



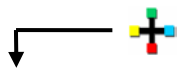
## What Do We Mean By 'God'?

1990

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*Reform* (February): 7.

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No-one has ever seen God, but everywhere there are rumours. No human language is without words for 'God'. The ideas to which these words refer are multitudinous and sometimes weird. But surely there must be some reality behind the rumours.

Even the strangest ideas about 'God' are not so absurd as the idea that this mighty cosmos is a sort of machine designed by nobody to serve no purpose. A tribe which believes that must be very credulous indeed!

If 'God' exists, how could he (or she or it) make himself known? By direct address to the reason and conscience of each individual? Many have thought so. There are ancient traditions of rationality and spirituality which affirm this.

The problem is about the relation of this individual reason and conscience to the happenings in history. The saying of Lessing is often quoted, that accidental happenings in history cannot prove universal truths of reason. But if there is no connection between 'God' and the things that happen, is 'God' only an idea in the mind or a feeling in the heart? On the other hand, if we depend for our knowledge of 'God' on the accidental happenings of history, how can these happenings affect the millions of people who live in other times and places?

*The gospel firms that in the happenings which the New Testament records at a particular time and place ('under Pontius Pilate') God was present in the fullness of his being in the man Jesus; that this Jesus understood himself to be the Son of his Father 'who is in heaven' and whose rule embraces all creation; and that the Spirit by whom Jesus was conceived, led and sustained would, through his final act of loving obedience to the Father, be communicated to all who would give their lives to him.*

The model of God as Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – worked out in the early centuries of the Church, enables us to hold together things that fell apart in the ancient classical world and that often fall apart in ours. The separation of 'spiritual' and 'material', and the separation of our personal purposes from what seem to be the meaningless accidents that befall

us, are overcome when we begin all our thinking from this Trinitarian model. As I allow myself to be taken into the crucified and risen life of Jesus and daily offer my life through him to the Father, the Spirit enables me to find in all the 'accidents' of life the guiding and providing hand of the Father.

You have to start with this model. Many people start somewhere else. 'God' for them is a monarch in the sky and it is nonsense to say that Jesus is that. If I begin not with my idea of God but with Jesus (the real Jesus in his context in the whole biblical story) then in following him I begin to learn to know God – a kind of knowledge which is not rumour or guesswork but the personal knowing which is love.

God is beyond our full comprehension. We have to pay attention, grateful attention, to what he has done and not pretend to determine what he can or cannot do. When we hold fast to Jesus we are on the way to the knowledge which is love – the love which is poured into our hearts out of the overflowing abundance of the being of God. That communion of love given and received is what we mean by 'God'.

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