

IS GOD THE PRODUCT OF OUR IMAGINATION?*

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Until a few years ago I thought I'd finished with God. I'd become increasingly disenchanted and worried by the whole idea of a deity who was omnipotent, benevolent and in some mysterious sense a personality like ourselves, with likes and dislikes similar to my own.

When I looked seriously at such hideous phenomena as Auschwitz I found it very hard to see how the God of Western classical theism could be reconciled with such a horror. In Western theism God is responsible for everything that happens in the world; he is entirely benevolent, entirely omnipotent. So the problem of God was somehow there in Auschwitz and did nothing; it was troublesome and I could see why many Jews felt that God had died in Auschwitz. Then of course it was also difficult to reconcile the conventional notion of God as Creator with some of the discoveries of modern science; how do you answer such cosmologists as Steven Hawking who find no room for God in the cosmos; and there was my own rather troubled personal religious history,

I had been a very devout teenager. I'd entered a convent at 17 and lived as a nun for seven years and during that time I really struggled hard in prayer. I knelt for an hour every morning from 6-7am trying to meditate and spent at least 6 or 7 hours in the day also engaged in various spiritual exercises in and out of the chapel; and try as I might I found prayer an increasingly problematic exercise. I could not do it, and I would wrestle and try to open myself to the experience of having God somehow get in contact with me: here I am, I've given my life to you, now at least give me some glimmer. Everyone else seemed to be doing fine, but I was wrestling with boredom, struggling all the time with an ever increasing, sinking sense of inadequacy and failure; and so I left the religious life. Then, about seven years after that I slipped away from the Catholic Church, and God fell away from me - very easily, I thought. He'd never really seem to impinge much upon my life. I felt I'd given him every opportunity to do so and somehow this God slipped away; but I maintained my interest in religion and it was in the course of researching my history of the idea and experience of God in the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam that I came to see how very, very eccentric this Western classical theism is.

In the West for the last 400 years (and I'll talk a little later of how this came to be), we've got into the habit of speaking as though God were a matter of fact, an objective reality that's the same for everybody and whose existence can be proved. I've spent a great deal of time in my theological studies pouring over the famous proofs for the existence of God which seemed quite inconclusive to me; but when I started to do my research I realised that these proofs - as originally designed and even as adumbrated by the much misunderstood Thomas Aquinas - were not meant to be scientific and logical demonstrations of God's existence. We can't prove God's existence as we can prove the existence of this lectern or even the atom. And I began to look at really eminent monotheists of the stature of Aquinas himself, Maimonides, Ebenezer, Meister Eckhart, going right the way through the monotheistic tradition in which people were saying very, very authoritatively that it is a mistake to think about God as a being.

When I was about eight years old I had to learn this catechism answer to the question, What is God?: 'God is the supreme spirit who alone exists of himself and is infinite in all perfection'. It did not mean much to me at eight, and it still leaves me cold because I find it a rather dry, even an arid definition. I now see that there is something almost perverse about it, because the whole weight of the monotheistic tradition says that you cannot simply draw breath and define God in a single sentence; in fact you cannot define God at all. It's better, said Maimonides, to say that God does not exist, because our word existence is so limited that it cannot possibly apply to the ineffable God.

Mystics and philosophers in all three of the religions insisted that it's better to call God 'Nothing', with a capital N, because God is not another being, not even a supreme being, which suggests a chain - God albeit at the top; as though 'he', ridiculous pronoun, were a being like ourselves, just a continuation of ourselves, a continuation of the kind of reality, the kind of personality that we know. They also insisted again and again, often in very audacious ways, that all our ideas about God, all our doctrines, all our theology, was entirely man made. This could bear no relation whatsoever to the absolutely ineffable and indescribable reality to which one 13th Century Jewish mystic pointed when he spoke about the God Head as '*En Sof* without end'. *En Sof* is entirely beyond our care; we will never know *En Sof* even in the next world if there be such. *En Sof* himself, said this Jewish mystic, is not even mentioned in the Bible or the Talmud. What we have in the Bible and the Talmud he said are simply human experiences, human glimpses of the Divine; so our doctrines have constantly changed. I had

naively imagined that the idea of God had been pretty much of a constant since he first appeared and revealed himself, but not so; the idea of God, I found, had changed again and again often in very audacious dramatic and surprising ways, because we are meaning-seeking creatures. Ever since we fell out of the trees and became recognisably human, we created religions at the same time and for the same kind of reason as we've created works of art.

