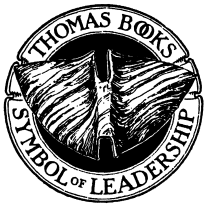
HOW WE SEE GOD AND WHY IT MATTERS

HOW WE SEE GOD AND WHY IT MATTERS

A Multicultural View Through Children's Drawings and Stories

By

ROBERT J. LANDY



CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
Springfield • Illinois • U.S.A.

Published and Distributed Throughout the World by

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62704

ISBN 0-398-07170-5 (hard)
ISBN 0-398-07171-3 (paper)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 00-053651

With THOMAS BOOKS *careful attention is given to all details of manufacturing and design. It is the Publisher's desire to present books that are satisfactory as to their physical qualities and artistic possibilities and appropriate for their particular use.* THOMAS BOOKS *will be true to those laws of quality that assure a good name and good will.*

Printed in the United States of America
MM-R-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Landy, Robert J.
How we see God and why it matters : a multicultural view through children's drawings and stories / by Robert J. Landy.
p.cm.
ISBN 0-398-07170-5 (hard) -- ISBN 0-398-07171-3 (pbk.)
1. Image of God. 2. Children's drawings--Psychological aspects. I. Title.

BL205 .L36 2001
291.2'11--dc21 00-053651

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly;
what is essential is invisible to the eye.
– Antoine De Saint-Exupéry

FOREWORD

The creative imagination, in keeping with the mystical teachings of all world religions, is the opening to a personal relationship with the divine that unfolds with unending depth and variation. In this book, Robert Landy takes the creative arts therapies beyond the thresholds of secular "spirituality" and into the more challenging meeting with religious faith. This large undertaking is done in a simple and engaging way through the presentation of intimate children's stories and pictures about God.

The children are asked to "draw a picture of God that shows what God looks like and where God lives." They are also asked to "tell a story about the picture" and then presented with other questions. Curiosity and fascination with images, for both child participants and readers, generate a fresh and open discourse about God.

Creative energy and artistic transformation have served as my way of experiencing the divine realm. As an adult the closest I have come to orthodoxy is a love for passages like *Ecclesiastes* (1, 7): "All streams run into the sea, yet the sea never overflows; back to the place from which the streams ran they return to run again." And I have realized that we do not create alone as confirmed by Ahab in *Moby Dick*, "Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?" My vision of creative arts therapy has been one of participating in this primordial flow of healing energy that is accessed through the creative process.

The creative streams of this book originate from, and return to, the sanctum santorum of Robert Landy's relationship with his young son. These bonds bring him back to his own childhood relationships and ultimately to the realization that visions of God originate and return to childhood. Imaginings of children serve as the deep sea and the flowing streams of divine energy in the world. We learn through the children who have much to say and depict when asked about God. The creations pour from them in unending variety and imaginative vitality. There is no single and absolute image, but yet there is a constancy of the relationship between the children and God.

The reader is subtly stirred to do what the children do. As I read and viewed the many different presentations of God, I imagined my own. I also returned to my childhood relationship with God. For over thirty years I rarely uttered the word "God." It was just too big. My repression of the word was an inverted form of respect. People were too glib with their references and too

certain. Perhaps in keeping with Judaic and Islamic commandments forbidding images of God, and the Jewish namelessness of the divine, I was attracted to an idea that was beyond any utterance or form. The word God once again entered my speech when I was a visiting Professor in Ireland and became relaxed with the ubiquitous goodbye expression, "God bless." This daily exchange having little to do with doctrine about divine identity cracked my resistance.

Since I first discovered creative arts therapy, it has provided an important community of ideas and colleagues. As Ronald Rolehiser suggests in *The Holy Longing*, traditional spirituality "Is never something you do alone" (1999, p. 96). My decision to constantly involve groups of people with the arts is no doubt connected to this need for community. Experiences in the art studio with others consistently show how rational arguments are dissolved by dreams, images, and art experiences that integrate everything we are. Just as individual positions following particular lines of reason separate us from one another in personal relations, the same thing happens with religious doctrine. When we join together in a community committed to making and sharing imagery, common ground is established by paying attention to individual creations. We do not have to abandon our rational beliefs, but only relax them for a while in order to find a shared purpose with others.

