

# Imaging God

By Nicholas Peter Harvey

Theologians tend to be word-people rather than image-people, though it is doubtful how far this separation can be sustained. Despite the ancient prohibition of graven images - oddly not paralleled by a matching condemnation of word-pictures - God has continued to appeal to and to nourish the artistic imagination. The suggestion in Genesis that we humans are made in the image of God remains an enigmatic one. Perhaps of more immediate interest is the observable fact that artists have not hesitated to picture God in the image of man, in a piquant inversion of the Genesis notion. No amount of iconoclastic reserve about the unwisdom of all attempts to visualize God has managed to thwart this tendency, of which Brian Whelan is a forthright contemporary exemplar.

Whelan has not allowed himself to be inhibited by the 'Honest to God'[1] debate, originated by John Robinson, Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, in the 1960s. Robinson argued that it was no longer credible to picture God as a bearded elderly patriarch looking down from the sky. This made sense in the light of the scientific revolution, the rise of feminism and other modern thought-currents. Recent theology has largely taken Robinson's point. Brian Whelan, innocently or recalcitrantly, is too post-modern to do so. Instead he has done precisely what Robinson ruled out, albeit in cartoonish form, not least in his painting entitled 'God the Father'. But it is the form which makes all the difference. Though surrounded by tiny angels and radiating layers of light, suggesting traditional imagery of majesty and power, this God wears a deeply troubled aspect. A poet friend of mine responded to this picture with the words, 'He's got a problem!' - meaning God, not the artist. The gaze suggests total pre-occupation with whatever is being observed, presumably the state of the world. But there is no serenity. Is the dominant mode dismay or outrage? It is in any case reminiscent of the God of the late mediaeval Chester Mystery Cycle[2], who was so distressed by the mess humans had made of things that he dramatically voiced repentance for the act of creating man.



But with Whelan, as with Chester, there is no question of annihilation. The intensity of involvement with whatever is proceeding suggests a quite different response, remaining implicit here but spelled out in the Chester plays in the unfolding of the Christian narrative of redemption. Is it possible for the same eyes to show extreme anxiety, rage and active compassion all at once? It looks like it, although the God of supernatural fireworks is still hinted at here and made overt elsewhere in Whelan's work. The cartoon manner disavows the above the battle God of the Fathers of the Church, who believed in an all-powerful God who called all the shots, incapable of suffering. In their static universe suffering meant imperfection. In this sense at least, for all his playful deployment of ancient images, Whelan is refreshingly modern.

My predilection for a more reticent, 'Cloud of Unknowing'[3] approach to imaging God has found itself overwhelmed by startled enjoyment of God in the artist's image. Whelan's exuberant commitment, and unselfconscious engagement with the archetypal representation of God's image is both reassuringly traditional and yet of its time- so much so that this picture now occupies a most treasured position in my living room!

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[1] Honest to God. John A.T. Robinson. SCM Press. 1963

[2] The Chester Mystery Plays. Edited by Maurice Hussey. Heinemann Educational Books. 1957

[3] Cloud of Unknowing. Anonymous. 1375. A book written to advance the path of contemplation arguing that human reason cannot know God, but that the 'cloud' between God and man can only be pierced by a sharp dart of love.