Therein is our attempt to find some ultimate meaning in a puzzling, tragic, flawed, yet beautiful universe. When we look at the universe, human beings have always been struck with wonder, and ask the question - that essential religious question - 'Why is there Something rather than Nothing? Why is there anything at all?' I mean children ask this: 'How did I get here? Why am I? What am I doing here?' And that becomes crucial and we are surrounded not only by a world which fills us with awe, wonder and delight but fills us with terror, sadness and sorrow as we confront tragedy, mortality injustice, cruelty and danger on all sides. Humanity is frail, flawed and fragile, and we, unlike dogs - as far as we know- spend a great deal of time agonising and debating our position. We don't know whether dogs spend a great deal of time worrying about the canine condition or about the condition of dogs in other parts of the world and worrying about their eternal destiny and the meaning of their existence; but we do, we are continually troubled about it.

I don't need to tell any of you that, because you are all engaged in either religion or aesthetics, and aesthetics is entirely a part of this endless search for meaning to find some significance in life; a significance, let it be noted, that cannot always be summed up clearly, rationally, logically. It is very difficult to say why one of the last quartets of Beethoven, for example, has the effect it does have upon us. If it moves us, and lifts us momentarily beyond ourselves, it is very difficult to say *how* a great poem works, how it touches something deeply buried in us. I know because I tried to do it; my doctoral thesis at Oxford was a study of Tennyson's language and I struggled for a long time to apply modern linguistic techniques to explain the peculiar effect of Tennyson's verse; but of course I couldn't do it. Ultimately if you can do it, it is probably not a very good poem; and it's the same too with theology, except we in the West have rather forgotten about all of that.

You hear from all these sophisticated philosophers like Maimonides and Ebenezer and Thomas Aquinas that God does exist and that God does not exist, but what about the Bible? What about looking back to the early books of the Bible, where God bursts into the human scene very much larger than life and often acts in quite abhorrent ways, for example

drowning the poor Egyptian army in the sea of reeds. They were just doing their job .

I've recently been looking at the Book of Genesis. Now if you look at the first book of Genesis, there is the God of Western classical theism; there he is in his heaven, omnipotent, the Creator. He speaks and it is done; in total control of the cosmos that he is creating and utterly benevolent, blessing all his creatures; and he contemplates the world at the end and pronounces it good. So it's a good world, a good God in his heaven and all is right with the world. Then we switch into chapters two or three, and the editors have included stories that completely start to knock this picture of God around. We find a God who is not in control, who cannot control what human beings do.

They start doing things he doesn't like. Is the serpent one of his creations? If not, then what is it? No explanations are given, and the rest of Genesis goes on knocking down this picture of this omnipotent, benevolent God. God is the Creator in chapter one; then we find God is the destroyer, wiping out the whole world in the flood. It is very difficult, if you read that flood story with attention and care and see the hideous effect it has on Noah, to see the damaged survivor. We know about survivors and the damage inflicted upon them by catastrophe, and there is Noah, a damaged survivor. It is very difficult to see that God as anything but evil. This is a God who changes his mind; suddenly he regrets that he made man, so he wants to wipe man out, acting like a child who has built his tower block of bricks and wants to knock it all down; suddenly he has to learn to live with flawed humanity, as it is. It is very difficult to square this with the serene creator in chapter one.

