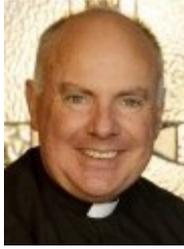


IS GOD THE SAME AS "NATURE"?

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In my last post I raised the question of balancing the polarities of transcendence (God is far away) and immanence (God is near).

If we think of God as immanent and present through sacramental signs like water or bread and wine does this imply that God is identical with the world or material things?

To answer 'yes' would be to embrace pantheism (God and the world are identical).

God is not the same as nature but we do see God and experience God in material things and in the world around us. Moses had that sort of experience at the burning bush (Exodus 3).

God was not a bush but Moses experienced the presence of God through the bush as a 'sacrament' of God. While God may exist in all things this is very different from saying that God is a thing.

John Macquarrie has said that 'the material world can become a way to God, joining us to him rather than cutting us off. It can become a door or channel of communication, through which he comes to us and we may go to him' (Macquarrie, *A Guide to the Sacraments*, 1997: 5-6).

Signs for Macquarrie have the 'potential of lighting up for us the mystery of God himself' (ibid., 8). Such signs are sacramental. God, through signs like the Scriptures, the sacraments, our worship together as the body of Christ and ultimately through the person and work of Jesus Christ lights up for us the mystery of God's very self. We know God and we are known through such material and spiritual experiences.

The word 'sacrament' comes from the Latin word 'sacramentum' meaning the oath a Roman soldier swore to the Emperor. This sacramentum was a pledge of sincerity and fidelity publicly symbolised by the soldier through a visible sign such as an oath or a deposit of money. The early church leader and African church father Tertullian (c.160–c.225) seems to have been the first to use the word sacrament to refer to Baptism and the Eucharist, saying that it was here through these material things that Christians pledged their spiritual fidelity to Christ and to know Christ's presence.

The response from the Anglican reformers

In the Reformation of the 16th Century the Reformers reacted to the abuses and superstitions of earlier times which came to make God identical with things of this world. It was in this balancing of the polarities that the Anglican Reformers came to define the sacraments carefully.

In the Catechism of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* for example, in answer to the question: 'What do you mean by the word sacrament?' the Reformers answered: 'I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ himself, as a means by which we receive that grace, and a pledge to assure us of this'.

This classic definition carefully distinguishes the 'outward sign' and the 'inward and spiritual grace' but at the same time does not dismiss either the material form or the spiritual grace and so balances the use of the material 'as a means by which we receive that grace' with the spiritual 'pledge to assure us of this'.

By Reverend **Brian Douglas**