

# HOW WE SEE GOD AND WHY IT MATTERS

A Multicultural View  
Through Children's Drawings  
and Stories



By

ROBERT J. LANDY

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*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 sanctorum 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.

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## 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, *Jesus 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."





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**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.

9. *(If you feel that the picture and/or story is not clear or incomplete, please prompt the children with supplementary questions, such as:)* Tell me more about the house, the cross, the sky, etc.
10. Do you believe in God? *(If the response is a simple yes or no, please ask for more detail.)*

At first I decided to limit myself to children within the Judeo-Christian tradition and to expand the research across several cultures in order to broaden my base of understanding. I would travel to some of these cultures myself and also ask others—psychologists, artists, creative arts therapists, and educators—to do some of the interviews, especially in places very far away from home. My choice of countries was somewhat arbitrary, dependent upon my fortunes in connecting with potential interviewers.

I decided to limit the age of the children from four to 11. I thought that this was an optimal age range, neither too immature in terms of thinking and communication skills, nor too sophisticated in terms of the same. As opportunities to work with certain children presented themselves, I expanded the age range from three to 13. The first countries involved in the research included the United States, England, Israel, Greece, and Austria.

In my wanderings, I met up with children from families whose faith or lack of traditional religious affiliation was different from the Judeo-Christian and thus I expanded my frame of reference into other spiritual realms. In examining the images created by Jew and Muslim, Christian and Buddhist, Hindu and Baha'i, atheist and agnostic, I hoped to uncover ways that children affirm and struggle with their faith and that of others who see God in different ways.

Throughout the book, a selection of pictures and stories by the children will be reproduced and paraphrased. I will offer my own stories and commentary, not as an analyst in a psychological sense or critic in a literary one, but as a fellow God-seeker and God-creator who trusts in the power of the image and the metaphor to reveal meaning. My aim is to attempt to answer the question, How do we see God? through engaging with the images created by a group of children from a number of different cultures and spiritual backgrounds. The *we* in the question refers to the part of us all that sees with the eyes of the child, fresh and open, capable of accepting wonder in a world beyond the rational and natural. And the *we* also refers to our more shadowy sides, whether child or adult, which need to condemn and judge and control others for holding beliefs different from our own. The *we* is, in fact, *you*, the reader, and *I* who have decided to spend time contemplating the following images of God in the hope of discovering our own in the process.

### The Jew Is in Jail

Mackey's first picture (see **Plate 1**), which he called *Jew*, is very striking. Mackey's only description is as follows: "The Jew is in jail." Each image, one of the Jew and four of the crucifixion, is contained within an enclosure that resembles a box, a cage, a bubble, a tombstone. The Jew has a frown on his face and large round eyes. He has no arms and the only differentiated body parts are the feet. The crucified Christ figures are smaller than the Jew and more abstractly drawn. One cross stands to the right of the others, with no figure attached. I wonder why the Jew is in jail and what is the connection between the Jew and the Christ figures. More generally, I wonder how is this a picture and story about God? How does my five-year-old son see God and himself in relation to God?

It occurs to me that Mackey's picture is not about God, but rather about what happens when someone is accused of killing God. The accused God-killer is locked up in a floating prison with no doors and no arms to open the nonexistent doors. He is surrounded with images, icons that remind him of his deed. And he is very sad, maybe because he is falsely accused of the murder and maybe because the punishment is so unfair and harsh, and there is no way out and no one to comfort him. He is cut off from friends and family, an outcast and pariah.

This picture, the first one, is very troubling to me. In many ways, I see the Jew as Mackey does. The Jew is trapped in a prison of misunderstanding, false accusation, and isolation. Because of this, he is lost in space. Yet he lives in a world surrounded by Christian imagery that he doesn't quite understand. I am brought back to my childhood in a working class neighborhood of Jersey City. I am one of a very small handful of Jewish kids. Our Cub Scout troupe meets in a church and I am both fascinated and frightened by the strange Christian imagery. I remember one of the first jokes I heard in my childhood about the young, wild Jewish boy who is kicked out of many schools because of his uncontrollable behavior. One day in desperation, his parents send him to a Catholic School and to everybody's amazement, he becomes the model of decorum. When asked why he has calmed down, he replies: "When I walked into school I saw this bloody guy hanging on a cross. Someone told me: 'They nailed that Jewish boy up a long time ago, because he wouldn't do what they wanted.' I thought I'd better be good."

Like his father before him, young Mackey, brought up Jewish, lives in a predominantly Christian community. And in the orthodox Jewish tradition, the God of Abraham and Moses is not supposed to be depicted. Yet like his father before him, Mackey needs to imagine God, and the one that is most available and most compelling in its dramatically wounded form is that of



Christ. Jesus is especially available to Mackey on the morning of this drawing as he had the experience the day before of accidentally pulling out a spike from a crucifix. Since he cannot see the Jewish God, Mackey settles on the Christian one. Aware already at five years old of the stigma of Jews as Christ-killers, Mackey envisions an appropriate punishment—the Jew goes to jail. And perhaps, in a more personal sense, Mackey envisions a similar punishment for himself, a Jewish boy who has desecrated the cross, the place of Christ's death.

Mackey's drawing is quite complex. It is about his community of Jews in relation to the God of the Christians. And it is, in many ways, a statement about the political and emotional consequences of killing Christ.

For days after creating this drawing, Mackey drew endless pictures of the crucified Christ, some with the same sad expression as the Jew in jail. Then, one morning, he awoke early to draw the face of God, a round, red, abstract face with glasses (Mackey is visually impaired and wears glasses all the time). With masking tape, he attached this face to his shirt and proclaimed: "I am God." The body of God was no longer wounded or nailed to a cross. It was Mackey's body that held the godhead, glasses and all, a full representation of divinity, removed from the trappings of traditional religious imagery. Mackey saw God as himself.

Beginning with Mackey's drawings is particularly poignant to me as there was a time not too long ago when I thought that Mackey would never be able to see or draw any image at all. When Mackey was born, in 1991, he had large, beautiful blue eyes and platinum blond hair. He was named after the grandfathers of both my wife and I and given the Hebrew name, Meir Natan which means the gift of shining light. At two weeks old, my wife, Katherine, was alarmed that he was not responding or smiling as he should. Within months we became aware that Mackey was blind, though the doctors seemed unable to pinpoint the reason or offer any reasonable prognosis. Slowly, with the help of an extraordinary teacher, Mackey learned how to see. Eventually, his condition was diagnosed as albinism and over the first several years of his life we learned that he would be able to function well, although his vision would remain impaired. He was slow to develop fine motor tasks such as drawing until one day, as if overnight, at age five, he awoke early in the morning and began to draw endless pictures of colorful scenes taken from books and magazines.

By the time Mackey was drawing Christ, he was already well practiced with the marker and crayon. It struck me as quite fitting that this gift of shining light, this marked child who would struggle with a disability throughout his life, would know how to see with his imagination and to express his vision directly and prolifically. And it did not surprise me at all that this child

artist would be attracted to things spiritual and invisible. As he created God, Mackey also created himself. He was not only like the sad Jew in jail but also like the sad crucified Christ—stigmatized and wounded but full of creative, restorative energy.

As Mackey draws *Jew*, his sister Georgie enters. She is seven. Not one to be outdone, she wants a piece of the action and draws her own version of the crucified Christ. At first, Georgie seems especially interested in his clothing. The next most interesting aspects of the figure for Georgie, not surprisingly, are the stigmata and the blood which appears plentifully in bright red. There is no Christ-killer present and Georgie, in discussion with my wife and me, seems to have made peace with the anti-Semitic episode in school. She has a well-developed sense of tolerance for others' religious beliefs, and her drawing seems to be more centered on the physical aspects of Christ.

I wondered if her thinking about the anti-Semitic episode was as resolved as it appeared, and I further wondered just what this Christ figure meant to her. If Mackey's gods with glasses and sad faces and vacant eyes had something to do with himself, I wondered if Georgie's picture was in some way also a self-portrait.

Georgie was the first person I interviewed through role-playing and storytelling. Her responses to my questions were minimal. When playing God, for example, her first statement was: "Help!" It was difficult for her to understand how to take on a complimentary role and respond to Christ's cry from the cross for help. But when I asked her if God had any enemies, she immediately drew a second figure who pokes a sword into Christ's chest. I wondered if this was the Christ-killer, a figure like the one she was accused of being by her classmates. Her story is, as follows:

Jesus is on a cross. An army is near him. A person standing near him with a big spear is poking at Jesus. The guy who is poking at Jesus is not a girl. The guy is Chinese. There's a Chinese army. The army thinks Jesus is a bad man.

I found it striking that Georgie distances herself from the guy with the spear. It is important to her that he is not a girl and that he is very foreign, in this instance, Chinese, far removed from her own cultural experience. She does not want to appear at all as the Christ-killer, herself. Yet to me, the guy with the spear appears feminine, with long hair and a dress. I wonder if Georgie is, indeed, afraid that her classmate's accusation is true, that she is, despite her gender and cultural disguise, a killer of God.

This thought leads me back to myself as a Jew who has been attracted to Chinese philosophy and religion for many years and has brought that interest into the home, sharing it with both Georgie and Mackey. It has been difficult

for me to fully embrace my religious sense of Judaism in part because of the prohibition against picturing God. Of course, to forbid a child from picturing God is as good as insuring that she will leap to the nearest image. And for me as child, that image has been patriarchal and forbidding, a giant of an old man with white, flowing beard and powerful arms and hands, sitting in judgement high above the clouds. In growing up and slipping into my own identity, I have needed so desperately to let that image go, to kill that God who would kill me with his harsh judgement should I displease him. In some ways, I revisit that image each Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the most sacred of the Jewish holy days when God listens to the confession of the Jewish community and inscribes each person's fate for the coming year in his massive Book of Life. Somehow I do not seem able to completely kill the image of the old man with his book sealing my fate with the turn of a page.

But Georgie's God is so much simpler. Her drawing of Jesus is so childlike with his short dark hair, chubby face, and yellow loincloth, dripping stage blood. Her Chinese guy almost seems to be tickling Jesus. He appears more funny than threatening, a black and white cartoon figure, in dress and cape. I had the sense that for Georgie, there was a more grown-up, more remote figure to be discovered. And perhaps this figure would incorporate some of my own fears of judgement and victimization by a powerful unseen presence far beyond the world of children. She would offer it up soon.

### **Why Is God Saying This?**

Georgie's second God drawing is not of Christ, but of a God with whom she is more familiar—a Hebrew God. Without an awareness of the orthodox Jewish prohibition against creating images of God, Georgie offers just a glimpse of the divine. Her God is represented by a long arm descending from the clouds with an outstretched finger pointing downward (**see Figure 1**).

When I ask Georgie to speak as God, she says: "I want the world to be peaceful." As we shall see, this sentiment is standard among children from many different cultures. She chooses "Rachel from the Bible" as God's listener. Rachel responds to God with a question: "How can I make the world peaceful?"

Georgie's story is quite simple: "God is pointing to Rachel from the Bible and telling her I want the world to be peaceful, but Rachel doesn't know how." Georgie mentions that God is male and names her picture, "Why Is God Saying This?" When asked if God has enemies, Georgie responds: "God's enemies are devils. They want to rule the world."

The God that I see in Georgie's drawing is quite remote yet omnipresent and powerful, taking up a lot of space on the page. Georgie's God communi-

cates through a pointed finger. When I look at this image, I feel a sense of threat. I think of the oft spoken defense of those menaced by an aggressive digit thrust in their face: “Don’t point that finger at me!” Although Georgie’s God asks for peace, he does so in a most unpeaceful way.

As my consciousness of God grew from my very early years, I held onto a notion of a threatening presence of massive proportions. In human terms, the threat was about being accused of either doing something wrong or not measuring up to a task by someone with greater moral authority. This powerful, judgmental figure also felt remote to me. This must be what it means to be a god, I thought—to be able to point the finger at others, squashing them if they behave too badly, while remaining so distant as to be blameless. And when that god asks for peace, perhaps he is really demanding submission to his will. What kind of peace is that, I wondered? How can this be a god of peace?

Ironically, even when I was young, I had an answer to Georgie’s question floating somewhere within the clouds of my brain. God is saying, “I want the world to be peaceful,” because he is controlling and judgmental. He doesn’t want world peace; he wants his own peace which can only be had by shutting down those who would disturb it. Even as I write these lines, I wonder if this is the dilemma of all creators embarked on projects that demand the power of the gods. Writing a book or painting a picture is not equivalent to creating the universe in six days, but it might feel like that when the imagination fails and the deadline draws close.

It is likely that Georgie chooses Rachel in her story because she was introduced to Rachel in Hebrew School around the time of the interview. Be that as it may, Georgie’s Rachel is a female who doesn’t know how to carry out the request of a powerful male figure.

In a surprise drawing some six months later, quite spontaneously, Georgie offers an alternative version of God. In this picture (**see Figure 2**), the arm of God is long and slender; the pointing finger is a pinky. Jewelry is on the arm and finger. The clouds are smaller and lighter. From the finger, a flock of birds ascends to the heavens.

Georgie’s divine figure now says: “I am God and I am letting the people be free from being slaves. The birds are really free because they get to go where they really want. They are freer than people. God is a girl.” A demanding male God is no longer telling a girl what to do. God is a girl who liberates rather than commands.

Georgie tells me that God’s enemies are devils who “would try to get rid of God by taking the birds away.” Her title for this picture is: “You are Free.”

At first glance, I dismissed this picture, judging it as much less powerful than the earlier one. But as I entered into its quiet poetry, I found my own

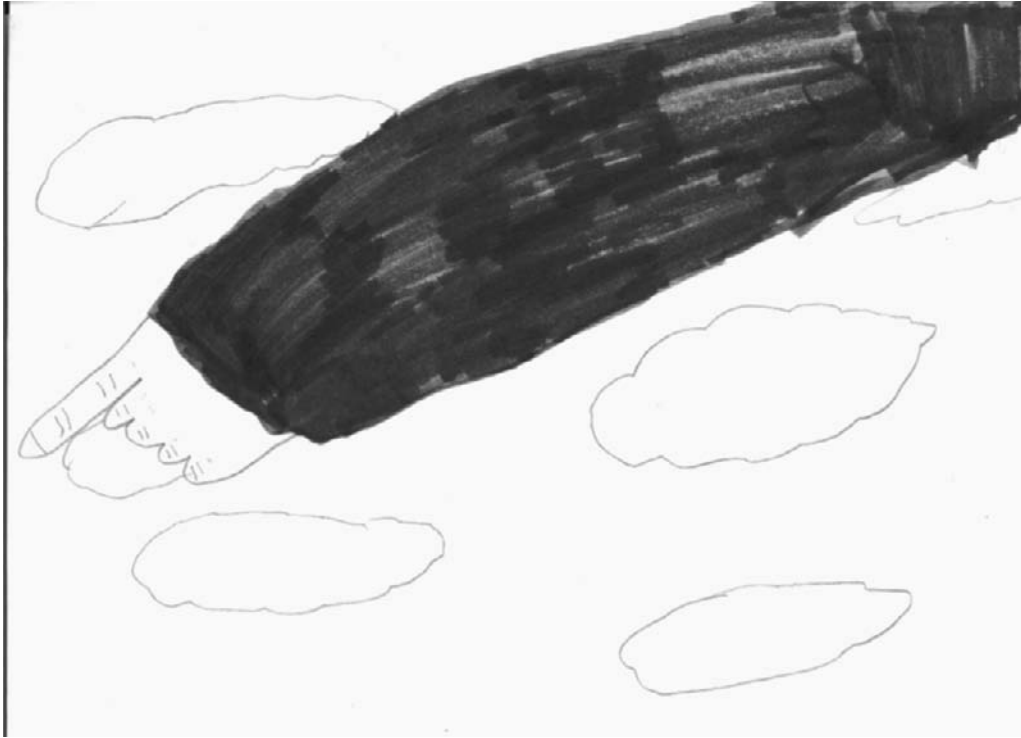


Figure 1. *Georgie—The Hand of God-Male, USA*

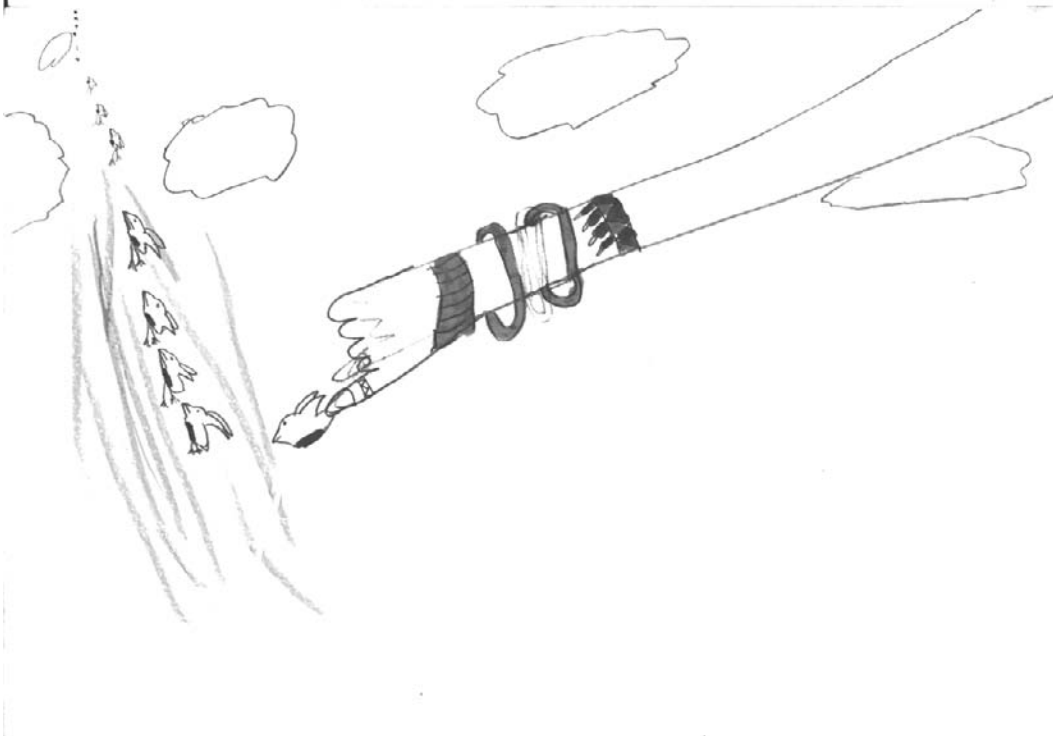


Figure 2. *Georgie—The Hand of God-Female, USA*

corrective to a figure that I have carried around like a lead weight throughout my life, the Old Testament patriarch. Georgie's girl God is the divine feminine who liberates and points the way, whose flock is on the move, who lets them go where they really want. This is not a heavy God with a bulging forearm, but one of lightness, adorned with beautiful jewelry. Her long arm is elegant as it maneuvers among the clouds and nudges the birds toward their chosen destination.

In encountering the picture, I feel more the slave in need of liberation than the bird sure of its destination. I fear the devils who would take away that part of me that can soar upward, instinctively. And yet, I also sense a feeling of hopefulness. When Georgie names her picture "You Are Free," maybe the *You* has something to do with *me*. The message from the divine feminine is clear: I have the capacity to fly like a bird. Too often in my life, the God that I have carried around has given me the opposite message. On this second round of drawing God, my daughter offers the corrective. This new image of God can also be with me even though it is harder to hold onto. I feel I need to see it more. Could it be more ubiquitous than the Old Testament patriarch? To answer, I must turn to the God drawings and stories outside my home. But first, not quite ready to leave its safety, I look at one more drawing by the child artist who inspired this book, Mackey.

### God's Story

Mackey at five draws a brown god on a white cloud near a yellow castle against a background of blue. Mackey's God is smiling. He has big eyes and four arms. Again I note the importance of the arm(s) of God. His castle has a black entranceway, two windows and two red turrets. As this picture was drawn shortly after the Passover season, Mackey is still full of the story of the Jews' exodus from Egypt. Mackey's God speaks to Moses: "Go back to Egypt. Your people are slaves. Free the people."

Mackey and I reverse roles, with him as Moses. I give my best reading of God's lines and Mackey responds: "I can't go back to Egypt. I need a boat."

A technical problem arises. Wherever the meeting place of Moses and God might be—in the desert or on the sea—Moses needs a way to return. Mackey is thinking at his practical best.

I am amused by Mackey's request, and slipping back into the God role I ask: "Why do you need a boat, Moses?" In retrospect I really want to know why Mackey is hung up on modes of transportation when the story is one of magic and miracles. If Moses needs to get from the Sinai to Cairo, can't God just put him there with a flick of the wrist or a blink of an eye?

But Mackey responds to my question simply: "I need a boat because

walking to Egypt is too far.” Of course! Logic reasserts itself and how historically accurate. At a time of no trains or planes or cars, why not take a boat? I imagine even the matter of bodies of water to cross seems logical to Mackey as he knows that the Jews will cross the Red Sea on their exodus from Egypt.

I ask Mackey to tell the story of his drawing and he offers this:

God lives up in the sky. He lives in a castle. Rain is God’s tears. Thunder is God bowling. Lightening is God’s light. God has four arms. God lives in the air. Sun is God’s early light. God is standing on the clouds to go back to his castle. God could fly. God has an invisible dog.

Mackey, the practical one, suddenly becomes the poet when telling a story about God. I am very impressed. Interestingly though, although he describes the supernatural in magical terms, he also applies his knowledge of God toward an explanation of the natural world of thunder, lightening, and sun. Mackey sees God as the source of nature, as a means of understanding the natural world.

Mackey calls his drawing “God’s Story.” I would have called it “Mackey’s Story,” because this God is, in fact, Mackey’s creation. Somehow the God in the drawing and the story does not connect with the Hebrew God who commands Moses to free the Jews from bondage.

I am curious about the castle and I ask Mackey about it. He has little to say so I ask whether God has any enemies and this brings him back to the castle. “I don’t know if God has enemies,” he says. “They’re in the black castle because bad guys have black armor.” Another story comes into play, a morality tale of good guys and bad guys, of knights in armor living in castles and fighting their enemies. So Mackey’s God is three things: the Hebrew God of Moses who has the power to set the Jews free, the God of nature whose actions affect the natural world, and the warrior who protects his kingdom from black knights.

When I look at Mackey’s picture, I see the God figure, facing straight ahead, as vulnerable and slight, flapping its wings frantically in order to avoid falling off the cloud. The castle looks more like a monster’s head, seen from the side, with the black entranceway as a mouth, the windows as eyes and the turrets as pointy ears. It seems to be threatening God and, for me, becomes God’s enemy in itself. Having said this, I am taken back to my childhood fantasies of clashes between forces of good and evil—Flash Gordon and Ming the Merciless, Innocent Children and Bogeymen, even, on some level, Jews and Gentiles. In an early memory, I am sitting around the Passover table. My grandfather, as leader of the service, recites the names of the plagues foisted on pharaoh by God. In a chorus we repeat each name as we dip our knives in the wine and let a drop of red fall on our white plates with a click. I

remember my mother saying that right after the news of the holocaust reached the States, one additional plague was added, and after the family dipped their knives in the wine, they chanted: *Hitler* as they stabbed at their plates. Although I do not recall dipping my knife in the blood red wine as Hitler's name was invoked, I know that I have carried that plague around my entire life. The story of Moses and the exodus of the Jews from Egypt is forever linked in my mind with the Nazi plan to exterminate the Jews, especially in countries where my family, one generation removed, was born.

For me, Mackey's picture is an archetypal one of good guys and bad guys at war. But it is also a specific one that brings me back to that most special war that determined the fate of many in my extended family and in my extended Eastern European Jewish culture. Could it be that God's story is that in the face of such evil, even he becomes shaky on his cloud? Could it be that in even thinking about Nazis, I transform the castle that could be God's home into a monster with a devouring mouth, vacant eyes, and pointy devil ears? This is my story. In the face of profound evil, God the good appears shaky, about to take a fall. And if he falls, what then would happen to nature? Would there be no more light?

I leave these thoughts temporarily. They are not Mackey's thoughts. As Mackey is to me, I was once a son to my father who fought against the Nazis in Europe and brought back his stories of the horrors of war and genocide. Mackey's God is good and intact, the God of Moses and the God of nature. But Mackey's God is also a reminder that trouble lurks nearby, perhaps in one's own house and that even gods must be vigilant and strong. Perhaps that's why they need four arms and a dog.

I recognize that it is time to leave my children's images behind for a while and seek out others from other homes and cultures in order to learn more about this most complex of beings.



## Chapter 2

### IN THE KITCHEN

#### AMERICA

**M**y first travels do not take me far. I start on the easy route by car and train to visit nearby religious schools, all the while fantasizing about the extraordinary spiritual visions of children in remote villages and cities thousands of miles away. I am reminded of a story I heard about a researcher who needed to interview the last survivors of a nearly extinct indigenous culture living on the border of a hostile country. He had negotiated with the government for months and was repeatedly refused a visa. Without the interviews, he could not finish his lifelong work on this group. After many futile attempts, he returned home despondent. That night, he went to a local ethnic restaurant and ordered his dinner. Engaging with a familiar waiter who inquired about his emotional state, he told his sad story. To his astonishment, the waiter informed him that two members of that group, recent immigrants, worked in the kitchen. With heart pounding and tape recorder running, the writer finally completed his work.

Staying close to home, I interviewed children from families of Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Baha'is, evangelical Christians and Reform Jews, some recent immigrants, others long-time Americans. Discovering such a wealth of cultural and spiritual diversity just a stone's throw from home, I began to wonder if a long hard journey into the world was warranted. Part of me was convinced that I had to journey far because the melting pot that is America blurs any pure vision. Another part of me was content to seek the spiritual around the corner. I reasoned finally that children are, after all, like immigrants in the kitchen. When they are among themselves in the back room, unseen, they whip up their own recipes. But when they are required to cook for others, they learn to serve up the cultural stew consumed in the public dining room.

I resolved my dilemma by embracing a paradox—I would go out in the world and I would stay close to home to search for answers to my questions. The most authentic Hindu child with the purest spiritual vision might be in the dining rooms of Calcutta or the kitchens of the Bronx. If God is

omnipresent, then I must look for him everywhere.

An overriding question I had throughout this research was whether children who saw God in one way could accept other points of view. Beginning my work close to home I wondered whether the liberal traditions in urban and suburban New York City would be the primary determinants of the children's vision. Throughout this research, I had no way of fully answering this and related questions. In fact, the more I interviewed, the more questions arose. At some point, I let go of the questions and relaxed into the process. I imagined youth to be a wonderful culture in itself, full of colorful images and imaginative stories. At some point, I let myself be with the pictures and stories and enter into a world that I once knew so well a long time ago.

### **The Color of God**

My first stop was to an evangelical Christian school in the city. In the school's brochure was written:

Everything begins in seed form and grows into an experience. We are privileged to have the opportunity to plant the seeds of knowledge, understanding and wisdom of God's Truth into the lives of young children. It is upon the sure foundation of God's Truth that their lives will be built.

I was anxious on this first outing. What did the school mean by God's Truth? Would the children be able to tell me? I lacked experience with the spiritual and cultural orientation of the children, four to seven-year-old African American and Hispanic children from evangelical Christian families, many of whom saw the Bible as the direct word of God.

My anxiety quickly vanished as I entered the lively circle of children who were prepped and ready to go. They wanted to tell me about God and I wanted to listen. I picked up on the image of the seed and led them through a dramatic exercise, asking them to act out a life cycle from seed to tree to earth and back again. They related this experience to the work of God, identifying him as the one who creates, sustains, destroys, and renews life. They told me many things about God. The young ones said: He is very big and almighty; he is invisible; he is a spirit; he is light; he's watching us and he watches over our loved ones in heaven who have died. He looks like a lot of stars; a lot of clouds; a big sun; a lot of angels; a lot of people. The older ones said: God lives in heaven; in the clouds; in the rain; in the heart; in your love; everywhere.

All the children drew God in human form. The younger children pictured a God in the sky surrounded by clouds and sun. Many saw him in nature with trees and flowers. Imagery of Christianity abounded, especially the cross and

the word *Hallelujah*. God appears in most pictures with his arms extended either from his sides or above his body. Many of the children colored or outlined God's face and arms brown so that he is indeed a personal God.

One outstanding picture is drawn by Liora, five years old. God in yellow stands on a cloud in heaven surrounded by good things to eat (**see Plate 2**). Liora writes this caption: *God eayts froots. He eayts food. Yum, yum, it is good.* For Liora, God is hungry and fills himself with the good fruits of the earth. This is not the hungry wolf in fairy tales or the wily coyote in Roadrunner cartoons. This is a satiated vegetarian God. Liora seems to suggest that good deeds can best be accomplished on a full belly.

When I asked the children about God's enemies, they all pointed to the devil. The children had fun creating dialogues between God and the devil and telling the story of how the devil, once an angel, got booted out of heaven. This is Olajawon's story:

God was at a dinner party with the devil. The devil was Christopher. One day he decided to show God how he felt. He said: "God, I wanna be king." God said: "You wanna be king? I'll put you down in hell." So he whooped him down in hell.

Throughout this experience, many children offered moral lessons. When playing God, for example, one child said: "Everybody will go to heaven with me except those who follow the devil and celebrate Halloween." Another, as God, said: "Always be obedient and listen to all the people in your family."

At the end of the day, I was pleased to have discovered no prejudice, no sign of intolerance toward those who see God in other ways. These were good Christian children whose sensibilities were very much in line with the school's philosophy.

There was, however, one moment that distressed me. One boy playing God was about to expel another boy, playing the devil, from heaven. He looked intently at the devil and said: "You are not going to be king because you are black." Prejudice was present after all, only this time it was turned back on oneself.

