

Can an 'Unreal' God Change Reality?

Ray Vincent explores a 'non-real' interpretation of the volatile God of the Bible and the biblical prophetic tradition of resistance rather than acceptance, social justice rather than personal enlightenment.

Those of us who are exploring a non-real understanding of God usually focus our critical attention on the classical concept of God as it has developed in Christian theology under the influence of Greek philosophy. The concept is of a universal Creator or Prime Mover who is in and yet above and beyond everything that exists, who is eternal, perfect, impassible, omnipotent and omniscient. For Christians the personhood of this God is expressed in Trinity: God the Creator, God incarnate in Jesus Christ, and God omnipresent in the Holy Spirit.

However, we are well aware that in the Bible there is a God very different from this philosophical concept: a God who is a real person with passions, capable of desire, tender love and outbursts of anger. This is a God who interacts with human beings, a God who, in defiance of all our classical logic, can even change his mind. On the face of it, this kind of God appears to be more 'primitive' and less believable than the God of classical Christian theology. In parts of the Hebrew Scriptures he (definitely a male) is hardly different from human beings. He shapes a man with his hands and breathes into him to give him life (Gen 2:7). He walks in the garden in the cool evening breeze and asks Adam where he is (Gen 3:8-9). He sews garments for Adam and Eve to cover their nakedness (Gen 3:21). He makes sure that Noah, his family and the animals are safely inside the ark, and then shuts the door (Gen 7:16). When the flood has ended, his mood is softened by the smell of roasting meat and he repents of what he has done (Gen 8:21). He comes to see Abraham and Sarah in the form of three men and eats and drinks and talks with them, and then stands bargaining with

Abraham about his plan to destroy Sodom (Gen 18).

This God is unpredictable and at times apparently inconsistent and absurd. He places Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, but also places there a tree from which he forbids them to eat, and another tree, the tree of life, which he does not mention to them. The possibility that they might eat of that tree seems to come to him as an



Yahweh tries to kill Moses

afterthought when they have eaten of the first tree (Gen 3:22). He comes down to take a look at the building of the tower of Babel and decides to put a stop to the project (Gen 11:5ff). This strange God, having sent Moses to call upon Pharaoh to release the slaves, stops him while on that very errand and tries to kill him (Ex 4:24).

If those of us who are 'non-realists' have difficulty with the God of classical theology, or the God of the philosophers, we are likely to feel that the biblical Yahweh stretches our credulity right beyond its limits. Such a God is completely alien to our contemporary way of thinking.

Nevertheless, it may be that this portrait of Yahweh in the early parts of the Bible can actually speak to our experience in a more relevant way than the more classical concept. The biblical writers' thoughts about God were their thoughts about the world and life in general. Most of the people behind the Hebrew Scriptures took it for granted that whatever happened it was God who was doing it. Even in the Book of Ruth, which is probably fairly late among the Hebrew Scriptures, Naomi, returning to Bethlehem after the death of her husband and both her sons, says, 'Call me no longer Naomi ('pleasant'), call me Mara ('bitter'), for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.' (Ruth

1:20) There is no suggestion of a reason why her life has turned out this way. These things happen: or, as Naomi puts it, God does things like that. This rather absurd, changeable, unpredictable God was a reflection of the biblical writers' experience of life. And if this is the case, could this God be a better metaphor for us in our thinking about life today than the more classical theological metaphors?

The world, or life or whatever we want to call it, is in fact very specific, particular, unpredictable and absurd. We can never tell what it might do to us: it can be wonderfully kind to us at times, giving us a sense of blessedness and gratitude, and then for no reason it can deal us a cruel blow. It can seem to be in our favour and then suddenly turn against us. Life shows no clear sign of a consistent plan. The laws of nature reveal no tendency to favour human life, and the whole planet we live on is a vulnerable body in the vastness of space. Perhaps this unpredictable God of the Hebrew Scriptures is a truer representation of reality than the God Christians have traditionally believed in. If the 'non-realist' approach to theology is an assertion that, while God may not exist, the *idea* of God is still essential to a full human life, this principle can be applied not only to the philosophical idea of the universal Deity, but equally, and perhaps even more appropriately, to the personal and apparently more 'primitive' biblical picture of God as a person.

