

GOD AND WHOSE IMAGINATION?

Gerard Windsor

Half a lifetime ago I had a girlfriend who suggested to me one day, without rancour or the spur of some conflict, that I did not have a speculative mind. The diagnosis has haunted me ever since. It reduces me to being an empirical sort, and I've always believed that quality to be a characteristic of the English mind, whereas I would far prefer to share in what I like to think is the more interesting Irish mind - a wayward, fanciful, visionary, imaginative mentality.

Immediately I find I'm launched into gross generalisations, and not being empirical at all. Yet this topic, 'God and Whose Imagination?', is certainly on the ambitious, abstract level, and I shy at it. My territory is much more, 'The Malaise of Book Reviewing in Australia' or 'The Current State of the Australian Short Story' or 'Income and Investment Among Writers'. There I am much more solidly in the world of Gradgrindian facts. Whereas 'Is God a Product of our Imagination?' is out of the 'A Survey from Adam to the Last Judgment' stable, and then some. How, for a start, are those two massive terms, God and the Imagination, to be defined?

So, like an overshadowed animal, I'm retracting. I'm going to be preliminary and autobiographical. For I am not the least bit literate in contemporary theology, and yet this question is, for me, not just today's academic springboard, but a constant and worrying presence.

My first God was most certainly not a product of my imagination; as a very small child I was given him. In fact, as inevitably seems to happen nowadays with soft toys, I was given several Gods - neither chosen, designed nor produced by me. Earliest I suppose I got the Sacred Heart, and the Baby Jesus, and a little later a figure more or less from the illustrations in Schuster's *Bible History*. *Mutatis mutandis*, I imagine 'twas ever thus. New hominids have old hominids beside their cots to enlighten 'em, and old hominids have older hominids, and so ad infinitum. Any notion of God being produced with total originality by some uncontaminated human mind is beyond provability. Put most simply, God cannot be created, cannot be imagined *ex nihilo*.

Let me note, for a start, that my god was visible and tangible, not a product of words, not even the *Word*. In this I was still a child of the Middle Ages; the Gospel was preached to me through icons and images. In fact, in

spite of the most thoroughgoing and rationally-based iconoclastic faith of the reformers, I don't see how Christians at least can avoid the visual imagination determining the features, the contours, of their God. No matter how many rood lofts were burnt and stained glass windows smashed, it's hard to avoid falling under the spell of a millennium's worth of still extant Nativities or Depositions or Resurrections or Judgments.

I suppose I dressed and undressed and redressed my Gods, and put them to bed at a certain angle or on the shelf in a particular light. I certainly had more use for them at night than during the day, and played with them on Sundays far more frequently than at other times of the week. In brief I adjusted my image of God to my own purposes and desires. What were those purposes and desires? Well, yes... Every way I look at this subject, there seem to be cliffs of sheer fall. How does God meet the purposes and desires of a child's life? Or, of *my life* as a child? It is so difficult to answer this without the intervention of more or less sophisticated hindsight's. I accepted God, these Gods, because he belonged to, he was part of my parents', my relatives' family. Secondly, the Gods I had came to me with a story, in a drama, and they made my life all story and drama. For any child brought up under the spell of fairy stories and great myth cycles and narratives of the relentless opposition of Good and Evil, the Christian story, in all its fullness - scriptural, ecclesiastical, hagiological - was an addition both logical, wondrously enriching and aesthetically comprehensive. Thirdly my Gods validated, or gave a greater dimension to, the world of new life and love and authority and obedience and sanctions that I lived in. My universe, that is, was consistent. The same ripples that I knew going out endlessly, the pattern I was used to reproduced on a larger scale. Of course this is to say that my tribe had cumulatively imagined a god in their own image. But then they had also adapted their own identity to the god they had been given.

The chicken or the egg dilemma of all this - man in God's image, man having to invent God in his own image - doesn't bear repeating. Here I simply say that as a child I didn't actually feel a need for God. He was simply pervasively present. At times, many times, he became the dominant presence. I suppose I could say he had been imagined into a role as the web, the skeleton, the oxygen - on and on go the metaphors - for the whole of my existence. Recently, in something I was writing, I was trying to capture this imaginative presence in my child hood, and I described it like this:

When I was a child and staying with my grandmother in Murrurundi she slept me in the front room that had been her own parents' bedroom. Only the hedge and the orange tree shielded it from the main street, the road that linked the New England Tableland with the Liverpool Plains. In the front room I lay in the centre of things. Down Main Street was the bakery and its sweet smell reached back to my grandmothers general store. The store was on the other side of the wall across the corridor from my bedroom. Next came the bank and Dr Middleton's and then the Pages River. Once you went across the river there was the Post Office and the library and the oval. It was from the front room you most distinctly heard the old bridge twitching and creaking. The sound only stopped for the quickfire exercise of wooden scales when wheels spun across the polished planks.