Before I left the school, however, I was heartened to notice that most of the children who drew a picture of God and the devil gave God a brown face and the devil another color, usually red. The lesson most were learning, at least in this environment, was that brown is beautiful. It is the color of God.

### **God's Persistence**

My next stop was to a Hebrew School in the suburbs. The children attended this school once a week, primarily on Sundays, to study the spiritual and cultural traditions of Reform Judaism. Although a spiritual center, this

particular reform congregation is devoted to social activism. Some members see themselves as agnostic or even atheist yet still affirm cultural ties to their religion. The Reform movement is a reaction against the Orthodox patriarchy and strict adherence to the laws. This particular synagogue has a woman rabbi who believes in a nonsexist interpretation of God.

The children I worked with were seven to eight years old. I introduced the experience of the life cycle of a seed as I had done in the Christian evangelical school. After the exercise, I asked the children whether the experience reminded them of the work of God. Many said yes and offered the following explanations:

- God has no beginning and no end.
- God grows older and older and never dies.
- Because God made everything, he's part of everything.
- God is always dead and always alive.
- God gets so old that he gets young again after a certain point.

Before the children drew their pictures, they created some strong verbal images of God:

- God can make you do everything.
- You hear it in your mind. Like if he says: 'Go to sleep,' you go to sleep.
- God is like remote control.
- God is an instinct.
- God is a little molecule in everything.
- God created the big bang, an explosion that created the universe.

Learning from my previous experience, I felt the need to interview children individually and seek more depth of response. The first interview was surprising to me. David drew a green God sitting in a red chair above an orange gate-like structure. He wears a *kippa* or skull cap, a mustache, and a black Star of David on his chest. Embedded in the gate is a cross and what appears to be a *mezuzah*, a hollow tube enclosing scripture which is traditionally fastened to Jewish doorposts as a sign of faith.

David tells me that it is possible to speak with God although his thoughts are very confidential. He speaks to people in their dreams. David tells the following story:

God stands in an ark and controls everything in his holy ark. He is in heaven. In front of him are the gates to heaven. In front of him is a lock to the gates of heaven. This is the Holy Jewish Lock. God has a special key. He uses the lock to keep out other gods, like Zeus and the devil and other religions because God is one.

David calls his picture *God's Persistence* because: "God stays with his religion. He doesn't become a Christian. He sticks with the Jews." Although David sees God's enemies as the devil and the murderers, I wonder whether

this God has other enemies, that is, the gentiles. My hunch is that David has learned his lessons well that the Jews introduced the concept of monotheism to the Western world. In fact, the most well-known prayer in the Jewish liturgy is the *shema* which proclaims: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one*. This echoes David's sentiment, but I wonder if David has taken this further. Why does God need a lock to keep out the other gods? Are they enemies or simply representatives of other points of view? And if the main theme is God's persistence, why should David be concerned that God might abandon Judaism for Christianity?

I find it interesting that I saw the lock, the Holy Jewish Lock, as a *mezuzah*. I wonder what non-Jews think when they see a *mezuzah* on a doorpost. Do they think it is a sign of faith and tradition or do they see it as a separation between Jews and gentiles?

I was taught early on to be wary of the gentile world. As a young child living in an ethnically mixed neighborhood, I didn't think much about the differences of Christian and Jew. But as I grew older, the differences became so much more important. I had to try so much harder to persist in choosing Jewish friends and eventually, Jewish lovers, to make sure my gates were securely locked against intruders. These attitudes were clearly set at an early age, and I attributed them to growing up in a second generation American family with roots in the cultural, religious and oppressive political traditions of Eastern Europe. I was surprised to find these old attitudes so overtly articulated within a liberal, socially active Reform congregation.

And one more thought—David's God is green. He has heavy lids and looks tired. Could he be green with envy? Could he be tired from working so hard at guarding the gates? The ark in Judaism is the container of the torah, the holy book of spiritual stories, commandments, prayers and laws. If God did not have to guard and control the ark, if he were less persistent, there would be no need to wield the key. And perhaps there would be no need to create the Holy Jewish Lock. It might be transformed into a *mezuzah*.

I discovered other more ecumenical points of view on the other side of the green God. Michael draws a figure very much like the green God, an old man wearing a *kippa* embossed with a Star of David. He identifies the figure as being like his grandfather who shunned the gentile world. Yet Michael foresees the demise of this perspective: "When less than 100 people stop believing in God, when they stop praying to him, he dies. He would get so mad, he would die."

"Who would they pray to then?" I ask.

"Then they would pray to another God. Maybe Shiva or Buddha," replies Michael.

"What would the Jews do if he dies?" I persist.

“If he died, the Jews would still pray to him. They wouldn’t know if he’s dead or not. But it would be no use. When they found out he was dead, they would believe in another God.”

Michael concludes his interview by distancing himself from his grandfather’s intolerance: “I like friends for what they are,” he says.

Johnny imagines God abstractly, drawing a star figure that contains symbols of the three faiths of the Middle East—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Andrew draws a more human figure, adding on his chest the same three symbols of the star of David, the cross and the star and crescent moon. His simple pencil drawing shows a rather bewildered God flying in the sky. Around God’s body are eight question marks (**see Figure 3**).

Andrew tells the following story:

God is a feeling. He’s a feeling for everything. We don’t really know what he is. Other people might believe in something different so he is all things and all religions. That’s why I put all the religions in God. God was originally instinct. Instinct is an invisible force telling you what’s right and wrong. Like the conscience in Pinocchio. He’s not just for one religion. He’s good and bad, all emotions, everything.

When I asked him why God looks angry, he replies: “He is angry and crazy. He’s the God of everything. He feels all feelings. He has all feelings.”

I notice many complexities and contradictions in Andrew’s interview. At first we learn that Andrew is accepting of all religions. His God is nonjudgmental. Yet he is also a righteous and punitive God. Like the conscience in Pinocchio, he dissuades boys from seeking instant gratification.

Andrew’s God is not only moral, but also instinctual—he embodies all feelings. In Freudian terms, this is a God of the superego and the id. And yet when I look at Andrew’s drawing, I don’t see all the feelings. In fact, I see rather distressed feelings which Andrew identifies as angry and crazy. What does this God want, I wonder? Is it really peace and tolerance among the religions? Or does he want preadolescent boys to make peace with their contradictory desires to do good and to seek pleasure? In the final analysis, I am left with lots of question marks, just like Andrew.

At the conclusion of his interview, Andrew says: “I made the question marks because we don’t know what God is.” That will have to suit me for now. Maybe Andrew has projected his own feelings and struggles onto this God of all feelings. As for me, I would like to think that one being can hold together many contradictions. As a human being, I find this task very hard, and when the moral struggles become overwhelming, I get angry, just like Andrew’s God.

While I was at the Hebrew School, I also heard some very simple stories attesting to the presence of God. In these, God was neither instinct nor keeper

of the Holy Lock, far removed from the children. He was more of a magical spirit who could touch the children directly and help them find their way. In listening to the stories, I let go of my questions and entered into the magical world of childhood:

—One day I was in my classroom taking a test and I wasn't sure what the answer was and I kind of asked God if he could help me out with the answer. When I answered it I kind of felt a breeze of God on my face. I got the answer right.

—God sent one of my dead kitties down. When I looked at it I saw this shadow on the steps, this black thing that looked like a cat. When I turned around to look again it died. The ghost of the cat came back.

—I was climbing a tree. I couldn't get down. I asked God if he could help me. There was a branch that was like a hand. I thought it was God's hand that helped me down.

I felt a sense of relief hearing these stories. They reassured me that God is not just unknowable, a big question mark in the sky. He is also visible in nature—in breezes and branches—and in death. In these ways, God also persists.

### **Baha'i**

A long time ago there was no sun, trees, grass or people. One day a large mass of kindness, love and light by the name of God saw the empty, dark world spinning in its orbit with not a spot of light. "How much the world needs sunshine to brighten up its sky." So he took his light and made the sun so it wasn't dark anymore. How warm the sun made the earth with brilliance and light as it spun in its orbit. "How much the world needs love, so it's filled with peace and harmony." So God rained down his love and grass, trees, flowers and plants grew from the ground. "Oh, my! There is all this beauty and no one to share it with." So God radiated his kindness down, and there were people and animals enjoying the earth. That's how the world was made. Every day you smell a flower or take a walk, you are with God.

This very gentle story of the creation was told by Francesca, a 13-year-old girl, at a Sunday morning Baha'i meeting. It is a simple story of a loving, radiant God associated very much with nature. I knew almost nothing about the Baha'i faith and was quite curious to meet a group of children and adults one rainy morning just a brief distance from my house. The group was warm and welcoming, curious about my research and eager to share their drawings and stories.

I quickly learned that the Baha'is often meet in people's homes and have no hierarchical clergy. The members in my neighborhood were from diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. At the beginning of the service,

people sang songs and read verses from the teachings of their prophet, Baha'u'llah. I learned that he was a Persian who lived in the mid-19th century. His message was unity and connection among human beings. His was a political as well as spiritual philosophy that envisioned all the great religious prophets, including Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, and Muhammad, as manifestations of God. Baha'is believe in abolishing all forms of intolerance and prejudice, the equality of men and women, and the establishment of universal systems of educational and justice.

Following the service, I interviewed children as young as three and as old as 13. No one drew an image of God in human form. Instead, most, following Francesca's example, drew images from nature—trees, flowers, sun, rainbows. The youngest drew abstract shapes. Varqa, age three, drew green and purple circles and green elongated figures. He told me: "God is a green bean." Four-year-old Dakota drew three sets of linking circles and said: "God is swinging." He called his drawing *Infinity*.

Ian, six years old, drew a beautiful colored rainbow to represent God and called his drawing *All the Things in the Universe*. Ian contemplated his drawing and said: "There is no way I can see God. I can feel him. All the colors you can see everywhere. In grass and the trees and everything."

There is no trace of discord or evil in these drawings. For these children, God has no enemies as all the other gods are considered holy. I left this experience a bit radiant myself. I was in a room with people of many colors and from many faiths and they all seemed committed to the simple philosophy of the prophet Baha'u'llah.

### God Lives Seven Skies High

I was quickly becoming aware that my children were growing up in a neighborhood very different from the one I experienced as a young boy. My first eight years in the 1940s and 1950s were spent in a Christian neighborhood within walking distance of half a dozen churches. The Jewish community was a bus ride away, but close enough. As far as I can remember, there were no other religious groups around.

In my adolescence, I lived in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood and became isolated from my Christian peers. It was unusual in school for Jews and Christians to fraternize. Right on through the mid 1960s, I had never met or, to my knowledge, seen a Muslim. My education, experience and curiosity stopped at the edge of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

My first exposure to Muslims was in the mid-1960s as I began to travel. My first brief encounter was with a young Arab man from the Middle East in a youth hostel in Northern Germany. In contrast to many of the Northern



Europeans at the hostel, he was warm and engaging. At the wash basin at the end of a long day, I noticed him wash his feet and I must have stared at him a bit too long. He was as curious about me as I was about him. Why had I washed my hands and face instead of my feet, he must have wondered. I was the first American he had ever met. I was afraid to mention that I was also a Jew. But we talked in broken English and German and exchanged addresses. That was all.

Over the next several years as Israel engaged in bloody wars with the Arabs, I distanced myself from that encounter thinking that Arabs are the enemies. All that changed when I visited Israel in 1970 and discovered that many of the enemies were fellow travelers with different customs and that too many of them lived in poverty. But being a good Jewish boy, that perception again changed as I sat glued to the television as Arab terrorists killed Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic Games in 1972.

I remained distant from an understanding of Islam as a faith, confusing the spiritual principles with the political acts of defiance and terror against Israel. Although I knew better having been in the world of fellow travelers, although I understood the consequences of oppression and rage, I couldn't shake my prejudice. And yet I found a way to the other side. It came during my research for this book. I needed Muslim children to interview but didn't know how to find them.

As it turned out, the group I discovered was as nearby as the Baha'is. Through a series of phone calls and letters to a Reform rabbi and a Muslim doctor both interested in interfaith dialogue, I located an Islamic Sunday school. But for reasons I did not completely understand, I was not invited to do the interviews. The teacher at the school graciously offered to do the interviews herself, but first, she informed me, she had to revise the questions. When she told me her last name, I recognized it as traditionally Jewish. She informed me that she was from a Muslim Indian family and had married a Jewish man, hence the last name. Her husband subsequently converted to Islam. So my stand-in at the Muslim Sunday school was an Indian-American, Muslim-Jew. The image of America as a melting pot rushed over me.

The teacher explained that she had to revise the questions out of respect for the Muslim traditions. She informed me that she could not ask the children to depict God in any way nor could she ask the children to take on the role of God.

I immediately approved of the revisions which are, as follows: Where is God? Why did God create us? What does he want us to do? How do you know this is what he wants from us? What do you do when you learn what he wants from us? Do you believe in God? What is the image of God (When you think about him, what do you see)?

The children interviewed represented a number of different nations including India, Pakistan, Egypt, and America. They ranged in age from six to ten. For the most part, the children gave similar answers which I would guess reflects their religious education. I imagined the questions and answers to be a kind of catechism leading the children to a clear and strong sense of spiritual identity. I include some common responses these children gave to the questions:

*Where is God?*

—Everywhere.

*Why did God create us?*

—To obey him and worship him.

—To test us. To see if we are really going to listen to him and praise him, because then he'll reward us with paradise. Otherwise, we'll be punished.

*What does he want us to do?*

—To read the Quran.

—To praise him and obey him.

—To be good Muslims.

—To help the poor.

*How do you know this is what he wants from us?*

—It says so in the Quran.

*What do you do when you learn what he wants from us?*

—You do what he tells us to do... If I don't, I'll get punished afterwards.

—I pray because I know this makes him happy.

*Do you believe in God?*

—Yes.

—There has to be a God, because nobody could have created this world and everything. Because people who worship idols, the idols can't help themselves. And God has no son, no children actually, no parents, no relatives. He's the only one worthy of worship.

The last question, *What is the image of God? (When you think about him, what do you see?)* was answered in a variety of ways. Many, consistent with Islamic teachings, said that they could not visualize God. And yet many others gave in to their imaginations, offering up visions that in some ways are particular to Islam, but in other ways parallel the perceptions of children from all faiths.

The clearest expressions of Islamic faith in response to the question were:

–Allah really isn't anything. He has no form but power.

–I see the Kaba. I see where he lives and when I think about him I always think about the Hajj so I can visit the place where he lives.

The Kaba is a small building in the shape of a cube within the Great Mosque in Mecca. Within the Kaba is the Black Stone, the most sacred object within the Muslim faith. When Muslims pray, they face in the direction of the Kaba. Hajj is the sacred Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca.

Other Muslim children respond to the question about the image of God in more universal ways:

–God is a ghost.

–God is everywhere, big, tall.

–Everything belongs to Allah.

–He is something that is eternal and hard to visualize. No one can see the real God.

–I see really, really bright lights.

–God is huge and beautiful.

Nine-year-old Nyla says simply: "God is powerful. His power lets him see everyone." God is not only one who is seen, but one who sees. Or maybe because Islam forbids God to be depicted, his presence is most felt in his power to see.

Because I could not see these children, I could only imagine them—children like any others, searching for ways to express the inexpressible. And like other children, their responses were both predictable and unpredictable. I feared that the predictable responses were too much based upon the concept of a jealous God who demands unreasonable loyalty and is quick to punish the offenders. It was easy for me to visualize the fatwa leveled by Ayatollah Khomeini against Salmon Rushdie for publishing *The Satanic Verses*.

I felt somewhat uneasy reading these responses and became especially aware that the question about God's enemies had been eliminated. Were these children sheltered from negative thoughts about the political and spiritual domains? I knew that if I could have been closer to the children, my uneasiness would have been mollified. I couldn't shake the latest news reports of suicide bombings in Israel.

And then it all changed. Ironically, my epiphany occurred in a kitchen. I had befriended the owner of a local Indian restaurant and told him about my work. He invited me to stop by the restaurant one summer morning and meet the Muslim children of the cook, recently arrived from Bangladesh. Without realizing it, I was about to enter the metaphorical kitchen I had only heard about in a story.

The restaurant was closed. The cooks were preparing for lunch. The door was locked and I felt a sense of disappointment. I called through an open window. A dark face peeked out the window: "What do you want?" I ask for the cook and state my purpose. I am ushered into a room right off the kitchen. Within seconds, I see a backstage scene quite unique to my small town. The kitchen is buzzing with half a dozen men—all speaking a strange language, all dressed in traditional clothing. For a moment, I lose my bearing. I could just as well be in India. I greet the men who keep their distance, although they are not unfriendly. They seem curious about my early morning invasion.

Soon four children enter: Mohammed and Rizwanul, 11-year-old brothers, recently arrived from Bangladesh, and their cousins, Tamanna, eight, and Sirajul, six, who have been living in the United States for several years.

All of the children are eager to get to work. I am relieved, yet when I ask them to draw a picture of God, Sirajul is the first to shake his head no. As a Muslim, he cannot depict God. I am aware of the adult men peeking over my shoulder. I assure all as I had previously assured my host that I will only ask for drawings of spiritual places.

Sirajul speaks incessantly. He is young and very engaging. He makes several drawings of worshipers and mosques and then says:

God makes the people. God is magical and can make toys for people. God made the world and he makes everything. He's stronger than the whole earth. If you're bad all the time, God puts you in fire. The devil is fire.

I feel the fire. It is a hot, sticky morning and the pots are boiling over on the stoves. These children are cooking up images. They have no catechism to recite.

Tamanna starts by drawing God's house, large and red, with two windows and a big door in the center, birds and clouds in the sky. But she suddenly loses interest and wants another piece of paper. She asks if she can draw the Titanic. I easily grant permission. Tamanna says very little. She seems overpowered by the boys. In the end, I ask her if the ship has a connection to God. She says yes and names her drawing *God's Ship*.

Mohammed is quiet and serious. He draws a yellow circle of pilgrims with a large green rectangle in the center (**see Plate 3**). On either side are two mosques. Mohammed tells me the rock is inside a house. God sits in the rock. Nobody is allowed inside the house to see the rock. The pilgrims walk around the rock seven times. He calls the picture *The Special Place to Pray*. He tells me the special place is in Saudi Arabia. Every Friday the people go there to pray. Feeling more enlightened than before, I recognize Mohammed's descriptions as the Kaba in Mecca. Mohammed and his brother collaborate on many

stories. Mohammed begins a story and Rizwanul often takes over.

Rizwanul's drawing is similar to Mohammed's. He draws several mosques with a yellow crowd of pilgrims below. There are three clouds and a sun in the sky. Having discovered a tube of glitter, he adds sparkling highlights to his picture, as do the others. The chimneys on the mosques are bent like periscopes. He tells me that the chimney points upwards toward God. I ask him of his connection to God and he says: "God sees us. We don't see God." I am reminded of Nyla's words.

The four continue to draw. As they do, I ask questions and listen to their stories. Rizwanul does most of the talking:

Wherever you die, you have two places to go. If you're bad you go down to the devil. The devil burns you to a skeleton. If you're good you can walk in the air and go to heaven. In heaven, everything's magical. If you want a new house, you get a new house.

Tamanna adds: "If you want an apple, you get an apple."

Rizwanul continues: "If you want an apple, God will give you the whole tree. When you finish walking in the air, there's a golden house. You open a door and go into the house. Everything's ready—lunch, dinner, everything."

Soon the conversation shifts to one of Rizwanul's favorite topics, angels and ghosts. He refers to the latter as zeens:

You have angels. Angels are people who die. All are good. Two angels are on each shoulder. One writes good things and one writes bad things that you have done in your life. God will read these things and decide what to do with you. Angels are male, boys—they are God's messengers and helpers. When one angel blows his horn, everyone dies. The people who die will come back from the dead. God judges who is bad and who is good. The bad people go to the devil. The good people go to heaven. When you die, God takes the soul. He keeps them.

"They are invisible and at night they visit the family," adds Mohammed with great conviction and not a little fear and awe. He continues:

God makes angels. Zeen can take any shape. Some zeen are good. Some are bad. They are made out of fire. Before he made dinosaurs, God sent zeen. There are still zeens. The bad ones scare people in the night. That causes nightmares. They are like devils. The bad zeens go to the devil. The good ones go to heaven.

When I ask whether God has enemies, Mohammed says yes and points to the devil. Rizwanul says: "God has no enemies. The devil is an enemy of the people."

The food for lunch is nearly prepared. Soon the cooks will become waiters. Soon the customers will arrive and we will have to leave the kitchen. I am

reluctant. I want more stories. I am a joyous captive of these four children.

Rizwanul tells a final story:

One day, God told Abraham to bring his son. Abraham was told to cut him but God turned him into a goat. That is why Muslims eat goat on a special day.

During the story, the father of Tamanna and Sirajul enters, dressed for lunch in a starched white shirt. He looks so young. He offers to finish the story of Abraham and Isaac I know so well from my Jewish education. But for him, the story is about Abraham and Ismael, the banished son of Abraham and Hagar, whom many believe is the progenitor of the Arabic nations. Tamanna's father tells me how much Abraham loved his son, Ismael, and how he put a blindfold on his son before the sacrifice. He also tells me about the ritual of cutting that is still practiced today.

"Circumcision?" I ask.

"Yes." he says.

And then he excused himself. It was time to leave the kitchen and go to the dining room.

As I was about to leave, Mohammed stopped me and said: "Do you know where God lives?"

"Where?" I ask.

"God lives seven skies high."

Even if it is forbidden to picture God, a tradition shared by orthodox Jews and Muslims alike, the children still know he is present, although he may live very far away.

As the first customers entered the restaurant, I felt full, my feelings of intolerance washed away.

### **The Red Dot**

As I walked to my car, it occurred to me that some of the men who worked in the kitchen were Hindu and believed in many gods and taught their children their beliefs. And it occurred to me that they were not alone in this small circle of towns and cities. Realizing I had focused almost entirely upon children who believed in one God, I arranged one more meeting, this time at a class in traditional Indian dance for girls situated in the basement of the home of the owner of the Indian restaurant.

I approached the house as eager but ignorant. The role of novice was all too familiar. I first met with the father of one of the girls and began to ask questions. He was a research scientist originally from Bengal, but his stories belied a culture steeped in things spiritual and imaginative. He told me:

Having grown up in different parts of the country, I was exposed to many gods and goddesses. In a typical Hindu temple, you have the main deity, but then there are so many pictures and statues of other gods and goddesses. They say there are thousands. India is such an old culture. A lot of the spiritual masters would have visions. They would have their own path and ascribe that path to a different god. The Hindu religion is one of rituals, of meditation. We say Mother Earth and Nature are symbols. In our spiritual books there is a linkage of Durga and Khali to energy. Everything springs from energy. They say that the goal in life is to reach nirvana and get out of this karma, this eternal cycle of being born and reborn. To do this you have to look inside yourself and discover the god. The god is within you. You have different paths of attaining this. The topmost level is the trinity, Rama, Vishnu and Shiva—the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer. The definition of Hinduism is a way of life. There is no strict dogma. You're allowed to explore on your own and there are so many avenues.

At that moment, his eight-year-old daughter, Sunanda, enters, with several other students. Like her parents, she is Hindu. When I ask her to draw God, she creates a picture of the Goddess Durga with a tiger. Sunanda is reticent but does say that Durga is the queen of all the gods and that her function is to stop evil.

Shivani, a 12-year-old girl, tells me a story about Durga but seems more interested in another god, Ganesh, half-human, half-elephant, who bestows happiness and eradicates sorrow. She draws a picture of Ganesh with a red dot on its forehead. Ganesh is enclosed within a heart. A young girl stands underneath. Shivani tells this story:

His mother, Parvati, created him because when she was bathing, she didn't want anyone to interrupt her so she created this child. He guarded the door. When her husband came he got angry because the child was there. So he chopped off his head. The mother said: 'That was my child and I love him. Go find an animal who's dead and chop off his head and put it on my son's head.' He came across an elephant and chopped off his head and put it on her son's head and so Ganesh is half animal and half human.

This story is close to the traditional myth of Ganesh, except that the interloper is not Parvati's husband but the god, Shiva, who is, incidentally, the namesake of Shivani. Shivani tells me that Ganesh represents all people. When I ask about the red dot she says: "I don't know why they put it there, but they put this red powder that means this god has been prayed to and we respect him."

When I ask what Ganesh would say to the girl in the picture, Shivani replies: "He would bless her. If you're there, you're blessed. You really don't have to say anything."

And finally, Shivani sums up her understanding of the Hindu faith: "In

Indian religion, God is not in a certain place, like the sky. He is everywhere. God is always in your heart and you have to bring it out if you want to pray to him.”

After the interviews, I went downstairs and watched the girls dance. The music and movement was exquisite. For a moment, I was lost in space. The teacher was dressed in traditional sari and make-up. The same red dot in Shivani’s picture of Ganesh was on her forehead. She told me it was the third eye, a source of spiritual power. And then it occurred to me that she was like a goddess and that the dance was a celebration to the gods and goddesses that exist in the world and in the heart. For a moment, I saw a profound connection between the spiritual and the material worlds. Visions of gods, thousands of them with wonderful names, danced in my head. “Why one?” I thought, “Why just one?”

### Beijing and Bialystock

An image of my grandfather appeared. I was a child and he was putting me to bed. He told me: “Every night before you go to sleep, chant the *Shema*. It will remind you of the one God of Israel.” I have chanted that prayer religiously every night before shutting my eyes and have taught my son to do the same. I dared not do otherwise even though it never quite satisfied my yearning for other gods.

Before I journeyed farther away from home, I decided to try one more neighborhood beyond the reach of my grandfather. With a great interest in Chinese culture and with visions of Buddhas in my brain, I set out for Chinatown.

I had arranged to meet a group of kindergarten children, first generation Americans whose families had recently immigrated from China. Their family backgrounds would be very different from other children I had interviewed. I suspected that their parents, growing up during the Communist times, would have much ambivalence about formal religion, not only based in the secular policies of Mao and his successors, but also in the unique eclecticism of Chinese spirituality, mixing superstition, ancestor and hero worship with more traditional elements of Buddhism and Taoism. I expected that the children would draw pictures of Buddhas and tell stories of folk gods and goddesses who protect and bring luck to their families.

I walked to the school through the familiar streets of Chinatown. As I headed east, the Chinese characters in the shop windows became scarce and I noticed more and more kosher bakeries and yeshivas. A line of old brick buildings in poor repair all with faded Hebrew signs on the door stood on the block before the school. For a moment I imagined myself to be in Tel-Aviv,



not a Buddha in sight.

In the school, I was ushered into the classroom by a friendly Hispanic teacher and introduced to a class of 20 five-year-old, bilingual, Chinese American children. The first order of business was to pledge the flag and sing “My Country T’is of Thee” and “The Star Spangled Banner.” The teacher, apologizing for not having a proper flag, produced a six inch version. She invited one girl to the front of the room who stood proudly on a worn wooden chair and held the flag on high as others put their hands on their hearts and pledged away. Few knew the words.

Then I gathered the children around me and after a brief warm-up asked them what they knew about God. The first responses were familiar: God lives in heaven, up in a cloud; God is a king, like a star, like a teacher, a light, a tooth fairy. One boy echoed the thoughts of Nyla, the Muslim girl: “We can’t see God, but God can see us.” A girl said, cryptically: “God is like children because children are little and God is big.”

Some had very little concept of God at all. Others said unusual things like: “Some people drink God’s blood.” What horror movie had she seen? I wondered. But soon I realized that this wasn’t a story about vampires. The tip off was when one girl responded with the line: “and you also eat those white things.” Perhaps their families were Christian or they had seen images of Christ in the wider culture. The children were simply trying to make sense of some very compelling Western religious images.

Several children drew Christian symbols although few made direct reference to Christ. Most of the drawings were of nature and houses and human figures. Only one girl, Jenny, drew a picture of a Chinese God whom, she said, lived on the television in her home and protected her from danger. This drawing was an afterthought, made on the reverse side of a picture of two human figures labeled good and bad. Another girl, Mandy, drew a house and a human figure labeled God. She wrote this caption underneath: *God is in the sky and he could see China.*

These children would soon learn all the words to the patriotic songs and distance themselves further and further from the old country that in itself has become distant from its old traditions. In their inevitable plunge into the American melting pot, would they embrace a new god, perhaps one who is symbolically consumed in church? Would they eventually search for their own traditional roots and rediscover an older one, a life force or path or human-like figure who, tradition says, once sat under a Bodhi tree rather than on top of a television set?

It was time to go. As I collected the drawings, one boy, John, emphatically told me that he wanted to take his home. I agreed easily. His drawing was not particularly remarkable and I didn’t want to upset him. As I walked through

the long hallway toward the stairs, a small voice called out: “Mr. Robert! Mr. Robert!” It was John. He wanted me to have his drawing after all. It was of a large cloud with three figures. One was smudged, drawn in pencil with a full body. Another was less detailed but colored, with sticks for legs. John had told me earlier that the one of color was the real God while the other was an incomplete rendering that he tried to erase. The devil in red stood on a smaller cloud nearby. He was a formidable figure with horns and pitchfork.

I thanked John. His drawing was the only one with the devil. It had a certain balance, like Jenny’s drawing of good and bad, a yin-yang relationship. I felt oddly reassured. God is a work in progress that requires many drafts, I thought. He can best be known in relation to his counterpart.

Out on the street, hungry, I found a small bakery run by orthodox Jews and bought a buttered bialy. The bakery was named after Bialystock, the town in Russia where my father’s father was born. In this mix of cultures—Chinese, East European Jewish, Hispanic—I felt a sense of connection. All was calm and peaceful.