Then you've got the insecure God of the Tower of Babel story, who is horrified that human beings are daring to make a tower. He says 'they'll be getting ideas and might even ascend up to us, we'll have to do something about this' and comes down and stops them. This is a very insecure God, a very unfair God, constantly choosing people, younger sons over older sons, and causing immense distress. The Cain and Abel story is really a very difficult story immediately after the Garden of Eden. Two people offer sacrifice in good faith, according to the text, as far as we know. And God spurns Cain and picks up Abel and causes murderous rage in the heart of Cain. And so it goes on, until finally God disappears from the scene altogether and Joseph and his brothers, at the end of Genesis, are struggling like us to cope with an absent God, struggling to make sense of their dreams,

intuitions and native wit in order to survive in a dangerous and unpredictable world.

So what you have in the Book of Genesis is set up by the biblical authors. They are very skilled stories these, not the works of naive primitives. The craft of those stories is immense and the editors knew what they were doing. In Genesis there are fitful glimpses of the Divine: sometimes ambiguous, sometimes frightening, sometimes doubtful, sometimes wonderful. But you struggle with the text, as Jacob wrestled all night with the Angel and found it was God. So there, from the earliest monotheistic text, you have no clear theology. You cannot read the Book of Genesis and come away with a neat notion of what God is. The Rabbis later were very happy with that. They said, when they were devising the Talmud, that it was utterly impossible for human beings to have a clear notion of God because our little minds cannot contain it. They said that on Mt Sinai, when Moses received his vision and revelation of God and the Torah, every Israelite standing at the foot of the mountain experienced God in an entirely different manner according to his particular temperament, personality and makeup; that was one of their ways of saying that God is not an objective fact, the same for everybody: we all have to struggle to find our own God. (I'm afraid it was not 'his or her'; I'm not using inclusive language here; the women were banned to a place far off while all the *men* standing at the foot of the mountain experienced God in an entirely different way!)

Now God has been called other things in other parts of the world. It starts off as an experience. People don't see the biblical characters sitting down and working out God's existence according to the five proofs. They experience the luminous and the sense of the sacred. The Divine has been universal in human history; it's part of human history, this sense of a mystery that transcends our existence and yet is somehow deeply entwined within it; it is a fact of human life. That is something that human beings have experienced and have expressed in their art as well as in their religion. So it starts out as an experience, and in fact the whole notion of trying to prove God's existence was a rather late development. It happened for the first time in the Islamic Empire during the 8th and 9th Centuries. At this time the Muslim world was enjoying a sort of cultural efflorescence which was a cross between our enlightenment and renaissance. They were particularly strong on science. More scientific discoveries were made at that time in the Muslim world than had been made in the whole course of preceding human history up to that point, and the Arabs had come into contact for the first time with the works of Aristotle and Plato and Plotinus.

They were immensely excited by Greek rationalism, and they devised a new philosophy which was an attempt to live wholly rationally - rather like the French philosophes of the Enlightenment. So they said 'let's try to prove that Allah exists, as Aristotle proved the existence of the prime mover', and they devised their own proofs and did some very interesting work. The Jews living in the Islamic empire picked up the torch. They felt challenged by this rationalism and felt they had to respond. They too began proving God's existence and trying to see the God of the Bible as a rational entity whose existence could be proved and discovered by reason alone. You didn't need revelations they said; any human being could work it out from scratch going from one step to another. Interestingly enough, however, the Greek Orthodox Christians wanted no part in this project; It was their ancestors, Aristotle, Plato and the like, who had spurned this rationalism in the first place.

The Greek Christians instinctively understood the limitations of their metaphysics. They might have said that though reason and logic were admirable and indispensable for some disciplines such as medicine or mathematics or natural science, it was no use for God. It was like trying to eat soup with a fork; forks are a very good implement for certain foods but useless for a liquid such as soup. We can often forget in our chauvinistic way, about the immensely rich and much older Greek and Russian Orthodox tradition which formed most of the doctrines to which Christians now subscribe but which understood them very differently from us.