On the mantelpiece on the far wall of the room was a votive lamp. When I came to bed the wick was already alight. It rode on its tin disc, bobbing steady in its saucer of oil. The Sacred Heart stood before it, his arms stretched out low in front of his body. There were other objects and shapes along the mantelpiece, but the lamp was for him, and for me. I lay with the lamp on my left and the window on my right and faced out across the corridor to the closed door of the sitting room where the adults were talking. Before I closed my eyes the small tip of flame, in the sharp collar of its float, was bending and rearing and flickering and holding steady. The vitality never eased. As I went and came and went again across the boundaries of sleep, the shadow of Christ was the only thing I could see. He was immense, he loomed, he moved up the wall. He trembled, pinned up there against the flat blankness. But he broke away and slid easily from side to side. Then he moved down, gathering himself in till he was someone I knew and his hands were moving together to pat mine or to lift me up. Over my eyes his shadow rose and fell. I breathed in easily to the exhilaration of him, and breathed out just as steadily to the red glow that sustained him. The hum or murmur or sharp variation of the adults' talk, the hurl or rainy hiss of vehicles, the dash of headlights, the steady arcs of streetlights, all passed across the screen of my eyelids and were absorbed into the one ceaseless drama on the walls around me.

I'd just like to add a footnote to this. Imagining God, not into some vacuum of existence, but into the more immediately known world, is a major problem. In December I went to a children's show called 'Christmas At the Opera House', a confection of pantomime, carols, Savoyard jigs and lolly distribution. Near the end, the drama - let's call it that - applied its brakes

suddenly, shrieked to a halt, and into the dead stardust swept a clergyman, in the most beautifully laundered soutane, to give us 'the Christmas message'. The inorganic artificiality of this is acutely painful - God severed and stale, as disincarnate a nightmare as the Fourth Evangelist could ever have dreamed. Yet it recurs time without number around the country in December. This dissociation of sensibility is quite complete. My own childhood starts to look like the half-way point between 'Xmas at the Opera House', and Herod and Beelzebub capering around in the medieval Miracle plays; certainly in the 1950s, when I was a child, the pantomime villain was still the Demon King.

I don't think I made any major imaginative shift until I was well into middle age. In the years between that time and my early twenties I lost much of the sense of the drama of my life being acted out in God's presence. Up until my twenties I had the props of a strongly Catholic family, a Jesuit boarding school, a Jesuit seminary, and a church still in the full pride of its authority and self-confidence. Once I no longer had those props, God took up a position at the back of the stage, for some time. But then I found him coming forward again, and being needed when I became a parent nine years ago. Being a father translated me into a new world of heightened and prolonged emotional intensity. Of course this romantic uplift was accompanied by lashings of frustration, lost productivity and bad temper. Furthermore I am open to being told and believing that as one's offspring move past childhood, the bubbling of love subsides into a calmer, more detached bond of affection. Yet in my case the fact remains that parental love has meant an access of feeling that is precious to me as nothing else has ever been.

And God? I ask you to follow the plodding, and rather bleak, logic that I not uncommonly find mark my mental processes. Now, in the salad days of parenthood, this logic takes the following form. This love, this bond is so wonderful. It reactivates and gives fresh echoes to biblical phrases that have always told me of joy beyond my experience - 'unimaginable bliss' and the eye that has not seen and all the other organs that have not sensed what is in store for those who love (God). In brief my imagination boggles at this experience of love. My awe at it and my gratitude for it issue, quite naturally, into a desperate wish to keep it, never to lose it. Because, ah, I think, this is what eternal happiness means, this is the promise affirmed in the Creed - *resurrectionem mortuorum et vitam venturi saeculi*. A continuance of life, a continuance of love.

I imagine such ambitions as universal and absolute. Death might be welcome, but surely not extinction. So I have to confront the disconcerting proposition that I need God, that I want him to exist for the selfish reason that I want to go on living. I find it hard to imagine other people not being in the same position. I try to sober myself and suggest that around some corner I haven't yet probed there are people who don't yearn for a life after death, who have comprehensively come to terms with animal finiteness and who don't ache and worry their way towards the crucial bridge. Notionally, I suppose, I concede the possibility of their existence, but I have no sympathetic grasp of a state of mind that can both love and yet be reconciled to that love's extinction.