### **The Rest of the USA**

There is a very famous Saul Steinberg cartoon that originally appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine. It is of a map that shows New York City as the center of the universe. Across the river you can see New Jersey, then Europe, then the rest of the world fading into the horizon. Having discovered children from so many different spiritual orientations so close to home, I felt that I had exhausted the US, if not the world. But just to be sure, I asked several colleagues to help me out in the middle and western part of the country. The results were not surprising. I discovered an equivalent sense of tolerance and hopefulness, with a smattering of stories about some gods who were superior to others. There was no overt evidence of anti-Semitism. The main factor influencing responses seemed to be age, although culture and economics certainly did come into play in these interviews.

For example, Cory, a seven-year-old Christian African-American boy from the projects of Chicago tells this story:

God lives in the sky. And God, he knows when people are going to die. And he knows everything about your world. And he strike down the gang bangers when they get old. And he do not love the people who got struck down.

On the other hand, Ryan, age ten, a Native American Southern Baptist from Oklahoma tells a story that is less culture specific:

God is walking on water. He is bringing a message to the people. Some people will get it. Really good Christians will get it. He will show them the

light. It will be a stairway, like a beam of light and you can walk up those stairs to heaven. Christians and someone who cares about other people and don't make fun of other people and don't cuss, and help the homeless people, and go to church and don't think about themselves will walk up those stairs. Bad people will not—those who do drugs and who think you have to kill. I think to be good has nothing to do with how people look or how they talk or what they look like or what they do.

Although both boys come from entirely different cultural backgrounds, their stories reflect a common vision of God as a moral being who will punish the bad the reward the good. A great deal of the vast United States is Christian and this sentiment is very much within the teachings of the Christian faith. Yet most all the children share a common vision. The one God or the many is good and loving. God stands in opposition to the forces of evil, as represented by Satan or the devil or the people who act out in an abusive way. This divine being stands above human beings and helps them or reminds them that they, too, can be kind and loving.

The only problem I have in fully embracing this vision is the idea that sometimes creeps into these stories of an exclusive God who chooses his own people at the expense of others. Certainly God's heart is large enough to embrace and protect all. The great majority of these children know that. And yet I worry for my daughter. I worry for my son whose first religious drawing is of a Jew in jail because he has been identified as a Christ killer. And I worry for all the children like Cory and Ryan who will inevitably experience intolerance as they grow up. I worry even as I hope for something better.

One of my favorite stories is told by a five-year-old, African-American boy living in the Midwest. He comes from a poor family of Jehovah's Witnesses. He tells it this way:

Heart is the very best heart. Your heart is for love and goodness. The heart is in heaven, but heaven kicked the heart out. Jehovah didn't like that. He gets mad and kicks the heaven out. Then he puts the heart back in heaven. Hearts eat cookies.

I recall the words of Liora above: "God eayts froots. Yum, yum, it is good." On a full belly, God can do good deeds, one of which is to nourish the human heart.

With a full heart I realize it is time to move on. Not ready to go too far away from home, I venture North and South, to Canada and Mexico, wondering what I will find.

## Chapter 3

### GOD IN NEARBY PLACES

#### CANADA

Some see Canada as an extension of the United States as both share a common language, a common border and, to some degree, a common geography. But for others, especially for Canadians, the two countries are noted more by their differences. Many Canadians see themselves as more culturally and politically linked to the British and French than to Americans. They tend to see violence in schools and other nagging social ills as particularly American. They tend to see their landscapes and vistas as more open and less polluted.

Canada and America share common religious traditions. Both are primarily Christian countries with a mix of many other religions. Both countries have been settled by groups seeking freedom from religious persecution in other countries. Both have sizable native populations. I suspected that the children interviewed in Canada would respond in ways similar to that of the American children.

My strongest associations with Canada are based in a trip I made in the late 1960s up the coast of western Canada. It was a time of protest against the war in Vietnam, of hippies and draft dodgers, many of whom fled to Canada. I was with a group of friends, all of whom were out of work. We made the trip by car for no particular purpose. As we drove further and further north, we would stay for a night or two with acquaintances or sometimes at hippie communes along the way. At some point, I became aware that most of our hosts were ex-patriot Americans who fled to Canada to avoid the draft and could not return for fear of being arrested. These were not happy people.

After what seemed like weeks and weeks of driving, we arrived at a solitary island off the northwest coast. One of our group knew a family that had given up a comfortable professional life in Los Angeles to homestead on this outpost, population barely 100 souls. The terrain was rough, with dense forests, rugged dirt paths and mud everywhere one dared to walk. We could drive only in an ancient jeep owned by the former Angelenos. They were trying hard to make their new life work in a shell of an old barn with no

electricity or running water. Their lives seemed very noble to me except for one thing—they had a one-year-old baby who needed attention and care. Every time she cried, I felt a sense of sadness. She was just too far away from home, this little hippie child, with parents as lost souls struggling to rediscover their own innocence. Each night, they would crank up their small generator so that we could all listen to the stereo. Their favorite group was Jefferson Airplane. I distinctly remember the lyric blasting through the still night air:

*When the truth is found, to be lies,  
And all the joy within you dies . . .*

On the last day of our stay, the well ran dry. We summoned an old man, a dowser who lived on the other side of the island. He cut down a willow branch from a tree, then used it to locate an underground spring. The four of us dug all afternoon until we hit water. Presumably, all would be well for the Angelenos again.

But by this time, my head ached terribly. I wandered off through a path in the woods to clear my head. I needed to be alone. I must have wandered too far, because I lost all sense of time and place. It was getting dark and I quickly became aware of having lost my way. I called out but no one responded. I walked toward the water hoping to regain my sense of direction, but to no avail. The forest became more and more frightening and I dreaded the thought of having to spend a cold night alone in the wilds.

I could feel the fear build throughout my body. The headache pain was blinding. But then I caught my breath and tried hard to concentrate on the sounds outside my body. I thought I heard music and imagined that it was time for the generator to work its magic. I would be rescued by the Jefferson Airplane! But there was only the sound of the wind picking up through the trees and waves. My body shivered. I sat down under a tall pine tree and waited. The wind subsided and then, miraculously, I heard the sound of a human voice. It was a cry. The baby, I thought, it must be the baby needing to be fed. Lucky for me, the baby remained hungry long enough to lead me out of the woods.

I was glad to return home from Canada. It was not a very enlightening journey. The people I met were lost. The wilderness I experienced was frightening. But then I thought, maybe I had not experienced Canada at all. My only guide was a small child too young to know the differences between cultures and landscapes. Yet she was there, in Canada, on that island, and her cry was a beacon. Even though I doubted a sense of the spiritual all along the way, I found it in that lost child whose voice summoned me out of the fading light, who reminded me so much of myself.

In reviewing the spiritual images created by Canadian children, I thought

of that time often. I collected an unusual group of interviews—from pagan children, some of whom belong to native tribes, from Baha'i children and from Christian children, many of whom were Mormon. Like the small child on the island, these children have helped me to understand the object of my search some 30 years ago.

### **Isis and Jupiter**

Jasmine is a ten-year-old girl whose parents' backgrounds reflect a mix of European, African, and Native American cultures. She and her parents refer to themselves as pagan in terms of religious belief. She draws a picture of a goddess, whom she calls Isis (**see Figure 4**). Isis is very much in the likeness of a young, sensitive Native American woman, with long black hair and headband, red dress and brown necklace with the symbol of the feminine upon it. A sun and mountains in the shape of pyramids stand behind Isis.

When asked to define God, Jasmine replies: "A god is a goddess' mate." She is very much a feminist.

Jasmine tells the interviewer that she chose Isis as her personal goddess when she was five. To be more precise, she says: "I kind of chose her, but she kind of chose me." She tells a story of having once spoken to Isis in a dream:

Well, I was about five and she was there waiting for me, and then we went into space. It might sound weird. And then we walked on the moon. She said: "I love you." That's all I remember.

Jasmine also mentions a second goddess, Melusine, whom she recognizes on the logo of Starbuck's, a chain of coffee shops. Both goddesses protect Jasmine and help her with her schoolwork. Jasmine remarks that Isis has the ability to change shape and form at will.

Kian is a five-year-old boy, also from a pagan and eclectic cultural background. As Jasmine creates a feminine goddess, Kian creates a very male god—Jupiter, the god of war. In Kian's drawing, Jupiter holds weapons and has a long spiral of a tail. And yet, Kian makes it known that he is no sexist—his god can take either a masculine or feminine identity.

As he tells his story, we learn that just as there are masculine and feminine spiritual beings, there are also destructive and peaceful ones. According to Kian, Jupiter is destructive because he lives on the wrong side of the sky. He has no specific enemies but will fight anything in nature, such as rocks and trees. We learn that Jupiter fights because he has a warlike nature: "Jupiter likes to fight. He just likes everything about it. He likes that he can do it the best. Hardly anything hurts him because he is so tough."

Even though both Jasmine and Kian attempt to be nonsexist, each presents a god that bears gender-based archetypal qualities. Isis is the loving,



Figure 3. *Andrew—Instinct God, USA*



Figure 4. *Jasmine—Isis, Canada*

nurturing mother and Jupiter is the warring father. It could be that all young children, regardless of their spiritual orientations, project desirable aspects of their gender upon their god. And not only gender—but all things that exist in nature and all feelings that exist within the heart.

In my earliest recollections, I remember believing in spirits in all things—the high chair at the kitchen table, the masks kids wore on Halloween, even the silver dollars my grandfather would give me each time we said goodbye. It could well be that the nature of consciousness in the early years of life, before the development of an identity separate from the world of objects and people, is, in fact, pagan. Kian is five, and Jasmine reflects upon her first encounter with the goddess at five. Could we all, at five, share the same sense of the mystery of life, of the confluence of things material and things spiritual? Perhaps the name of our gods in the early part of our lives—Jesus or Jehovah, Ganesh or Buddha, Isis or Jupiter—is less important than their presence in a world more spiritual than material.

### **A Blind God Gives His Child a Teddy Bear**

I collected a number of interviews from a group of First Nations, an Eskimo tribe from the Northwest Territories. These children come from families struggling economically. None of the children had been educated in any direct way about religion, although as part of the larger Canadian culture, all were exposed to images of Christianity.

One interview was particularly striking to me. Ossycha, a six-year-old girl, draws the head of God in yellow, sitting above a black dotted line that separates heaven from earth. Below the line are two female figures, one with green hair extending into the ground, the other in a purple dress with arms outstretched. Two large flowers protrude from the ground. Ossycha writes a caption above the girl with the green hair: “This is an angel.” And just on the other side of the black dotted line, Ossycha writes: “An eagle is god’s enemy.” The angel has no arms. The girl in the purple dress has no legs.

Ossycha begins her story by identifying the place and the characters:

God lives up in heaven even though he’s in your heart. Heaven’s in your heart. The little girl lives underneath, in the ground. She lives with her Mom. That’s her Dad (pointing to God’s face). He’s dead. God’s her Dad. The angel is the little girl’s mother. She’s trying to stop the flower from growing up too high. If it does, it will kill all the other angels because it’s poison. Angels are mean. These are flowers. That’s a tulip and that’s a red daffodil. The black line is so that the angels can’t get up because they’re mean.

Ossycha continues:



God hurt his eye. He walked into a wall by accident because he was blind. He was trying to get a taxi and he didn't know that the wall was there, so he walked into the wall. He took a taxi because he wanted to go home to see his child for Christmas.

The interviewer asks Ossycha to take on the role of God. As God, she says: "Child, I'm sorry. I don't have any money to buy you a present for Christmas."

The interviewer then asks: "How does God give his child a present without money?"

Ossycha replies: "He uses his magic to give his child a teddy bear. He gets his magic powers from Santa."

Ossycha sees God as a wounded but loving father. At one point, during her role-play, she imagines God as a grown-up baby Jesus. But her God is more closely aligned to the pagan Santa Claus than to Christ. He is like the magical Santa who insures that the children will get presents on Christmas.

I am very touched by Ossycha's interview, and I am left with many questions. Is her drawing and story an allegory about her own family's struggles or about the struggles of her people within a larger culture blind to their needs? Why is the angel mean and why is the eagle an enemy of God? Why is the flower poison and why is God blind?

There seems to be a lot of sadness in Ossycha's story. As I look at her drawing, I notice that the most prominent figure is the little girl. She floats above the ground with outstretched arms and appears to be asking for help. The angel/mother appears to be looking at her, but she has no arms to reach out. The head of God above seems to be looking away. He is separated from her by a black line. He doesn't see her. But then he is blind. Who will help?

And then I remember Ossycha's first statement: "God is in your heart." Despite the poison flowers and mean angels and hostile eagles, despite the distance and disability of the divine, she will get her teddy bear. Her heart cries out and someone responds. Although her vision of God may be cloudy and neither he nor she can see each other very well, she has faith. She believes in a figure who gives gifts to children. She might not be so sure about God whom she perceives as blind and broke. But even without a strong spiritual seer, she will work her own magic. She will see her way through.

### **Heaven and Hell**

There is one more child with no Christian affiliation I wish to mention, Kento, eight years old, who comes from a middle-class Japanese-Canadian family. I am most intrigued by Kento's description of death:

When you die, you fall to the ground like this. (He lies flat on the ground,

eyes closed.) Your spirit is in you. You can't see it. And it goes up, when you die, all the way to heaven. And then you're all white, no color up there, just white. Heaven is a good place, the nicest place of all. And hell is a bad, bad place. It looks like a pumpkin. There's a monster in hell. He is black. Hell sort of feels like running around naked.

As Jasmine and Kian divide the psyche into feminine and masculine, and as Ossyha divides the world into heaven and earth, Kento divides the spiritual domain into heaven and hell. Unlike the others, he takes a more conventional view of a white God and a black devil. I wonder if Kento is pointing toward a further dichotomy of soul and body where the soul is pure and white while the body is naked and black? My mind races to Moby Dick, to the whiteness of the demon whale and the darkness of the soul of Captain Ahab. At the end of each reading, I was always left with the same question: Who is the demon and who is the god?

### **The Book of Mormon**

Most children who grow up in a conventional Christian family do not confuse demon and god. It is clear who is good and who is bad in the spiritual world. This is especially true for the Mormon children interviewed. The Mormon church, known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, began as a reaction to what its prophet, Joseph Smith, perceived as corrupt Christian doctrines of 19th century America. He offered a purer sense of truth to the people based upon a direct revelation from God. Although Mormons support religious tolerance, the Mormon church perceives itself as "the only true and living church upon the earth." This exclusivity leads to a major effort on the part of the church to convert others worldwide to Mormonism.

Unique Mormon doctrines include a belief in the existence of human souls before birth and a belief that human beings can through their good deeds achieve the status of divinity in future times.

Lauren, age nine, tells a story with echoes of Noah and the flood. The good people, the believers, will be saved and from them new generations of believers will be born:

When there is going to be an earthquake, Heavenly Father and Jesus will make a split in the earth and put all the people who believe in them in it and close it up. And when the earthquake is over, he'll open it up and make a whole new generation.

Six-year-old Rachel knows that God's enemy is Satan because Satan "wants us to choose the wrong way." For Rachel, the image of Satan is clear. He is angry and is dressed in rags, all black and brown. God, on the other hand, is blond-haired, clean and white. For Rachel, "white means nice." Her

black and white description is similar to Kento's with one exception. Kento's monster-devil exposes the body and shames people into an awareness of their physical nakedness. Rachel's Satan is a deceiver who leads people away from God. And to be separated from God is the basest state, one of spiritual nakedness.

Kurtis at nine offers a solution to this problem. This is his story:

One day a boy had a dream about an adult on a cloud which he thought might be Jesus. And there were people that already died and gone up to heaven and there were angels with trumpets and the kid had a vision that he would go up there one day. And after the dream, he repented and felt like he was forgiven.

Lauren complements Kurtis by telling a story in six scenes dramatizing the divine work of Heavenly Father:

In the first scene, Jesus is talking to Heavenly Father saying people aren't doing things right and they need to know how to do things right and follow the right path. The second scene is Jesus watching over us. The third scene is Jesus thinking about what he could say to the people when he goes down because Heavenly Father is going to let him come down because things are getting worse each day. The fourth scene is him coming down. The fifth scene is speaking to them nicely and talking about Jesus and how he created Adam out of the sand of the earth and Eve out of his rib bone. And the sixth scene is everybody welcoming and nice, but it took a few years. I hope this will happen when I'm alive. Then people can leave their doors open all night.

There is a sense of certainty in these children. Theirs is a world of clear moral options and of redemption for those believers who repent their sins. Their God is clear: he is Heavenly Father and his son is Jesus Christ. His story is written in The Book of Mormon. Lauren summarizes its teaching in a very simple way:

I think the Book of Mormon is true and everyone can return to the Celestial Kingdom and we can live a happy life. Heavenly Father is coming down to talk to the people so everyone can believe.

But what if you don't believe in Heavenly Father and his messages revealed to select Mormons? What if the book that you turn to for ultimate wisdom is called by a different name? Can this book also be true and good? And can those who read it also live a happy life?

As these questions spin around my brain, I think of the almost idyllic summer I spent in a Mormon community in southern Utah back in the late 1960s. I was an actor with the Utah Shakespeare Festival and a group of us, primarily from the East and West coasts, performed in an outdoor replica of the

Globe Theatre to an audience of local people and tourists. The air was pure and the work was enriching. We were all happy during that summer. And yet one odd incident returns to my consciousness. We would notice a group of young men watching us from the hillside surrounding the theatre after each performance. Sometimes they would taunt us. We tended to ignore them until one night they cornered us in a cafe and began to assault us. The proprietor, a young woman not more than 15, called the police who arrived soon and escorted us outside. They formed two lines together with the young toughs and ordered us to walk through the gauntlet as they hurled epithets and punches at us.

After that incident, we rarely left our safe conclave near the theatre. We were different and it was the sixties. We served a purpose in the town, entertaining the people with good wholesome fare. But when the show was over, we were as good as heretics worthy of scorn.

### **God's Hat**

I end my excursion into Canada on an upbeat note with interviews of Baha'i children. Six-year-old Desire paints a picture in words as open as the Canadian prairies:

God is kind of like...you know Jesus? You know that kind of guy? That's the Christian religion. We're kind of a different religion, but we think of the Christian people. That's one thing you're supposed to do. I think that God is kind of a person that's spiritually real. He thinks of every religion. He could be the valley, the sea, the clouds, the sky, anything. He made up people and trees and flowers. He was the kind of person that made dinosaurs. Nobody knows how they got killed. It's just that he makes new things if they run out.

Mina, at nine, whose parents are from Iran, complements this description with a drawing (**see Plate 4**). God is a shapeless, colorless figure resting on a cloud in the bright sunshine. He wears a hat decorated in a traditional Iranian design. "It's his favorite hat and the only thing he wears," she says. God is at peace lying in the sun in his favorite hat. He has no enemies. He accepts all religions.

Canada is a large and open country whose cultural and spiritual influences are manifold. I have returned many times since my early trip to the Northwest islands and have wondered what became of that child whose cry led me out of the woods. Maybe she returned to the city abandoned by her parents once upon a time, or maybe she has created her own idyll in the forest primeval. I hope she has managed to stay clear of those who would make her walk the gauntlet. I hope she has received many teddy bears and

many blessings. I hope her wells have been full. I hope she has read many books. I hope she has found a way to see the many faces of God that are visible on any given day in the mind's eye.

## MEXICO

To complete my research in North America, it was time to head south to see how children in Mexico see God. My firsthand experience of Mexico is very limited. Over the years, I have visited the towns bordering California and Texas—Tijuana, Ensenada, Juarez. In my imagination, Mexico appears as a land of spirits, of folk religion, of puppets and masks embodying the figure of Death, of a primal Christianity centering on the spiritual and visceral heart of the Virgin Mary and Jesus. My images are very much influenced by seeing the miniature paper-maché objects used in the celebration of The Day of the Dead, a time when demons of all sorts fly through the air. And they are also influenced by my knowledge of Mexican painting. Several years ago, upon first viewing Frida Kahlo's work, I was particularly drawn to her psychodramatic self-portraits detailing her visceral and spiritual fantasies. The one image that best embodied those fantasies for me was the heart.

### Work to Live

The heart appeared as a central image in several stories and drawings made by Mexican children. A very moving story about the heart of God was told by Andrea, an eight-year-old Catholic girl from a comfortable middle-class family. Her story was, in many ways, an afterthought.

Andrea began by drawing God as a large figure on top of a dense cloud with arms raised and a large red heart in the center of his chest. A smaller yellow heart lies within the red one.

Andrea's God speaks to the natural world of trees and flowers and animals, telling them to gather food and to grow. Finally and emphatically God says to all: "You have to work to get life." In fact, Andrea entitles her picture: *Work to Live*.

Then she adds the following:

—God also works because he has enemies. He works so that the world won't die, because if he dies, the world dies.

—Who are God's enemies? asks the interviewer.

—Herod and lightning. God sees things he doesn't like, but he doesn't get angry. He wants us to organize our lives. He wants us to lead our own life, without having to tell us what to do.

At this point, Andrea adds God's enemy to her picture. She calls him

Trenoatico (*trueno* means thunder in Spanish). Trenoatico is a small figure with blond hair whose body is in the same posture as God's, arms raised, sitting on a cloud. Under the cloud is a swirl of black which encases a bolt of lightning.

Then Andrea adds a third figure to her drawing—a little girl with blond hair in a blue dress, arms raised like God and Trenoatico. Like God, the little girl has a large red heart in the center of her body. When asked about the little girl, Andrea replies: "God is in heaven, in my soul, everywhere."

—Who is the little girl? asks the interviewer.

—Me, replies Andrea.

—Why is God lifting his arms?

—Because he is trying to stop the lightning Trenoatico is throwing, but Trenoatico doesn't pay any attention.

—Is God thinking anything?

—Yes, that Trenoatico was a good friend of God but now Trenoatico is throwing lightning at God.

The interview seemed to be over when Andrea asked: "Can I tell you a story related to this one?"

—Yes.

—God is fighting with Trenoatico and I arrived and I put my heart together with God. God had a very big heart, but he was missing a little part, and I gave that missing part to him. See that blank area in the middle of God's heart? That's what's missing. My heart is full. My heart fills the blank spot in God's heart.

Andrea's God is a hard worker whose work sustains life. In his hard labor, especially in his battle with the thunder god, Trenoatico, God needs help. He is besieged by lightning bolts and perhaps tired of holding up his arms to deflect the lightning. And he might also be sad, because he was betrayed—his present enemy was once his good friend. So Andrea intervenes. She, the little blond girl with a big, red heart, is the third part of this holy trinity. Her heart is pure, her enemies few. Of the three figures in the drawing, she is the only one to have legs and feet. She is grounded, complete in a way that they are not. In filling the blank spot in God's heart with her spiritual power, she becomes the savior of the savior. It is her work that saves the world. And the force that drives her work is love.

In this pure vision, the child takes on the qualities of Christ whose enemy, among others in the New Testament gospels, is Herod. The mention of Herod becomes a distraction for me. It pulls me back to the earlier vision of Jews as betrayers and murderers of Christ. Even Andrea's title, *Work to Live*, echoes the most ironic of slogans left over from the Nazi times, *Arbeit macht frei* (*work makes one free*), boldly displayed over the entrance to the most infamous of

death camps, Auschwitz.

I want so much to stay with the pure act of generosity and love created by Andrea. I am reminded of an old Greek story, part of the oral tradition, about a mother and child who love each other so much that they are never apart. They live in the forest and rarely go out, except to market. One day, the child goes off alone and meets a friend. The friend is a jealous person and demands the child's love unconditionally. The child is torn between the two and the friend knows it. Playing on the child's ambivalence, the friend says: "If you truly love me, you will prove it by killing your mother and bringing me her heart." The child first panics but then calmly decides upon a plan of action. While the mother is asleep, the child takes a knife, kills her, cuts out her heart and puts it in a sack to bring to the friend. On the way through the forest, the child trips over a stone in the path. The heart falls out of the sack, looks up at the child and says: "Did you hurt yourself, my child?"

In this guilt-inspiring story about a mother's undying love, the child is of a very different nature than Andrea's child. Yet the heart remains pure and loving, despite all betrayals. In this case, it is the mother's heart. In the drawings of many children, it is God's heart that remains pure even in the face of evil. And when that pure heart is wounded or diminished in some way, the children envision that another figure, like the girl in Andrea's story, will work hard so that the sacred heart of the divine will live.

### **The Street of Chapultepec**

Andrea's brother, Santiago, is five. He draws a figure in red with long hair, no hands, and no feet. The figure has a visible heart in its chest and seems to float above the ground. Above in the blue sky is a small dimly realized figure in yellow which appears as a head upon a cross.

Santiago tells the following story about his picture:

God was above and saw a girl who was very obedient, and he told Santa Claus to give her the gifts she wanted. Also the Three Kings should give her the gifts she wanted, because she obeyed her mother and would not cross the street unless her mother was there. The girl told God: "I wanted to die to see God." And then the girl said: "It should rain because the flowers by my house are almost dry." The girl felt God in her heart.

Santiago calls his picture *The Street of Chapultepec* as that is the street the girl's mother forbids her to cross. He identifies the girl as Andrea, his sister, and says that Andrea and God are closely connected. The picture is set in a park. According to Santiago, God has no enemies.

When first viewing the drawing, I imagined that the red figure was God and that the tiny figure in the sky was an angel. But then I forgot how large

an older sister can appear in the eyes of a younger brother. Although without hands and feet, she has a big heart and is a good girl who obeys her mother and cares about all living things. She is as worthy of earthly gifts as she is of God's love. I wonder if this big sister is the closest Santiago can come to seeing God, for his God is so small and unrevealed. Or perhaps they are mirror images—God and Andrea, both good and caring beings, both protectors of the children who cross the Street of Chapultepec. When a sister is so open-hearted, it is no wonder that she takes on the qualities of God.

As I look at the picture, I see a very vulnerable little girl and a distant God. I see the girl as a daughter rather than a sister and I flash back to a memory of driving my daughter Georgie, at eight, to school one dark morning. She has a project due about life in the Arctic Circle and has built a diorama in a cardboard box. There are several small animals—a snowy owl, an Arctic fox, a baby polar bear. Center stage is an adult polar bear in the snow, having just killed a seal. The rest is empty space—snow and ice, water and sky.

Georgie is proud of her project but afraid that it will not measure up to those of her classmates. Hers is the last to be completed, and it was a great struggle. The others are so polished, so well conceived. She is afraid to go into school alone. As usual, I am in a hurry and need to make my train to work. She asks me to come with her to the classroom. I cannot. She asks again. I explain why, then she leaves the car. I watch her walk up the path to the side entrance of the school. She looks so small carrying her large box and its story of predators and prey. I pull the car over to the curb and watch her become smaller and smaller, until she disappears into a doorway to face her peers. Although she is the creator of a powerful scene of bear killing seal, she is afraid that she will be eaten alive by her classmates, all little eight year olds with their own models of a dog eat dog world.

Watching her, I feel sad and helpless. What can I do? How can I protect her? I am her father and she is alone and scared. Is she the seal on the way to slaughter? At that moment, I feel God's absence. Who can help me help her? In going through the door to the school, she is crossing the Street of Chapultepec unprotected.

But I have a train to catch, work to do, a life to lead. I am a grown-up and I know how to cross a street and how to protect myself from predators. So I leave and I try to forget the image of my daughter that is so strongly etched in my mind. Later at my desk, I turn to Santiago's drawing and I am drawn to the little God in the sky. His arms are outstretched, just like the sister with the big heart. He is so easy to miss as he seems to fade into the background of sky and clouds. But he is there, watching over those who are good and those who are in need. He is there, I remind myself, small as he is, watching



over my daughter. And small as he is, he is there watching over me and helping to soften the heartaches that come from all the moments of feeling inadequate as the father of a girl with a big heart that is all too easily broken.

### **The Careful Cloud**

Not all the Mexican children draw images of the heart. Many feature clouds. Alonzo at five draws three figures in a cloud whom he identifies as Jesus, God, and the Virgin Mary. They are surrounded by several other clouds.

In the role of God, Alonzo speaks: "We have to take care of the children so that they can exist." He speaks to a boy who replies: "Dear Father, take care of us, for our Mother will die when we are big." He identifies the other as: "the boy that wants to take care of God so that he will always take care of us."

According to Alonzo, God's enemy is the devil. "I don't like him. He is dumb!" he quips. In explaining the cloud motif in his drawing, Alonzo says that the clouds give power to God and the Virgin. In fact, he names his drawing: *The Careful Cloud*.

Alonzo sees God as part of a family with a wife and child. And it is Alonzo's task to take care of God so that God will take care of him and all of the children, especially when they have to face the death of their mother. The operative word is *care*. Even the cloud where the holy family lives is a careful cloud, one that literally means full of care.

Clouds appear time and again in so many of the children's drawings cross-culturally, generally representing the sky and the heavens. As I look at the clouds in Alonzo's drawing, they appear to be pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. Each has its separate form but if put together, will make a whole. The central piece, the cloud that is full of care, is holy. It is the nucleus, the core, the center of the universe. It holds together the spiritual and the domestic family.

I am left with the question: Who takes care of whom? Alonzo tells us that his double, the boy, takes care of God so that God can take care of the children. Alonzo is only five, a very dependant age. Could it be that we are all children of God, vulnerable to the pain and suffering of the world, fearful of the death of our caretakers and thankful for the beauty and power of the divine? If we take care to love God, Alonzo seems to be saying, then God will carefully return that love to us. There is a logic and wisdom beyond the five years of Alonzo's experience—care begets care. The pieces of the puzzle of clouds fit. In this holy universe, there is no room for the devil.