Let me just show you two words which give you at once the difference between Eastern and Western outlooks in the Christian world. For Greek Christians the word *theoria* means contemplation; for us 'theory' is a mental construct. For Greek Christians such as Basil the Great and his brother Gregory of Nisar the word *dogma* meant everything in religion that could not be defined or spoken or said. Now look what we in the West have done with 'dogma' and 'dogmatic'.

The Greeks eventually split off from the Western Church for very many complicated reasons, some of them political. But underlying the split there were also theological reasons, because the Greeks feared that the Latins were developing a far too rationalistic and anthropomorphic concept of the Divine. So the Greeks proved to be wise.

The Jews withdrew from this project of proving God by reason and the Jews found that when tragedy struck, the remote God of the philosophers could not speak to them in any way at all. What spoke to them was the

mysterious God of Kabbalah, and mysticism became the dominant popular form of Judaism until about the 19th Century.

Then the Muslims withdrew. I would like to tell you a story which I find emblematic of this process of transition. In the eleventh century a very famous scholar El-Ghazali had a prestigious post in the *Madrassah* at Baghdad and he had been increasingly troubled about God. He was looking at all the conventional ways in which to approach God in the Muslim world and *philosophia* was one of them. He was incredible. He had an encyclopaedic mind and he mastered *philosophia* perfectly and even wrote his own treatise, so much so that when the Western world encountered it later they assumed that El-Ghazali had himself had been a *philosophos*, but he was not; he was a man in conflict with himself. He found that some of these arguments could give him no certainty of God's existence while at the same time he could lay his hand upon his heart and say he was utterly convinced by these rational proofs. This was no light matter for El-Ghazali because he fell ill and found he simply could not speak. He was paralysed. He couldn't give his lectures. He was just lying immobile as though he had a stroke. Doctors who saw him rightly diagnosed this as a conflict within himself and said he would not be cured until he managed to resolve this conflict. So he had himself taken away from Baghdad, gave up his post and went off to join the Sufis, the mystics of Islam. The Sufis of Islam were at that point a rather disreputable, eccentric lot, very much on the fringe. But El-Ghazali went to Jerusalem and lived above the Golden Gate on the Ahrum El Sharif and practiced Sufi exercises. He came back and said the only way of gaining absolutely certainty about God's existence or about the existence of the Divine was through mystical exercises, spiritual exercises of contemplation where one apprehended, by intuitive, imaginative means, the Divine reality in the depth of the self. It was El-Ghazali who was responsible for this immense shift in Muslim thought, which thereafter led to all Muslim philosophy being wedded with spirituality. Henceforth there could be no philosophy in the Muslim world unless it was accompanied by spirituality and spiritual exercises.

It was El-Ghazali who made Sufism and its doctrines and its intuition and insights respectable. Not only respectable: Sufism became the dominant mode of Islamic belief among the ordinary people. It was sometimes frowned upon by the establishment, but became immensely popular with the ordinary people, who accepted the mystical notion of God.

Now mysticism has rather come into disrepute in our own day, as has mystery, which fell out of favour at the time of the enlightenment. This is

seen in the word 'myth': when you speak of a 'myth' today we usually mean something that is not true.

The triumph of mystical religion over the more rational forms of faith in the monotheistic religions was not, however, an abdication of intelligence. This was a highly imaginative view of God. The Cabbalists developed a whole mythology based very much on some of the old pagan mythology which showed how *En Sof* - the Godhead, the inscrutable, unknowable Godhead - emanated towards humanity in ten stages. There is nothing about it in the Bible, but they were not interested in reading the Bible as a holy encyclopaedia for information about God. They saw it as a spring board into the Divine and they interpreted the Bible so that every word referred to one of these inner *Sefirot*. The first Chapter of Genesis became entirely transformed in their hands to mean God's decision to make 'itself'. God is not 'he' they made quite clear. 'He' may become 'he' at the end of his quest at the very end of his quest, when he becomes personable in order that we can apprehend him; that is the moment at which in the depth of his soul the Cabbalist ascends to the inscrutable Divine. But God also has female attributes. The *Shekhina*, God's presence in the world, is female and the Cabbalists imagined the *Shekhina* wandering around lost, separated from the Godhead. Huge, imaginative stories about the *Shekhina* were true because they described the path of the spirit.

