II

THE IMAGE OF GOD

Those things which are said of God and other things are predicated neither univocally nor equivocally, but analogically.

Accordingly, since we arrive at the knowledge of God from other things, the reality of the names predicated of God and other things is first in God according to His mode, but the meaning of the name is in Him afterwards. Wherefore He is said to be named from His effects.

—ST. THOMAS AQUINAS: Summa contra Gentiles

We have torn away the mental fancies to get at the reality beneath, only to find that the reality of that which is beneath is bound up with its potentiality of awakening these fancies. It is because the mind, the weaver of illusion, is also the only guarantor of reality that reality is always to be sought at the base of illusion.

—SIR ARTHUR EDDINGTON: Nature of the Physical World
THE IMAGE OF GOD

IN the beginning God created. He made this and He made that and He saw that it was good. And He created man in His own image; in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them.

Thus far the author of Genesis. The expression “in His own image” has occasioned a good deal of controversy. Only the most simple-minded people of any age or nation have supposed the image to be a physical one. The innumerable pictures which display the Creator as a hirsute old gentleman in flowing robes seated on a bank of cloud are recognized to be purely symbolic. The “image,” whatever the author may have meant by it, is something shared by male and female alike; the aggressive masculinity of the pictorial Jehovah represents power, rationality or what you will: it has no relation to the text I have quoted. Christian doctrine and tradition, indeed, by language and picture, sets its face against all sexual symbolism for the divine fertility. Its Trinity is wholly masculine, as all language relating to Man as a species is masculine.¹

The Jews, keenly alive to the perils of pictorial metaphor, forbade the representation of the Person of God in graven images. Nevertheless, human nature and the nature of human language defeated them. No legislation could prevent the making of verbal pictures: God walks

¹ cf. St. Augustine: On the Trinity; Bk. XII, Chap. V.
in the garden, He stretches out His arm, His voice shakes the cedars, His eyelids try the children of men.

To forbid the making of pictures about God would be to forbid thinking about God at all, for man is so made that he has no way to think except in pictures. But continually, throughout the history of the Jewish-Christian Church, the voice of warning has been raised against the power of the picture-makers: “God is a spirit,” 2 “without body, parts or passions;” 3 He is pure being, “I AM THAT I AM.” 4

Man, very obviously, is not a being of this kind; his body, parts and passions are only too conspicuous in his make-up. How then can he be said to resemble God? Is it his immortal soul, his rationality, his self-consciousness, his free will, or what, that gives him a claim to this rather startling distinction? A case may be argued for all these elements in the complex nature of man. But had the author of Genesis anything particular in his mind when he wrote? It is observable that in the passage leading up to the statement about man, he has given no detailed information about God. Looking at man, he sees in him something essentially divine, but when we turn back to see what he says about the original upon which the “image” of God was modeled, we find only the single assertion, “God created.” The characteristic common to God and man is apparently that: the desire and the ability to make things.

This, we may say, is a metaphor like other statements about God. So it is, but it is none the worse for that. All language about God must, as St. Thomas Aquinas

2 St. John iv. 24.
3 Articles of Religion, I.

pointed out, necessarily be analogical. We need not be surprised at this, still less suppose that because it is analogical it is therefore valueless or without any relation to the truth. The fact is, that all language about everything is analogical; we think in a series of metaphors. We can explain nothing in terms of itself, but only in terms of other things. Even mathematics can express itself in terms of itself only so long as it deals with an ideal system of pure numbers; the moment it begins to deal with numbers of things it is forced back into the language of analogy. In particular, when we speak about something of which we have no direct experience, we must think by analogy or refrain from thought. It may be perilous, as it must be inadequate, to interpret God by analogy with ourselves, but we are compelled to do so; we have no other means of interpreting anything. Skeptics frequently complain that man has made God in his own image; they should in reason go further (as many of them do) and acknowledge that man has made all existence in his own image. If the tendency to anthropomorphism is a good reason for refusing to think about God, it is an equally good reason for refusing to think about light, or oysters, or battleships. It may quite well be perilous, as it must be inadequate, to interpret the mind of our pet dog by analogy with ourselves; we can by no means enter directly into the nature of a dog; behind the appealing eyes and the wagging tail lies a mystery as inscrutable as the mystery of the Trinity. But that does not prevent us from ascribing to the dog feelings and ideas based on analogy with our own experience; and our behavior to the dog, controlled by this kind of experimental guesswork, produces practical
results which are reasonably satisfactory. Similarly the physicist, struggling to interpret the alien structure of the atom, finds himself obliged to consider it sometimes as a “wave” and sometimes as a “particle.” He knows very well that both these terms are analogical—they are metaphors, “picture-thinking,” and, as pictures, they are incompatible and mutually contradictory. But he need not on that account refrain from using them for what they are worth. If he were to wait till he could have immediate experience of the atom, he would have to wait until he was set free from the framework of the universe. In the meantime, so long as he remembers that language and observation are human functions, partaking at every point of the limitations of humanity, he can get along quite well with them and carry out fruitful researches. To complain that man measures God by his own experience is a waste of time; man measures everything by his own experience; he has no other yardstick.

