The two gardeners

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Imagine that you had to employ a gardener. You ask around among your friends and neighbours, and eventually you hear of two gardeners who are available. From people who have employed them, you are able to draw up the following profiles of the two.

The first gardener plants a variety of vegetables and flowers. Periodically he comes along and inspects them. Whenever he sees a plant or a flower that is not doing well he pulls it up and throws it on the compost heap or into the bin. He has planted plenty of seeds and plants, so this practice does not greatly affect the yield or the appearance of the garden. Small, stunted and yellow cabbage plants, wallflowers that slugs have had a feed on, frost-bitten blossoms, all of these go out. There are a lot of advantages in this approach. The appearance of the garden is always pretty and healthy. And diseased plants do not get a chance to infect other plants.

The second gardener also plants a variety of vegetables and flowers and periodically inspects them. But his approach is different. He is on the lookout for plants that are not doing well to see what he can do to make them more healthy. If a cabbage is looking yellow, he gives it more feed. If a flower is attacked by slugs he puts down extra slug-killer. If some of the blossoms are frost-bitten he puts a glass cloche over them to protect them and give them a chance to recover. He hates to see any plant or flower dying. His gardens are not

as pretty as those looked after by the first gardener, as some of the plants are clearly ailing.

If you wanted to employ a gardener, you would almost certainly choose the first. The first strikes us as an efficient, practical, no-nonsense gardener. The second gardener seems soft-hearted, and is plant-centered rather than garden-centered. Except in the case of very rare plants, few of us would want to pay good money so that sickly specimens would be nursed, and perhaps the overall condition of the garden neglected.

Images of God

When it comes to choosing between different images of God we find alternatives that are somewhat like the types of gardener proposed above. However, we may find to our surprise that the image of God that seems in line with Christian faith is more like the second, inefficient, gardener than the first one. We can, as a kind of shorthand, describe the first as the God of 'reason' and the second as the God of 'revelation'. Of course, since revelation comes to us only with the help of human reason, it would be a mistake to draw a hard and fast line between the two images. But nevertheless we can draw a distinction between the images of God that are solely or mainly based on abstract and scientific reasoning, and ones that have as their basis the holy books. In the case of these holy books, the imagination and emotion of the authors, as well as their reason, plays a part.

Faith and reason: Aquinas between Aristotle and Plato

The God of reason has been around at least since the time of the great Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Plotinus. In fact, the First Vatican Council, building on centuries of Christian philosophy, taught that God can in principle be known by the natural light of human reason. Christian philosophers worked out 'proofs' for the existence of God.

The attempt to create a 'rational' image of God has particularly come into its own with the rise of modern science. The Enlightenment saw the rise of 'Deism' which was proposed as a 'rational' alternative to traditional Christian faith in God. As more and more of the mysteries of the universe were found to have rational explanations, many scientists and philosophers of science began to question where God fitted into the picture, or even whether there was room for God at all. Modern cosmologists such as Stephen Hawking and Richard Dawkins have pondered the question of God in the context of a universe apparently originating in a Big Bang and then designed blindly by evolutionary forces. In fact, all modern cosmology really has place for is a 'god of the gaps'. In other words, where science comes to a point where no explanation can be found (such as who lit the fuse for the Big Bang) 'god' may be trotted out to fill the gap.

Because science is so dominant in modern life, our conception of God has become more and more shaped by the questions and debates of the scientists. If this debate does not actually lead us into agnosticism or atheism, we are at least in danger of constructing a God which is science-friendly, but without personality. This is very different from the images of God constructed by the writers of the Psalms or the medieval mystics, who looked for God within themselves, or found him in the 'awe' of the universe.

The physical sciences are not the only disciplines which shape our view of how the world works. Increasingly, modern economics has made us look at human behavior in an increasingly rationalistic way. Economics has become a world with laws of its own independent of other norms of behavior. 'Economic Man' is seen as an individual who follows only the dictates of his interest in personal gain. The notion of social justice is eliminated. Justice becomes 'commutative' justice, which is bound only by the conventions of negotiated contracts within the framework of the law of supply and demand.

The modern god of reason may be a subject for academic debate. But this God does not engage us in any personal way or command our loyalty or affection. The whole thrust of modern scientific enquiry is to make God as impersonal as possible, rather like a giant computer, predictable, inflexible, and somehow even pre-programmed. God in this view is also rather like the first gardener described above, in that he (or 'it') is efficient in running the universe, but we do not expect him to be bothered with the minor details of human misdeeds and misfortunes.