### God in His Cloud

Emilio, a nine-year-old boy from a middle-class family, continues the cloud motif. Unlike the others, he offers a vision of God as a young superman, modeled after a superhero from a television cartoon show. He draws a striking figure in bold red costume with blue wings, black boots, and a yellow halo. His black hair protrudes in batches. He stands on a yellow spoon-shaped object and is otherwise surrounded by space (**see Plate 5**).

God speaks directly to Emilio: “I am all powerful, and that is why I can destroy evil characters.”

Emilio responds: “It’s good that you kill them, because if you didn’t, they could destroy the world.”

Beyond this, Emilio offers very little. He notes that God takes care of the people and that the devil and the Satan worshipers are his enemies. He also refers to the yellow spoon as God’s flying cloud and calls his drawing: God in His Cloud.

It felt very appropriate to me that this nine-year-old boy would envision God as a superhero whose task is to destroy evil characters and defend the righteous. In fact, I wondered why I hadn’t seen more depictions of God as superman since both are moral figures that capture the imagination of many young people, especially those who watch cartoons on television. God is a superhero of sorts, I reasoned. Whether his enemies are devils or Satan worshipers or infidels, he exists to protect people from evil. My own fascination with superheroes as a young boy well fueled my belief in the divine and the mysterious. Such figures gave me a sense of hope in a moral universe where ultimately good wins out over evil.

But something else gripped me in Emilio’s drawing, something beyond the obvious connection of God and hero. Emilio’s figure looked almost familiar to me. When I showed it to my daughter, she recognized it as the young hero of the television cartoon, “Dragon Ball Z.” I watched the cartoon which, incidentally, I couldn’t really understand. My adult logic was insufficient to decipher the pastiche of images. Then I flipped through the channels to catch glimpses of other superheroes—ghosts, dinosaurs, hulks, power rangers, ninjas, and the like—all basically doing the same godlike things with very little imagination. Then it struck me. Emilio’s drawing, unlike the characters on TV, was highly mysterious and evocative.

Looking again at the hair and face and body of this God on his cloud, I was reminded of the figure from Saint-Exupéry’s book, *The Little Prince*, standing on his tiny planet in the sky, Asteroid B-612. And the spoon/cloud brought back the remarkable beginning of the book where the author recalls that at six years old, he drew a picture of a snake having just devoured an

elephant. When showing the drawing to grown-ups, all they could see was a hat, as that was the shape of the external form. In becoming a grown-up himself, disillusioned at the dearth of imagination of his fellow human beings, he encounters the magical Prince in the desert who easily deciphers his drawing.

Toward the end of his book, Saint-Exupéry writes: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." The children featured in this book all ponder the unseen with open hearts and attribute marvelously important qualities to it. In writing this book, 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.

In contemplating Emilio's drawing of God on his cloud, I see the Little Prince on a spoon, served up as a reminder that the imagination is a powerful and holy presence in the universe. For me, he is less the superhero and more the alien lost in space, the visitor who descends to inform human beings that there are other worlds outside and other ways of seeing.

I return to the cloud in Emilio's drawing. Like the Little Prince, I try to imagine its interior. As hard as I push my adult mind, I don't seem to get beyond the image of the spoon. If it is a spoon, then it serves up a spoonful of God. Whether spoon or cloud or star, it is a vessel far away in the sky that holds the divine.

When I was young and ornery, I would sometimes use my spoon as a catapult, hurling the last vestiges of dinner through the air. And so, ready at last, I hurl myself across the Atlantic to other continents in search of other gods and other demons.

## Chapter 4

### GOD IN EUROPE

#### ENGLAND

The first place I landed was England. I was in London to attend an academic conference. It was shortly after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. Although I was not present for the full pageant of the funeral and procession, I found myself getting fully caught up in the visual displays of public grief and in the conversations with all who would talk to me. Taking a break from the tedious paper presentations, I wandered over to Buckingham Palace. From a distance, I saw a crowd of people milling around and piles upon piles of flowers encased in plastic wrappers. As I approached, I felt my heart racing. I was aware of entering some extraordinary, even holy site. I couldn't really explain it as I was merely curious to see what all the fuss was about. A bit cynical, I never understood the endless media attention on this frivolous, fragile young royal who jet-setted about doing good deeds between dates with playboys of the Western and Eastern worlds.

The dying flowers covered the ground like a cellophane carpet in front of the massive gates. Bouquets protruded everywhere from the iron ribs of the gates and from the limbs of trees. The odor of dead and dying flowers was palpable. Most remarkable, however, was not the flowers, but the letters and drawings taped to the trees and the gates, the walls and the lampposts. In a very intimate way, children and adults, sometimes entire families poured out their hearts in grief. "My Dearest, Dearest Princess of Hearts," began the letters. "Sweet Diana, May your poor troubled soul finally rest in peace," said others. There were photographs of grief-stricken families, Teddy bears from children, poems from adolescent girls, flags from refugees of oppressed countries—all gifts in memory of this beloved figure.

Breathing hard, I looked around me and saw a blur of cultures—bright colors of saris and kimonos, gray flannel business suits and black shawls, paisley headdresses and blue denim jeans, all gliding slowly past my field of vision. This wasn't a break from a boring conference, I realized. This was the reason I had come to London—to attend a spiritual event of great magnitude. All present were pilgrims. And so was I. Without thinking, I followed the

crowd toward Hyde Park and the ultimate symbol of Diana—Kensington Palace, her home.

Jet-lagged and dazed, I wandered through the park, wondering if I was going the right way, stopping every hundred yards to ask directions. And then, just ahead, I saw a Buddhist monk in orange robe and black wing-tipped shoes, walking at a leisurely pace. He must know where he is going, I thought, and I tagged along, keeping a respectful distance. My silent guide led me to the Palace and its more massive displays of dead flowers and curious human beings with their cameras and camcorders. As I merged with the crowd, I discovered more and more letters from the heart to the Queen of Hearts, photographs of families from Turkey, India, Israel, Morocco, and naive renderings of Diana, herself, by children in crayon, pencil, and colored marker. She wore a crown in many of the drawings, a halo in some. In most, she had a beatific smile. In these children's creations, Diana was indeed a goddess who was at peace.

The crowd moved slowly as many paused to collect their thoughts and record the event on film. At one point I leaned against a tree, incapable of taking it all in and willing for a moment to cease attempting to understand this extraordinary spectacle. My cynicism was completely gone and I recognized that I was, like the others, there for Diana. Like the families in Liverpool and New Delhi, I had a personal connection to this Princess Goddess. She was mine and to my amazement, I cried for her. And one more thing. I carried a single red rose with me all throughout the journey from Buckingham to Kensington Palace, led by a Buddhist monk in orange robes and black shoes. It was my offering, my small way of saying goodbye to that sweet, sweet Queen of Hearts. It was alive when I threw it in the air and it landed among a pile of many thousand dead and dying flowers.

Late that night, returning to my hotel by taxi, the driver got lost. The name of my hotel was unfamiliar to him and it irked him that he couldn't find it. I was of no help whatsoever given that I had trouble finding my way to Kensington Palace even though a steady stream of tourists all followed a well marked path through Hyde Park. He mumbled something about tourist hotels suddenly changing their names and assured me that he would get me safely home. But the meter was running and the hour was getting late.

As we searched for the hotel he held forth: "When I was a boy, I knew that when I grew up I would become King. I was certain of it. And as King, I would reward all those who treated me with respect. Those who lent me money when I was down and out, I would see to it their pockets were full. Now I drive a taxi, been at it for 17 years and I have no regrets. I'm very proud of my work."

And then, for the fourth time, he made an abrupt U-turn and doubled

back to yet another dark street in search of a hotel that had obviously changed its name on him. He continued: "I don't really understand all the fuss made about Diana. I never found her beautiful like the ladies do. I didn't get too involved in the funeral and all. But maybe little girls dream about growing up and becoming a Princess some day. Maybe, like me, they know it will happen to them and then they will reward all those who did them a good turn. Most of them turn out like me, a working bloke, and if they're lucky, they'll be happy with their lot. She had it all, Diana. She became a Princess and she did some good in the world. She had all the money and the fame and she still was a human being with all the troubles of the rest of us. Now that's the kind of dream worth dreaming, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said, "it sure is." And then I looked up and saw my hotel. "Used to be called something else, wasn't it?" said the driver. "I guess so," I said. I went to pay him but he stopped me. "I can't take your money," he said, "I shouldn't have gotten lost."

So he was a king after all, I thought, a commoner with a noble heart, just like Diana. Saint-Exupéry was right—it is the unseen that matters most. And it occurred to me that God appears in the world in many masks, all of which can only be seen with the heart.

### **The Center Colors of Heaven**

The first interviews I received from England were from a sister and brother from a middle-class, Christian Pentecostal home. The Pentecostals believe generally in a fundamental view of the Bible and an emphasis upon the unity as opposed to the trinity of God. From their perspective, there is no spiritual separation between Jesus Christ, the son, and God, the father.

Joanna, age six, draws a picture of a human-like figure floating in the sky near clouds and sun. Down below are very small buildings and even smaller people. Joanna's story is: "God is looking over his people to make sure they are OK. God is in the sky and the people are on the ground."

When asked to speak as God, Joanna replies: "God is not speaking. He's just looking." When asked who God looks at, Joanna replies that he looks at one of the little people who is called Joanna. God's enemies are the non-believers and Joanna is not one of them. She believes in God because "he does miracles."

Joanna's God appears lonely and uncommunicative, very far away from Joanna who sees herself as small and remote.

Joanna's older brother Stephen, age eight, doesn't bother with God's relationship to earthly things. He draws a rich and colorful vision of heaven with a small God holding a yellow glowing object suspended on a string. God

stands beside a throne. Above him hovers a smiling angel. All around is sky, clouds, water, and a tiled floor. Stephen tells the following story about his picture:

God's off his throne in the middle of heaven by the dance floor, practicing his magic to make colors that no one's ever seen before. One of his angels is watching him. The stairs are made of gold and they go to the other houses. The roof is made of clouds. Under the dance floor is a big river that you can just see by the stairs.

God speaks to the angel named Lucy and says: "Perhaps I might be able to make a color that everyone will like." The angel Lucy responds: "Perhaps I might not like it. You never know!" Stephen calls his picture *The Center Colors of Heaven*.

Stephen affirms that he believes in God, and explains why: "Because there's no one else to believe in England, and I don't want to upset my Mum."

Not only is there humor in Stephen's explanation of his faith, but also mystery in his vision of God. God seems to be quite royal, living in a palace with a vast dance floor. Even the palace is mysterious with a river running under the floor and a heavenly roof. God's main task is not to take care of people or to make peace on earth but rather to create new and beautiful colors. In his own way, Stephen imagines God as artist, a creator in a pure sense. Although small, this God is not remote. He speaks with an angel about his grand ambition to create a color that everyone will like. The angel plays devil's advocate, but this does not deter God, for in the drawing, God has created a yellow color which rises up to the heavens.

At the end of the interview, Stephen voices a sad commentary on his country. He believes in a spiritual being because there is no secular figure of great stature in England. I wonder if his words are in response to the death of Princess Diana and the exposé of the common foibles of the royal family.

As I am about to move to the next interview and say goodbye to Stephen's small creator, I notice that he had sketched a second picture of God, a large portrait in pencil, without any color. I get the feeling that this is a blow-up of the face of God, the artist (see **Figure 5**). Or maybe it's a statement about the substance of God—colorless, as opposed to his colorful creations.

God is silent and appears very tired. In fact, he looks as if he will fall asleep at any moment, needing a nap after a long day of painting at the palace. I have a sudden urge to talk to him before he nods off. But what would I say? Even as I entertain this thought, I take it so far as to imagine that if I could speak to God, my attempts at profundity would bore him and he would slip quickly into sleep.



Figure 5. *Stephen—The Face of God, England*



Figure 6. *Sandra—God at 102, Germany*



I remember a story told by a Buddhist friend. All his adult life he had fantasized about meeting the Dalai Lama, the great spiritual leader of the Tibetan Buddhists. In his imaginary ruminations, he would meet the great man and ask profound questions. Finally, he had saved enough money for a trip to India and planned on visiting Dharamsala, the village that has come to be the home in exile of the Dalai Lama. On the plane, obsessed with his usual fantasy, he noticed a familiar piece of saffron-colored cloth protruding into the aisle. Peeking over the seat, he was shocked to find the Dalai Lama sitting in the seat directly in front of him. His heart raced as he rehearsed all the spiritual questions he always wanted to ask. Before he could muster the courage to approach him, the holy man turned around, evidently sensing the psychic confusion. He had been reading a comic book about the exploits of a superhero. Without missing a beat, the Dalai Lama engaged my friend in a conversation about the pleasures of reading American comics. He was good humored throughout the conversation and laughed out loud more than once. When the conversation ended and the Dalai Lama lay back in his seat to take a nap, my friend caught his breath and reflected. The wise man and wise God alike get tired of having to be profound and serious.

The Dalai Lama and his comic book, like Stephen's black and white sleepy God, are visible and accessible in their simple acts of laughing and sleeping. When far away from the everyday lives of the common folk, they create their heavenly colors. When they walk among us, they show their colors in humble ways. On earth, they have no need for palaces or thrones. An economy class seat in a plane cruising through the clouds miles below heaven will do.

### **The Sky in Heaven Has Lots of Colors and Everyone Is Asleep Except God**

Four-year-old Kristy from a Christian Pentecostal family also speaks about the colors of heaven. Like most of the youngest children interviewed, Kristy draws the spiritual world as abstract forms and colors. This may be because she is too young to draw realistic images. In looking at Kristy's drawing and listening to her story, I get the sense that she is connected to a more primal energy than that displayed by her older peers.

Kristy's heaven is a swirl of bright pink with dashes of yellow, orange, and blue. A bright yellow sun sits on high. Two balls, one colorful and fanciful, the other plain, float in the sky. A simple columned structure stands between the orbs.

Like most four year olds, Kristy has little to say about her picture. She provides the setting—it is early morning in heaven and all the heavenly

creatures are preparing for breakfast. She refers to the columned structure as a church. She does not identify the two orbs, but she does name the cast of characters—there are angels, Jesus, and God. For Kristy, God creates everything, including the colors. More specifically, Kristy says: “God made Jesus and water and heaven.”

At the end of the interview, reflecting upon her magnificent drawing, Kristy offers the equally magnificent statement: “The sky in heaven has lots of colors and everyone is asleep except God.”

So here we have the other side of Stephen’s view of God. God is awake. It is the beginning of a new day which, I imagine, may be the first day of creation. Each time I try to make sense of Kristy’s images—I see a satellite, a Greek temple, an open mouth, five swimming tadpoles—I give up. The colors and shapes carry the sense. God has packed all the colors of heaven into a swirling ball which may become the earth. He is the first one up in his heavenly family, and he sees his creation and it is good.

Kristy is a four-year-old mystic. Her vision could be comparable to that of Siddhartha Gautama under the Bodhi tree—an awakening to the colors of the spiritual world.

### **Shiner**

Colors figure prominently in the next interview with Joshua, a nine-year-old black Catholic boy from a lower middle class Dominican background. His vision is also a spiritual one but rather than portraying the colors of heaven, he focuses upon the body. Joshua draws a boy with baseball hat and sneakers on a street (**see Plate 6**). His bones are fully exposed so that he looks like a skeleton. His body parts are depicted as colors that are contained by his bones. A chart above him provides an explanation for each color. To the left of the chart is a bright yellow sun. And to the left of the boy is a red devil with wings, horns, pointed tail, and pitchfork.

Joshua describes his drawing as follows:

I have drawn this picture representing God. I have labeled him. The pink bits are the skin. The red bits are the muscle. The yellow is God’s love and the Holy Spirit. I think you can see God through people just by looking at them, just by listening to them, getting to know their personality. I believe God is in all of us.

The interviewer wonders whether Joshua has drawn the inside of human beings or of God. He replies: “This is inside us. This is just an ordinary person with God inside him.”

She continues: “Which part is God?”

“The yellow part,” he replies. “The yellow part is light.”

“What does God inside you mean?” she asks.

“It helps you to be good,” replies Joshua. “It helps you to be kind. You got to let him flow around. In very good people he keeps flowing and they spread his love around.”

“How do you stop him flowing around?” she wonders.

“You got to keep doing bad things. Then he won’t be able to flow around.”

Joshua creates a dialogue. He plays God and speaks to Joshua: “Be good, try to do your best. Try never to do bad things.” The boy responds with a series of questions to God: “Have I led a good life? Have I got a good soul? When will I die? Will it hurt? Is Mum and Dad gonna die before me?”

Joshua at nine is wrestling with profound moral issues. In his drawing, the devil stands side by side with the boy surrounded by God’s love. Joshua refers to the devil as a friend of God who turned evil. How hard it must feel sometimes, I think, to maintain one’s own moral integrity when betrayed by friends. I wonder whether Joshua as a person of color feels betrayed by a society so bound by class and status. And I wonder if Joshua fears that there might be a devil lurking inside of him someplace. I notice that the red bits, the same color as the devil, are the muscle and the heart. Perhaps that’s the way Joshua can defend against the bad things—by remaining strong and passionate.

I think about Joshua’s title: *Shiner*. What does he mean? For me, a shiner is a black eye, a sign that one has been in a fight and has taken a punishing blow. But I have the sense that Joshua’s intention is different. Perhaps he has had his share of shiners in life, but he looks to the other side, to the shining light of God. It is all the yellow in the picture, the exterior outline of the boy and the interior of his chest, right next to the red heart. It is the sun, the shining light of the spiritual world that holds the boy’s fears in check.

Joshua asks God: “Have I got a good soul?” Looking at the picture, there is no answer. We see heart and skull and brain, muscles and skin and bones and guts. This x-ray is a scary image suggesting demons and skeletons. It stands next to a bona fide devil. Both figures are on the run. But surrounding and containing and protecting all—the body and the heart— is the shining light. It also shines in the sky. The one who shines the light is the shiner. As I see it, God is the shiner. Although he doesn’t answer Joshua’s question directly, he flows around the body and the sky. If the boy were bad, the yellow light would dim. As the boy glows, as God flows, there is an answer—“Yes,” says the Shiner, “You have a good soul.”

### **The Lord’s Light Is Shining**

I was fortunate to receive interviews from other children living in England

who come from immigrant and refugee families. The last two children I will discuss grew up in Africa. Gloria, a ten-year-old refugee from Uganda, comes from a Catholic, middle-class family. Like Joshua, she represents the spirit by colors within the body. And like Joshua, she imagines God as a shiner. In fact, she calls her drawing *The Lord's Light Is Shining*.

Gloria's figure of God fills the page. He looks like a British magistrate in long gown and dark wig. He has dark skin, a blank expression and a large exposed heart with colored banners attached that read: *Pray, Love, Help*. At God's feet is a small horned devil, carrying a torch (see **Plate 7**).

Gloria describes her picture:

In the middle of God's body there is a heart. The red light says pray. When people want to pray really hard, he sends the red light to help. The orange light says love, so when people want love, he sends the orange light. The yellow light says help, so when people need help, he sends the yellow light. I see God as a really normal person. He doesn't wear nice fancy clothes. It doesn't matter what's on his feet or how he looks or how his hair looks. He just comes out. God is on earth all the time. People see him as a spirit.

Gloria sees the devil as God's enemy. She says: "The devil takes God's children into the burning fires of hell." But as I look at him, he seems so comical with his animal hooves, red hair, and buck teeth. It is God who has the weight. The devil might burn up a few children, but God shines down his love and his help. As she plays God and speaks to the people, Gloria says: "I have loved you so much I sent my body to earth as Jesus to sacrifice for you. It doesn't matter what you do. I will always love you."

I get the sense that the Lord's love shines brighter than the devil's fires. And I get the sense that the children will be saved from such a harsh punishment. In applying her Christian education, Gloria knows that the sacrifice has been made—God sent down his son. At the end of her interview, Gloria adds: "That shows he really loves us that much, to offer his life for us." I can only imagine what sacrifices Gloria's family made to land safely in England, what dangers the children might have faced. And I can only hope that her prayers will continue to be answered by the Shiner, a judge of infinite mercy.

### Everyone Is Allowed In

England might not be a paradise, but to many, it is a good substitute. Odi, ten years old, also Catholic, came to England from Nigeria with his family in search of a better life. He, too, echoes the motif of God's shining light. He draws a powerful image of God in yellow with wings (see **Figure 8**). Lines stream down from his eyes and become parallel columns of small hearts descending to earth. Above God is a tablet inscribed with the words: "The

Gates to heaven, Everyone is aloud in.” Beside God is a muscular Satan all in red with blue wings and fancy sneakers.

Odi says:

The picture shows that God is shining love on the whole of earth. The lines coming down from his eyes, that’s love. It shows he’s very special and there for everybody. Everyone goes to heaven no matter what you do. Jesus and God always forgive you.

Like the interviewer, I find Odi’s God to be unhappy. When asked about God’s sad expression, Odi replies: “He’s not sad or happy, he’s just OK. He’s concentrating on shining love on everyone and not anything else.”

Odi identifies the devil as God’s enemy because “he tried to kill Jesus.” But his focus is clearly on God whom he presents as unconditionally accepting. In the role of God, Odi says: “Everyone is allowed in my house.” And in a very moving way, Odi asks him: “How come some people are born disabled? How come you didn’t try to save Jesus?” And finally, Odi offers this: “I believe in God because Jesus cured a girl who had died. That’s not luck. It is the power of God.”

It is important for all children from other lands, fearful that their differences will be handicaps, to feel that the gates are open and that, despite the presence of enemies, there is a guiding light leading them to their new home. Joshua, Gloria, and Odi, far away from their native homelands, have found a way, through their faith, to locate the light and separate it from the darkness. It lives in the heart and in the eyes of God. It extends to human beings who are open to its power and it flows around. It shines as bright as the eyes of my son, Mackey, whom we named *Meir Natan, the gift of shining light*.

### A Story

When I was in England collecting interviews, I was told a story. A four-year-old boy asks permission from his mother to go into his newborn sister’s room all alone. The mother agrees and curious, stands near the door, listening. Feeling safely alone, the boy approaches his infant sister’s crib and asks: “Tell me, please, what God looks like. I forgot.”

The meaning of the story offers a view of children that is both mysterious and poetic. Children are spiritual travelers from heaven to earth. Before birth, they live with God, whom they leave when they come into this world. As they grow up, they lose their sense of the spiritual world, and this loss saddens them. And yet they want to remember the time before birth when they were with God. In participating in this interview process, the children have a chance to remember. Their creations of God can be seen as re-creations of an

unseen reality once part of their experience in another plane of existence.

I am not a mystic and find this explanation hard to fully accept. And yet, I have no clear explanations of where the children's images come from, except to say somewhere in the imagination. The youngest child interviewed in England, Kristy, creates a very pure image of the spiritual world. Even her words seem inspired by a grace beyond logic: *the sky in heaven has lots of colors and everyone is asleep except God.*

Like Kristy, the older children, Sophie, Joanna, Stephen, Joshua, Gloria, and Odi, create worlds beyond that seen by grown-up eyes. Some aspects of these worlds certainly reflect developmental, cultural, and social realities of the children at the end of the millennium. And some seem to remain more connected to the spiritual qualities that I have experienced during my wanderings in England among circles of stones, in taxi cabs, and at public expressions of grief. It could be that part of this majestic isle named England was once a child of God. It could be that like its youngest inhabitants, it yearns to remember.

## NORTHERN IRELAND

In Northern Ireland, so much of life is politicized and, as the saying goes, all politics is local. In this country of storytellers, a story is told of a man who meets a stranger with dark curly hair in a bar. "What are you?" asks the man. "A Jew," replies the stranger. "Tell me," says the man, "Are you a Protestant Jew or a Catholic Jew?"

On August 15, 1998, the town of Omagh in Northern Ireland was bombed. A splinter group of IRA terrorists claimed responsibility. Twenty-nine people were killed. It was the single most deadly bombing in 30 years of violence that wracked this small country of Protestants and Catholics, of supporters and defiers of British rule. Since the bombing, politicians on both sides have worked hard to fashion a peace agreement that would insure a stability for future generations of children. Whether the peace will hold or not remains to be seen.

Many children in Northern Ireland, like those in other parts of the world where violence continues to be a means of solving ingrained sectarian problems, pray for a more peaceful world. In this case, they pray to a common Christian God, whether Protestant or Catholic, whose politics are less important than his spiritual message: "Love thy neighbor as thyself."

The interviews below were conducted shortly after the Omagh bombings. They took place in July 1998 in Portadown during marching season, a time when many festive parades occur throughout the town. On this particular

summer, a tense situation arose involving a decision of a Protestant group to march through a Catholic neighborhood. The group, called the Orangemen after the Protestant William of Orange who defeated his Catholic foe James II in the 17th century, chose a particularly inflammatory time to march, not only because of the bombing of Omagh but also because of a recent firebombing of a local Catholic home by Protestant extremists that killed three young boys. As a key to understanding the children's drawings, it should be noted that in Northern Ireland, the colors orange and green are charged—the former representing Protestants and the latter representing Catholics.

### **The Orange and the Green**

The first interview reflected the tense situation. Maeve, a nine-year-old Catholic girl, draws a smiling God standing on a cloud hovering above the ground (**see Plate 9**). He is drawn in pencil with no color. Below God are three children on a playing field, a ball beside them. One child wears an orange sweater. To the right of the ball is a yellow snake. All are colorful. Besides God in the sky are two children, one dressed in orange pants, the other in a green shirt. They appear to be fighting with sticks.

Maeve describes her picture as follows: "God lives in Heaven, up above the clouds and he's very happy when people go to mass and do what he wants. He is sad when people fight with each other."

"Would God like to change that?" asks the interviewer.

"Yes, he tries, when you're saying your prayers, to make people like each other and not fight, like when people are not nice to each other in Northern Ireland."

"Why do you think people fight?" asks the interviewer.

Maeve responds: "Because they haven't found God yet."

The interviewer asks Maeve about the difficulties living a good, moral life. She responds: "Sometimes you just want things your own way, and it's hard to give in and let somebody else do what they want to do. Sometimes it's very hard to be good."

"Does God get tired being good?" she asks.

"No," says Maeve, "God is always good and he always forgives the people who are bad if they are really sorry."

Maeve offers a simple vision: "Heaven is all around us. We just can't see it. I think when people die they don't go to heaven straight away if they've been a bit bad. But if they were good then they go straight away. In heaven they are all friends together, no fighting."

In her dialogue with God Maeve asks, "Did you let Judas in heaven

straight away after he hung himself or did you make him wait?"

As God, she responds: "I let him in after a wee while. I think he was sorry for what he had done."

She tells the following story about her picture:

The two are fighting, maybe about different religions. That upsets God because when God looks at us we're all the same. God's looking down on children playing together and not fighting. They are playing with a ball and a skipping rope and he's very happy because they are happy, but he's sad about the two people fighting. They're just fighting about something stupid, maybe TV or toys or games, or if they're big people, because they didn't get their way. Maybe like parades. If the Orangemen want to march down a road and the people who live there don't want them to, then they fight. And God doesn't like that. It makes him very sad.

Maeve's God is just and forgiving. He is also very human in his sadness when conflict is resolved through violence. Perhaps Maeve draws God in pencil because he stands above the colors orange and green that set Protestants apart from Catholics. Perhaps standing above color is what it means to be divine. And yet Maeve draws God in the shape of a human being who feels pain at ground level and is capable of compassion and forgiveness.

I notice that the yellow object on the ground I thought to be a snake is actually a jump rope. Satan is not present in Maeve's picture. God is very present, just feet above the ground, but he looks like you and me. All is seen on a human scale—the fighting, the betrayal, the forgiving. From a child's perspective, there is hope for peace and forgiveness, even in a society very much at war with itself.

### Soten Fights God

In contrast, Grace, a nine-year-old Protestant girl, presents an image of Satan. In her drawing, it is not the humans that fight, but God and Satan. In a charming, childlike way, she calls her picture *Soten Fights God*. Four figures appear (see Plate 10). God is the most prominent. He wears a gown and orange shoes. His only colors are orange and a touch of yellow in his hair. A small figure stands to God's right, similar in appearance except that the small one has orange hair. Below God is a large cross and a green serpent called Soten.

Grace makes very simple statements about her drawing. God looks like an angel and lives in heaven. Only those who are saved can go to heaven. Grace explains saved as: "You have to believe in God and ask him to go into your heart."

God lives in heaven with angels and Jesus. God's happiness depends upon the happiness of human beings: "If we are happy, God is happy," says Grace.



Satan is God's enemy. His job is to "fight with God and try to get people to turn away from God." She adds: "God is fighting with Satan, because he doesn't like God because he wants to have more friends."

So finally, Grace sees the divine struggle as a popularity contest, grounding it in her growing awareness of social competition and peer pressure.

There is a simplicity and balance to Grace's drawing. God, large and prominent, is above, with a smaller divine presence, Jesus or an angel, to one side. And in between is Satan, whose negative energy is counterbalanced by a large cross. I note that both God and angel/Jesus have orange coloring. Are they Orangemen, I wonder? And Satan, the friendless one, is green. Is he presumed Catholic, the intruder to the Republic?

Satan's crime appears to be an aggressiveness caused by his competition with God—God has more friends. If Satan represents the minority Catholics of Northern Ireland whose most aggressive faction planted the bomb in Omagh, perhaps they need to be neutralized by God's grace.

I have one final reaction to Grace's drawing—no one is fighting. There is little enmity. God and Satan smile. Balance and harmony reign. What if fighting could be understood as a reaction to the loneliness and isolation of being green within an orange world? What if fighting could be seen as a consequence of failing to win friends and connect with others? To me, this is a picture not only by Grace, but about grace. If Satan could speak, he might say: "I need friends!" If God and his son could listen, good Christians that they are, they might say: "We forgive." In the final analysis, it could be that Satan is, after all, only human.