How We See God and Why It Matters creates a community of children from diverse parts of the world, all making images of God. The extensiveness of the imagery and the ambition of the collection establish an important milestone in the creative arts therapy's demonstration of how to do art-based research. From a research perspective, the collection of data is a major achievement in itself. I am especially intrigued with the way in which the book moves like a "shape shifter" between God and research. The children present highly varied and intimate images of God. The closeness of the children to what they are doing evokes a sense of the nearness of God who lives in the process of being experienced.

A five-year-old Bulgarian Jewish girl says, "My grandpa died and became God. There are his jewelry and his clothes. They are golden. He is rich. There are his trousers. They're golden too. And the sky is everywhere around him." Robert also recalls how his Orthodox Jewish grandfather praying was a childhood embodiment of God.

A Czech boy presents God as an abstract landscape and a Gypsy boy says, "God is the heart." Another child, in sync with the world's many mystical traditions says, "I think everything came out of some basic light." A seven-year-old Danish boy describes God speaking to "extinct dinosaurs."

There are also the inevitable superhero representations, but not too many; images of nature; domestic scenes of home and family; male, female and

androgen images of God; vulnerable images in need of support; clouds; stars; angels; temples; water; shadows behind us; and golden chairs–a variety as large as the imagination.

The pictures are equally astonishing from Odi's (England/Nigeria), "The Gates of Heaven" (Plate 8) to Robert's son Mackey's "All about Jesus" (Plate 15) and his "Jew in Jail" (Plate 1). In keeping with the dictum that the wound is the opening to the soul, Mackey had an anti-Semitic experience that sparked this Odyssey by his father. Twelve-year-old Bianca's (Germany) comforting image of God cradling the globe, can be likened to the way in which this book respectfully holds children's expressions from diverse regions of the world.

Varied art forms and drama methods give the children opportunities to speak directly to God and to "play" God–"If you were God in this picture, what are you saying?" Robert also joins in the dramatic exchange and his way of amplifying one artistic expression with another corresponds to Jung's practice of active imagination.

Erez, a six-year-old Israeli atheist, describes how God is blind and deaf and doesn't exist and says, "Once I talked to him in kindergarten, but he didn't answer me." He goes on to say, speaking as God, " I am God and I want you to know that I can't talk and I can't see. I live in the sky and I have a funnel." God is bored in heaven and says, "Because I have no friends." Erez invites him to earth.

The children's stories and drawings show how we create our images of God. What some might call projections from imagination are ways of giving human form to a divine reality. Robert pays homage to imagination as "a powerful and holy presence in the universe." He describes how the children "all ponder the unseen with open hearts . . . I struggle to feel and to see with the eyes of the child or at least to recall what it was like to see in that special way before my senses were re-educated, before my heart gave way to my brain."

Again the spiritual traditions of the world teach how soul loss and renewal are parts of a necessary cycle of life. Robert describes how he had to lose God to find him again. "The children," he says, " have led me back." The book begins with his son's experience and reconnects to it at the end. The streams "return to run again." The personal vein provides the mainstream through which all of the different parts of the book flow. This constant and sensitive presence holds together all the varieties and transcends the notion of "an exclusive God who chooses his own people at the expense of others." Robert holds the space and makes it safe for readers to open their hearts.

The guiding spirit of this book is the Hasidic saying, "God is present wherever people let him in." There is no push to present a particular image of

God or religious point of view. Robert Landy moves with great ease and humility amongst the religious traditions of the world, embracing them all as they return him to his own. The artistic images connect the viewer to experiences of God, just as angels do. For Robert Landy it is the children who ultimately show how to open the heart, "With very few exceptions, the children I interviewed let God in."

In keeping with ancient wisdom, this book reveals how children are given a vision of God at birth that is lost as the mind takes control. Robert Landy listens to the children, looks at what they make, opens his eyes to what they feel, and completes himself through their transcendence of logic and ego. He lets them in and God comes with them. He concludes that the mind of the child is "the source of the consciousness of God." As Edith Cobb revealed, the return to childhood imagination is the source of vision and wonder in the adult (1993).

How We See God and Why It Matters is a wonderful advance for my profession. The best among us turns his eye to God while acting within the role of a creative arts therapist. Our discipline, established to give compassionate and expressive service to the suffering soul, enters new territory in this book. Robert Landy displays what the creative imagination can do to help the world regain missing parts of itself.

