

# R C I A

## *Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults*

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### *Creation*

Charles Darwin put forward his theory of evolution in 1859. At first this scientific theory seemed to those who read it to question the account of Creation with which the Book of Genesis begins the Bible. Genesis said *God created*; Darwin seemed to say that *the universe evolved* according to its own laws. Genesis said *miraculously, in six days*; Darwin spoke of processes taking *millions of years*. A huge row broke out in the Church of England, which ended in a general perception that scientists must be atheists or religiously cretinous, and Christians must be scientific ignorami and probably hypocrites and ostriches.

The mistake which led people to think they had to choose between science and faith is now easy for us to detect. Genesis was composed in about 600 BC, long before anyone had studied dinosaur bones or taken an overview of human cultures. It was written by priests, the only leaders of the Jews left alive after the invasion of their land by the King of Babylon. It was written in Babylon, where their conquerors worshipped the sun, the moon, and the stars. Its aim was to assure the defeated Jews that their one God was the creator of what their captors worshipped; that he was still Master of all that lives (including the King of Babylon).

So Genesis can never be a scientific book. It knows nothing, and says nothing, about *how* the cosmos came into being. The “six days” of creation simply give the story an order and rhythm, rather like a liturgy, with the Day of Rest, the Jewish Sabbath, coming in at the end; the priests wanted their people to know that God has everything in hand, and proceeds in a stately and sovereign way to make the universe in all its parts, according to his own mind: *he saw what he had made, and it was good*. They also wanted to present human beings as the summit of the Creation: so they appear on Day Six, and are made “in the image of God”.

Ironically, when God says *Increase, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it: be masters of the fish, the birds, and all animals on the earth*, he could be seen as commissioning not only Adam and Eve, but Archimedes, Galileo, Mendel, Darwin, and all who have developed and harnessed the powers of creation by science and technology.

But Genesis isn't interested in the *how* of creation. Instead, it tells us *why* there is a cosmos, rather than nothing at all.



### *The Image of God*

“Image” in the Old Testament (*Gk* “eikon”) is a loaded word. It comes in the first of the Ten Commandments, where human beings are forbidden to make any image of God. How could anything God had fashioned be used to depict the Creator? If God is enthroned above all reality, and give all reality its meaning, then God must not be ranked among his creatures, as if he were one more factor *within* the Universe. The Creator *must* be independent of the universe, and not himself be subject to its laws; otherwise he would need a creator himself; he wouldn't be God, and we should have to search for another.

The Jews don't like images of human beings either, since they believe humans are created "in the image of God". So they will not allow statues, and they have special problems with the Roman coinage bearing the image of the "divine" Emperor. When the Roman prefect tries to adorn the Jerusalem Temple with statuary, there are riots in the city.

For the early Church, the statement that we humans are *made in the image of God* describes our dignity as the summit of God's making. But when Paul says that Jesus is *the Image of the Unseen God*, it is different; he is *identifying* Jesus with God. John's Gospel is similar, when Jesus tells Philip at the Last Supper: *To have seen me is to have seen the Father*. God gives Jesus to us so that, seeing him, we may understand what God wills and does. Conversely, the phrase makes it perfectly clear who Jesus Christ is.

We are very limited in our knowledge and understanding of God, and therefore we have a natural tendency to seek for images, for imaginary pictures, as we try to think of God. But in truth the greatest human images - like Michelangelo's Creator on the Sistine Chapel ceiling - actually distort the truth of God just as much as the cartoon of the old man in a nightie sitting on a cloud. God simply isn't a human being.

The coming of Christ as a man - therefore having a face and a figure, colouring of skin and hair, cast of countenance and the rest - means that it would have been possible (if things had happened differently) to take a photograph of the Son of God. You might like to discuss how far such a document would have given us "a picture of God".

In the name of this coming of the Son of God, Christians (with one or two hiccups) have come to believe that it is acceptable to paint pictures and carve statues of Jesus, trying to put into them by artistry some of the meaning we struggle to reach with theology and meditation. Eastern Christians hold in high regard the painters of ikons, who fast and pray before they begin to make an ikon of heavenly figures.

## *Looking for Meaning*

There's a kind of spiritual hygiene about speaking of God. We have to take care not to stray into what Scripture calls "merely human thinking" - reducing God to human terms. Unbelievers are rightly offended when believers try to sell them an image of God that is human. They accuse such religion of being a *projection*: we project what we would like God to be onto a big screen, and then we worship it. This is, indeed, what idolatry is, and that's why it's forbidden by the first commandment.

What makes religion interesting is the fact that God does not behave himself, as he would if I had invented him. My idol would, of course, have to do what I say. Fortunately God doesn't do what anybody says: he is sovereign, a free agent: and his deeds frequently both delight and appal his worshippers, as if to prove that he is God and we are his creatures - not the other way around. When the people suffer, they say: *He is God*. The voice in the Bible that says this is Job's; on the death of his children he says:

*The Lord gives; the Lord takes away: blest be the name of the Lord.*

We long to understand God, and we will always fall short: because our understanding is *finite* - limited by our nature; and God is *infinite* - limitless - in his. So we can never prove his existence from what we know of the Universe he has made; he could never be *deduced* from the other facts we know. They don't contain him, and therefore they can't prove him.

On the other hand, his being, and the divine nature, can never be *contradicted* by what he's made (the cleverest of us needs a Creator even wiser than he!). So everything we ever learn, however off-putting, can be used to modify and refine our thinking about God.

This is sometimes a troubled progress. We may cultivate one of the Biblical images of God: for instance, *The Lord is my Shepherd*. You can meditate for half a lifetime on a caring, watchful, brave God who takes on the wolves and searches out the lost sheep to bring them home. Then suddenly something happens on the face of the earth: a child dies of meningitis...the earth quakes in Pakistan and 70,000 die...we contract some loathsome ailment: and we feel we have lost our faith, and say with Peter in the Passion Story, *I do not know him*. Somehow we have to draw together the surviving bits of our life, still determined to find the meaning, still keeping faith in a God whose mystery has suddenly shattered our hold on him. You can greatly resent the demotion: one day you felt you were an advanced soul, and now you are back with the apprentices, struggling to begin again. Yet you have advanced enormously, just as Peter, running away from the Passion in tears, was actually becoming a disciple for the first time. You're still religious; still searching; and God is still God, even though a precious, trusted image of him has been smashed to smithereens.