We have, then, various analogies by which we seek to interpret to ourselves the nature of God as it is known to us by experience. Sometimes we speak of Him as a king, and use metaphors drawn from that analogy. We talk, for instance, of His kingdom, laws, dominion, service and soldiers. Still more frequently, we speak of Him as a father, and think it quite legitimate to argue from the analogy of human fatherhood to the “fatherhood” of God. This particular “picture-thought” is one of which Christ was very fond, and it has stamped itself indelibly on the language of Christian worship and doctrine: “God the Father Almighty,” “like as a father pitieth his own children,” “your Father in Heaven careth for you,” “the children of God,” “the Son of God,” “as many as are led by the spirit of God are sons of God,” “I will arise and go to my father,” “Our Father which art in Heaven.” In books and sermons we express the relation between God and mankind in terms of human parenthood; we say that, just as a father is kind, careful, unselfish and forgiving in his dealings with his children, so is God in his dealings with men; that there is a true likeness of nature between God and man as between a father and his sons; and that because we are sons of one Father, we should look on all men as our brothers.

When we use these expressions, we know perfectly well that they are metaphors and analogies; what is more, we know perfectly well where the metaphor begins and ends. We do not suppose for one moment that God procreates children in the same manner as a human father and we are quite well aware that preachers who use the “father” metaphor intend and expect no such perverse interpretation of their language. Nor (unless we are very stupid indeed) do we go on to deduce from the analogy that we are to imagine God as being a cruel, careless or injudicious father such as we may see from time to time in daily life; still less, that all the activities of a human father may be attributed to God, such as earning money for the support of the family or demanding the first use of the bathroom in the morning. Our
own common sense assures us that the metaphor is intended to be drawn from the best kind of father acting within a certain limited sphere of behavior, and is to be applied only to a well-defined number of the divine attributes.

I have put down these very elementary notes on the limitations of metaphor, because this book is an examination of metaphors about God, and because it is well to remind ourselves before we begin of the way in which metaphorical language—that is to say, all language—is properly used. It is an expression of experience and of the relation of one experience to the other. Further, its meaning is realized only in experience. We frequently say, "Until I had that experience, I never knew what the word fear (or love, or anger, or whatever it is) meant." The language, which had been merely pictorial, is transmuted into experience and we then have immediate knowledge of the reality behind the picture.

The words of creeds come before our eyes and ears as pictures; we do not apprehend them as statements of experience; it is only when our own experience is brought into relation with the experience of the men who framed the creeds that we are able to say: "I recognize that for a statement of experience, I know now what the words mean."

The analogical statements of experience which I want to examine are those used by the Christian creeds about God the Creator.

And first of all, is the phrase "God the Creator" metaphorical in the same sense that "God the Father" is clearly metaphorical? At first sight, it does not appear to be so. We know what a human father is, but what is a human creator? We are very well aware that man cannot create in the absolute sense in which we understand the word when we apply it to God. We say that "He made the world out of nothing," but we cannot ourselves make anything out of nothing. We can only rearrange the unalterable and indestructible units of matter in the universe and build them up into new forms. We might reasonably say that in the "father" metaphor we are arguing from the known to the unknown; whereas, in the "creator" metaphor, we are arguing from the unknown to the unknowable.

But to say this is to overlook the metaphorical nature of all language. We use the word "create" to convey an extension and amplification of something that we do know, and we limit the application of the metaphor precisely as we limit the application of the metaphor of fatherhood. We know a father and picture to ourselves an ideal Father; similarly, we know a human "maker" and picture to ourselves an ideal "Maker." If the word "Maker" does not mean something related to our human experience of making, then it has no meaning at all. We extend it to the concept of a Maker who can make something out of nothing; we limit it to exclude the concept of employing material tools. It is analogous language simply because it is human language, and it is related to human experience for the same reason.