SHAUN MCNIFF
Provost
Endicott College
Beverly, Massachusetts

REFERENCES

Cobb, E. (1993). *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood.* Dallas, Spring.
Rolheiser, R. (1999). *The Holy Longing.* New York, Doubleday.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since I can remember I was always searching out pictures of hidden mysteries. As a young adolescent, I would wander into a magazine store and surreptitiously look for the one with a racy title and the promise of a glimpse of a partially naked body. Inevitably, I would settle for something with a title like *Sexology* and become disappointed to discover that the pictures were medical rather than pornographic and the mystery I was searching for was yet again beyond my grasp. This was, after all, the 1950s, a time when popular images of forbidden fruits were drawn by hand or hidden behind fig leaves. I was a shy person originally from an orthodox Jewish home and, I suppose, took more than a little pleasure in sneaking around and fearing that I would be discovered and appropriately punished for my unacceptable cravings.

My search for a vision of the flesh in every candy store was supplemented by another one, more compelling and more motivating over the long haul. This was my search for the spirit, represented by the spiritual being that I came to know at an early age as God. God, too, was a hidden mystery, much more so than the naked body of women.

To complicate matters, my God was nowhere to be seen, no matter how many books and magazines I acquired, no matter what nook and cranny I searched in the synagogue. The only holy image available was that of Jesus Christ, one that seemed to be everywhere–in books and paintings and songs, in stores and churches, on crosses of wood and plastic hanging over my friends' beds. Before my young eyes, the figure of Jesus was frightening, not only in his bloody wounds, but also in his strange romantic quality. His was a face of even and soft features–a hint of ecstasy and ambivalent sexuality, blond hair and big soulful eyes looking heavenward. This was the face of a movie star, a rock star, later to be incarnated in the popular musical, J*esus Christ, Superstar.*

But Jesus was a forbidden object for Jewish boys like me. Neither his name nor his image was permitted within the walls of my home. The closest he got was when my uncle, annoyed by some mistake made by the children, uttered an exasperated: "Jesus Christ, can't you kids get it right!" Whenever Jesus was present visually, I was supposed to look the other way. And, ironically, the God that I was supposed to see, the Old Testament patriarch, Jehovah, was

nowhere to be found, that is, in a visual form.

One way of thinking about my childhood is as an education in seeing. I was taught over and over again what to see and what not to see. As I grew up, I carried around Hamlet's famous query with a twist: "To see or not to see, that is the question." My answer was: "To see." And, of course, the things that I was not supposed to see were the things that I wanted most desperately to see–the hidden body and the hidden spirit.

This is a book about seeing the ultimate mystery as represented by the figure of God. It is not about religion per se, although I will make reference to many of the great religious traditions of the world and their gods. Rather, it is about the presence of the spiritual world and its inhabitants, a place that lies on the other side of the domain of material things.

The inspiration for this book stems way back to some of my earliest memories. I was four years old, going to *shul* with my grandfather and feeling the presence of the spirit of God as I watched the old men *davin* from their worn prayer books, covered from head to toe in prayer shawls, bobbing on the balls of their feet to the rhythms of an ancient language whose sounds touched me deeply. To this day, in temple or church, I am still filled with a sense of wonder and reverence as the hum of communal prayer begins.

As a child, I could sense the gentle power of God through my grandfather and his fellow celebrants. Although I was bereft of a particular visual image, I imagined God in biblical terms as present in thunder and lightning, in burning bushes, pillars of fire and tidal waves–in short, in extreme forms of nature. Yet all the while I imagined his shape to be human, most particularly like that of my grandfather. At times the connection was so strong that I could smell and taste God in the thick slices of rye bread my grandfather would cut for me at breakfast.

As I approached the age of Bar Mitzvah, 13, I saw God as an anthropomorphic figure different from my grandfather. Certainly God did not smoke cigarettes or shave his face with a straight razor each morning. Before my mind's eye was an old man with a white beard, massively huge, dominating the world above the clouds. This image was reinforced when I first saw Cecil B. DeMille's film, *The Ten Commandments.* Although DeMille's God appears in the form of wind and fire, his presence is implied in the aging figure of Moses, portrayed by a 30-year-old Charlton Heston. I got the message that this was finally the true shape of God, and although he was not to be seen directly, if you looked long enough at the prophet Moses, then you would see his Master.

Like so many others before and after me, my image of the unimaginable was shaped by Hollywood. And the Barnum and Bailey snake oil salesman this time was Cecil B. DeMille, whose mysterious sideshow attraction was not

Charlton Heston or even the Moses character he portrayed, but God, himself. Mr. DeMille, in a speech delivered at the New York opening of the film, had this to say:

> What I hope for our production of *The Ten Commandments* is that those who see it shall come from the theatre not only entertained and filled with the sight of a big spectacle, but filled with the spirit of truth–that it will bring to its audience a better understanding of the real meaning of this pattern of life that God has set down for us to follow–that it will make vivid to the human mind its close relationship to the mind of God.