The influence of Trent

Another factor that has deeply influenced our image of God has been the teaching of the Council of Trent in the area of sin and confession. Trent

reinforced the notion of a heavenly calculus, by which the gravity of sins was measured precisely, and punishment administered automatically. In the 1950s most Catholic schoolchildren would, by way of illustration of divine justice, have been presented with the paradox of the man who had lived a blameless life, but late in life committed a sexual sin. The next day he was killed in a car crash. There was no doubt about his eternal fate. He would have gone straight to hell, as sexual sins were always 'mortal' sins, with no exceptions. In this presentation of sin there was no discussion of what view God might take of the man's misfortune. Indeed, the impression was given that God was powerless in the situation, bound by rules which may have been ultimately his, but which had now been tidied up and fastened down by his earthly delegates. God was depicted in the same way as a human judge who, in the case of particular crimes, has no option but to pronounce the death penalty or some other determinate penalty.

The last judgement by Michelangelo

In the heyday of 'fixed penalty' offences, there were some priests who held out some hope of a more flexible approach by God. During retreats, little anecdotes were told about God's mercy and the power of grace. But, in general, it was suggested that the only hope lay in some type of 'death-bed' repentance, where the sinner managed to summon up the contrition necessary to strike out the offence. Again, it was not really up to God. The responsibility was the sinner's.

There can be little doubt that this kind of theology deeply influenced the popular image of God. At worst, God was reduced to the level of a robot, applying sentences with the cold impersonality and rationality of a traffic warden writing a parking ticket. It reinforced the 'scientific' notion of a God

without personality and with only a passive role in a universe governed by moral as well as scientific laws.

The God of Christian revelation

The God of revelation is very different from the God of reason. In the holy books, God is far from impersonal. We find all kinds of emotions and attitudes attributed to God in the Bible. Some of these are not very attractive, such as jealousy, impetuousness, vindictiveness, favoritism, unpredictability and so on. But the outstanding qualities that come through, taking the Bible in its entirety, are love and mercy.

The God of revelation is in fact rather similar to the second gardener described above. Indeed the Bible sometimes uses images of plants and plant-care to illustrate the solicitude of God: 'A bruised reed he will not break' (Isaiah 42:3). The Bible is full of images of a God who seems to be more interested in the individual than in the overall system. The New Testament constantly employs the metaphor of the lost sheep: 'Suppose a man has a hundred sheep and one of them strays; will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hillside and go in search of the stray?' (Mt. 18:12). Just as the second gardener was plant-centered rather than garden-centered, so the God of revelation is depicted as having a special concern for the weak, the poor, the lost, the blind, the sick, rather than for the overall efficiency of 'the system'.

'The good Samaritan' by Vincent van Gogh

This is not an image of God that could be worked out by scientific reasoning or logic. The God of revelation is, frankly, a very peculiar God. Terms like 'soft-hearted' and 'woolly-headed' come to mind. Even practicing Christians can react negatively to some of the more extreme examples of Christ's concern for the 'losers' such as the son who ran off and wasted his money, or the workers in the vineyard who strolled in just before closing time. Nobody recognized the 'scandal' of the God revealed in Jesus better than St. Paul, imbued as he was with the 'logic' of Greek

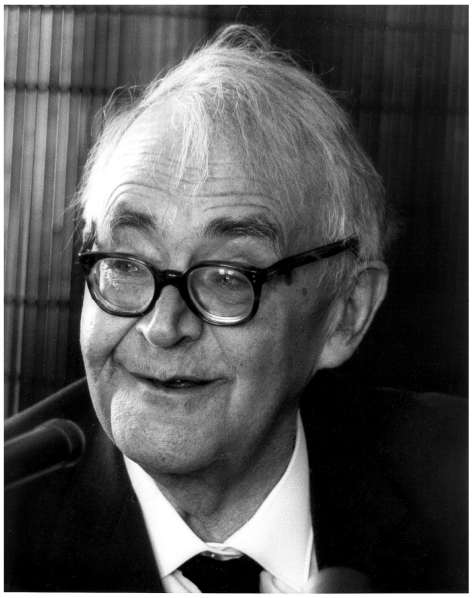
philosophy: 'While the Jews demand miracles, and the Greeks look for wisdom [a term used by Paul for the human wisdom of philosophy and rhetoric], here we are preaching a crucified Christ; to the Jews an obstacle that they cannot get over, to the pagans madness' (1 Cor 1:22-3).

The God who is 'off-centre'

If we look at the world and the universe through the eyes of science, we have to be struck by its regularity. The natural world is full of systems, recurrent patterns, and scientific 'laws'. Many of us have learned these laws and systems in school, particularly in chemistry and physics. We learned Boyle's law about air pressure, Newton's laws of motion, the Periodic Table of the elements and so on. To the scientific mind, it is difficult to believe that there is a God who invented or created these physical laws, in the sense that he might have invented different laws. It is a temptation for us to see these laws as having priority even over God. We cannot imagine a universe in which the square on the hypotenuse is not equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides. It is then an easy step to believe that in his work of creation, God is determined or limited by a set of prior laws, so that he does not have complete freedom to do this or that. The scientific mind, if it is prepared to countenance the existence of God, demands at least that this God be a 'regular guy' who follows the rules and knows his place, rather like, as was said earlier, a giant impersonal computer. Apart from this he has no function.