### **Speaking to God**

Lauren, an eight-year-old Protestant girl, draws a picture called *Speaking to God*. There are four figures. Like Grace, she draws God and Satan, whom she names devil, as do many of the Protestant children. She also adds herself and Judis (sic). All four are quite colorful. Lauren is the most fully and beautifully drawn.

For Lauren, God is a man with long brown hair and a beard. "He wears sandals and a dress-type thing." God lives in heaven with people who have died and sleeps in the clouds. He doesn't need a house in heaven because the weather is always beautiful—it never rains or snows.

Judas is God's enemy because he betrayed God. Lauren says: "I think he lives in hell with the devil. Hell is a dark, dirty place under the ground. If you are very bad, you go to hell."

Who are the real betrayers in Lauren's life, I wonder? Is it the Jews? the

Catholics? Or is her story simply to be taken at face value—a story about faith and morality, passed on by the church and the family? Lauren says: “My family has helped me believe in God by helping me pray. When I pray to God everyday, this helps me believe more.”

Most children see hell as a dark and frightening place. Lauren adds the description of hell as dirty. Those who are bad and betray God live in a dirty place. This feels very human to me, and I wonder how the dirt can be cleaned up. Lauren offers a solution by talking about the creation of rain. God tells the angels: “I think the earth needs to be cleaned up so let’s make rain.” Then Lauren adds: “I think rain is when God is spreading polish on the earth to make it clean. It rains a lot here in Ireland, so it should be clean.”

In heaven, it never rains. In hell, the sun never shines. Ireland, which for Lauren is the center of the earth, is like hell—it gets dirty. And yet like the earth, Ireland can be made clean. If the children of Northern Ireland who fear the darkness and dirt could speak to God, maybe they would ask for a clean slate—a country less divided, less enmeshed in years of troubles.

So many of the children interviewed in Northern Ireland told stories of war and divisiveness, adding their own visions of hope. Eight-year-old Robin, a Protestant, draws a smiling God in a sunny world, then adds: “He doesn’t like people who throw bombs or hurt wee creatures or people who don’t like other religions . . . In heaven, it’s just one church. God likes all creatures great and small.”

Eight-year-old Lisa, a Catholic, sees God’s enemies as: “People who fight and throw bombs and kill and hurt other people.” Those who are good and those who are sorry will go to heaven. Says Lisa: “My mummy is going to go to heaven, because there is nine in our family and she is very good because she looks after us all.”

Aine, a nine-year-old Catholic girl, calls her drawing, *Love Your Enemies Too*. “I think it’s a good title,” says Aine, “because if everyone did love their enemies, then there wouldn’t be the violence that we have.” Aine is open-minded, as are many children, allowing for divergent points of view. She even allows the nonbelievers their due offering the thought that there is no real evidence for God’s existence. At the end of her interview, she adds: “My mummy says there is a God and I believe her. She told me there was a Santa Claus and I know there really isn’t, but somebody had to make the world and I think that was God.”

I was saddened to come across an anti-Semitic reference, that by a ten-year-old Catholic girl, Alicia, who says: “The Jews crucified Jesus because they didn’t believe he was the son of God.” But then she added: “There are a lot of other religions beside Catholic, but God loves them all, even if we don’t.” For me, that is the precisely the point. The *we*, the unholy *we*, is the

culprit. It is the group that sees things through its particular colored lenses, whether orange or green, black or white, Jew or gentile. But *we*, being less than God, struggle and like Alicia, can attempt to see with the clearer vision of love.

On the other side of the war stories is the sense of playfulness I discover time and again re-reading these interviews. The pictures and words of these children are imaginative and witty, sometimes hilarious. Ten-year-old Maïre says that not all dead people go straight to heaven: "You can go to hell or puberty or something." I suppose many preadolescents, wherever they may live, see that in-between state of psycho-sexual development as a kind of purgatory, if not hell. Speaking of hell, seven-year-old Roisin is asked how come the devil doesn't burn in hell? She replies: "Because he is already burnt."

Many of the children muse aloud about God's physical appearance. Hannah at six offers this: "My granny has a picture of God and the picture has a beard." Eunan, five years old, says: "God's tummy is red and that means he is very holy." Seven-year-old Adam adds: "God has black eyes so at night nobody will see him."

Others wonder how God speaks. Philip, ten years old, says: "God speaks in Latin. If he spoke in English, I would ask him if I am on the list for heaven." Still others picture the daily grind in heaven: "God waits at a desk in heaven and an angel checks the book and gives out the halos," says Nadya, ten years old, the daughter of an Irish mother and Iraqi father.

The cast of characters is consistent from child to child: God and Jesus, Satan and angels, and many family figures and children. My favorite characterization of the son of God belongs to five-year-old Megan: "Jesus is God's wee boy."

I am left with the sense that these children are strong—survivors all, unafraid to look at the troubles and try to make sense of all the conflict created by those adults hiding behind their colored banners. In the midst of injustice and conflict, even while admitting a sense of doubt, they are still able to affirm their faith in a God that is good.

Emma, a nine-year-old Catholic girl, discusses at length her belief in guardian angels who watch over and protect people on earth. This idea cuts through so many cultures, especially those where poverty, war and trauma are so close to the surface. At the conclusion of her interview Emma says:

My family, friends, teachers and priests help me to believe in God. When something bad happens to me I begin to question whether God is real or not, but my faith is always strong enough to make me believe in God.

Although I have never visited Northern Ireland, I feel privileged to have

been given an insider's view by these children. The spiritual landscape of Northern Ireland is so infused with the richness of the culture. And despite its divisiveness, it is a culture of storytellers and stories. Some of the youngest storytellers tell some of the best stories which for just a moment offer a glimpse of how things might be on the other side of darkness, in the bright light of day.

## DENMARK

I stay north for awhile to search for other images of God across another sea. Since my adolescence, The North has held a certain allure for me. Without really knowing much more about Nordic mythology than the names of the gods Odin and Thor, I created my own personal mythology of Nordic goddesses with long blond hair and powerful bodies. I must admit that my few visits as a young man to Denmark and Sweden were more about a search for a profane goddess than for a spiritual god.

I later discovered that the Nordic myths were set in their own Mt. Olympus, a dreamlike place called Valhalla. In the stories of Valhalla, my fantasy women were called the Valkyrie. They were fierce warrior virgins, messengers of the great God, Odin. They dressed in helmets, carried spears, and rode fierce horses through the heavens. In full gallop on a warlike mission, their armor glittered across the sky, casting an eerie light that human beings named the Aurora Borealis.

For me, the North was a place of paradox. On the one side was the cold and ice, the long, dark winters and the air of depression hovering over many of the people, the distant powerful women and the giant gods who killed their enemies with blows from a hammer. On the other side was the magnificent visual splendor of the sky and sea, the stark landscapes, the beauty, generosity and openness of the tall, lanky blond Scandinavians in matters of the body and soul. This side offered its own cast of magical characters, especially in the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen. Far from the superheroes of Valhalla, these were diminutive, modest creatures—little elves and mermaids, ducklings and tin soldiers who inhabited a spiritual realm much closer to the everyday lives of ordinary working people.

Denmark was my first exposure to the North. At 25 years old, I was unable to get beyond the allure of Danish pastries in the morning and Hamlet's castle in Elsinore at dusk. There were few blondes in the crowd, certainly none willing to offer me a ride through the Northern sky on their mighty steeds. I remember the great amusement park at Tivoli, all lit up with tens of thousands of electric lights. No god was in sight.

### **The Little Mermaid**

And now, in my middle years, I look at two images of God from young Danish children. The first is from Jeppe, an eight-year-old Protestant boy. A yellow God with reddish-brown hair sits on a cloud, smiling. God is visible from the waist up. His arms and hands are outstretched. Above him is a clear sky. Around him is unencumbered space (**see Plate 11**).

As God, Jeppe offers, simply: "There should not be war on the earth."

This God speaks to a young person on earth—white-skinned, dark-haired, blue-eyed, who agrees that war is bad.

Jeppe's story is simple:

God stands on top of a cloud up in the sky. He feels that it is a beautiful day, and so he says that there should be no more war in the world because he is happy.

Upon further questioning, Jeppe says that the enemy of God is the devil. His job is to torment and burn all the evil people who go down to hell when they die. Jeppe's cosmology deepens as he says that God is not alone in heaven. "Behind him all the angels are flying, all those who have been good."

The interviewer asks Jeppe about God's dictum of peace on earth. He responds with the following:

—The angels agree with almost anything that God says.

—Almost anything?

—If he thinks that there is a person who has been very harsh, then that person dies. Some of the angels think the same, and there is also one of Jesus' disciples who betrayed him.

—Where did he end up—in heaven as a disciple or in hell because he betrayed Jesus?

—I am not quite sure. I think in hell.

—Was he guilty?

—Yes, he was.

When asked: "Do you believe in God?" Jeppe responds: "Yes and no, but sometimes I talk with him when I am sad. I am not quite sure that I believe in him."

I wonder, then, who is the figure Jeppe creates if not God? Jeppe has such a clear idea of heaven, earth, and hell. His god speaks to humans on earth, like himself. In fact, his god looks a lot like humans in Denmark, with light skin, dark hair, and blue eyes. Jeppe's god is happy, open-armed and welcoming. It is a fine day and his mood extends to the moral condition of the world. He seems to exude a sense of generosity banishing all gloom from the spirit and all war from the earth. And yet, as in many of the children's

creations, the spiritual realm is as changeable as their moods. Jeppe may be uncertain about the existence of the happy god, because when Jeppe is happy, he might not need him as much. But when he is sad, then he reaches out for his god.

I wonder if, in Jeppe's mind, the God with whom he speaks when he is sad is sad, too. Perhaps his smile hides his sadness. One thing I recognize is that whether sad or not, Jeppe's god is punitive, as punitive as Odin and Thor who spend their time battling evil giants. Perhaps he is hurt because once he or his son, Jesus, was betrayed. The betrayer was Judas. I wonder if, for Jeppe, the story will stop here or if he will see Judas as a Jew, a murderer, among others, of Christ.

Jeppe calls his drawing *God in Heaven*. Strangely, each time I look at the image, I see a female figure with blond hair and open arms. My fantasy of the Nordic goddess remains, although I now have transformed the cold and muscular part to a warmth, openness and softness. Jeppe's god is like the bronze statue of Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid that sits in Copenhagen Harbor, naked, innocent and perfect, welcoming all pilgrims of the body and spirit to the North. In the Andersen story, she is pure and innocent, a martyr for love, who suffers unspeakable tortures and finally sacrifices her life and earns an immortal soul. She does not feel betrayed and has no need to punish anyone and send them straight to hell.

At eight years old, Jeppe probably also knows how it feels to be betrayed and to have his feelings hurt. It is at these times that he most needs his god. And it is at these times that God's ears are most attuned to human suffering.

### **Away With the Devil**

Karl Emil, at seven, creates a spiritual world more abstract than Jeppe's. His god is a towering figure outlined in red with wings, two stick arms with crosses for hands, a solid square body, robot-like legs and a tiny head with no discernable features. To God's right is a house in the shape of a cloud or a wing, with four windows and no door. Beneath God and his house is a horizontal line which seems to separate God's plane of existence from another below. A circle with a web-like design sits on top of the line. An arrow points downward. A second circle inscribed with a figure similar to God sits below the line with an arrow pointing upward.

Karl Emil has a difficult time taking on the role of God but finally agrees to speak in role about the earth: "It's a good place I have created along with other good creations."

When asked to whom God speaks, Karl Emil responds: "Extinct dinosaurs." As an aside, he adds: "God fetches the dead, sometimes the dead

warriors.”

Karl Emil takes on the role of the extinct dinosaur and responds to God’s vision of a good creation as follows: “Thank you! A thousand times thank you!” This dinosaur, though extinct, is pleased.

Karl Emil’s story is descriptive of his drawing:

It’s God, right, it is his house and these windows don’t let anybody in. A watch tower is on top of the house. There are angels on their way up and devils on their way down.

Karl Emil calls his picture *Away with the Devil*. He believes that God’s enemies are “those who think that God is something stupid, just like the devil.” Finally, when asked whether he believes in the existence of God, Karl Emil responds: “Yes, and also Odin and Thor. I believe in it all.”

I believed in it all as a young child myself. If I had known about Odin and Thor at seven, I’m sure they would have been included in my pantheon of gods. As early as I can remember, I held on to various powerful images that seemed to fuel my conception of God. Like Karl Emil, I was drawn to dinosaurs, especially since they were extinct and thus inhabitants of the more invisible realm of the imagination. And I was drawn to robots and puppets which I saw as supermen. I remember my fascination with giants, not only the largest of the dinosaurs, but also the cyclops in *The Odyssey*, the giant in “Jack and the Beanstalk,” the godlike whale in *Moby Dick* and the giant apes in *King Kong* and *Mighty Joe Young*. Anything large and male and mythic was part of my belief system.

On one occasion, when I was five, my mother rented a lion suit which I was to wear in a school play. My mother’s friend was visiting the house at the time with her four-year-old son, Jimmy. Eager to test the power of my role, I secretly slipped into the costume and crept up on the unsuspecting youngster. I filled myself up with a power I never knew I possessed and let out a roar that brought the poor boy to his knees. Devastated, he clung to his mother and sobbed. For just an instant, I felt a profound sense of omnipotence. And then, I don’t know if it was guilt or genuine remorse, I unmasked myself to reveal a frightened little boy who has just discovered a secret power that was far beyond anything he had ever known. Was this the power of God or of the devil, I must have questioned, because it felt both good and bad at the same time. Or was this simply the power of artifice and make believe? And, if so, was Jimmy just another in the audience taken over by the energy of the performance?

As I grew older, my belief system expanded to include the superheroes of the comics and the serials—Superman and Batman, Captain Marvel and Flash Gordon. As a boy child of the fifties, I shifted my focus to a group of godlike

men, the starting lineup of the Brooklyn Dodgers. My favorite was Duke Snider, a rugged man with a heavy stubble of beard who spoke, surprisingly, with a soft, high-pitch lilt. When I listened to the radio as the Duke approached the plate, I would break into a chant, a kind of silent prayer, so that he would hit a home run. If he did, I knew that I was the cause. If he did not, it was clear that I botched the prayer. Looking back on that moment, I realize how much I personalized my godlike heroes and how I wanted to influence their creations. When they hit, they were angelic.

It was in 1959 that the boys of summer abandoned Brooklyn for California and left the heavens temporarily bereft of angels. The fans were devastated. So was I. But there would be other heroes on other mythic teams to take their places on high—players from teams called the Giants and the Angels, the Astros and Padres. As Karl Emil shows, the ascent and descent of devils and angels is a constant. The universe is in motion. And the earth is good.

As a final thought, I notice that Karl Emil's God has a tiny head. This God, like my hero gods, is all brawn and no brains, hardly the intellectual giant. To this day I still tend to idolize supermen in sports and mythology, though with a healthy touch of adult cynicism. And although my mentors of the past 30 years have tended to be intellectuals, there is something more primal and compelling about the heroic giant with the tiny brain. From one child's point of view, especially one who knows something about dinosaurs, robots, and giants, God is a muscular being with enough power to fetch the dead warriors up from earth and cast the devil away from heaven.

But we musn't forget the other side of this conception—for God is also a selfless mermaid in search of an immortal soul. It is her body, not her brain, that stands in the way. In a Scandinavian culture of powerful bodies and soulful myths, we discover, at least in two modest examples, a robot-like God of massive proportions and a soulful one with half a body. Through them, I have located more clearly my own contradictions of head and heart, body and soul, the competitive part that craves the power of the superman, and the loving part that reaches beyond the body for meaning and connection. Both parts, taken together, reveal a bit more of the mystery of God.

## PORTUGAL

It was time to head south. The first country that came to mind was Portugal where I had lived for several months in 1990 as a Fulbright lecturer at the University of Lisbon. I arrived in 1990 with my wife and newborn daughter, then seven months old. I had been to Spain before and expected



the culture to be similar. But Portugal was more subdued, less fiery. Its recent political history took its people through the right-wing government of Antonio Salazar to the socialist and social democratic governments in power since the 1970s. Portugal appeared to be a third world country with one of the weakest economies in Western Europe. Wages and prices were low, services were poor. And although socialism tended to nudge people away from religion, the church seemed very central and powerful in people's lives.

We arrived in Lisbon in March, just days before Passover. We settled into an apartment and realized that we had never before missed the celebration of Passover with our families. We reasoned that being in a major European capital city, there must be a way to get invited to a Seder, the traditional Passover meal. I found the telephone number of the one listed synagogue in Lisbon and called. The voice on the line was very suspicious. We could come to the synagogue, but we must arrive at a special entrance and pass our passports under the door and if we passed the inspection, we might be allowed in. So this was to be our Passover, I thought, immediately fearing that we would be passed over.

My wife phoned the Israeli consulate which was difficult to locate as it was not listed in the phone directory, and we were informed of a special Seder in a small town nearby. We arrived at a large restaurant within a gated housing complex. The place was cheerful, packed with Jews from all over the world who, like us, had the need to mark this special night. While there, we learned that Portugal once had a flourishing Jewish population, but that during the inquisition in the 16th century, Portuguese Jews were forced to denounce their religion or face certain death. Many took on coded names and continued to celebrate the Sabbath and holy days in secret. The names they took on were varieties of flowers. In recent years, we were told, as people yearned to get back to their roots, some Portuguese with names like Rose were learning that their ancestors were Jews who practiced their forbidden rituals in secret, fearing death and torture if they got caught.

The search for identity by young Portuguese people was in stark contrast to the fear of those living in the shadows of real or imagined inquisitions of the past. It was not just the temple doors that remained shut, but the doors of people's homes. Although we were invited into the homes of several colleagues, who graciously welcomed us, we learned that this was an anomaly in Portugal. We found a closed society during our months in Portugal rooted in a repressive past that seemed difficult to overcome.

Images of God abounded throughout Portugal. Crosses and statues of the saints were everywhere. We visited many of the holy sites. At Fatima, where a vision of the Virgin Mary appeared to three young children, I watched old and young women in black dresses and kneepads crawl the distance around

an enormous open field once blessed by the pope to the holy chapel, perhaps one mile in circumference. With bleeding hands and knees, sobbing, the women approached the altar in a state of ecstasy. From where I stood, these women gave of themselves fully to the divine female presence of God.

Outside the chapel, I watched old and wounded people, many with marked physical disabilities, light large wax candles and offer them to the Virgin Mary, in hopes of a miracle cure. I watched people bring wax and metal body parts—hands and arms and legs and eyes and bellies—offering them, wearing them as talismans, praying for God to reverse their biological destinies.

As I watched, I remained distant, even cynical. The mix of asceticism, piety, and self-immolation kept me far removed. From what, I wondered. Maybe I feared the bondage and the self-denial that inevitably precedes liberation. Or maybe I feared that the God of these tortured souls was more authentic than mine. My people were back in a restaurant drinking wine, singing songs, and telling stories about the liberation of the Jews from bondage. Maybe these festivities were more like the carousing of the impatient Jews of old before the idol of the Golden Calf while Moses communed with God on the mountain top, his spiritual Fatima. I was certain of God's presence at Fatima, but these pilgrims were not people with whom I could identify. I was neither crippled nor old. My limbs and organs were intact. And yet, far removed from my home and my language, in a closed society, in the new roles of father and husband that were hard for me to play, I felt vulnerable and frightened. Although the doors of the restaurant were open, the doors of the temple were shut and I feared that I did not have the right papers. I felt very much separated from God.

Looking back, my months in Portugal were difficult ones. I was very lost spiritually and didn't even know it. I tried hard to do what was expected of me, but fought too much against the cultural realities which I only began to understand as I was about to depart. When I first received the few interviews from Portuguese children, I immediately rejected them as inferior to others. I think I was not ready to revisit my experience in Portugal. But as I took them in and looked at the photographs of the children who responded to the questions about God, I began to relax. I recalled that wherever I went in Portugal, whenever I felt most alienated, I would be jolted out of my mood by the sounds and sights of children. Adults who treated each other indifferently would lavish their warmth and attention on children.

When Georgie was most upset and uncomfortable, creating great distress to her parents, a waiter in a restaurant or a teenage boy or an old woman in the street would pluck her from her carriage or high chair and dance her around the room. In a crowded train, she'd be passed around from person to

person, all laughing and singing. Her foul mood would pass and everybody would be happy for that moment. The children were the healers of the gloom that seemed to sit over people like a heavy cloud.

In this country of religious shrines, exuberant children and quiet desperation, how did the children see God? It was difficult organizing the interviews. Several people whom I knew were not able to help. But finally, I was able to collect four drawings from six- and seven-year-old Catholic children. I notice that in three of the four, God is seen either on or close to earth. In two, God is pictured near his house. All except one feel very domesticated—God is close to home and family.

### **A Very Little Man with Very Big Horns**

The one exception, done by the most outgoing child, seven-year-old José, shows God in heaven, sitting on a throne above five clouds (**see Plate 12**). He is accompanied by two angels. A line divides the paper in two. On the bottom is a scene from hell. The devil in red, with huge ears and tail, stands near a fiery caldron. One of his minions is present, as are three burning fires. When he completes the top part of his drawing, José exclaims: “God seems to look like a girl!”

In his story, José tells how God instructs the two angels to make the sun because “It’s very cold on earth.” He identifies the angels as sons of God. Then, he focuses upon the devil, drawing him and speaking about him in much greater detail than God. The horns are large and very sharp. They have no color because, says José, they are white. He is “a very little man with very big horns. Some people think he is not that ugly.” The figure to the devil’s left is a little devil, the hellish equivalent of an angel. The caldron pot serves “to roast the dead.”

I note that for José the devil seems more powerful and desirable than God. God is female; the devil is male. This is a culture that preaches sexual equality even as the women work a full day, then come home at midday to cook for their husbands and children. I wonder who has the power—God or devil, female or male? In my life, both have exerted a strong attraction. In my struggle with the divine feminine, the spiritual power of women, I have often found myself confused as to my responsibilities as a pilgrim and as a man.

I also note José’s sense of the world as a cold place. For me, Portugal, a temperate land of warm sun and sparkling sea, also felt cold. The sun certainly provided enough warmth. Yet I often felt under the spell of the fires of hell, like a little man with big ears, trying desperately to decipher the foreign sounds and images. When in that place, there were no women in sight.

### **God Is Our Friend**

The least articulate child, seven-year-old Joana, brings God down to earth in her drawing. God, in green robe and yellow beard, stands next to his house with a door, two high windows and no roof. He is saying: "This is where I live." Below the house are seven smiling children with open arms, all gesturing like God. Above the house are three clouds and a bright yellow sun, all smiling. Joana avoids most questions, offering minimal information. We do learn that the seven children come to God because they want to talk to him. God is their friend and so Joana gives her drawing this title. Joana refers to the house as the house of God, making it clear that the house does not have a roof. And one final thing—Joana says that all in the picture are happy—the sun and clouds, God and the children.

It would certainly appear from the interview and drawing that all are happy. There is a precision and order to the drawing. All the figures have open arms and open smiles. Two things, however, concern me. One is Joana's reticence. She hardly responds at all to the interviewer's questions. The other is the fact that God's house is without a roof. Both might mean very little, having to do with Joana's mood and temperament. Yet, I wonder whether these two facts are meaningful? God speaks but the children do not. God's house has no roof but a door that is shut and windows that are too high up to see through. How does one get into the house of God? I am reminded of my experience at the synagogue: "Bring your passport and push it under the door," I was told.

The only way in appears to be through the roof, and the only way to get there appears to be to fly up. I realize that the picture frightens me. It could be that the children all lined up with smiley faces have come to visit God because they have died. Perhaps Joana has created a picture of heaven, a place where all is good and everyone is God's friend, a place beyond language. As such, it is a lovely fantasy, even though I hold onto the chilling possibility that this is about the death of seven children who can only truly be God's friend if they leave their earthly homes and enter his spiritual domain.

Seven-year-old Rita also draws a house of God with door, two windows, a chimney, and a roof. As in Joana's picture, Rita draws God floating in the air beside the house. Below are not children but flowers, grass, and a tree. Interestingly, Rita's interview brings up the subject of death. This time, the one who dies is God. Rita tells this story:

Once upon a time there was an angel who met God in the air and saw him dead. The angel took him home then went to pick flowers to put in his house. God woke up. They were happy.

I wonder whether Christian children associate God with death because of

the central image of the crucifixion of Christ? Or could it be, in addition, that in traditional Catholic countries like Portugal, so many images of death and martyrdom are present. I recall, for example, a trip to the city of Évora visiting a chapel whose walls were lined with the skulls and bones of hundreds of monks. Or is it that a discussion of God naturally leads children to think about their own mortality or about the death of a relative who might be a stand-in for God, as was my grandfather.

Seven-year-old Ana Carolina brings me back down to earth with a family scene. A mother, father and daughter stand on the lawn. A fourth figure is present, but is unclear in its form. Ana Carolina refers to the figures as God, Maria, and Jesus. Maria is God's girlfriend and Jesus is God's son. The fourth figure appears to be one of God's enemies. The trinity of father, mother, and son is typical for many Christian children. God is a family man and the celestial family mirrors the nuclear family.

It is not surprising that children from a predominantly traditional culture see the divine as a mirror of the earthly. On the surface of the drawings and stories of these Portuguese children, all is in place. But in the culture, as the children grow up or as outsiders over the age of ten appear with their different ways of seeing God, that order is threatened. God is present to the children interviewed, very near his house. But the door is closed and it could be that in order to get in, visitors need the proper passport. And it could be, too, that once in, those same visitors never leave.

## SPAIN

My first trip to Spain was during the last years of the Franco dictatorship in the early 1970s. There was a strong police presence wherever I traveled. Despite the controls, the Spanish people I met were exuberant. Restaurants and cafes were open throughout the night and the street noise made it impossible to sleep. As in Portugal, churches were everywhere, as were visceral images of Christianity. All the years of dictatorship by Franco did nothing to quell the sensual and spiritual appetites of the Spaniards.

I collected several hundred interviews from Spanish children, all Catholic, ranging in age from seven-12. What struck me most is the political consciousness of these children. So many of the children present a moral God in social and political terms. His focus is on war and peace, respect for the environment, and social problems like drugs and violence. The new Spain has become a relatively free country, economically sound, an important member of the European Union. A burgeoning political and ecological awareness is clearly present in the school system, and these children used the

interviews as a means of expressing that awareness.

### The Carpenter

I found the drawings of the Spanish children to be particularly beautiful and whimsical. One, drawn in pencil by eight-year-old Adriana, shows Jesus in his carpenter shop. Adriana confuses God and Jesus. In her story: “God is at his carpentry and he has an idea. He thought to have a son of him and his wife. And it is for that God is dead.”

In Adriana’s mind, Jesus does not die for the sins of humankind, but God dies so that Jesus can be born. The father dies to give life to the son. Adriana clearly expresses the natural, if not supernatural, order. Death continues to be an important theme in the children’s drawings and stories.

Like Adriana, eight-year-old Guadalupe sees God as a worker. In her drawing, God is a woodcutter (**see Plate 13**). He is with his son, Jesus. There is a path leading from the worktable to their house. In the house is a table and chair and a yellow illuminated light bulb. Above the house is a large yellow sun.

The gods of Adriana and Guadalupe are strong and robust. As an interesting touch, Guadalupe draws breasts peeking through the overalls of an otherwise masculine, bearded God. I note that the mother, Maria, is missing. She doesn’t even appear to be in the house. Perhaps God is both father and mother. There is a clear path from work to home. The home is illuminated with the light of the sun and perhaps of God. There is an order and wholesomeness to this drawing, yet also a mystery. What is Guadalupe trying to say?

Guadalupe’s interview offers no hints. She says very little and what she does say is unrelated to her drawing. As I sit with the drawing, I think of the connection I had with my father. For the most part, my father was distant, working long days at his place of business, which he always called *The Place*, and seeking to shut out all problems at home. We bonded in two ways—one, through the stories he told me about his experiences in World War II and about the equally brutal battles in the family business; and two, through working together at *The Place*. I loved seeing my father as a competent salesman and boss. His workbench was a rectangular cutting table in a small men’s clothing shop. His tools were a pearl-handled pocket knife, yellow tape measure, and square piece of white chalk. As small and reticent as he was at home, he was the opposite at *The Place*. Working beside him on Saturdays and school holidays was exhilarating. I was so small and he was so large. And after work, we would drive home as the sun was setting, along the path leading from *The Place* to our modest, well-lighted house.

My father and I never went to synagogue together nor did we talk about God, but in those days when I was young and he would let me play at working in The Place, I would watch him sell suits off the rack like so many perfectly cut logs. In those moments, I felt a very special connection to him. And that connection helped forge a safe path from work to home.

### **Don't Be Cruel**

These childhood memories were centered in the 1950s. My burgeoning passion was not religion but rock and roll music, and my god was Elvis Presley. I was particularly surprised to find Elvis in a drawing by seven-year-old Alejandro. Alejandro shows a small God in green speaking to a larger figure with long hair in blue. God says: "Hello, Esbrin Pelis." Pelis responds: "Do you want my record?" I am not at all surprised that a pop idol is seen as a god or his companion. But I am surprised that the one who sees it this way is a seven-year-old boy from a Spanish town far removed from Memphis, Tennessee.

Many years ago, on a spiritual journey through Europe, I paused at a local country pub far in the North. It was getting late and everyone seemed bored and tired. Suddenly, guitars materialized and the music galvanized the patrons. Feeling lighthearted, I sang an old American rock song, "Don't Be Cruel." After my brief performance, a young man well into his cups approached me and said: "The King is dead. My father, the King, is dead!" He was very emphatic and I told him how sorry I was. But he kept on, urging me to listen. I was about to walk away when he stopped me and sobbed: "The King of Kings. My Lord. Elvis. He's dead!"