Mythology has been well described as an ancient form of psychology; it describes not things that actually happened in historical time, but the inner life of the spirit: the ten stages of development of the *Sefirot* represented the ten stages of human consciousness, whereby the mystic ascended from within his being to an apprehension of God. Similarly the Sufis evolved huge wonderful, extraordinary myths about God. For example, God's sighing with compassion and pathos creates the world. He then created beings so that he could be known and be redeemed from his loneliness. How do we know this, say the Sufis? By the yearning in our own hearts. When Sufis and Cabbalists contemplated these myths and stories, and went through the Yogic disciplines created by contemplatives all the world over, they encountered a reality they couldn't describe. But just as when we listen to a wonderful piece of music or are struck dumb by a magnificent painting and are lifted momentarily beyond our normal dreary depressing state of mind, so were they by these myths. Therefore they had a reality, though not an objective one.

The Sufis made great play of the fact that the way to God lay through the creative imagination; within all of us, they said, was an entire world of

interior states, of heaven and hell. It was through entering into this inner world of pure images you could apprehend God; not by going through the logical proofs of Kabbalah. Now, Jean Paul Satre said that if we define the imagination as the ability to think of what is not present, it follows from this that imagination must be the prime religious faculty because it is the way in which we conceive to ourselves the ever absent God. The Monotheists have done this from the very beginning.

When Van Gogh looked at that chair he didn't see just a very mundane and boring chair; he saw something brimful with mystery, being and significance and transformed it for us. Similarly the mystics taught their disciples to look at the world as symbols of the Divine, to look further than the surface. This is just what an artist does to pierce through to the inner reality that lies at the heart of his subject. When we look at the world with imagination we are like any great artist; we look at the world and see further than what is on the outside.

Reason, logic and science teach us very correctly to look very carefully at the outside of things and to weigh up the actual physical phenomena of properties. Aesthetics teaches you to look within to God the Divine. This is absolute fact in religious history; the Divine never appears directly, it always manifests itself in something else: in a law code, in a book, in a human being, in a man or woman, in places, in mountains, in certain aspects of scenery which seem special or significant or bring our attention. This is not something that will just happen to you; not like going off to Damascus one day and being knocked off your horse like St Paul. Most of us have to train ourselves to look in this way, just as you can't walk straight into a concert of advanced chamber music never having heard Western music before and immediately appreciate it unless you are highly gifted musically; or immediately understand a painter like Kandinsky; or immediately understand Shakespeare or T S Eliot. You have to train your aesthetic sense. Similarly it was an absolute requirement in all societies before our own, through imaginative effort, to train the sense of the Divine in the same way: to pierce, to look through and create symbols for ourselves, to see the world as symbols of the Divine, to look for the deep currents in existence.

One of my favourite mystics - to give you one example of how it was done - was the very influential 12th Century mystical philosopher Muid ad-Din ibn al-Arabi, who saw al-Lah the Divine in a girl called Nizam when he was encircling the Kabah in Mecca. He wrote whole poems to this girl (very like Dante's experience with Beatrice). He looked through to the heart of this girl and saw her as an incarnation of the Divine wisdom Sancta Sophia,