But the God described in Christian revelation does not seem to be at all like the God that some of the scientists, such as Hawking, are prepared to accommodate in their system. Instead of an automaton or a computer, we find in the holy books a person with a very distinct and even 'quirky' personality. The Christian God is indeed a Prime Mover, but he is a Prime Mover With Idiosyncrasies. This can be a very scary thought, even for the non-scientist. It raises the kind of mind-blowing questions that many theologians, particularly Karl Barth, have debated – questions such as, Why is God this kind of God, and not some other kind of God? (Answer: Because God in his freedom has chosen this way of being); What determines the nature of God? (Answer: God). Barth concludes that God's way of living and loving is absolutely his own, in no way dictated to him from outside or conditioned by any higher necessity.

In so far as we can grasp this, it is a terrifying thought. Even in the cosmic myths that we construct ourselves there is always implicitly some limiting factor to protect the universe from chaos. If there is a wicked witch, there is always a fairy godmother. We cannot accept the possibility that Superman will be ultimately vanquished by Lex Luther. But there is no limiting factor where God is concerned except God himself. Still, we may perhaps hope that God is a



Karl Barth

'regular guy', the kind of God we could arrive at by logic and reason. But revelation suggests that this is a vain expectation. Barth does conclude that God 'cannot be other than he is'. Yet, our question, What is God Like?, cannot be answered by logic and reason. We have to take God as we find him, as revealed to us in the pages of our holy books. And the God we find is one who, among other things, has a distinct bias towards the poor and downtrodden.

The option for the poor

In some ways it is a pity that the latter-day emphasis on the option for the poor has an identifiable modern origin, namely the 1968 Medellin Conference and the 1971 Synod. For those who wished to take exception to it, it was too easy to say that it was a 'new-fangled' idea emanating from Marxist clerics. In fact, no message comes out louder from the gospels than the fact that God is biased in favour of the poor and the outsider. The fact that the bishops had to draw attention to this shows how successful the gospels of rationalism and economism had been, in drowning out the Magnificat, the Sermon on the Mount, and most of the parables.

The truth is that God is defined by his option for the poor. It is not, of course, the only way of defining God, but it is the most important one. For particular historical reasons, the early theologians were much more concerned with defining the nature of God in quasi-philosophical categories, declaring that he was one being in three persons, and that he was almighty, with power that was not limited in any way. This philosophical approach had the effect of depersonalizing God. For one thing, if God is thought of as 'perfect' it does not encourage us to look for distinguishing marks, since, in our limited understanding, they may be seen as flaws. We might say of a human acquaintance, 'He was a very good man, but he was too kind to beggars', implying a personality defect. In human logic, as St.Paul never tired of pointing out, God is full of such personality defects. In particular, he is very biased towards poor people and, perhaps more alarmingly, very prejudiced against rich people ('It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven')

Although the scientist that is in all of us may find it difficult to cope with the idea of a Prime Mover With Idiosyncrasies, we may find belief in such a being more of a challenge, and something that we can seriously engage with, than belief in a heavenly computer. People want, not just something to believe in, but somebody. They want faith, not just belief. A God that can be deduced through abstract formulae is unlikely to be ever anything more than something. The God of Christian revelation, especially as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, is very much somebody. Such a God can also spur us to action, in a way that no abstract construct can. The option for the poor also brought with it the faith that does justice, because we cannot maintain our personal integrity if we declare our faith in God but fail to act in line with what God clearly wants of us.

The option for the poor comes to us from revelation. However, there is always a danger that it may become cut adrift from this revelation. Concern for the poor, after all, is a value in itself. Many people in the world who have no interest in God have opted for the poor. At the same time, where the option for the poor comes adrift from the gospels and the church, it loses its roots, and the other foundations it attaches to may not be so secure. It does not have a 'rational' basis in what passes for rationality in much of our modern culture.

But there is another danger, which is perhaps more real for the church today. If, rather than the option for the poor losing touch with the church, the church instead drifts away from the option for the poor, an important part of revelation may be effectively lost to the church. The option for the poor, when it is operative in the life of the church, shows us what God is like. It reminds us that God, a real person, with a real, somewhat quirky, personality, is a God who loves the underdog and the loser, a God we would be likely to find very annoying were he again to come down among us, a God we would never employ as a gardener. If we abandon the option for the poor we may find that there is not much else, in our liturgy or in our theology, that presents to us a God who is distinctive and concrete, a God we might want to get to know rather than just know about.

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