The mind of God–that is what I longed to know at 13 years of age, just as I longed to see the figure of God at four. I have always welcomed those who present me the opportunity to contemplate this figure. But over the years, journeying far away from the orthodoxy of my grandfather, the figure of God became cloudy and distant. I chose friends and teachers and colleagues because they were interested in more worldly ways of making meaning. Together we examined the great moral dilemmas of genocide and world war, of injustice and victimization by looking at the arts and humanities and social sciences for explanations.

Even so, I would wander away from them at regular intervals and travel, alone. In my travels I would find myself being drawn not to the great archeological or historical sites but to the spiritual ones. Again, unwittingly, I was resuming my search for the presence of God. Occasionally I would arrive at a place, whether Glastonbury in England, Iona in Scotland, Fatima in Portugal, Mt. Athos in Greece, Jerusalem in Israel, and feel that presence so powerfully that I knew I had returned to the scene of my childhood faith. But these experiences were all tempered by my more predictable return to the secular world and all its familiar rituals, rewards, and punishments.

Then a quite extraordinary thing happened. In the midst of my seemingly very important work and struggle to become worldly wise and respectable, I became a father. Well into my 40's, I was blessed with two children. I didn't think of it at the time, but on each occasion when I cut the umbilical chord and released each child into a world of its own, it was as if I were playing God. At the moment when the doctor handed me the knife, my hands were holy. And when I looked at the tiny faces before me in the delivery room–my daughter with the markings of my family and my son with the markings of my wife's–it was as if I were gazing at a being just recently separated from the other side.

For several years, I stayed close to home, my journeys confined to trips to the supermarket for extra packages of diapers. My attention was focused upon the shared chores of parenting. Sometimes, among the many dramatic moments of projectile vomits and late night fevers, I would experience small

epiphanies. They would occur at any old time and pass by so quickly that I wasn't even sure they had any particular meaning. These were moments when my daughter, agitated by a late night bad dream, would allow her body to fold into mine or when my son, growing into his independence, would simply reach out for my hand while walking down the street and hold it as if it really mattered.

At some point, I recognized that these small connections of body and hand, of heart and spirit are the ones that count the most. And it is these moments that present a certain kind of evidence of the presence of God. When I allow myself to stay connected to my small children in these moments, I am brought back to my own childhood connection with my grandfather and his God. My children evoke the part of me that is like a child, that is close to the spiritual nature of things, that is close to God.

Growing into fatherhood and watching my children slip away from their direct, ingenuous wonder and awe of the everyday workings of the universe, I yet again lost sight of the small revelations. My nose to the grindstone, I resumed my professional work and my travels, eager to succeed in new and better ways. But I did so in a fashion different from before. My children taught me to be mindful of the spiritual and to the memories that nurture my sense of wonder. My work in theatre, education, and drama therapy, helping people to discover ways to live more playful and spontaneous lives, has changed. Somewhere, somehow, like a drop of water, God has seeped into the cracks and broken down the rigid parts of my psyche.

Having written several books about the theory and practice of drama therapy, having traveled throughout many cultures, having worked for 30 years in theatres and universities and treated a variety of people with varying forms of psychological distress, I turn to the parts of me that are father and child and spiritual seeker. And as such, I return to the hidden, most compelling mysteries, the things unseen.

As a man, I know more about the body than I did as a young adolescent searching through the titillating magazines. The body is less mysterious to me now, though it remains a changing, awesome landscape that demands attention and scrutiny especially as the biological clock ticks away. To this day, I know less about the spirit, about the persona of God, having seen it still only through a medium, whether nature or grandfather or child. As a man past the half century mark, moving into a new millennium, sensitive to the limitations of ideals and ideologies in bringing about personal and political tranquility, I want to see God more than ever, long before I die.

And so, I write this book. As you will see, a particular experience with my children led to the actual concept, one in which I ask children to draw a picture of God, to play the role of God, and to tell a story about God. My

children, in fact, became my most important collaborators and critics. Unbeknownst to them, they have pointed me in this direction all along.