I was unaware that this King of Kings had penetrated the consciousness of a people in such remote places. At the time, I was an unwitting prophet of sorts, spreading the message of Elvis. This omnipresent figure carried a universal message. One way to read it was: "Don't Be Cruel." This rock star, arrayed in a thousand sparkling sequins, was once the brightest in the firmament. And in a remote Heartbreak Hotel of a pub, miles away from home, his death was mourned long into the night.

In other drawings by Spanish children, God talks to ducks and sheep and camels, all of whom he offers an Elvis-like message—don't be cruel to a heart that's true. In one very touching interview, Maria, an 11 year old, tells this story:

Once upon a time, God was taking care of the sheep and the devil came and killed all 30 sheep, and God stayed there crying and the devil was laughing.

Maria's God is an old man wearing a skullcap. The very cruel devil is encased in a red haze. God seems so very human and vulnerable, his heart

broken, tears running down his face.

Another very touching story is told by Cynthia, also 11. In her picture, a girl kneels at her bed in prayer. God stands over the bed and tells her: "Don't ever leave the convent." She replies: "I will never leave the convent, because when I pray I always see you." Beside the bed is the devil, envisioned as an animal with four legs. He holds a trident and is enveloped in flame.

Cynthia identifies the girl as St. Rosary. There are, in fact, two strings of rosary beads in the drawing. She tells this story:

St. Rosary was at the convent and every time she prayed, she met God. But one day God didn't go to visit her. She thought that God did not love her anymore, but that was not true. It was the devil who was with God. He wanted to destroy God but St. Rosary began to pray until God went to her room and told her: "St. Rosary, I must leave you because if I don't, the devil will take heaven away from me and transform it to hell." So all the female saints in the convent and St. Rosary summoned God and told him to come back to her. And all the female saints saved God and the devil was destroyed and heaven today is safe.

Cynthia, like Maria, portrays God as vulnerable to the cruelty of the devil. She also portrays him as incomplete. Could it be that he is incomplete because he is masculine, and that God can only be made whole and powerful with the help of the feminine? All will be well in heaven as the male and female parts of the godhead defeat the devil.

In the song that Elvis made famous, the lyric goes:

Don't be cruel to a heart that's true.  
I don't want no other love,  
Baby, it's just you I'm thinking of.

Back on earth, in the convent, St. Rosary and God will be reunited—true heart to true heart.

### **The True Flowing**

Shanira at 11 echoes the motif of truth. In her story, there is a heart that is true but rather than belonging to God, this heart is found in nature. Shanira envisions God talking to a river. In her drawing, God and the river greet one another. The river speaks from a face in the shape of a red heart (**see Plate 14**). Shanira's version of God is quite earthy and in some respects pagan. This is her story:

God went to walk by the gods' Mt. Olympus and found a river. God drank the water and the river greeted him. They began to talk. God said he was very worried because there was a lot of bad in the world. The river said he shouldn't worry, that sooner or later there would be peace and people



would live happier. God stood up and went away thinking about the river's words. He knew that the river was right, that some day the bad would be good and there will be peace in the world.

Shanira calls her story *The True Flowing*. In thinking about how Shanira sees God, I am again struck by the thought that God is vulnerable and in need of reassurance. It is not God that can transform cruelty and bring about peace. Somehow, implies Shanira, it will happen, as the river has prophesied.

In this example, God is influenced very much by nature. Rather than the conventional biblical revelation of God to man, here nature reveals itself to God. And, interestingly, the revelation takes place near the classical Mt. Olympus, the domain of the Greek gods. This reference to the non-Christian gods is somewhat unusual in a traditional Catholic country. On the other hand, an understanding of God as existing in many human, nature, and animal forms is commonplace throughout the world.

When I consider the meaning of *The True Flowing*, I think about the spiritual power of nature and the easy confluence not just of waters but of the natural and the supernatural. And I think about the metaphors evoked by Shanira's drawing. The river has a heart. God has a voice. The heart of the river has a voice. There is a great sense of motion in Shanira's drawing. She presents a hopeful vision. "Don't worry," she seems to say, "sooner or later things will change." As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus tells us, perhaps from high on Mt. Olympus, one cannot step into the same river twice. The cruelty of war and intolerance, which have a way of turning up time and again and baffling even God, will give way to peace and love. The river has wisdom and feeling and flow. The only thing certain is change.

### **The Protective Cover of God**

Marta, also 11, focuses on the social, political, and ecological realms. She draws God as a large, powerful figure standing over a dome within which are four children of different cultures and races. On either side of God are images of cruelty and sadness—a gun and syringe, a broken heart and tears. Each image is marked with an x, negating its power. Below the children are mountains.

Marta envisions God as talking to the heads of state of every country in the world and urging them to protect the environment. She tells this story:

God protects the good and bad ones, black and yellow, red and white. He rejects sorrow, broken hearts, war, injustice and weapons. God has us under a protective shell. He takes care of us, protecting us from everything. Unfortunately, sometimes people resist and disobey and invent new ways to be cruel.

Marta presents a more powerful God than the one created by Maria, Cynthia, and Shanira. How different he is from the gods that see other faiths or religions as enemies. The enemies of this God are not people, but their destructive and anti-social acts—war and addition, intolerance and abuse of the earth. This God has the power to protect people from such acts by encasing them within a shell. Marta even calls her picture *The Protective Cover of God*.

Yet I wonder how effective it is to protect people by means of isolation. If this is God's method, just how strong is he? By denying a place for the negative forces in the human psyche—heartbreak, for example—does one actually help a young person grow up to be a tolerant and loving adult? I note that at the end of her story, Marta recognizes the futility of confinement. When confined, some people resist and disobey and in doing so, carry out the acts that lead to heartbreak. If this were a less forbidding God, perhaps the people would be less inclined to resist if not God's protection, then at least God's love.

### The Lost Angel

Before I leave Spain, I want to tell a moving story, offered by a ten-year-old girl named Judith. It is about a lost angel:

Once upon a time an angel was lost and he arrived at the star of God. He asked God: "Lord, I am lost. What way must I choose?" God said: "The way of love."

In my mind, Judith offers one of the most profound ways of seeing God. Whether vulnerable or not, whether hidden or revealed, whether in the form of nature or animal or human, God is one who offers a way to those who are lost.

I end this chapter by sharing a story I heard told by a rabbi at the memorial service for a friend who died young, leaving behind a wife and two young children. It is about the great opera composer, Puccini who, as an old man, was attempting to complete his great work, *Turandot*. Knowing that he was near death and might not live to complete his work, he turned to his students and said: "If I should die before the work is finished, you must complete it for me." The students reluctantly agreed. Shortly thereafter Puccini died, the work unfinished.

In keeping with their covenant, the students completed the great opera. When it was first performed, one of the students, Arturo Toscanini, conducted. The opera was going splendidly when Toscanini suddenly stopped the performance and turned to the audience. "This, dear audience," he said, "is as far as the master wrote." The audience was stunned. Many

thought the performance was over. But then, just as poignantly, Toscanini took up the baton and said: “But we, his students, completed the opera at his request.” When the piece was over, the audience was deeply moved.

When a star is lost, a guiding light in our lives, we become sad and lonely. We can easily lose our way. The hope is that we have learned so well from our master that we can complete his work. What we learn on one level may be a skill or an art. But on a higher level, we learn to trust that we can complete the journey ourselves. That is the way of teaching and learning. That is the way of love.

## AUSTRIA

Austria is in many ways a transitional country located somewhere between East and West. It is a charming country of great natural beauty and urban sophistication. So much of its recent history concerns a separation from the effects of World War II and an attempt to distance itself from the Nazi times. My visits in Austria have been few, although I have sampled the very traditional culture of the mountainous countryside as well as the high culture of the city. I have listened to Mozart in Salzburg, eaten Linzer torte and marveled at the 18th century architecture in Vienna, sampled new wine and slept in 200-year-old hand carved beds in the countryside.

I was also present in the early days of the 1970s when the first legal abortion clinic opened in Vienna. Having that experience introduced me to a central paradox in Austrian culture—on the one hand, this is a country of progressive ideas, of Freud and Wittgenstein, Egon Schiele and Gustav Mahler; on the other, this is a place of unbending political conservatism.

At the turn of the millennium, the far-right Freedom Party, formerly headed by Jörg Haider, was admitted into the government. The Catholic Church maintains a strong influence on the lives of most Austrians. I wondered how children would see God in this birthplace of classical music, psychoanalysis, and the failed painter who would become leader of the Third Reich and architect of the Final Solution of the Jews.

### **The Loving God Warms Himself and Smiles**

The first interview in Austria is with Fabian, a six-year-old. Fabian is born to unconventional Catholics who have questioned the authority of church and state on many occasions. In one act of independence, they decided not to baptize their son. In Austria, Fabian is thus considered to be officially *konfessionslos*, literally without confession, a reality that can cause him bureaucratic and identity problems as he grows older. Being removed from the

church may affect his status within the conventional community and lead others to question his morality and competence. Fabian's father informs the interviewer that Fabian knows nothing about God. His mother, however, tells a different story. Although God is not spoken about in the house, Fabian confesses that sometimes he prays. Fabian lives near the countryside and attends the local kindergarten.

Fabian draws two pictures. The first drawing is of a large God who lives in the sky. A bank of clouds is above him and he stands facing front. His round face is attached to his square body by a small neck. One arm and two legs extend from the body. He has yellow curly hair, large eyes, and a broad smile. He has a robot-like appearance, and he seems to be looking to one side.

The second drawing is of a domestic God inside of his triangular house warming himself by the fire. God's head is a circle with black curly hair that rests on top of a rectangular body. There is no neck and no visible limbs. God's body seems to be facing the fire although his head faces front. As in the first drawing, God is smiling. Gray smoke rises from the yellow fire and exits through the red brick chimney.

Fabian's story is as follows:

This is God (first drawing), and he looks up to the sky where he lives. And here (second drawing) he lives in a small chapel. Here he sits and here is the oven and this is the chimney hood and here the smoke comes brown first and then it comes gray. This is the glow and the fire and the wood.

Fabian sees God as a country gentleman, sitting on his comfortable chair near a warm fire. Fabian describes the mechanism of the oven in some detail and remarks that the color of the smoke is due to the quality of the wood, with bad wood underneath and good wood on top.

As Fabian is describing the wood, the interviewer asks: "What does God do with the bad wood?"

—He burns it so he can be nicely warm.

—The bad wood?

—With the bad wood and then with the good wood. He collects the wood that lies in the forest, takes a basket, puts wood in it and puts the wood in the oven.

—Does he say anything while doing this?

—No, he just laughs like in the picture, because he is happy.

Fabian refers to God as the loving God, in German, *der liebe Gott*.

Fabian says that God's enemies are the devil and the evil spirits who live under the earth. He elaborates:

They are under the earth and have a fire, and they also have forks, very big

forks that look like pitchforks. And the devils, they go up and take bad people and throw them into the fire.

“And what is the difference between the God’s and the devil’s fire? Is it the same fire or is it different?” asks the interviewer.

“It’s a different fire,” replies Fabian. “There’s a lot of good wood with the devils.”

Finally, the interviewer asks Fabian to provide titles for the pictures. He names the first *The Loving God Is Warming Himself by His Feet*. He calls the second *The Loving God Looks Up and Smiles*. Fabian offers an afterthought: “God has his hand in the pocket of his trousers like I often do.”

Fabian has depicted three spiritual levels—heaven, earth, and hell. His God with one hand in his pocket lives in the heavens. He is a casual God, a happy God. He seems transcendent and carefree in his heavenly home. The second figure is the God who lives in his earthly chapel which has all the accouterments of a small house in the Austrian countryside with wood-burning stove, a chair, and a bench. This God, however, is reminded of his enemies by the very fire that keeps him warm. The third unseen figures are God’s enemies, the devils with pitchforks who live underground and stoke their fire by tossing in the bodies of bad people from the earth above.

I have two associations with Fabian’s images. One is negative, associated with the holocaust. The image of the devils feeding bodies of bad people into the ovens is just too reminiscent of the crematoria set up by the Nazis to burn the bodies of the Jews. As I child, I had a dread of large ovens and furnaces. I could never listen to the story of Hansel and Gretel without a twinge of fear, even when the one who gets tossed into the oven is the wicked witch. In my visits to Germany and later Austria, I was always drawn to the beauty of the old porcelain stoves that often served as centerpieces to a kitchen or living room but at first glance sent a small shudder through my bones.

The second association is a more positive one and pertains to a culture and religious experience far removed from my own. When traveling in Taiwan, I was curious to discover large stoves on the street outside of Taoist temples. People would approach the stoves with paper money and other paper facsimiles of such worldly possessions as houses, cars, and furniture. In ritual fashion, they would burn the paper in the oven and watch as the smoke rose heavenward. Later, I discovered that through the ritual the celebrants were communicating with their deceased relatives, sending them the money and worldly goods they might need to make their spiritual existence more comfortable. There seemed to be, from the point of view of the Taoist, a continuity between the two planes of existence.

I note again that in Fabian’s creations, it is God’s enemies who burn the bodies, not God himself. Fabian’s Smiling God is quite benign. I am as drawn

to him as to a beautiful Austrian country farmhouse with an old stove in the central room and a fragrant featherbed and goose down pillow in the bedroom welcoming me to rest after a day of wandering through the cold mountain air. When I ask myself, “Why is this God smiling?” my answer is that all appears so well in this country of pure air and rosy faces, of old traditions and classical music, of hearty food and splendid architecture. But when I look at the domestic God burning wood in his cozy oven, I question the appearance of heaven on earth. This God on earth is just too close to the ovens of the underworld for comfort.

And so I rediscover Austria through Fabian’s images. This was, after all, the land where Freud discovered the hidden, repressed demons of the unconscious mind. Fabian reminds me that this land of high art and progressive ideas, of legalized abortion and a woman’s right to choose, also embraced Nazism and genocide, the killing not of unwanted fetuses but of fully grown people who worshiped a God different from the acceptable one, whether the thousand year Reich or even the apparently benign figure who lives up in the sky, one hand in his trouser pocket, smiling.

### **God in the Gate of Clouds**

Anja is a little older than Fabian. At eight, she comes from a more traditional Catholic family and lives in the city. Her God, dressed in purple, looks like a hand puppet with no discernable hands and feet of its own. Anja’s God has a pink face with a bright smile, a wisp of long gray hair and a bright yellow halo. God seems to be floating within a window frame or doorway which is surrounded by blue clouds.

Anja identifies two characters—God and the angels. God summons the angels and tells them: “Fly to earth and make people happy.” God and the angels live in heaven. When the interviewer asks Anja about the enclosure around God, she replies: “This is a gate of clouds and God is behind it. He lives in a big hall with the angels.”

Anja names her drawing, *God in the Gate of Clouds* and says that God exits through the gate to look for the angels. He calls the angels and sends them to earth to “make people happy.”

Anja says: “When people fight a lot and don’t share, there is war. The angels make sure that people are nice to one another. They make them share. That’s what God wants from the angels.”

In her childlike fashion, Anja offers a direct understanding of war. War is a conflict between selfish people. But in the spiritual domain, all is calm, enclosed, lovely to contemplate. It is the mortal domain below, harboring the potential for war, that is in need of help. God has the ability to mediate

between the two worlds by sending down his angels whose mission is to transform human anger and selfishness, to beat swords into plowshares.

When I contemplate Anja's picture, the first thing I notice is a single figure that looks more like an angel than like God. As I look further, this angelic figure appears to be a puppet that doesn't have any life of its own. Could this be a disguise of God, I wonder, who remains hidden behind his gate of clouds?

Anja brings me to the mystery of the puppet, an inanimate object given life by the human hand. In extreme cases, as in certain ritual practices in Indonesia, puppets are considered to be possessed by their puppet masters. Sometimes they are even buried along with their deceased puppeteers.

I think of the sustained power of puppets in religious rituals and in the early lives of children. In many Eastern religions, they are present in temples as manifestations of the divine, presumably manipulated by the hand of God. And even in traditional Catholic countries, puppet-like displays of saints, fully painted and adorned in bright robes, can be seen in churches as lifeless reminders of the eternal spiritual life.

Shakespeare might have gotten it wrong in characterizing human beings as the playthings of the gods. Perhaps God is as much puppet as puppeteer, an object to breathe our life into. It may be that we, as human beings, hold within us the divine touch and word which gives form to the holy. And so through my encounter with Anja's God, I discover a new vision—that of God as puppet, a thing of selflessness and joy. If we are the puppeteers, then it is up to us to give our puppets the simple word of peace: Share.

### ***Dominik Dominus***

Dominik just turned four at the time of his interview. He comes from a Catholic middle-class family. Within the six months preceding the interview, he experienced two significant losses. The first was that his parents divorced and his father left home. The second was the death of his 19-year-old uncle. The latter is the occasion for Dominik to learn about God. It seems that his uncle was discovered dead under a bridge. The cause of death was unknown and might have been accident, foul play, or suicide. After the funeral, his mother tells him that his uncle's body is now under the earth but his soul is in the sky with God. His mother reports that Dominik finds it difficult to understand the contradiction of a man being in two places at once and settles for the more down to earth explanation that his uncle is in the ground. This understanding is reinforced as Dominik accompanies his mother on her many visits to her brother's grave.

After some preliminary conversation to break the ice, the interviewer asks

Dominik to draw a picture of God. Dominik responds by writing his name on the paper several times as he repeatedly verbalizes: “Dominik, Dominik, Dominik.” He adds: “I’m writing my name. That’s my name.” And then: “What’s your name? I’ll write your name.” The interviewer attempts to move Dominik back to the task of depicting God, but he resists. She believes that the subject of God is linked to death and loss which are burdens too heavy for this four-year-old to bear. At that moment, Dominik’s mother enters and tries to help him focus, but again, he deflects all attempts at rendering God. Later, his mother tells the interviewer that she would try to teach Dominik about God by reading stories from the Old Testament, but he clearly was disinterested.

The interview ends as the mother asks her son to tell the interviewer about his uncle. Dominik offers simply: “My uncle died. That’s very sad.”

“Is there anything else you want to say, Dominik?” asks the mother again.

Dominik responds nonverbally by propping his five fingers on the edge of the table and suddenly dropping his arm. Then, abruptly, he leaves the room. The interviewer reports that she felt helpless at that moment. Nonetheless she had an insight. Dominik comes from *Dominus*, the Latin for God. Dominik’s name means God and by writing his name on the paper and reciting it aloud, Dominik does, in a sense, complete the task of drawing God.

But where is this God? It seems clear that God is associated with his uncle’s mysterious death. Yet the logic of God as holding his uncle’s soul in heaven seems to escape Dominik as he has more direct proof that his uncle rests in a grave under the ground. Is God with his uncle? Is his uncle with God? Or is God separate from his uncle, present only in a name on a paper—*Dominus* also known as Dominik? Is God with Dominik? Or is Dominik God?

I am brought back to the image of Mackey at five drawing the red-faced God and taping it to his shirt. At that moment, at least from my point of view, he and God are one. For Dominik, who has trouble resolving the location of his dead uncle and, consequently, the location of God, perhaps the only place to turn is toward himself. It is there where he can find the one certainty he knows and write, simply: “That is my name.”

I associate Dominik’s statement with the Hebrew God who tells Moses in Exodus: “I am that I am.” In the orthodox Jewish tradition, it is forbidden to utter the name of God. Instead, one refers to God as *Hashem* which means *the name*.

So how does this little boy who sits with the loss of father and uncle, who sits with his mother’s pain of losing a husband and a brother, see God? God is not seen. God does not yet exist outside of the bereaved four-year-old boy. He is a character in a book of little interest, one who speaks in riddles. But a hint of his presence may be found on the inside where he and the young boy



share a common identity: Dominik-Dominus. In Dominik's existence, God lives.

I think of all the people in the world who have been named after God and God's holy family of prophets and apostles—of Mary and Moses, of Mohammed and Abraham, of Christina and Athena and Judah, of Jesus and Dominick. In naming their children, I imagine the parents hoped their children would develop in the image of a loving and righteous God.

Names have implications. Dominik at four is certainly unaware of the particular blessing and burden of his name, even as he is unaware of the spiritual nature of God. But when he grows up, how will he bear this burden and this blessing? Will he become more or less of his divine namesake? Will he separate out from God, as we all seem to do as we grow up? Will there be a time when Dominik understands and accepts his mother's belief that body and soul are different and when the body dies, the soul is released and resides forever with God? Or will this little *Dominus* learn to see God differently?

I am left with one more response to Dominik's God and that concerns the need we have to explain death through the figure of God. In this instance, Dominik's mother explains death as a journey toward God. For Dominik, death is about the burial of the body. My first awareness of death also occurred at the age of four. At that time, I was visiting a large building which later I learned was a hospital. My mother was inside visiting her dying friend, Al. My father sat with me on the lawn outside, teaching me how to play a game called Land. I am intrigued because it involves a real pocket knife. My father flips the knife into the air and when it sticks into the ground, he draws a box in the earth with the sharp blade, a boundary that defines his land. Excitedly, I toss the knife in the air again and again, occasionally hitting my target and staking my claim to a piece of the earth.

When my mother returns, all is not well. My game is interrupted and I am sad. I don't quite understand what's wrong and why we have to leave. Later, I find out that my parents' closest friend is dying of cancer. He is young and exuberant, with the whole post-war world at his feet. I have no recollection of his death, only my parents' anxiety and regret that such promise has been so unfairly cut down.

Like Dominik, I did not associate this death with God although someone must have told me that Al was in heaven. In my early years, no grown-up ever spoke to me about death. I only heard the word death in discussions about the holocaust. But those discussions were abstract and removed from my personal experience. What I remember most clearly is a vision of the bogeyman, tall and thin with a large sack on his back, slightly hunched over, always alone, walking the dark streets of our small city in search of children who had wandered off from their mothers. I imagined that in his sack were

the bodies of the captured children who were about to be dragged off to some horrible lair for eternity. The bogeyman was Death and when he was lurking, God was nowhere to be found.

For many believers, God exists to make sense of death and assure them of a transcendent spiritual existence beyond the body and the earth. For some, God becomes the place to go when one dies. Dominik does not see God this way, nor did I when I learned of Al's death. For us, God was more remote. I felt his presence not in hospitals or cemeteries, but in houses of worship. I knew he was in the temple with my grandfather and his friends on Saturday mornings. I knew he was somewhere in the holy water that I saw in the church on my way to cub scout meetings. And I knew that he was in heaven with Moses and the other sages, far away from me. But in the shadowy streets of the city and in the freshly dug plots of ground in the cemetery, he was absent. For the four-year-old that is Dominik and for the four-year-old that was me, God and Death were separate and neither was to be seen on the other's turf.

### The Red and the Black

When children think about God, the shadowy sides of the supernatural world often come to the fore. Many of the children speak readily not only about death, but also about the devil, also known as Satan and Lucifer. Many children make sense of the world in terms of polar opposites. An experience is either good or bad; people are nice or mean; the weather is either hot or cold. When thinking about spiritual matters, most children visualize the good God in heaven and the bad devil in hell.

The final interview in Austria is with a six-year-old girl named Hannah. She comes from a nonobservant family and, like Fabian, is *konfessionslos*. Her drawing of God is quite colorful and fills an entire page. Two round suns are on either side of his head. His gown is a rainbow of muted colors, each color representing a season. God is a healer who sends his son, Jesus, to another country, like Greece, to help people who are sick and needy. But what is most remarkable about Hannah's God is to be seen in a second picture where she draws her vision of hell (**see Plate 15**). God appears as a black oval, an egg caught up in the flames of hell. God's opposite number, the devil, is red. For Hannah, black is good and red is bad.

Hannah's vision of hell is frightening:

The devil goes and gets the people and tells them: "Come with me. I'll show you something." And then he forces them to work for him and to be his slaves. They bring him food and he lies in his bed and he says: "Do this and do that!" And they are exhausted, and they still have to work because if they can't anymore, they will die.

We learn that God tries to help the people:

The devil lives in a cave in which everything is red. And then God makes himself black and the devil is scared of black. And then the devil says: "Help! Help" And then the slaves run away because he doesn't notice. And then the devil has to look for new ones.

Hannah completes the story by saying that this scenario is played out over and over again. God makes himself black and frees the slaves. The devil finds new people and forces them into slavery in his red cave. God returns as a black egg and frees them and the cycle is repeated.

In looking at Hannah's drawing, I see a red devil with horns and blood dripping from his mouth, surrounded by flames. His slave is a girl with long curly hair. Above them is the black egg that is God. In part I am again brought back to the horrors of the holocaust or to the biblical enslavement of the Jews in Egypt. This is familiar territory for me in the German-speaking countries. And yet, when I think of Hannah's God, I get another picture entirely. He is a rescuer, a hero. He is unrelenting in going where he is needed or sending his son. He will save the sick and the oppressed even if he is powerless to ultimately break the cycle of exploitation and evil.

This is a God for all seasons, as we see in Hannah's explanation of God's colorful gown. Hannah offers a vision of hope and also one of mystery. Why is God who is so colorful in one drawing, black in the second? Why the egg shape? I think of the fragile Humpty Dumpty whose fall left him permanently disabled. But this God is powerful and whole. Within his shell, protecting him from harm, is the substance of new life. Why black? Could it be a disguise? a sign of power? Or maybe it is, in Hannah's mind, the opposite of red, an antidote to the slave camp in hell. The archetypal bad guy in black has been transformed. Black is good and in this otherworldly place of moral contrast, it shines. The red and the black become the primary moral colors that, at least to me, reflect the paradox in Austrian culture.

As I leave Austria, I take with me the highly imaginative, evocative images of Fabian, Anja, Dominik, and Hannah of God as peasant, as puppet, as counterpart to death and devil, as rescuer of slaves. I try to push aside my associations with the holocaust. But then as I wander into more dangerous territory, I fear that they will return. My next trip is to Germany.

## GERMANY

I vividly recall a homework assignment given to my class when I was ten. Our teacher provided a blank map of the world and asked us to fill in the names of 30 countries and cities. That night I entered all 30 within the

borders of Germany. Ten years later, on my first journey far away from home, I found myself in a youth hostel in Kiel, a far northern German city. I sat on a landing watching in fearful fascination a group of 30 German school-children below singing a patriotic song in strict unison.

Twenty years after my experience with the blank map of the world, I married a German woman and spent holidays and summers wandering through Germany's lush forests, well-preserved medieval towns, and concentration camps.

My marriage ended in divorce. My obsession with Germany lingered, although somewhere around the time that the Berlin Wall came tumbling down, I began to feel less of its grip. At that time, it occurred to me that I may have found what I was looking for in Germany. While in Germany, my Nazi detector was constantly activated, flashing wildly when in the presence of any ordinary *burgher* whose words smacked of anti-Semitism. The most shocking expression I heard was *bis zur vergasung*. In German, the full sentence is: *Ich habe auf Dich gewartet bis zur vergasung*. It was used to express annoyance when waiting for someone who was late for an appointment. One understanding of the expression is this: *What kept you so long? I've been waiting for you as long as it takes to gas the people*.

I have been told by my German-speaking friends that this expression, referring, some would say, to the Nazi gassing of the Jews, is rarely used anymore. Some see it as a military term predating the Nazis, some as a more idiomatic expression having to do with the extermination of vermin. All I could do was hope that the children of the present generation would separate themselves in word and deed from their virulently anti-Semitic past.

I wanted so much to see these good Christian people who could use language so painfully as demons. But I found it hard to find the devil's horns poking out of their skulls. So many times in Christian and Muslim cultures I heard the reverse, that is, the folk superstition of the Jew as a horned demon. It must have been equally surprising for those who carried this belief to actually meet a Jew and discover his head as smooth as theirs.

In expecting demons, I discovered human beings. And yet, the part of me that cannot forgive will always wonder what the fathers of all the Germans I meet were doing during the war. And I will always be suspicious of how their legacy has been transmitted to their children and grandchildren. Although not necessarily different from others who have at least tacitly participated in crimes against humanity, Germans expelled and killed my grandfather's family and millions of others whom they deemed undesirable. I would have been one of the undesirables and I carry that burden.

As long as I held onto the dark superstition of the demon Jew, I despised myself. When the Berlin wall came down, I began to wake up from that

particular nightmare. It was time to fill in the rest of my psychological map, to move out of Germany and into the world. It was time to look for the halo rather than the horn. It was time to love myself more and hate myself less.

One way of doing this was to look to the youngest generation of Germans, the children who were born 50 years after the war. If their attention was toward the goodness of God and away from the hatred of the Jew, it might help me move further along the way of letting go.

At first it was difficult finding a sample of children. I was too timid, too afraid to ask for help. But then, with the help of a very kind German colleague, the floodgates opened and I managed to gather several hundred interviews. The bulk of the children, all Lutheran, ages seven–13, are from a common school in Münster. A smaller sample is from a special group of children, all of whom attend a school for the blind.

When I first received the interviews, my impulse was to immediately scan them for any anti-Semitic references. I was dismayed to discover that they were untranslated and that I either had to delay my scrutiny or muddle through the German myself. Because of my obsession, I had studied German in college, only to forget it all when on German soil. Nevertheless, I chose to translate all the interviews myself. While translating, I recalled a moment of sitting in a car with the young niece of my wife in Germany, engaging in a delightful conversation in German. I was at home with children. We spoke the same language.

Of 200 interviews, I found only one blatant anti-Semitic reference. An eight-year-old girl proclaimed that the Jews were God's enemy because they killed Christ. Oddly, I felt a sense of relief. My daughter heard the same words in school. I took a deep breath and began to slow down and engage with the wonderful images created by these children, images so much like those created by all other children.