My own more immediate dilemma however is this. The very keenness of my experience of love and hence the keenness of the desire for it to continue, become the measure of the unlikeliness, or even the impossibility, of that continuance. Quite simply, it's too good to be true. I *couldn't be* given something I would like so much. Faith, I ask myself, is it anything more than a pig-headed mantra, repeating that I'm going to get the very thing that an animal, natural me fantasises and moons about more than anything else? An infantile velleity? So that God is a product of an immaturely human - even subnatural - imagination? But is that to write off far too slickly both myself and myriad other emotional, rational, yearning men and women who have previously imagined a God and put into his mouth a promise of the unimaginable? Obviously, then, my state of mind is a jostle of circularities and tensions yearning checked by rationality (or rationalism?), ambition tempered by moderation, commonsense in a stand-off with faith.

I have not programmatically tried to dissect the rub and grind and strain of this mentality in fiction, but they are part of the swirl of belief and doubt that I wanted to dramatise in a piece I wrote as a coda for *Heaven Where the Bachelors Sit*. It concerns my son Harry and myself going to Mass. This is totally empirical.

The questions brim. Sermons are just an occasion for our imaginations to be scratched into play. I am hearing Luke's story of the Sadducees with their riddle about the final heavenly status of the woman married seven times. I register the hypocrisy of the Sadducees because they had no belief in the resurrection in any case. Most of all I am seized by the implication of Christ's answer. 'Those judged worthy to attain to the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, for they cannot die any

more.' So, we marry because we are going to die? I wonder whether I have ever properly read this text before.

'And Dad,' Harry leans in abruptly and whispers, 'what happened to the woman who looked back?'

'Ssh. What? What do you mean?'

'You know, last night, in the story, when everything was being destroyed.'

'What? Ohh, Lot's wife. Tell you later.' But what happened?'

'She was turned into a pillar of salt.' 'Yes, but after that?'

'I don't know. We're not told. She was preserved I suppose.' 'Does God usually destroy things?'

'Well ... not if they're worth keeping. I think. I hope.' 'Is God true?'

'Yes. But I hardly know the first thing about him. Ssh. Now listen to Father.'

We bob up together, flurried, caught by the sermon's ending, and we recite the Nicene Creed.

The age of seven, according to the tradition I follow, is the age of reason. That seems to mean the questions tail away then, or at least that they are not aired. It is the time children are thought ready for Communion. But when Harry turns seven, my wife, an Anglican, steps in.

'He can't possibly make it. He's never even heard of the Pope.'

'Well ...' I shrug.

We slog on, into the prayers and the first hanging loops of the mystery, and Harry is nine by the time we get there.

He comes back alone, from the altar. 'It's all right,' he tells me. 'It doesn't really taste like bread.'

'No, it's different.'

'Now can I have the drink too?'

'No, wait for a while. You're not used to that.' 'Is it good?'

'A bit... sticky.' 'I don't mind.'

'No, take a leaf out of Jesus' book. "Let this chalice pass me by," he said to his father.'

'Ohh Dad.'

'No.'

Later, we are together in the foremost-occupied pew. It is Communion time, and there is no one to distribute the chalice. By now it is Father John Milliken who presides, and he raises his eyebrow at me. I go forward. 'The Body of Christ,' he says to me.

'Amen,' I answer. I take the wafer and consume it.

'The Blood of Christ.'

'Amen.'

I clasp the chalice, and take just the slightest sip of what could be called a sweet, distasteful ichor. Then I stand beside John Milliken, and I hold the chalice ready to offer it to other men and women. It is no longer a chalice, just a tall, ruggedly thick wine glass. There is no value in this vessel, no rare sensation in putting it to the lips.

Harry is the first who comes to take it from me. I am holding a reverent pose, watching the light and shadow slide about the surface of the thin red liquid. But Harry stands there, not putting out his hands, so that I am forced to raise my eyes and look him full in the face. He is grinning. He is saying hello. He is pleased that it is me. But there is a dare at work too. And I can say only one thing to him. I am not standing here as his father. I cannot use any words I choose, nor speak in any tone of voice I like.

'The Blood of Christ, Harry,' I say to him.

His hands reach up. 'Oh,' he shrugs and wriggles his head as he remembers he needs a formula. 'Yes,' he says, and takes the chalice, beyond my control. From my step above him I can see through the glass the liquid brim against his lower lip and then swirl higher against his upper lip. I grip my linen towel in readiness. But the level subsides and Harry opens his mouth and I see a first substantial, but not excessive ripple wash in. He reels in my eyes again to his flushed, playful face, and steps back.

The communicants pass by, perhaps one in three taking the chalice. I watch the level. It drops only slowly. I don't want to taste it again. I have had enough. No one takes it as boldly as Harry has done. I count the communicants still in the centre queue. They move forward and dwindle, and there is no one left. I stand, holding a chalice still half full. I wait, poised, but without options. From the pews, immediately in front of me, without my seeing its launch, Harry's whispered hiss bursts by my ear.

'Drink it,' he says.

I turn half aside, inward to the altar, and I close my eyes and obey.