As I am a traveler, I asked other children from all around the world to offer their particular depictions of God in the hope of obtaining a universal vision that would help me clarify my own. But to reach my lofty goal of seeing God, I needed to take another step. With the children's images as patches of the great divine, I began to weave my quilt. This patchwork quilt of a book is more than just the sum of its parts. On the one hand, it is a description of the many sacred images of children; on the other, it is my dialogue with and response to their gods.

Finally, this book offers a method for readers to discover their own ways of seeing God. As you engage with the pictures and the stories of young children and as you engage with those that I create, you will be challenged to create your own. This book is about creating the Creator, about discovering a way to see the unseeable through drawing, role playing, and storytelling. This is a book for all those who have hung out in candy stores and temples and churches of all kinds, for all those who have traveled far and wide to great spiritual sites and for those who have stayed close to home hoping to see a glimpse of wonder in the small rituals of everyday life. This is also a book for doubters, those who wonder whether God is simply a wish or a crutch or a dream. They, too, can test out their beliefs by engaging with the images in this book.

This is a book for children of all ages who are able to leave behind for just a moment the jaded, sophisticated, often cynical vision of the workaday world and answer the question: "to see or not to see" in the affirmative. In an odd way, my aim is similar to that of Cecil B. DeMille in making the film *The Ten Commandments:* "to make vivid to the human mind its close relationship to the mind of God."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There were many helpers and interviewers from all around the world who unselfishly devoted their time and prodigious skills to sit with children and explore the mysteries of the spirit. I am particularly indebted to the following: Elektra Tselikas-Portmann, Katerina Robertson, Chiao-hua Cheng, Stan Corwin, Gioia Ottaviani, Marcella Palazzolo, Annamaria Grimaldi, Antonella Ristagno, James Mirrione, Darko Lukic, Nellie McCaslin, Barry Lynch, Ciara Stuart, Grainne Hall, Ciara Douglas, Roisin McKeever, Jim Cosgrove, Line Kossolapow, Uwe Hermann, Veronika Krumnow, Edith Shawyer, Torben Marner, Lawrence Arturo, Sara Lavner, Melanie Bramlett, Carole Bramlett, Joyce Sykes, Judith Bernard, Junko Muraki, Hiroko Muraki, Young-Ah Kang, Jinsook Kim, Uma Singh Mahajan, Urmila Jain, Mary Lou Lauricella, Janice Valdez, Emily Nash, Donna Ray, Martha Kemp, Kory Lorimer, Alistair Martin-Smith, Aliki Romano, Galila Oren, Avi Hadari, Noga Kaplan Zvi, Rina Itzhaki, Ali Goughti, Avivit Deby, Daphna Eyal, Shevy Rahat Medzini, Anat Tanamy, Craig Haen, Nic Billy, Milan Valenta, Graciela Rojas-Bermudez, Manuel Rosado, Delfim Ribeiro, Nuno Barreto, Mafalda Costa, Asra Chapnick, Alma Villegas, Mrs. A.C. Rhinehart, Vincent Dopulos, Stanislava Zaprianova, Veronica Santoyo, Matilde Hall, Stanley Kalathara, Jaben Khan, Frank Tang, Stephen Snow, Nadine Permutt, Roger Grainger, Ann Ball, Linda Lampitt, Rachel Worthington, Clive Holmwood, Pastor Paul Chamberlain and the parents and children at Calvary Church, Kingswinford, West Midlands, England.

I would like to thank Tom James, Gordon Pradl, Elektra Tselikis-Portmann, Howard Robinson and Ron Janoff for reading and critiquing an early version of the manuscript. I would also like to express my gratitude to New York University, School of Education for supporting my travels to the Middle East through the Research Challenge Fund Grant.

Sue Emmy Jennings, dear friend and fellow God-seeker, was a guiding light for me since the inception of this project, nudging me out into the world of children and their gods.

The true inspirations and guides for this project were my children, Mackey and Georgie. At five and at seven-years-old, they led me on a wonderful journey that has changed my life. My wife, Katherine, has kept me earthbound during all the highs and lows of this journey. I am grateful for her

keen eye and wise council.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge Michael Payne Thomas, my publisher, for his continuing support, thoughtfulness and vision.