as in our home at the moment,** and he evolved a whole philosophy which I find inspiring and wonderful. He said that every single human being that had ever existed was a revelation, an unrepeatable unique revelation of one of God's hidden secret and Divine names. So that immediately tells you that you can't sum up God in any sense at all. If a human being in this room is an incarnation of the Divine then it's impossible to sum up God in a single sentence in al-Lah, as in the Catholic Catechism. It is our duty to discover this Divine name that's been spoken in the depth of our own being; that is the God we come to know. I won't know your God, and you won't ever know mine. And he made it quite clear too that the Divine name spoken in you would be deeply coloured through and through by the religious tradition into which you had been born; and Sufis had a really outstanding appreciation of the value of other faiths. Ibn al-Arabi said he was at home anywhere, in a Mosque, a Temple, a Synagogue or a Church. He was neither Muslim, Jew or Hindu, because once you've encountered the Divine, you've left these man made distinctions behind. So he said we must take our own traditions very seriously into which we were born and discover that Divine; it's no good trying to find somebody else's God or allow the establishment to tell you what God is. You'll find the God that has been spoken in the depths of your own being and the way to do that.

He also said we have a duty - and I wish someone had told me this in the convent - to create theophanies for ourselves; because on the few occasions that I did think I was getting somewhere - being inspired by a particularly eloquent preacher or a particularly wonderful poem or spiritual writing, having an aesthetic response - I was cut short by the thinking 'no that's not really God at all, I'm just responding to the music, or I'm working myself up here'. But al-Arabi would have said of course that is how we do it; we have a duty to create theophanies for ourselves and to look into others with that respect and see the Divine name spoken in that person and value it and honour it as he had glimpsed it momentarily in Nizam. And it was not an illusion because when you get to that person, you will see the person for what 'it' really is or what 'it' really should be in each person. To create this reality he said to strip away the ephemera and go around using our creative imagination; to look - as Wordsworth might have said - 'into the heart of things'.

Now, what were we in the West doing while all this was going on? Well, just as people like El-Ghazali were abandoning the attempt to prove God's existence by reason, this idea was transferred to us in Europe and we

seized upon it with glee and started to try to prove all kinds of things, like the Trinities. Anselm was very hot on trying to prove the Trinity by natural reason. Thomas Aquinas was perfectly clear that all his great *Summa Theologiae* was human doctrine. You all know the famous story that's told about him that when he dictated the last word to his scribe he laid his head down in his hands and the scribe said, 'What's the matter?' and he said, 'Everything I have written is straw compared to what I have seen'. But unfortunately Thomas Aquinas gave the impression by the way he wrote that you could prove God by reason, and he called God 'being' rather than 'nothing'. We were already on our way towards this rationalistic conception of the Divine.

This really became acute at the time of the Reformation, when we were beginning that great scientific revolution in Europe that was going to transform the world and create modern Western society. And just as the Philosophes in the 8th and 9th Century Islamic Empire had been scientists who wanted to try to see God in line with their science, we have started to apply scientific accuracy and the empirical method to our religious texts. Hence you have all this great distress about how God created the world in seven days, so that Darwin is not able to be taught in some states in America because people regard it as a literal account of God's creation.

We were evolving this kind of thinking when the Cabbalists were completely rewriting the Book of Genesis to mean some interior motion in the heart of the mystic and in the heart of God. The enlightenment compounded this tendency in the West; the religion of reason, the deists, wanted to get rid of all mystery. They had no time for the Trinity for example, saying the Trinity was wholly incomprehensible. They hadn't realised that was precisely why the Greeks had evolved that doctrine of Trinity in the 4th Century: to remind Christians that it was impossible to think of God as though he were a simple personality. That was the whole point of the doctrine, according to the Greeks; and so it has gone on.

Now, there were the poets who understood. Think of the Romantics who reacted against the rationalism of the Enlightenment, saying that the creative imagination must come to the fore: 'I'm certain of nothing but of the holiness of the heart's affection' says Keats. And again: 'What the imagination sees as beauty must be true whether it existed before or not'. This is a very mystical perception: that what one can create has a reality because it does something to us, even though we can't say what it is; just as we can never say what God or the Divine is. My favourite one is when Keats is speaking of the incident in *Paradise Lost* where Adam dreams about

Eve and is shown her the next day. The imagination is like Adam's dream: he awoke and found it to be truth. Just as we create our own theophanies so we create our own truth and beauty. And where is God in that: negative capability? When a man is capable of being uncertain, having doubts, accepting mysteries without any irritable straining after the fact and reason, it couldn't be better. This is close to that 14th Century mystical text *The Cloud Of Unknowing* which asks 'What is God?' and answers 'I haven't the faintest idea'. That is the kind of spirit which I want you to enter right now, so that you can only come to apprehend the Divine by saying you know nothing whatsoever about God.