Eleven-year-old Katharina pictures a contemporary scene, very much down to earth. God stands on a patch of grass. He dominates the picture, looking like a large boy in purple shirt and blue pants, arms outstretched. On one side is a girl; on the other, a house. Katharina says that God speaks only with people in church and has no enemies. He looks like a person and lives in heaven. And yet this God who lives in heaven is very earthbound. Katharina presents a placid and orderly neighborhood. There is no hint of discord in this picture of heaven on earth.

Nine-year-old Elisa draws a more minimal scene. God is the only figure present, and he is dressed in a long red robe. In his belt is a large yellow cross that is almost as tall as his body. Elisa says that God speaks to those who believe in him and that his voice sounds very much like ours. God is infinitely forgiving, even when people act badly. Elisa sees God as a pious monk

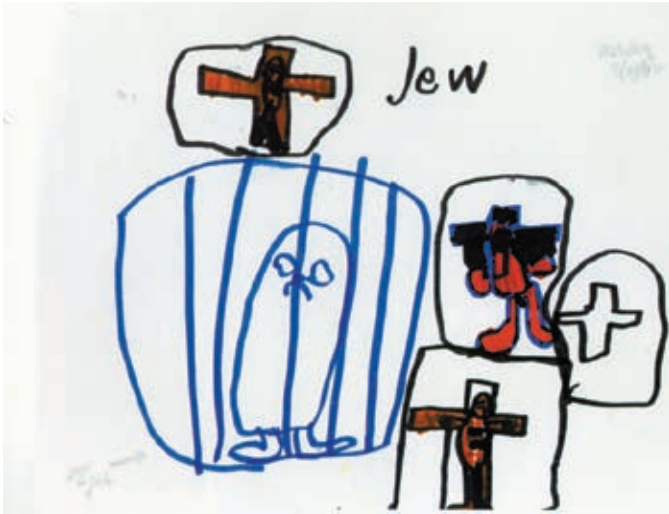


Plate 1. Mackey—Jew in Jail, USA



Plate 2. Liora—God Eats Fruits, USA



Plate 3. Mohammad—The Special Place to Pray, USA/Bangladesh



Plate 4. Mina—God's Hat, Canada





Plate 5. Emilio—God in His Cloud, Mexico



Plate 7. Gloria—The Lord's Light Is Shining, England



Plate 6. Joshua—Shiner, England



Plate 8. Odi—The Gates to Heaven, England/Nigeria



Plate 9. Maeve—No Fighting in Heaven, Northern Ireland

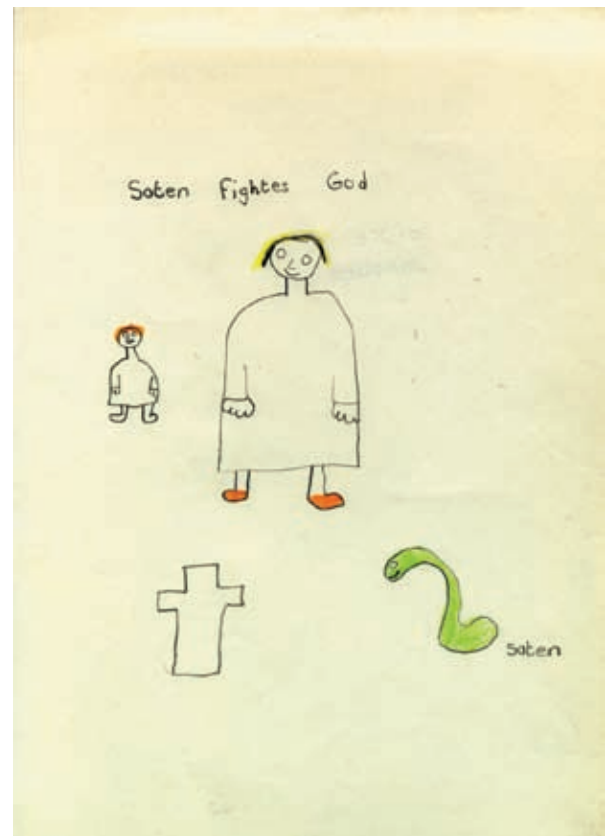


Plate 10. Grace—Soten Fights God, Northern Ireland



Plate 11. Jeppe—The Little Mermaid, Denmark



Plate 12. Jose—A Very Little Man with Very Big Horns, Portugal



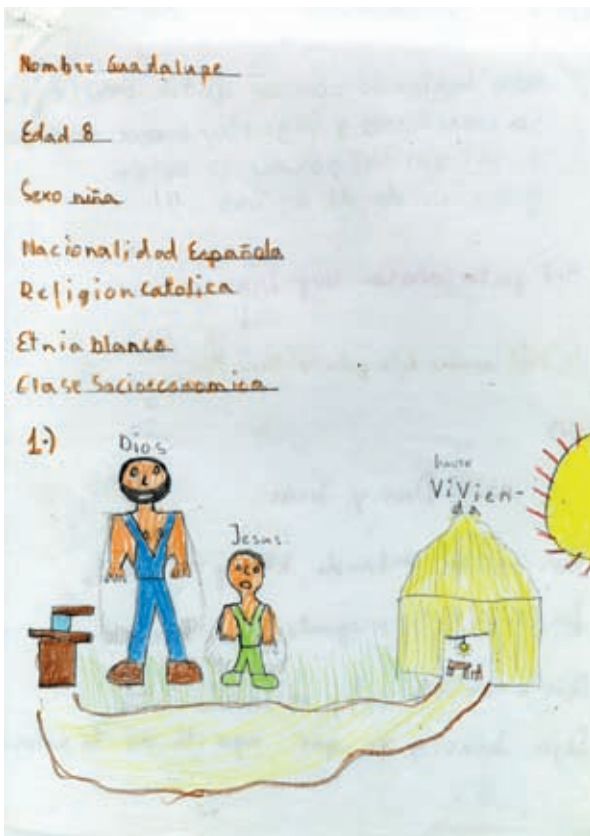


Plate 13. Guadalupe—The Woodcutter, Spain



Plate 14. Shanira—The True Flowing, Spain



Plate 15. Hannah—The Red and the Black, Austria



Plate 16. Viktor—God Is the Hope, Germany



Plate 17. Vanessa—God Has Big Ears, Germany



Plate 18. Bianca—God, the Comforter, Germany



Plate 19. Lavinia—I Go with God to Heaven, Italy



Plate 20. Francesca—Mary Poppins' Bag, Italy





Plate 21. Hana–Sky God, Czech Republic



Plate 22. Ladislav–Lightning God, Czech Republic



Plate 23. Pavlos–God Speaks in Ancient Greek, Greece



Plate 24. Apostolis–God's Willy, Greece



Plate 25. Panagiotis—A Picture of God and the Virgin Mary and Christ and All the Saints, Greece



Plate 26. Shreya—The Faithful God Who Listened to His Moter, India



Plate 27. Sonu—The Water of Shiva, India



Plate 28. E-Fan—The Goddess of Mercy, Taiwan





Plate 29. Brian—Crucifixion, Taiwan



Plate 30. Chang Mong—God Is a Soldier, Taiwan



Plate 31. Pei-zo—The Buddha-To-Be, Taiwan



Plate 32. Keita—God and Hotoke-sama, Japan



Plate 33. Sang Min—Magician God Who Rides the Clouds, Korea



Plate 34. Sang Mi—The Red Cherries, Korea



Plate 35. Lihi—A Ray of Light, Israel



Plate 36. Naama—God and the Wishes of Man, Israel





Plate 37. Gil-God's Golden Chair, Israel



Plate 38. Anonymous-The World and Satan, Israel



Plate 39. Anonymous-Sharp-Tooth Satan, Israel



Plate 40. Musta-Satan's Dance, Israel

wearing his cross in his belt like a sword, ready to do battle with nonbelievers.

Ten-year-old Viktor is even more minimal, drawing just the head of God with long, wind-blown hair and mustache (**see Plate 16**). All around him is a green agitated sky. Viktor's picture is a bit disturbing. God clenches his teeth and seems to brace himself from a force blowing in from the East. Viktor calls his picture *God Is the Hope*, yet when asked if he believes in God, he replies: "I don't know whether I should believe in him or not. Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't."

Is Viktor saying that sometimes things seem hopeless? From looking at the picture, I do not see a sense of hope. I see struggle, movement, even fear and pain. Something is amiss. Why is the body of God missing?

I think that many children struggle with the question of what happens to the human body after death. I think immediately of Dominik's struggle, mentioned above. Viktor might be projecting this concern onto the body of God. If God is a disembodied spiritual being floating in the sky, and if he is tormented, and if human beings are created in the image of God, what terrible fate awaits us when our bodies die?

### The Soul

One way to answer this question is to envision a transformation of body to soul. I was struck by how many German children created images of the soul. Nico, at nine, draws a rather large, scary God with brown club-like arms and a third eye in the center of his forehead. He is encased in a pale yellow bubble. Above him is a red soul, rather mysterious. We learn that this is the soul of Nico's grandfather.

Melanie, also nine, draws a benign, childlike God poking his head up from a cloud. He is surrounded by souls drawn as bright yellow stars, each labeled with the name of a deceased relative. And nine-year-old Katrin, like Nico, draws God in a bubble floating in the air. Underneath is a soul, also floating.

Sandra, at ten, created the most amusing rendering of God and the soul. Her God looks like a silent film comedian (**see Figure 6**). He reminds me of a heavy-set Harold Lloyd in bowler hat and glasses. His arms are raised and his hat is elevated inches above his head. Sandra even draws a patch of white on his forehead where his hat protected him from the sun. Just above him is the soul, labeled *Sele* (a misspelling of the German *Seele*), an oval with dark markings within. The soul can be that of anyone who has died. It contains feeling. All the souls stay near God.

Sandra says that she saw God on television. She imagines him as living in a heavenly palace, yet she describes the palace in worldly terms, with a



kitchen and a bed. She sees God as old, “about 102.” He eats a meal in the kitchen.

I am struck by the combination of the earthbound and the spiritual in many of these drawings and stories. Among the spiritual heaviness of souls and death, it is refreshing to discover Sandra’s earthy humor. The idea of God as a comic levitating his hat is very appealing to me. I think of my favorite old-time comedians, Oliver Hardy and W.C. Fields and Charlie Chaplin, and imagine them in heaven eternally tipping their hats.

When I was a child watching my favorite comics at work on television, I always had the sense that they operated on planes of existence different than the rest of us. Indeed, they ate in kitchens and slept in beds, but they performed human tasks in a most superhuman fashion. They could eat shoes and defy gravity and logic by hanging onto the hands of a clock hundreds of feet in the air. They could take brutal beatings and spring back in an instant without a mark. When life became unbearably cruel, they would laugh it off and allow us all to come along for the ride.

The idea of God as comedian presents a way of addressing the cruelty and suffering that occurred in Germany during the Nazi times. The great German playwright, Bertolt Brecht, offers up a parody of Hitler in the character Arturo Ui, a bully who rules a bunch of thugs in Chicago. This image is taken up by Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*, where the Hitler figure becomes a barber. And more recently, the Italian comic Roberto Benigni, in the film *Life Is Beautiful*, plays a clever fool transported to a concentration camp during the war years, who attempts to defy the cruelty through laughter. In the end, this lovable fool is killed, as are many fools. It could be that the comedian in his innocence and playfulness is well chosen to counter the most brutal human circumstances. His actions remind us that play and laughter are the divine antidotes to the harsh realities of war and hatred. If not God, he is a spiritual messenger who descends with a simple message: life is beautiful after all.

### **God’s Ears**

I really didn’t expect to find much lightness in the images of German children, but the ones I found helped me hold onto the feeling that life is beautiful. Seven-year-old Vanessa created a particularly amusing drawing. God is a mouse with huge ears, triangular body, arms reaching up to the sky, and no legs at all (**see Plate 17**). Vanessa says simply that God has big ears so he can hear everybody. He hears not only what everybody says but also the cries of children. He is a good, loving God who has no enemies.

On the other side of this humorous and generous image is that drawn by another seven-year-old, Natascha, of God as a man in striped pajamas, an

image that brings me back to the pictures of emaciated concentration camp survivors staring blankly through the barbed wire fences dressed only in their striped pajamas. Natascha's God has enemies—the bad people. Who are these bad people I will always wonder?

### **The Eagle**

I question just how much I am reading into these images and feel the need to let go of my associations with the war. And yet there is one more. I see the war again in an image drawn by an older girl, Meike, 12. It is of an eagle with a large, round body and a stern expression. It is drawn in pencil. The only color is a bright yellow halo (see **Figure 7**).

Meike says that God looks like an angel and lives in heaven. All seems well yet, says Meike, “when a devil appears, he becomes God's enemy.” And who are the devils? Certainly not the Jews at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Maybe the Nazis and all intolerant fascists who would destroy others for daring to see God in their own ways. Meike's picture of God as eagle reminds me too much of the insignias worn on the hats and uniforms of Nazi officers. These were no angels.

### **God's Eyes**

Sometimes, I remind myself, a devil is just a devil. This was made clear by a small group of blind children who work with an art therapist in a special school. The art therapist asked the children to sculpt God out of clay, an interesting twist on the biblical metaphor of God as sculptor. Several of the children had fun sculpting not only God but also Lucifer in the shape of a snake. In their stories, they told of Lucifer's disobedience, God's punishment, and the subsequent temptation of Eve by the snake. It was a relief for me to get away from the war.

Two interviews were particularly compelling. The first was with Christian, a ten-year-old Protestant boy. Christian worked with white clay and sculpted God as two heads, one on top of the other. Christian describes his figure:

My God, the one on top, is blind. He has a shock absorber and he has a mouth so he can talk. The one on the bottom can see so that he will not bump into anything, and when he runs into something, it will go *boom* like a kind of buffer, and then it will go kind of flat, and then pump itself up again, and then it will go *boom* again.

Christian offers this story:

Once there was a God who created everything in the world and he lived where the dinosaurs were. Something happened to God, he became blind

and then joined up with someone who could see so he would not bump into things. And when he bumps into something it goes boom and then it will inflate again. The clouds have always been there, also when there were dinosaurs, but God is much older than the clouds. And when the dinosaurs did not live anymore, we were in this world.

This God holds a very touching projection of Christian. I learn from the art therapist that Christian once could see but was struck blind by a brain tumor. In his story, God, too, is originally sighted. Something happened to him, making him blind, as it happened to Christian. In the story, we learn that God creates a double for himself so that he can see again. Christian, through his story, offers a solution to his visual impairment—when one hits the bumps in life and gets the air knocked out, one needs to take a deep breath and bounce back. This is a very wise Christian.

In creating his double-headed God, Christian offers a vision of balance and hope. I have often lost this vision from staring too long at the bright intensity of the Nazi times and imagining too often a blind God. Christian corrects this: God is blind and he is sighted. He's been around for a long time and he knows a few things. He took his time to create human life, waiting patiently until the dinosaurs were extinct so that they would not cause the weaker creation too much harm. God is a visionary and in creating this double God, so is Christian.

Like Christian, Ahmed, an 11-year-old Muslim boy, an immigrant from Turkey, lost his vision due to a brain tumor. He is not only blind, but also severely impaired in his movement and speech. Like Christian, Ahmed created two images of God. In his first sculpture, he builds a full-figured God with a chair attached to his back (see **Figure 8**). He names the individual parts of his creation: "hat, mouth, hands, fingers, legs, something to pee with, head, back and seat." Ahmed's sculpture is very powerful. The mouth dominates the entire head. There are no eyes. The arms and fingers are long and thick. The penis is prominent. There is no doubt that this is a male God.

Ahmed's God is a creator as we learn in his story:

God made chair, made chair by himself, made table, made bed, for himself,  
all by himself. Grandpa gone. Grandma gone. Car made. Grandpa made.  
Bed made for sleep. House made. Windows made. Food made. Finished.

Ahmed made the second God similar to the first, with some notable differences: there is no chair, there is no penis and no hat, and there are eyes. In a further story, we learn that the second God created a shark in the sea. The second God kills the first God. He is not good. Ahmed then says:

Second God can't make anything. It's a shame that the second God can't  
make things. Animal. Second God made one animal. First God made many



Figure 7. *Meike–The Eagle, Germany*



Figure 8. *Ahmed–God with a Chair, Germany*

animals. Made bed, made table, made head, made house, made ship, made man, made all the animals.

The interviewer tells me that he imagines the first God to represent Ahmed's able-bodied self before the tumor and surgery that left him blind and disabled. This part of himself was creative and whole, capable of making everything. The second God represents his disability, that which killed the healthy parts of Ahmed. Without a seat to offer support and without a penis to provide a sexual identity and to create new life, Ahmed's second God is only able to create one animal, a predator. Ahmed identifies most strongly with the first God as he creates his world fully and names the parts. The only part missing is the eyes, a commentary that mirrors Ahmed's reality.

In so many ways, God becomes a projective object for children. They give to him whatever they are missing—whether parts of their body or members of their family, whether a sense of control or a sense of peace. God is the conservatory of all the missing parts of the children. In seeing him this way, the children have an opportunity to feel more complete.

I felt elated having discovered such a therapeutic benefit in depicting God for Christian and Ahmed, and for a moment, my suspicions of Germany were transformed. But then, in a flash, I recalled walking down a street in a small German city in the late 1970s. Two figures approached, both with canes and dark glasses. They were blind and I acknowledged their presence as well as my awkwardness in their presence. As they passed, I experienced a cold feeling down my spine. I turned around quickly to verify the source—both figures wore yellow armbands with black dots to identify their disability. In that instant, it was 1939 and the blind people were Jews wearing a yellow armband emblazoned with the Star of David.

The new unified Germany has done much to distance itself from the Nazi times, and despite the pronouncements and random violent acts of skinheads and neo-Fascists, the government has been relatively successful. At the turn of the century, the body politic seems moderate. But I still wonder about the soul.

To see God, I think, demands more than just to see a projection of oneself. It means to somehow transcend the logic of the eyes, the desires of the ego. In my mind's eye, each Jew, each Gypsy, each homosexual, each brave German who resisted the Nazi plan for annihilation of dissent and racial inferiority is a special soul existing somewhere on a spiritual plane. And souls, as Sandra reminds us, have feeling. One responsibility of the living may be to keep that feeling alive, to remember that the antithesis of God can take many human forms and perform many inhuman acts.

Life is indeed beautiful, even in the shadow of death and suffering. But we must heed the lesson offered by Nazi Germany. The lesson is not the ironic

slogan above the gate at Auschwitz that work makes one free, but the idea that freedom requires work to combat the deadly consequences of intolerance and hatred, to ensure that all will be able to see God as they choose.

### God, the Comforter

One of the most inspiring drawings in my collection comes from a 12-year-old German girl named Bianca. A very colorful God seems to embrace a globe of the world which is located at the center of God's body (**see Plate 18**). Bianca says that God exists wherever there are people. He looks a little bit like an angel, a little bit like a human being. He dialogues with people, comforting them, especially during times when human comfort fails.

Bianca then offers this: "God holds the world in his hands and encircles it with his warmth." She calls her picture: *God, the Comforter*.

At the conclusion of this bout with Germany, I feel a bit more secure yet aware that my 40 year obsession is not quite over. However, as a security blanket, I take with me Bianca's image of a warm and comforting God. It is often hard for me to imagine that he was present during the holocaust. But as I learn time and again from the children, the imagination is limitless. It could be that God was there all the time, holding together the fragile people living in a fragile world spinning out of control. He was neither silent nor blind, just present. It could be that God does not exist to intervene in the affairs of human beings. He is no superhero who defeats evil. He has no weapons of destruction. These are inventions of man. He only has arms that contain and create.

In the end, after all the suffering and agony, the survivors of the holocaust found their way and rebuilt families and communities and new lands. The world did not become a massive concentration camp but that which it always was—a fragile ball in the hands of God. And if that fragile ball explodes in a holocaust of even greater proportions, it will be by human hands. It occurs to me that Auschwitz stands as a memorial to the victims of one holocaust so that others will never happen. With that simple thought in mind, I depart for warmer climes.

### ITALY

My experience in Italy is altogether different than Germany. The Italy I know is warm, inviting, informal. There are few visible remnants of the war years and fascist policies of Mussolini. In my several trips to Italy and in my many conversations with Italians, I heard no linguistic references to the atrocities of the war nor was struck by any image that reminded me of the

holocaust.

Italy is a Catholic country and the Vatican, the Holy See, flows through all the land. At the end of the millennium, the Pope and his colleagues have attempted to address issues of anti-Semitism in a Vatican document about the holocaust, "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah." The critics of this document argue that the church fell short in taking responsibility for the perpetuation of the notion of the Jew as Christ-killer. They claim that in their silence, the church gave credence to the Nazi campaign of genocide. Supporters argue that in directly addressing this issue, the church has taken sufficient responsibility and realized its goal of repentance and reconciliation with the Jews.

In some ways, the Vatican is an isolated community within the larger Italian culture often known for its celebration of worldly pleasures. In other ways, there seems to be a natural confluence of the sacred and the profane as if God and man conspired to feed the spirit and stomach in equal proportions. I find evidence of this in Fellini's films, in the extraordinary towers and monuments scattered throughout town and city, in the classical paintings and sculptures of holy and earthy pleasures. When I think about my experience of Italy, I recall a land of wonderful and, at times, fearful symmetry.

The Italian children interviewed presented a rather spiritual and moral view of God. I was relieved to discover no reference to the Jews as Christ killers. The most representative statement about God's enemies was by seven-year-old Francesco who said: "The enemies of God are the Romans because they crucified him." And this was spoken by a true Roman.

Some of the young Italian children confuse God and Jesus. Four-year-old Federico, for example, tells this story: "Once upon a time lived a God whose name was *Padre Pio*. He was always struggling and on a day he died."

Several of the children envision a spiritual God within a worldly setting. Five-year-old Fabiola draws God's house which he shares with a cat named *Ciro*. God is thirsty so *Ciro* brings him a barrel filled with water to drink.

### **I Go with God to Heaven**

Lavinia, at eight, draws a complex scene. Although she says that God lives in heaven, she draws him in a bedroom, in front of an open window (**see Plate 19**). With one hand, God gestures toward the stars outside the window. With the other, he holds the hand of a girl who stands in front of her bed. A teddy bear, holding a staff, is at the foot of the bed. Lavinia tells this story:

God comes down from heaven and asks the girl, Elisa, if she wants to go with him to heaven to see the angels, to tell her tales and to see a lot of beautiful things. Elisa answers: "It would be great. I would love to go." God

brings her with him. God is kind and brings Elisa back to her house. God brought her to heaven, because Elisa loved him a lot.

There is great sense of calm in Lavinia's picture and story. She sees God as a guide, a Virgil to Elisa's Dante. As guide, God will take Elisa on a wondrous journey and then return her to earth. Presumably, Elisa will return home and go to bed, safe and sound with her teddy bear who seems to be another spiritual being with his arms outstretched, a staff in one hand. There is an easy continuity between the world of reality and imagination, of the natural and supernatural.

My son, Mackey, at seven still sleeps with a stuffed animal he has had since he was born. He was once a lush furry tiger, whom Mackey calls Tigo. At night, the two have been inseparable, constant companions. But over the years, Mackey has plucked all the fur and Tigo is no more than a threadbare shell. About to turn eight, Mackey senses it is almost time to give up Tigo. He has begun to acquire new stuffed animals and attaches himself fully to his real dog, Trixie. Whenever Mackey goes on a journey away from home, he knows he will return to his home and his dog and his bed and his Tigo. These are the things that ground him. Tigo gives him comfort and safety. Like the teddy bear holding his staff and guarding the safe haven of the bedroom, Tigo allows Mackey the freedom to fly and explore the mystery of those lands beyond his field of vision.

### **Pettirossa**

Sandro, at nine, feels less comforted. His authoritarian father is sick and out of work. He is doing poorly in school and is regularly reprimanded by the teacher.

Sandro's picture is of blue swirling sky with God high up toward the top of the page. He is very small and his body is colored half brown and half white. His arms are outstretched as if on the cross and he seems to be floating in air. His hands are red to represent "the blood that came when they put in the nails." He has no feet. He wears a crown and his hair seems to grow in forelocks as is the custom of certain orthodox Jews.

Sandro identifies the figure as Jesus. He imagines Jesus on his knees in prayer, accompanied by his mother, Maria. He speaks to all the dead in the cemetery and says: "Brothers, don't worry, because you will be well there, nobody will touch you."

As for the two colors of his body, Sandro tells this story:

One part is all dressed and the other part is naked. On one part he is cold and on the other he is hot. Then there comes a pettirossa (robin red breast), a little bird who wants to remove a thorn, and the bird stains himself and



becomes all red, and now it is called pettirossa.

Sandro continues his story:

When Maria sees that they put him on the cross, she cries because she will never see him again. Jesus is afraid that they will also put Mama on the cross. And then the 12 apostles, they were also put on the cross. And then he managed to cut off everything of the 12 apostles—the nails they had in their hands, the crowns of thorns, the nails in their feet. But he remained on the cross, and then the 12 apostles helped him and now he is with God.

When asked if Jesus has any enemies, Sandro says no. Even the soldiers who put him on the cross are friends because “he let himself be put on the cross for us. He wanted to be put on the cross in order to save us.” Sandro names his picture *Jesus Who Prays for the Dead in Heaven*.

As they were completing their discussion, the interviewer asked Sandro about his father’s occupation. He told her that his father is a laborer but is not working at the moment. Sensing some sadness, the interviewer invited him to draw another picture. He eagerly complied, sketching a small crucifixion scene. Jesus has few clearly drawn features, except for his eyes and hands. The cross is on ground level, with one small blue circle to the right and one large blue circle above. The sun also appears as a large yellow circle with radiating points. Sandro tells the story of the drawing:

This is a cross. Next to it is a small lake of holy water where Jesus called his dad, God. And the large blue circle is a hole from where Jesus when he dies goes to heaven. And this is a sun that shines on Jesus. Jesus is saying: “Forgive me, God, forgive me, Daddy, forgive me for what I did, but I had to do it to save the humans.” His Daddy says: “I forgive you, and basta!”

Abruptly, Sandro ended the interview.

Sandro’s pictures and stories are very moving to me. Taken together, they recapitulate the Christian virtues as embodied in the figure of Jesus. Jesus saves all the dead, and he saves his mother. He even forgives the soldiers who crucify him, because they facilitate his divine mission. He is a man/God of love. One particular touching moment is when the bird, *pettirossa*, descends to remove a thorn from Jesus, becoming marked with the blood of Christ as a compassionate, holy being. I think back on Georgie’s drawing of the feminine hand of God and the birds that ascend to heaven.

Sandro completes his work by invoking the father. His Jesus does not turn in anger to God and accuse him of abandonment. Rather he asks the Father for forgiveness and it is granted—basta, just like that!

Jesus is very small and fragile. In Sandro’s first picture he appears puppet-like without feet. In the second, the crucified Christ has few discernable features, with the exception of eyes and hands. Perhaps this is a representa-

tion of Sandro, himself, a difficult student with a difficult, injured father. It could be that his faith sustains him. Feeling powerless, perhaps he identifies with the pettirossa who, though diminutive, is able to perform a small act of grace. I note that the largest image in both drawings is the sun. Sandro, the son, creates a God that illuminates his family and the world with his goodness and forgiveness. He is a beacon, a reminder that hope springs eternal.

### Mary Poppins' Bag

Francesca, at ten, envisions a scene in heaven. God sits in a red chair surrounded by clouds (**see Plate 20**). Each cloud has a small boat-like figure inside with a sign that says *Nome*, name in Italian. Francesca says: "Everyone that dies and goes to heaven has his little cloud." She has a hard time telling a story because she is in mourning over the recent death of her grandmother. She imagines herself engaging in a conversation with God, asking God to see her grandmother. But then she becomes very sad and withdraws. Still, at the end of the interview she offers this beautiful image:

Every cloud can be opened, just like a jewel case, and inside there are lots of things that can be taken out, just like from Mary Poppins' bag.

Francesca has created two very poetic images of the soul. It is a cloud with a name tag, a blue sea of moving air. It is also a magical sack that contains wonderful things, more precious than jewels. No doubt, one of the souls belongs to Francesca's grandmother, and it is very precious.

Francesca's God presides over all, Mary Poppins-like, eternally cheerful and grateful that the souls surrounding her are so rich in spiritual treasures.

### That Shadow Behind Us

Italy sits just across the Adriatic Sea from Yugoslavia and its former republics. In the long siege of Sarajevo and many years of civil war, there was great suffering on the part of diverse ethnic and religious groups who once lived in peace. All during the bombing of Serbia and Kosovo in 1999, NATO warplanes took off from Aviano airbase in Italy. The many brutalities committed in the conflict between Serbs and ethnic Albanians, Muslims and Christians were never too far away from the consciousness of the Italian people. Some of those most affected were the children who might have found it particularly hard to understand why people would torture each other because they believed in a different God.