CONTENTS

Page

Foreword vii
Introduction xi
Acknowledgments xvii
Plates and Figures xxiii

CHAPTER 1. AT HOME 3
Beginnings 3
The Jew Is in Jail 7
Why Is God Saying This? 10
God's Story 13

CHAPTER 2. IN THE KITCHEN 16
America 16
The Color of God 17
God's Persistence 18
Baha'i 22
God Lives Seven Skies High 23
The Red Dot 29
Beijing and Bialystock 31
The Rest of the USA 33

CHAPTER 3. GOD IN NEARBY PLACES 35
Canada 35
Isis and Jupiter 37
A Blind God Gives His Child a Teddy Bear 39
Heaven and Hell 40
The Book of Mormon 41
God's Hat 43
Mexico 44
Work to Live 44
The Streets of Chapultepec 46
The Careful Cloud 48
God in His Cloud 49

CHAPTER 4. GOD IN EUROPE 51

England 51
The Center Colors of Heaven 53
The Sky in Heaven Has Lots of Colors and Everyone Is Asleep Except God 56
Shiner 57
The Lord's Light Is Shining 58
Everyone Is Allowed In 59
A Story 60
Northern Ireland 61
The Orange and the Green 62
Soten Fightes God 63
Speaking to God 64
Denmark 67
The Little Mermaid 68
Away with the Devil 69
Portugal 71
A Very Little Man with Very Big Horns 74
God Is Our Friend 75
Spain 76
The Carpenter 77
Don't Be Cruel 78
The True Flowing 79
The Protective Cover of God 80
The Lost Angel 81
Austria 82
The Loving God Warms Himself and Smiles 82
God in the Gate of Clouds 85
Dominik Dominus 86
The Red and the Black 89
Germany 90
The Soul 103
God's Ears 104
The Eagle 105
God's Eyes 105
God, the Comforter 109
Italy 109
I Go with God to Heaven 110
Pettirossa 111
Mary Poppins' Bag 113
That Shadow Behind Us 113
Eastern Europe 116
Croatia 117

Bosnia 119
Bulgaria 121
God Stays in the Soul 124
Czech Republic 126
Greece 129
God Speaks in Ancient Greek 131
God with Maria 133
Gypsies 136
God's Belly Button 137
God's Willy 138
Going Around in Circles 139
A Picture of God and the Virgin Mary and Christ and All the Saints . . . 140
Nothing or Maria 141

CHAPTER 5. THE GODS OF ASIA 144
India 144
God Is in the Temple 145
The Faithful God Who Listened to His Mother 147
Sikhs 149
The Glory of the Gods 150
China 153
Taiwan 154
The Fat, Laughing Buddha 156
The Goddess of Mercy 156
A Crucifixion 157
All About Eve 157
The Laughing Grandfather 158
God Is a Soldier 159
The Buddha-to-Be 160
Japan 160
God and Hotake-sama 161
Mari-chan and God 162
The Emperor of Ice Cream 162
Lost in America 163
Korea 164
Fathers and Daughters 165
The Magic Sticks 166
The Red Cherries 167

CHAPTER 6. THE HOLY LAND 170
Israel 170
A God Party 173

The Mouth of God 176
A Family Looks for God 178
God and the Wishes of Man 182
God's Golden Chair 184
God Created 186
The School 187
The Satanic Verses 189
The Face of God 192
The World and Satan 192
Satan's Dance 193
In Jerusalem 193
Where Have All the Rabbis Gone? 193
All About Jesus 196
Across the Jordan 200

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION 203

PLATES AND FIGURES

Plate 1. *Mackey–Jew in Jail, USA* 93
Plate 2. *Liora–God Eats Fruits, USA* 93
Plate 3. *Mohammad–The Special Place to Pray, USA/Bangladesh* 93
Plate 4. *Mina–God's Hat, Canada* 93
Plate 5. *Emilio–God in His Cloud, Mexico* 94
Plate 6. *Joshua–Shiner, England* 94
Plate 7. *Gloria–The Lord's Light Is Shining, England/Uganda* 94
Plate 8. *Odi–The Gates to Heaven, England/Nigeria* 94
Plate 9. *Maeve–No Fighting in Heaven, Northern Ireland* 95
Plate 10. *Grace–Soten Fightes God, Northern Ireland* 95
Plate 11. *Jeppe–The Little Mermaid, Denmark* 95
Plate 12. *José–A Very Little Man with Very Big Horns, Portugal* 95
Plate 13. *Guadalupe–The Woodcutter, Spain* 96
Plate 14. *Shanira–The True Flowing, Spain* 96
Plate 15. *Hannah–The Red and the Black, Austria* 96
Plate 16. *Viktor–God Is the Hope, Germany* 96
Plate 17. *Vanessa–God Has Big Ears, Germany* 97
Plate 18. *Bianca–God, the Comforter, Germany* 97
Plate 19. *Lavinia–I Go with God to Heaven, Italy* 97
Plate 20. *Francesca–Mary Poppins' Bag, Italy* 97
Plate 21. *Hana–Sky God, Czech Republic* 98
Plate 22. *Ladislav–Lightning God, Czech Republic* 98
Plate 23. *Pavlos–God Speaks in Ancient Greek, Greece* 98
Plate 24. *Apostolis–God's Willy, Greece* 98
Plate 25. *Panagiotis–A Picture of God and the Virgin Mary and Christ and All the Saints, Greece* 99
Plate 26. *Shreya–The Faithful God Who Listened to His Mother, India* 99
Plate 27. *Sonu–The Water of Shiva, India* 99
Plate 28. *E-Fan–The Goddess of Mercy, Taiwan* 99
Plate 29. *Brian–Crucifixion, Taiwan* 100
Plate 30. *Chang Mong–God Is a Soldier, Taiwan* 100
Plate 31. *Pei-zo–The Buddha-To-Be, Taiwan* 100
Plate 32. *Keita–God and Hotoke-sama, Japan* 100
Plate 33. *Sang Min–Magician God Who Rides the Clouds, Korea* 101