Now what can we do now, project for the future. There is a lot of atheism in our world at the moment and I don't necessarily see this as the disaster that some people do.

I think a committed and passionate atheism can be a much more truly religious attitude than the weary, lazy, inadequate theism.

Sometimes our minds in the West may be clogged with so many inadequate images of God, and we may have been so put off by some of the really acceptable things that have been said and done in this name that we may need to free ourselves from these for a while and go out for awhile into the dark night of the soul, into the *unknowing*, until we can creatively summon up an expression of the Divine that will speak to us in the late 20th - 21st Century. We need to know of course that you can't force a poem or great piece of music; you have to wait humbly for it to declare itself. You can work and you can prepare yourself, you can prepare the ground; but ultimately a great work of art can't be produced; so it's no good sitting down and having a committee decision on a new definition of God in a counsel of the Church or anything of that kind. When that's been tried in the past it's always been a disaster; committee decisions never work. God is more like a poem; its got to arise from the depth of the believers. All we can do is prepare our hearts.

There is another way, though, I think in which we can help this situation. I think so many of the churches and possibly synagogues, mosques too (but I can only speak chastisingly of my own tradition), spend an awful lot of time haranguing the faithful about really inessential matters: about whether they can use contraception or not, or whether women can be priests. They spend a create deal of acrimony on these matters and have ignored the essential truth of religion. One of the main truths of religion is that no spirituality, no religious experience is valid unless it ensues practical compassion. That is the message of all the world religions in Buddhism,

Hinduism and it's also the message of the Hebrew prophets when they transformed the old pagan religions of Yahweh. It certainly informs the whole of the New Testament: if I had not charity... tinkling brass and a sounding symbol. And in the Koran it is absolutely clear that the bedrock message of the Koran is not a doctrine; the Koran has a hearty contempt for theological speculation and doctrines, calls it *zanna* (guesswork), self indulgent whimsy, and says you cannot prescribe for people's belief, things that you can't prove one way or the other. How, says the Koran, can Christians say that God has sired a son? People of the book, are you mad? they say. What the Koran teaches is that it is wrong to build up a private fortune and horde your wealth selfishly, but good to share your money and to create a just, decent society, where poor and vulnerable people are treated with respect; that is the bedrock message of the Koran.

Now I think if we started not so much to argue theologially about a god out there but perhaps tried to cultivate in our encounters with one another that sense of the uniqueness and ineffability and mystery of each one, we might be heading into a healthier direction. Remember Hamlet's great complaint to Guildenstern where he is trying to worm some information out of Hamlet to manipulate him? We so often manipulate people and use them for our own ends in all kinds of subtle ways. Instead of just seeing them as objects for our selfish uses, we should remember Hamlet's words where he says to Guildenstern 'play upon this pipe' and Guildenstern says 'I don't know how' and Hamlet says 'it's simple, you just blow down it and twiddle your fingers around' and Guildenstern says 'I can't do it, I haven't got the skill'. Hamlet says 'Why, what a poor thing you would make of me. You would play upon me as this pipe, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery'. And what is God but mystery; the absolute indivisibility of each human person; the utterly mysterious that is the Divine.

Christians are taught to see Christ in one another; Hindus when they greet one another join their hands and bow to acknowledge the Divinity in the person they're meeting. I think we could begin to use our creative imaginations to apprehend the mystery in one another. Then we might be on track to create a vibrant faith for the 21st Century.

* This is an edited transcript of an unscripted lecture.

** Conference delegates were housed in Sancta Sophia College, University of Sydney [editor].