This particular metaphor has been much less studied than the metaphor of "the Father." This is partly because the image of divine Fatherhood has been particularly consecrated by Christ's use of it; partly because
most of us have a very narrow experience of the act of creation. It is true that everybody is a “maker” in the simplest meaning of the term. We spend our lives putting matter together in new patterns and so “creating” forms which were not there before. This is so intimate and universal a function of nature that we scarcely ever think about it. In a sense, even this kind of creation is “creation out of nothing.” Though we cannot create matter, we continually, by rearrangement, create new and unique entities. A million buttons, stamped out by machine, though they may be exactly alike, are not the same button; with each separate act of making, an entity has appeared in the world that was not there before. Nevertheless, we perceive that this is only a very poor and restricted kind of creation. We acknowledge a richer experience in the making of an individual and original work. By a metaphor vulgar but corresponding to a genuine experience, we speak of a model hat or gown as a “creation”: it is unique, not merely by its entity but by its individuality. Again, by another natural metaphor, we may call a perfectly prepared beefsteak pudding, “a work of art”; and in these words we acknowledge an analogy with what we instinctively feel to be a still more satisfying kind of “creation.”

It is the artist who, more than other men, is able to create something out of nothing. A whole artistic work is immeasurably more than the sum of its parts.

But here is the will of God, a flash of the will that can, Existent behind all laws, that made them, and lo, they are! And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man, That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star.

Consider it well: each tone of our scale in itself is nought, It is everywhere in the world—loud, soft, and all is said: Give it to me to use! I mix it with two in my thought: And there! Ye have heard and seen: consider and bow the head!  

“I mix it with two in my thought”; this is the statement of the fact of universal experience that the work of art has real existence apart from its translation into material form. Without the thought, though the material parts already exist, the form does not and cannot. The “creation” is not a product of the matter, and is not simply a rearrangement of the matter. The amount of matter in the universe is limited, and its possible rearrangements, though the sum of them would amount to astronomical figures, is also limited. But no such limitation of numbers applies to the creation of works of art. The poet is not obliged, as it were, to destroy the material of a Hamlet in order to create a Falstaff, as a carpenter must destroy a tree-form to create a table-form. The components of the material world are fixed; those of the world of imagination increase by a continuous and irreversible process, without any destruction or rearrangement of what went before. This represents the nearest approach we experience to “creation out of nothing,” and we conceive of the act of absolute creation as being an act analogous to that of the creative artist. Thus Berdiaev is able to say: “God created the world by imagination.”

This experience of the creative imagination in the common man or woman and in the artist is the only thing we have to go upon in entertaining and formulat-

ing the concept of creation. Outside our own experience of procreation and creation we can form no notion of how anything comes into being. The expressions "God the Father" and "God the Creator" are thus seen to belong to the same category—that is, of analogies based on human experience, and limited or extended by a similar mental process in either case.

If all this is true, then it is to the creative artists that we should naturally turn for an exposition of what is meant by those credal formulae which deal with the nature of the Creative Mind. Actually, we seldom seem to consult them in the matter. Poets have, indeed, often communicated in their own mode of expression truths identical with the theologians' truths; but just because of the difference in the modes of expression, we often fail to see the identity of the statements. The artist does not recognize that the phrases of the creeds purport to be observations of fact about the creative mind as such, including his own; while the theologian, limiting the application of the phrases to the divine Maker, neglects to inquire of the artist what light he can throw upon them from his own immediate apprehension of truth. The confusion is as though two men were to argue fiercely whether there was a river in a certain district or whether, on the contrary, there was a measurable volume of \( H_2O \) moving in a particular direction with an ascertainable velocity; neither having any suspicion that they were describing the same phenomenon.

Our minds are not infinite; and as the volume of the world's knowledge increases, we tend more and more to confine ourselves, each to his special sphere of interest and to the specialized metaphor belonging to it.

The analytic bias of the last three centuries has immensely encouraged this tendency, and it is now very difficult for the artist to speak the language of the theologian or the scientist the language of either. But the attempt must be made; and there are signs everywhere that the human mind is once more beginning to move towards a synthesis of experience.