Plate 34. *Sang Mi–The Red Cherries, Korea* 101
Plate 35. *Lihi–A Ray of Light, Israel* 101
Plate 36. *Naama–God and the Wishes of Man, Israel* 101
Plate 37. *Gil–God's Golden Chair, Israel* 102
Plate 38. *Anonymous–The World and Satan, Israel* 102
Plate 39. *Anonymous–Sharp-Tooth Satan, Israel* 102
Plate 40. *Musta–Satan's Dance, Israel* 102

Figure 1. *Georgie–The Hand of God-Male, USA* 12
Figure 2. *Georgie–The Hand of God-Female, USA* 12
Figure 3. *Andrew–Instinct God, USA* 38
Figure 4. *Jasmine–Isis, Canada* 38
Figure 5. *Stephen–The Face of God, England* 55
Figure 6. *Sandra–God at 102, Germany* 55
Figure 7. *Meike–The Eagle, Germany* 107
Figure 8. *Ahmed–God with a Chair, Germany* 107
Figure 9. *Wanda–That Shadow Behind Us, Italy* 114
Figure 10. *Anita–The Fight, Bosnia* 125
Figure 11. *Plamen–God Is a Horse Man, Bulgaria* 125
Figure 12. *Joanna–God Stays in the Soul, Bulgaria* 148
Figure 13. *Mondira–The 10 Hands of Durga, India* 148
Figure 14. *Mohammed–The Satanic Verses, Israel* 190
Figure 15. *Mackey–All About Jesus, USA* 198

HOW WE SEE GOD AND WHY IT MATTERS

Chapter 1

AT HOME

Beginnings

There's nothing like a damaging remark aimed at your child to propel a parent into action. My daughter, Georgie, seven years old, was the target. At recess in school, she engaged in a conversation with her second grade peers about different religions and gods. One girl brought the discussion to a grinding halt by accusing Georgie and all Jews like her of killing Jesus Christ. This incident occurred at the end of the 20th century in a fairly enlightened school district in a New York City suburb. For my wife and I, Georgie's retelling of the story cut to the bone. Where was this medieval prejudice coming from? Were we too naive to think that in this place and at this time, overt anti-Semitism was all but dead and buried? Where and how does a seven-year-old girl learn that people of one faith murder the god of another?

As a family, we talked about the incident at length and made the appropriate phone calls to the parents and teacher and principal. Our five-year-old son, Mackey, remained silent during much of our conversations, but we thought he absorbed the essential lessons of religious tolerance and respect for those whose faiths and gods are different from one's own. In our family, we are all Jewish by birth and belong to a Reform Synagogue, despite my earliest years in an orthodox home. Although we are not observant for the most part, our Jewish identities have been very meaningful and we chose to pass along the traditions and culture to our children. And in our home, we openly discuss religion, especially after traveling to another culture.

Several weeks passed after this incident. It was early spring. Our family expanded as we acquired a frisky Labrador Retriever named Trixie who spent her days chewing the furniture and nights tossing and turning restlessly in her crate beside our bed. A freak blizzard hit hard on April Fool's Day, and we all spent one week without power, heat, and water. Something was churning, something beyond our control.