This is of course not all there is to say about the biblical God. If it were, then the Bible's religion would be no different from that of many pagan religions and mythologies. In fact it might even be less hopeful, because in polytheism there is at least the possibility of appealing to one god against another. If there is only one God, we are simply at that God's mercy and can do nothing about it, but in the Bible there is a persistent quest for a God who is consistent and fair. There is a strong conception of God as being righteous, and an attempt to hold him to account and get him to act by his own highest standards. Abraham, arguing with God about Sodom, says, 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' (Gen 18:25)

Some of the biblical characters have no hesitation in arguing with God, rebuking him and accusing him of injustice. Moses, exasperated by all the demands being made upon him, has a full-blown rant against God beginning: 'Why have you

treated your servant so badly?' and culminating with: 'If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once – if I have found favour in your sight – and do not let me see my misery' (Num 11:11-15). The prophet Jeremiah compares God to 'a deceitful brook' and 'waters that fail' (Jer 15:18). Job reproaches God bitterly: 'Does it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands and favour the schemes of the wicked?' (Job 10:3). The Psalms repeatedly ask questions like: 'Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?' (Ps 10:1), and 'How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?' (Ps 13:1).

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This human-like God is open to influence and can even be persuaded to change his mind. Having threatened to destroy the Israelites, he changes his mind in response to Moses' persuasion (Ex 32:14), as he does also (much to Jonah's annoyance) in response to the Ninevites' repentance (Jonah 3:10). Hosea represents God as being torn by conflicting emotions: 'My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger' (Hos 11:8-9).

Prayer is almost always portrayed in the Bible as something that can make a difference. Jesus compared it with someone waking a reluctant neighbour in the middle of the night to ask for bread (Lk 11:5-8), or a widow appealing to a heartless judge (Lk 18:1-8). These two parables portray prayer not as a magic formula that works instantly: they recognise the reality that prayer does not always achieve what it asks for. It is as if Jesus is saying, 'So God doesn't answer your prayer? Pester him till he does!' This stubborn belief that prayer can radically change the world in spite of all appearances is encapsulated in the

universal prayer of Christians: 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'.

There is a tendency for 'non-realist' thinking to turn towards a Buddhist or Taoist kind of spirituality and to reject those parts of the traditional Christian faith that express a personal relationship with God. However, it cannot be denied that much change for the better in the world has been brought about by people whose spirituality was in the prophetic tradition that is predominant in the Bible: a tradition that majors on resistance rather than acceptance, dichotomy rather than unity, prayer rather than meditation, social justice rather than personal enlightenment. It is a spirituality that, rather than advocating serene acceptance of things as they are, or learning to see eternal truth behind the ephemeral appearances of the material world, is determined to take on reality, challenge it and change it. The predominant duality in biblical thinking is not the world as it *appears* and the world as it really *is*, but the world as it *is* and the world as human values really *want it to be*.

This 'prophetic' tradition spills over from religion into Western secular thinking. In much Western thinking there is a preoccupation with the 'fairness' or 'unfairness' of life. Logically, if there is no God, what is the sense in making a moral judgment about the universe? Nevertheless, there is a tendency even among agnostics to question the order of things *as if* there were a person there to question.

Marxism came into being within the Christian culture of Europe, and there is something in it of the biblical prophetic tradition. Marx's statement that 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it' is a secular expression of the difference between prophetic and mystical spirituality.

Mao Tse Tung, addressing the Chinese Communist Party in 1945, offered a reflection closely resembling the saying of Jesus about the faith that can move mountains (Matt 17:20). He referred to an ancient Chinese story of an old man whose house faced two great peaks that obstructed his view to the south and deprived it of sunshine. He called his sons to help, and together they started digging with their hoes. When someone laughed at them for thinking they could dig away two mountains, his response was,

When I die, my sons will carry on; when they die, there will be my grandsons, and then their sons and grandsons, and so on to infinity. High as they are, the mountains cannot grow any higher, and with every bit we dig, they will be that much lower.' So they went on digging every day until God, moved by their determination, sent down two angels who carried the mountains away on their backs.

Mao continued:

Today, two big mountains lie like a dead weight on the Chinese people. One is imperialism, the other is feudalism. The Chinese Communist Party has long made up its mind to dig them up. We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we too will touch God's heart. Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people. If they stand up and dig together with us, why can't these two mountains be cleared away?

Perhaps it is time for theologians to explore more deeply a 'non-real' interpretation of the dynamic, relational, responsive God of the Bible, and to find in that God a secular theology that can change the world.

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The Uses of God (USA 2003)



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