

Touching the Ceiling

- talking back to the Sistine Chapel and the history of Protestantism.

The Sistine Chapel ceiling perfectly captures the religious paradigm of its day. God, the source of all power and wisdom is enthroned in some celestial realm and gives life to man who is the pinnacle of his creation, and whose role is to receive and be grateful. Michaelangelo's masterpiece remains a part of our conception of divinity in the West; the image of a Big Beard in the sky is a part of our cultural heritage whether or not we think ourselves as religious.

There was once an Englishman travelling in Ireland who got lost on the way to Dublin. Eventually he stopped ask to the way and received the reply,

"Sure and if I was going to Dublin, I wouldn't be starting from here."

But 'here', with all our preconceptions and misconceptions, is the only starting place we have. No one can come to religious experience like Michaelangelo's Adam, in a condition of innocence and open receptivity. Culture, personal history and temperament all get in first, and create for us the god whom we choose to reject, or choose to explore.

I can only build my understanding of God on the foundation of what I understand to be good, which is inevitably biased towards my own character and preferences. Then in a culture where God is considered to be a being rather than an impersonal force, I will also be strongly influenced by the personal relationships that I have experienced. For instance if my parents were gentle people and seldom punished me during my childhood I will have very different feelings about God than I would have had if they had frequently beaten me 'for my own good'.

On top of these influences and along with the idea of divinity that is a part of my western cultural heritage, as a Christian in the Protestant evangelical tradition I am also the victim and beneficiary of a particular church culture, which is easier to understand in its historical context.

The invention of moveable type printing made the production of Bibles cheap enough for individuals to own their own copy, leading to the Reformation emphasis on individual study of the scripture in search of The Truth. This approach sowed the seeds of the multiple and bitterly antagonistic denominations of the nineteenth century, each propagating and defending minute differences of emphasis or interpretation. Then with the advent of consumer culture the competing denominations converged, in practice if not in theory, on the presentation of Christianity as a product that would variously cure guilt, relieve anxiety, bring material security, give life purpose or generate ecstatic experience. These forces seem to have combined at the beginning of the twenty-first century to produce a religious culture the key tenet of which appears to be that the repetition of certain formulaic 'truths' will generate a life enhancing emotional state.

Of course I'm being rude and unfair here, there's a lot more to it than that, as anyone who calls themselves a Christian will be glad to explain to you.... It is in the nature of someone who is, as I am, making an immature attempt to think for themselves, that they will be unreasonably critical about those ideas which have previously formed their thinking. So in a culture where Truth has been replaced by truths, and in a church where some people 'experience the presence of God' and some do not, I am trying to understand the range of my own spiritual experience and what if anything can usefully be said about the object of my devotions.