Then my old friend and colleague, Sue, visited from England. I took her, along with my son, Mackey, to visit the nearby Maryknoll monastery. This was not, incidentally, a response to the storm, but our usual way of spending

time together, as we both shared an interest in places and things spiritual. As we were walking to the chapel, we passed a large wooden crucifix hanging low from the wall. As is his pleasure, Mackey reached up to sample the feel of this foreign object and his hand lingered on a wooden spike pierced through Christ's feet. Pulling his hand away, he exclaimed: "Uh, oh!" I looked down and saw that he held the spike in his hand. With good humor I said: "Watch out Mack, Jesus might come down and get you!" We all had a good laugh and I immediately experienced a twinge of guilt. Was I too flip, too demeaning of the Christian faith? Was I frightening my son and inadvertently instilling the fear of a vengeful God? Was I blurring the boundary between symbol and reality? Did Mackey think and did I that this wooded figure could be animate, that this spirit could indeed be made flesh?

I let these thoughts go and Sue, Mackey, and I continued our explorations of the monastery–its cloistered halls, its soaring architecture strongly influenced by classical Chinese design, its light and shadows, its serenity and glorious vistas. Mackey was quiet throughout.

In the morning, Sue and I sat in the kitchen at the breakfast table. Mackey, who had awakened at the crack of dawn, entered with a drawing. It was of a blobby figure, ghostlike and frowning, in some form of cage or prison. Mackey also drew four crucifixes, three to the right of the cage, one above it (**see Plate 1**). Having had the pleasure of being slobbered upon by our dog, Sue asked: "Is that Trixie in the cage?" And Mackey responded: "No, it's a Jew."

"And where is the Jew, then?" Sue asked.

Mackey replied: "The Jew is in jail."

We were all surprised by Mackey's response. At that moment, in walked his sister, Georgie. After examining Mackey's picture and asking some direct questions concerning our conversation, Georgie proceeded to draw her own version of the crucifixion, with plenty of blood dripping from Christ's wounds. Her only question to us was: "What is Jesus wearing?" We tried to describe a loin cloth and Georgie drew a yellow version, giving Christ a distinctively Tarzan-like appearance. I related to Sue how Georgie had recently been the recipient of anti-Semitic remarks. Georgie told Sue that her classmate said: "You know, Georgie, you Jews killed Christ." I mentioned that my wife and I had long discussions with the children about the need to challenge all forms of bigotry.

After a hurried breakfast, Sue and I rushed off to the train to the city and bid the family goodbye. On the train, we leapt into a provocative and difficult conversation about who killed Christ and the roots of religious intolerance. My anxiety abated just a bit, yet I was blocked from expressing all the hurt I felt from my daughter's first exposures to religious intolerance and, not

incidentally, to all the pain I have had to push aside or deny during my lifetime as a Jew in a Christian world.

But then, our talk shifted to a positive direction. We both became excited at discovering the rich imaginations of children who could draw what they felt, and who, like Mackey, could visualize the shame and despondency of the Jews in terms of a dog in a cage. We seemed to discover the contrary side of the thought that human beings are God killers, that is, human beings are the creators of God and that some of the most beautiful depictions of that which cannot be seen and, in some faiths should not be seen, are those imagined and drawn by children.

Sue and I began to wonder just how we form our images of God. So we decided to turn to the earliest creators of images, children, and encourage them to teach us about God. Although the creative spark and initial concept for this book came out of a shared experience and discussion between Sue and myself, I have taken on the task of bringing this project to fruition as it has become more and more a very personal search for my own sense of the holy.

Before I set out, I devised a creative method to interview the children, one consistent with my experience as a creative arts therapist and educator. In the interview, children were asked to present God through their drawings, role-plays, and stories. The interview questions evolved over time and were modified to suit the needs of particular faiths. But generally these were the questions:

1. Draw a picture of God that shows what does God look like and where God lives.
2. Tell a story about the picture.
3. If you were God in this picture, what are you saying? Are you speaking to anybody or anything? Who are you speaking to? If you are not speaking to anyone, who might you be speaking to?
4. I am now going to play God and speak the words you just spoke. You will be the person or thing God is speaking to. Please answer in any way you want.
5. Tell me who you are (as the person God is speaking to). What is your name?
6. Can you make up a title for the picture? What is the picture called?
7. Is there anything else you want to say about the picture or about the role-play?
8. *(If there are no antagonistic, bad or malevolent characters in the picture, ask the additional question:)* Does God have any enemies, anyone who wants to fight God? If so, can you name them and tell me something about them? If you'd like, add the enemies to your picture.