirely, preferring instead to see the cross as a symbol of God's unconditional love and an encouragement to righteous living. So how did the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion come to be understood in such conflicting ways? If not from the Bible, where did these explanations come from? Did they not reflect fundamentally different faces of the Christian God?

A final example of the questions arising from my new-found discovery of the multi-faceted God of the Christian tradition lay in the notion of salvation. Much of the evolution of Christian doctrine, I discovered, was best understood in the context of mankind's continuing search for salvation. Always there is the eternal question: What must I do to be saved? St Paul's answer, when the question was put to him by his jailer in Philippi, was: 'Put your trust in the Lord Jesus'. Other – rather different – answers have, however, illuminated the history of Christian theology. At one extreme are those who have argued that there is nothing we can do to aid our own salvation. It is God alone who decides whether human souls are saved or damned, and if people were able by their freewill actions to influence his decision, even to the tiniest degree, then he would not be the omnipotent God that he is. At the other extreme are those who have argued that there is quite a lot that people can do to help themselves. In particular, they can respond to the love of God by trying to lead good and morally responsible lives. God won't force himself upon us, but if we make the effort to follow his teachings, we will meet him coming towards us. There are assorted intermediate positions too. Such contradictory answers to the question 'what must I do to be saved?' seem to betoken entirely different faces of God. A God who chooses to save only *some* souls can hardly be the same deity as a God who invites the salvation of *all* souls. How did such a contradiction come about, and does it matter?



It is clear from these introductory illustrations that many different faces of the God of the Christian tradition have been unveiled in the stories and narratives that have come down to us across the years. Far from being the immutable Rock of Ages that I had imagined him to be, the historical God emerges as a complex and changing deity whose images have formed and reformed like the pieces of a kaleidoscope. If I am now asked whether I believe in God, I reply that it all depends on the kind of God the questioner has in mind – for it is meaningless to ask whether people believe in God unless some definitions are first agreed.

Does God unilaterally choose some souls for hell and others for heaven, or doesn't he? Does God manipulate the laws of the natural world in response to people's prayers, or doesn't he? Did God create the world and all its inhabitants in six days, or didn't he? Is the God of the Old and New Testaments the same God who is worshipped by Jews and Muslims, or isn't he? Did God require a once-and-for-all human sacrifice before he was able to forgive human sin, or didn't he? And so on. God comes in many different shapes and sizes; so tell me the shape and the size of the God you have in mind, and I will tell you whether it is a God in whom I can believe.

Lying behind these awkward questions is an even greater one that unites them all: why is it that people across the ages have claimed to have experienced so many different and sometimes contradictory faces of the Christian God? If there is one true God, and if he is known to those who believe in him through the revelation of himself in history, why hasn't a consistent understanding of him emerged from the witness and testimony of those who have experienced his presence and told their stories? There are various possible answers. One is that God has deliberately revealed himself in different guises over time – an answer implicit in the common Christian assertion that the true nature of God was revealed much more fully in the life of Jesus than in his dealings with the early Israelites. Somewhere along the line between Abraham and Jesus, the argument goes, God started showing himself in a different and truer light. Somewhere in the course of those two thousand years, his revelation of himself as the warrior God of Sabaoth or the micro-managing God of Sinai metamorphosed into his later revelation in Jesus as a God of universal grace. Perhaps, but why would an omnipotent God behave in such a misleading way? Why would he deliberately want to confuse people by giving out incomplete (or even false) messages about himself to earlier generations, only to correct them in later generations? It seems a very unlikely thing for God to have done.

A more convincing answer, perhaps, is that God has actually been changing over time, and the revelations that people claim to have experienced are the manifestations of a deity who is continually evolving new and different faces. Perhaps the angry and vengeful Yahweh of the early Old Testament learnt from his mistakes and became incarnate in Jesus as a more compassionate kind of God. The stories in the Old Testament that link him with such foundational figures as Abraham and Moses portray him as someone who was perfectly capable of changing his mind. It could be argued that he has continued to do so in the millennia that have followed. From this point of view, God appears to

be a kaleidoscopic God because he *is* a kaleidoscopic God. It is not, however, an argument that has very much to commend it. A God who feels the need to change within a time span that, in cosmological terms, is less than the blink of an eye can hardly be a God who created the cosmos in the first place.

Much stronger is the likelihood that many of the faces of God that people have claimed in good faith to have seen over the ages have simply been wrong. Believers may sincerely have thought that they were receiving true revelations from God, but in fact (for all sorts of good and human reasons) they were mistaken. Revelation is always mediated through human perception; and human perception can often act as a distorting prism. Since there are, as far as we know, no neural pathways within the human brain that are dedicated exclusively to the reception of divine messages, one man's revelation of truth can be another man's fanciful imagination; and there are no objective criteria for deciding which is right. There are numerous examples in this book. Plausible though such an explanation of the multi-faceted God of Christian history may be, it raises searching questions about certainty and doubt. Can we *ever* be sure that what we are experiencing, through whatever means we may experience it, is genuinely from God? Is it ever possible to see the 'true' face of God, or must we necessarily make do with the disparate and distorted images that have come down to us through the witness and testimony of the ages? Those who yearn for certainty will believe that, through the teachings of their Church and the authority of the Bible, they are indeed seeing the true face of God. Those who are content to live with uncertainty will reach their own conclusions from the array of images on offer.

There is, of course, a fourth possible answer to the question of why people have experienced so many different and contradictory faces of the Christian God – that he simply doesn't exist outside the human imagination. God could be an entirely human invention. In many ways, this is the easiest answer of all. Human inventiveness is endlessly creative, and if God is among its finest creations, then there is every reason to expect a rich diversity in the way he has been portrayed. From this perspective, the historical portrait gallery of God is stocked with nothing more (but also with nothing less) than the sum of human hopes and fears, and while they may tell us a great deal about the human condition, they can tell us nothing about God because he is not 'really' there. This is, though, rather too glib an answer. Whatever people may or may not personally believe about God, the human awareness of something beyond the ordinary world of everyday experience has been among the most potent drivers of human history. This awareness

cannot be explained *simply* as the product of a collectively deluded mind. It would not be true to the historical record to dismiss the human experience of God *simply* as the triumph of hope over experience, or romanticism over rationality, any more than it would be true to the record to portray him as the eternally immutable Rock of Ages. The truth is likely to be far more ragged and complex than either of these absolutes imply.



Against this autobiographical background, my aim in this book has been to lay out the fruits of my search for a less selective and sanitised image of God than the one I grew up with. The book is set within an historical framework, beginning with the gods of Canaan from whom the Yahweh of the Old Testament probably emerged and ending with the non-theistic faces of God that were gaining traction by the end of the twentieth century. It is, quite deliberately, a brief history, for as any writer knows, the quickest way to bore one's readers is to tell them everything. I have necessarily been highly selective in the examples I have included in the story, and I have surely omitted much that others would consider far more relevant. I plead guilty as charged. It is not my aim to offer an exhaustive account of the history of God – others have done that far more ably than I could possibly do – but to present what seem to me to be some of the major milestones in the human understanding of God within the main stream of Christian faith.

I offer no answers to the question (which runs as a consistent thread throughout the text) of why people across the ages have experienced so many different and sometimes contradictory faces of the Christian God. I have merely tried to supply the evidence upon which readers can decide for themselves. I hope that some will allow me to escort them on a journey that I have already undertaken for myself and that has led me to some surprising but ultimately sustaining conclusions; but if any decide not to, I will entirely understand, for the journey is not without its hazards, especially for those in search of certainty.