Ten-year-old Wanda questions this suffering and offers a vision of love. She draws a picture of a poor boy sitting in a city street, begging for money (**see Figure 9**). Behind him is the outline of God, a large man with a beard,

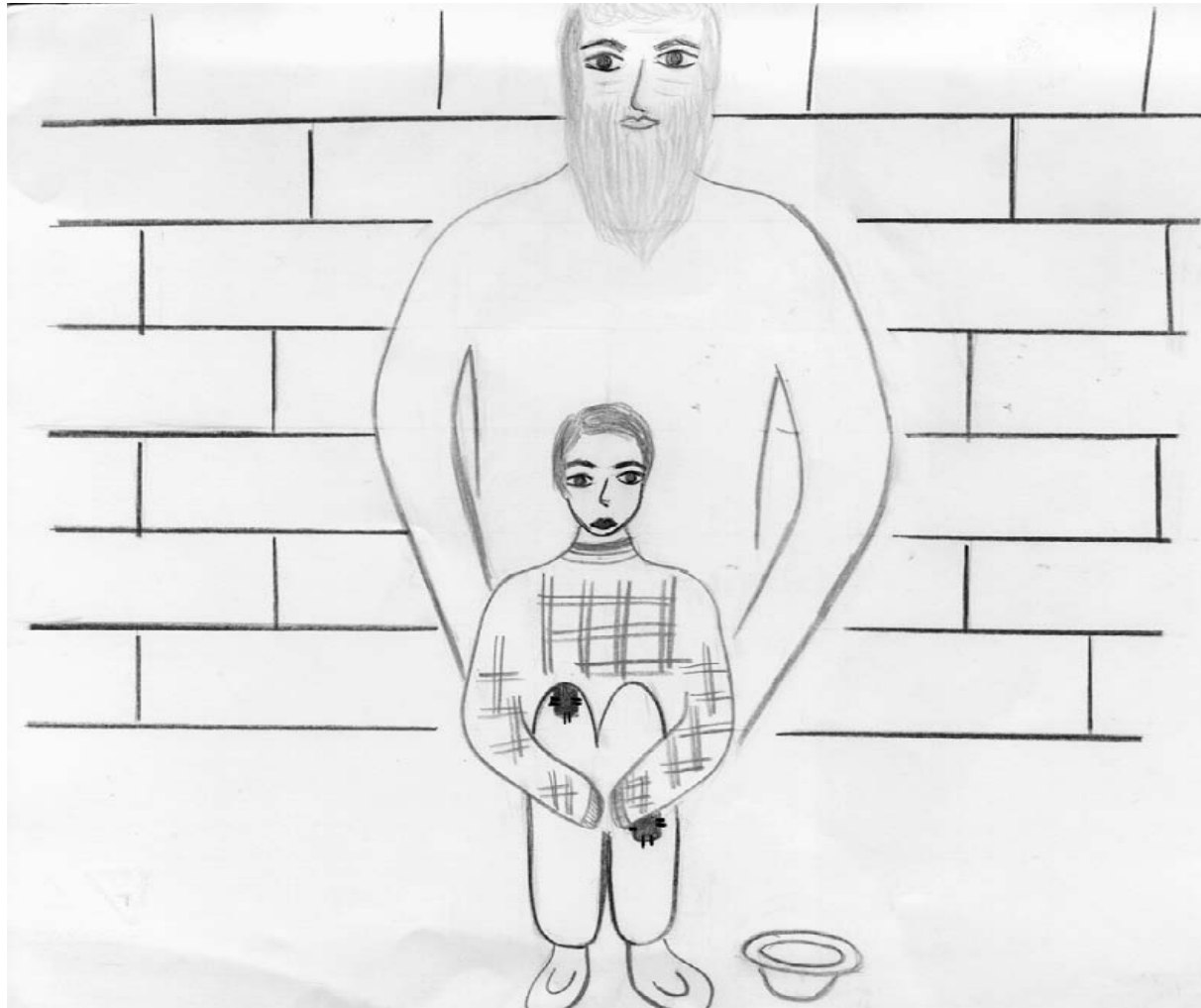


Figure 9. *Wanda—That Shadow Behind Us, Italy*

supporting the young beggar.

Wanda describes the boy as a six-year-old named Sinsha who lives in the suburbs of Sarajevo, destroyed by the war. She tells this story:

Sinsha was sitting for hours on the sidewalk. The chill was making him shake. He gazed at the hat, left on the ground for money. It was empty and that increased his hunger. Just a few months before, the war wasn't there. Sinsha thought about the smiling faces of his parents and the shout of his little sister, but the horrible memory of that bomb that destroyed his house and killed his family made him feel bad. A voice said: "Remember that you are not alone. I will always be there to help you." Sinsha knew that reassuring and familiar voice and said: "Lord, I am cold and I haven't eaten in the past two days. Make it that someone notices me." The voice remained silent but after a few minutes, a United Nations patrol passed and seeing the boy cold and numb had compassion and after they gave him food, they took him to a camp for poor children. Sinsha understood then that the love of God is also found through the acts of humans.

Wanda names her story *That Shadow Behind Us* and says that God's only enemies are those who are unable to love but who hate and make war.

Wanda sees God as an invisible force of love that transforms evil into good. For me, the shadow is a darker force. It is frightening in its literal separation from real substance, in its absence of light. In terms of the war in the Balkans, it is the fear of torture, death, and destruction, just on the other side of the sea. The shadow is always behind us threatening our sense of security. But I am reminded by Wanda that another intangible force also stands over our shoulder. It is the voice that sounds during the most desperate times. It is a ghost that sends a message of hope. "Remember that you are not alone," it says. "I will always be there to help you."

Sinsha, Wanda's alter-ego, is rescued by God, the holy shadow. But Wanda and many Italian children know that others across the sea are not so lucky. Their God has not kept them safe from the realities of war and displacement. And yet these Italian children, like so many others who refuse to accept the inevitability of intolerance, keep the faith. They know that there is a heaven outside the window. There is a godlike teddy bear at the foot of the bed. There is a pettirossa on the horizon, ready to perform acts of kindness. There is a holy shadow behind us that can and will find a way to mobilize the compassionate acts of human beings.

And so we cross the Adriatic Sea to the Balkans to lands where children live in peace and in war.

## EASTERN EUROPE

In many ways, Eastern Europe, from the Balkans to Urals, is my spiritual homeland. My grandfathers and their grandfathers grew up in this part of the world. I was drawn to Eastern Europe a number of times by the spirits of my ancestors. One memorable journey in 1972 was during the Cold War, a gray time of long lines and crowded trams and communal meals. I can't say that I was on a spiritual search at the time, although looking back, it feels that way now.

The long train ride from West Germany through East Germany to Poland was chilling. It was hard for me to shake holocaust images of deportations to the death camps 30 years earlier. At the border of East Germany, a frightening pair of soldiers scrutinized my papers and baggage, confiscating my magazines which were nothing more threatening than *Newsweek* and *The New Yorker*.

Over several weeks, I wended my way through the aesthetic and political touchstones of Poland—the Polish Lab Theatre in Wroclow, the docks of Gdansk, the Stalinist monuments in Warsaw, and remnants of the Warsaw ghetto. And then I searched throughout a countryside that existed only in memory—that of the *shtetls*, the small Jewish towns that once dotted the map of Eastern Europe. One of those was home to my grandfather. I vaguely remembered its name as Frystyk, but it was not even a memory any more. Retracing my grandfather's steps felt odd. Although I was aware of completing a mission of return that eluded my grandfather, I felt alienated from a culture that had worked so hard to obliterate the past. This was not the romanticized Yiddish culture of Isaac Bashevis Singer or Shalom Aleichem. This was the post-Holocaust time of hushed voices and averted eyes. The Nazis had won in one respect—East Europe was free of the burden of its Jews.

I left the best for the last. The most spiritual site I felt most compelled to visit was Auschwitz, the notorious concentration camp. I had held my feelings in check all throughout the journey. My grandfather was not present in the countryside. Neither were my spiritual and cultural roots. Eastern Europe felt like a place without Jews and without God. I asked many people how to get to Auschwitz. Most looked at me blankly or claimed that they didn't know. Finally, I discovered that the camp was located on the outskirts of the town of Oswiecim and was directed to the proper bus line.

The bus left me off on the side of a desolate road. It was hard to find the camp and there was no guide to lead the way. But I found it quickly enough and thought that it looked more like a movie set than a reality. I clearly remember the railroad tracks and the entrance gate, inscribed forever with the words *Arbeit Macht Frei*.

The rest of the time passed by as if in a dream-wandering through the barracks, the crematoria, the showers, attempting to take in the exhibitions of hair and eating utensils, of eyeglasses and suitcases, of empty canisters of Kyklon B. I remember seeing Christian crosses and photographs of Polish martyrs everywhere. There was little indication of the fact that most inhabitants of this camp were Jews.

I was cold throughout my time at the camp. Nothing was revealed except the externals. I saw it all and let little penetrate. It felt like a relic, nothing more. I couldn't mourn the death and suffering of my grandfather's family. I couldn't wrap my thoughts around the systematic torture and extermination of the Jews of Europe. If God was not present, neither was the devil. It was just an ordinary place, hard to find, on the outskirts of a nondescript town somewhere outside one of the countless gray cities of Eastern Europe.

With a 60-year history of occupation by Nazis and Communists, I wondered how I would find the children's conceptions of God. Had the Christian orthodox church reestablished itself following the fall of the iron curtain? I was eager to collect the responses of children from Eastern Europe. I was especially interested in the responses of children living in the former Yugoslavia, for many had directly experienced war that was at least in part about religious intolerance. It was difficult finding interviewers from these countries and others formerly in the East Block, but I managed to collect interviews from children in Bosnia and Croatia, as well as children from the Czech Republic and Bulgaria.

### **Croatia**

The first few interviews I received from Croatia were from young Catholic children. The youngest was four-year-old Sara, a direct descendent of former Yugoslavian President Tito. Sara comes from a privileged family of actors and grew up in a household Catholic in name only, with no religious education or attendance in church. Sara draws God and a friend, a young beautiful girl in full makeup. God and his friend play with Barbie dolls. God asks the friend: "Do you love me the most on earth?" The friend replies: "I love my boyfriend the most on earth. But I love you, too, God."

When asked to describe God, Sara offers this: "God is not nice. He is ugly because he is too old. But he is a nice person and good, because even old and ugly people can be good and nice. And I like him. He's funny and good."

Sara's attention is clearly on worldly things. At the conclusion of the interview, she asks: "Do you have make-up? I'd like to do make-up on God's face." Sara sees God as a plaything, a doll among other dolls, to be made-up. Or perhaps, coming from a family of actors, Sara's God is another performer,

a character actor grown old and ugly, desperately in need of make-up before he faces an audience of children.

Sara assigns God a low status. He is not as lovable or as nice as a younger and more attractive human being. Yet Sara is hardly cruel. She knows that God might be important to some people, perhaps even the interviewer. So she softens her criticism of this obscure figure—God is also lovable and good, despite his age and appearance.

Seven-year-old Hrvoje presents a different image of God. He imagines God as a teacher with students. He draws God with a yellow beard and cane. He floats above flowers in a garden near a simple house. He draws butterflies in the sky because: “They are beautiful. They have to be there.” Hrvoje’s God is “nice and good, like grandfather, loving all the people, no matter who.” God tells all the people in the family to be kind, supportive, and loving to each other.

Unlike Sara, Hrvoje is from a middle class family, all of whom are practicing Catholics. He attends a religious education class. His responses are more in line with that of other children. In fact, his association of God and grandfather is similar to my own.

Both Sara and Hrvoje have not witnessed war directly. They live in relatively comfortable circumstances. Their visions of God reflect two strains in Eastern Europe—that of the more recent atheistic past and that of the traditional Christian.

In contrast, nine-year-old Marina, also from a Catholic family, now lives in Austria. She has spent her first eight years in Croatia but tries to convince her interviewer that she is really Austrian. Marina comes from a working-class family.

Marina draws God in a long green caftan, arms raised, yellow halo over his head. He has long hair and dark reddish skin, a broad smile on his face. He is alone in the picture. God speaks through the feelings, that is, those who believe in God feel what he says. He says to the people: “Love and friendship are the most important things in the world. With friendship you can achieve everything. I will protect you whatever happens to you and be beside you. That is my task.”

When the interviewer points out that God is all alone in the picture, Marina informs her that there are others—Moses, for example. When given the opportunity to add the others, she declines. She writes the title of her picture in German: *God Is There for All of Us. Thank You, God.*

But is God there for all, I wonder? Or does he protect only those who see him in a certain way?

At the end of her interview, Marina blurts out: “I like it better in Croatia. There is more space there. There are more meadows, nice meadows. You feel

free there, you can do what you want and say what you want and scream. There is no police there.”

Marina, possibly like God in heaven, feels alone in Austria. Or she might feel, as a foreigner, abandoned by a God who once offered friendship, love, and protection. In Austria, I am told, the police watch over foreigners, not as good samaritans, but as authorities who control the destiny of all those with different skin colors.

Marina dreams of another time, another place—her idealized homeland. It is ironic that in her place of birth, men with guns have recently threatened the peaceful tranquility of the children. It could be that we need our dreams of order and peace, one of which is that of a God standing above the strife and pettiness of human beings, holding out to all the promise of eternal love, friendship, and protection. As long as we don't have to protect such a perfect protector, we are free to dream on and to hope.

### **Bosnia**

Bosnia has become the homeland of Muslims. During the war years, many families left for a better and more secure life in neighboring countries. Like Marina, eight-year-old Anita left for Austria where she has lived for one year. She, too, comes from a working class family. From Anita, we get a sense of war as well as a sense of the religious traditions of the Muslims.

Anita draws a picture of God in pencil. He sits on a chair surrounded by angels (**see Figure 10**). Two most prominent are called Roserrot and Evalischen. She tells this story:

Everywhere there was war. God wished it so. The angels didn't like it. But then one day God said: “War finish! I don't want this war anymore.” There was a little fight between the angels, because one wants war, the other doesn't. Evalischen is the peaceful one. Roserrot wants war. The angels go to God and he says the war was over. Then the sun shined nicely and everybody made their own houses nicely again.

Poignantly, Anita relates this story to her experience in Bosnia:

There also was war in Bosnia. And I was there, with my aunt. There was a woods up there and the trees were a bit further away from our house and they shoot on a tree. You can still see it. And they shoot and the tree had no leaves. It still has no leaves, no more leaves, no more leaves on the tree.

It's hard to imagine that God would want this war, but easy to understand why God would want to stop it. Anita sees the contradiction between war and peace in the figures of the angels, Roserrot and Evalischen. She also sees it in terms of a debate between two figures she adds to her picture, the devil and



the guardian angel. Both are perched on either side of God's head.

For Anita, "the devil looks like a vampire. He is black, he only says bad things, and he has a stick with points." The guardian angel needs to convince God to make peace. "God needs help," says Anita, "because he is alone." This reminds me of Marina's lonely God, standing above the angels and the humans. Yet although Marina might feel alone in a foreign country, her God is surrounded by angels.

As it turns out, the guardian angel helps God by pushing away the devil until the devil dissolves into air. But he is not banished forever from the heavenly kingdom. There will be a place for evil in the universe. Says Anita: "When he is away, there are little pieces of him, like dust. He will come again when he has something bad to say or to do."

And finally, Anita explains the difference between the big angels and the small ones. The small ones, exemplified by the guardian angels: "are besides our ears and talk to us in our thoughts. They bring what we need to say and what we need to do." The larger angels, Roserrot and Evalischen, bring presents.

At this point, Anita speaks enthusiastically about Christmas. After the conflicts between the angels are resolved and God decides on a plan, God exclaims: "Everywhere should be peace. The children should be happy, and they should get many presents for Christmas, all that they desire." Anita calls her picture, *The Fight*, and adds this ending to her story:

In the end, when all the enemies are away, the sun will shine and winter will come. God sends the angels to Santa Claus, because he needs help. The angels will throw the presents to all the children through the chimney.

Curious, the interviewer asks Anita whether there is Christmas in the Muslim religion. Anita refers to her religion as Ali Allah. She mentions that Christmas is celebrated in her new home but that in Bosnia, she celebrated Ramadan. She offers an explanation of Ramadan:

In December and January there is also fasting. It is special because the whole day you must eat nothing. In the first day, I did, too. At 5 o'clock, you can eat again, when out of the mosque the man says a prayer and the light is shining in the mosque. And after the fasting my grandma prays and my aunt and my grandpa.

Anita then speaks directly about her religious education:

Last time we had to write what does a Muslim believe: in the angels, in Allah, in the prophets, in the day of doom, in the four holy books and in the day of justice. Earlier in time, I didn't believe that there were things we don't see, but now I believe that there are.

Anita's spiritual world is a rich one. Although Muslim, she also depicts a Christian world with a visible God in the center. Anita sees God as a peacemaker yet one who allows dialogue, debate, and dissension. There is evil in the world which needs to be combated. Yet Anita knows that even defeated, evil must return in some form. It is part of the natural order.

Anita's spiritual landscape holds together contradictions in a seamless way. The unseen Santa Claus and Ali Allah feel like brothers. Anita's world feels like a vision of Sarajevo before the war, when Muslims and Christians lived in peace.

In leaving Anita's world, I hold onto one very touching poetic image of war—a tree is shot and gives up its leaves. And I hold onto a vision of transformation—the season of war passes, the sun shines and it is Christmas. And in this season of peace, the children get presents, all that they desire.

As a child listening to my father's stories about the war in Europe, about the killing and the fear and the liberation of the concentration camps, I devoured every word and image. These were my fairy tales and bedtime stories. My father provided no imagery of God or of spiritual beings fighting a celestial battle—just ordinary people struggling to survive.

My grandfather kept the affairs of men at a distance. His gifts were not stories but acts to emulate—prayers to a distant God. I listened to the stories of men and the prayers to God and took in both ways of seeing and being.

In my mind's eye, I held memories of two trees. As a young boy, I recall a tree in full bloom, bursting with chestnuts. Although standing in a scraggly patch of dirt in front of my drab apartment building, I imagined it as God's tree in the Garden of Eden. And as a young man in Oswiecim in 1972, I remember a thin, skeletal tree just on the other side of the gate at Auschwitz. It was late summer and the tree had no leaves at all. It stood there anyway, rooted obstinately in the earth as if to mark the place. It stood there above all the memorials and monuments made by the hands of men. It survived.

### **Bulgaria**

The interviewer in Bulgaria contacted 200 families, expecting a cooperative response. She was surprised to learn that only 13 families would agree to the interviews. Upon investigation, she discovered the parents were afraid that this project was the work of an American religious cult that had apparently been infiltrating Bulgarian society. In recent years, a sizable number of young people had joined religious cults and some met with tragic circumstances, including dropping out from school, running away from home, brainwashing, and even suicide.

I learned that Bulgaria has a long tradition of pagan folk beliefs that have

mixed with the orthodox Christian practices. The many years of Communism stifled organized religion, but with the fall of Communism, the mix of folk traditions and Christianity returned. I also discovered that unlike other Eastern European countries, Bulgaria protected its Jewish population during the war and the czar actually demanded that Hitler refrain from deporting Bulgarian Jews. As a consequence of his stand, he was assassinated. But because of this historic position, there is still a sizable population of Jews in Bulgaria, some of whom participated in the interviews.

Some of these families identify themselves as ethnically Jewish but as Christian in their spiritual beliefs. Stassie, a five-year-old girl, comes from such a family. As she reflects upon her drawing of an old male God, she notes: "This came out a little woman! Should I draw hair, long hair? Let's do him like a little woman. No, like a man. Well, like a lady. O.K. This is the Lady God. The little purple woman."

Stassie confuses God's gender then finally brings him back to a male God with a female wife. She tells a story that feels very much like a folk tale:

There is another woman. She is bad, big and red. She's a spirit. She can eat God and the people. She's got big sharp teeth. She scares God's wife. 'Oh, I'll eat you all,' she says. Then God will stay alone. God will need another wife.

When asked whether she believes in God, Stassie says: "Yes. He's living in his room. In the church. He's living there. I saw him. Daddy took me to the church. We had a little chat with him."

Anna, a six-year-old girl, is identified as ethnically and religiously Jewish. She claims that she does not believe in God and that her parents have told her that God does not exist. Referring naively to the laws of kosher she tells the interviewer: "My Mom and Dad say if we have to believe, we should not eat any meat." Yet Anna expresses spiritual feelings in her drawing. A blue God without arms floats in the sky. Below is a blond girl in a field with flowers and butterflies. In her story, the girl goes out to the garden, picks some flowers, captures a butterfly, and brings it to her mother. Says Anna:

Then she let the butterfly go. When they went to bed and went asleep, the dogs started to bark loudly. They were scared, very scared. In the morning the girl went out and planted some new flowers. There were flowers everywhere. And here comes an angel. He saw everything and told about it to God. God said: "Very well, girl, well done! Your father promised me to buy a lipstick and a small mirror for you." The girl was very happy and she took a basket and filled it with fruit and flowers and brought it home. Her mother gave her new clothes and a schoolbag.

It appears that God does indeed exist for Anna. He rewards the girl's acts

of liberating the butterfly and planting new flowers with presents. In terms of Jewish tradition, the girl has done a *mitzvah*, an unselfish act of generosity. God sees it and responds. In her drawing and in her story, God is very present.

Ester is a five-year-old Jewish girl who identifies her recently deceased grandfather as God:

My grandpa died and became God. These are his jewelry and his clothes. They are golden. He is rich. These are his trousers. They're golden too. And the sky is everywhere around him.

Ester draws her grandfather as a large figure in a rectangular coffin-like box. He has golden trousers and a golden halo. He has neither arms nor feet. He smiles as he floats in a blue sky. Above him is a small child-like figure, also floating.

We learn that the child-like figure in the drawing is a bad angel who promises people a better and wealthier life. God intervenes and says: "Don't worry, good people, this was a bad angel. He will not do any harm to you. But he will not fulfill what he had promised. He wants you to die. But I will help you."

The angel tries to deceive and cheat God. "He even tried to steal God's wife," says Ester. But in the end, God asserts his power and saves the people from death. In one touching section, as she dialogues with God, Ester says: "I'd ask that my parents won't die, ever."

In keeping with the recent history of Bulgaria, Ester tells the interviewer that she believes in God even though her mother does not. "My mom says it is all stupid girl stories. And she wants me not to watch the TV show about God. But I do, when I am at my grandma's place." So like Anna, Ester has to find her faith somewhere other than in her parents' house. In turning to her grandmother, she does what many children and adults have done—looked to their elders as sources of divine inspiration. In emulating the elders, they go so far as to deify them. I understand this well, because as a young boy, I associated my grandfather with God. And it feels very empowering for me to discover this connection once again in Eastern Europe, the soil of my family roots.

Many of the young Orthodox Christian children demonstrated a mixture of paganism and Christianity, some rather poetically. Four-year-old Savina draws a bear and four mountains. She says that although she has not seen God, she believes in his existence. She imagines God as old and frightened. As for his absence, she says: "God has hidden himself behind the mountains. He is hiding from the big bear. Bears are scary."

Philip, also at four, imagines God differently: "He lives on a star. He does

not look like a human. He is like a star himself. There is no star so big anywhere.” But when asked if he believes in God, Philip says: “No, I haven’t seen him yet. I have been looking for him, for the star. But I can only see Venus.”

Ten-year-old Vladislav draws a picture of God in a purple cape. “He looks like somebody named Miroslav,” he says. To me, he looks rather like a benign Count Dracula, minus the fangs. Vladislav, certain of God’s existence, believes in the power of prayer. Touchingly, he offers: “In the evenings I look at the stars and talk to God.”

Plamen, nine years old, draws a mythological God as a centaur, a horse man (see **Figure 11**). Plamen says:

God is good but revengeful. His punishment is death or a bad disease. God doesn’t die. He has a tail. His hair is like horse’s. He’s holding a trident. He uses it to make thunders. I think he has got hair. When he’s angry, he makes storms, like last night’s one. Wow! He got angry at someone, probably a priest who did something wrong in the church. He lives in a cloud and that is why we can’t see him. I pray in the church, sometimes I confess my sins but not to the priest, just to myself. If God doesn’t forgive me, I could get sick and die. But I’m not afraid of him.

Some of the Christian children, like four-year-old Peter and seven-year-old George, see God’s enemies as the gypsies who are considered outcasts. In the mind of a child, it is easy to transform a social outcast into an enemy of God. In some ways, this is an inversion of anti-Semitism where the killers of Christ are transformed into social outcasts.

Some of the Bulgarian children are more generous. Peter recognizes that gypsies become enemies, stealing from others, because they are poor and hungry. God, in his divine compassion, offers them work, but it is somewhat demeaning: “Come, I will find a job for you,” says Peter’s God. “You can wash carpets in a company store.”

### ***God Stays in the Soul***

On the other side of the moral and political spectrum, we find the true Christian virtues of love and compassion expressed beautifully by Joanna, an 11-year-old girl. Joanna draws a delicate angelic God in pencil within a larger figure (see **Figure 12**). The only color in the drawing is yellow streaks from the sky. There is great mystery surrounding this drawing. Joanna says: “God just stays in the soul.”

As God she says: “What can I advise people? To love each other forever, to help each other, not to mock other’s tragedies. We all are different, but we should have respect for each other.”



Figure 10. *Anita—The Fight, Bosnia*



Figure 11. *Plamen—God Is a Horse Man, Bulgaria*

Joanna then tells this story:

The girl in my picture is just an ordinary girl. She was upset. She was hopelessly upset. God gives strength to her. The girl was very poor. Her parents brought her up to be a servant, like a slave. She served for a while and then she was freed. She went to find her parents. She was looking for them for years. She was desperate and hopeless. One day she stopped near a spring and cried. Suddenly a flash illuminated everything around and the girl heard: "Do not be afraid. If you have faith, you will find your parents!" In a week, the girl found them in a small town. They lived together and were happy ever after.

In speaking about the moment of revelation, Joanna says: "I put only one colorful fragment in my picture. And that's the lightning coming from the skies. This is when God appears." And yet her picture is so much about the revelation of God inside the soul. Joanna goes on to say: "I believe in God so much! And sometimes I pray. And I can feel him inside." For Joanna, like so many children, God exists in two places—in the world and in the soul.

As I leave these children of Bulgaria, holding onto Joanna's delicate imagery of a revealed God, I return in my mind to Auschwitz. It has been said in bitterness by many survivors of the concentration camps that God remained silent during the atrocities. "How could he allow such horror and suffering?" they asked. The only otherworldly illumination they could see was the fires and smoke of the crematoria propelling the remains of their loved ones high up in the sky. Many have attempted an answer to this unanswerable question, some turning to the Biblical story of Job, the suffering servant, for solace.

In turning to the young girl, Joanna, we discover another message about suffering and faith. Although God allows suffering in the world and does not directly intervene, he continues to be an inward presence that supports one's capacity to hope. Joanna's story could well be the story of all who have suffered terrible trials: "She served for a while and then she was freed." When the price of freedom is bitterness and hatred, psychological wounds fester for generations. When, following an experience of loss and pain, freedom and faith coexist, the payoff is counted in increments of healing.

Although I embellish Joanna's message, I take my cue from her images and words. As she concludes her interview, she leaves this last inspirational thought: "And as to the creation, I think everything came out of some basic light. I believe the world was created that way by God."

### **Czech Republic**

I hold two images of the former Czechoslovakia. The first is of a group of young protestors in the streets of Prague in 1968, resisting the Soviet

occupation. From out of the group emerges a young man who confronts a Russian tank. It is an act of great courage in the face of certain defeat. The idealistic and hopeful Prague spring when a gray nation was coming out from behind the iron curtain was crushed by the tanks and full military presence of the Soviet Union.

The second image is of the new president of the newly formed Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel, whom I had known as a playwright and artist, giving a powerful speech about the rights and responsibilities of individual expression at the United Nations.

As I look at the images created by the Czech children, I do not see evidence of the struggle to attain freedom, but the fruits of that struggle. Unlike the images of children living in the Middle East or Northern Ireland or Bosnia, these pictures reveal a peaceful place, one safe enough to openly contemplate the spiritual realm. As is the case in Bulgaria, these Czech children combine elements of folk and Christian traditions. Many come from families who have rejected religion during the days of Communist rule. The children interviewed come from both public and Christian schools. Some of the children receive special education for learning disabilities and mild forms of mental retardation.

What immediately struck me about the drawings was their imaginative quality. There were several images of God as a figure common to the Greek myths. Ten-year-old Radek, for example, draws a Poseidon-like God in a long, blue gown, holding a yellow trident. Radek, diagnosed with learning disabilities, comes from an atheist family. He refers to the figure as Ares and tells this story:

As I followed a path, I tripped on a stone. I fell down in a hole with a crocodile. God took his three-pointed spear and ran it into the crocodiles. The bottom of the hole was raised up so that I could continue my journey.

Radek makes clear that he does not believe in God. I find it interesting that he names his god Ares who is traditionally the god of war. In the story, God rescues Radek from being devoured by a crocodile and from a hole in the ground. God serves as a protector, one who helps the boy continue safely on his journey. Even if he does not believe in a conventional Christian God, Radek, like most children, creates a sense of some magical guardian who, at least in a psychological sense, helps them move along the often frightening path of life.

Hana, ten years old, also from an atheist family, draws a similar picture, though calmer. The figure of God has no weapon, but floats through a sky filled with stars (see Plate 21). Hana, who is diagnosed with mild retardation, tells an unusual story:



I ran into the forest with my friends and there we saw the Lord. He practiced magic and made a baby carriage appear. We were happy. The baby carriage was a gift for us. We left with our gift and said goodbye.

Hana sees God as a magician who can produce things that contain babies. Perhaps he can even produce babies, like the mythological stork.

Zdenek, a ten-year-old boy with mild retardation, comes from a background similar to Hana and Radek. His God figure, although very much like Hana's, is masculine, with a brown beard and shock of black hair. He, too, tells a story of a journey to the woods:

One day I went for a walk in the forest. My leg got caught between two stones. I began to call: "Help me! Help me or I could die!" Suddenly the Lord appeared and helped me. Then he went to sit under a tree and talked about me.

And finally, Ladislav, also from a similar background as the others, draws a moving picture of God in an abstract landscape with sharp lines zig-zagging above him (**see Plate 22**). His story is like the others:

I went to the mountains and lightning struck into the big trees which fell down on me. Suddenly God appeared and pushed the trees off me. I was saved. I told him thanks and went home.

In all these examples, there is a journey into the woods where there is danger and mystery. God is a magician or rescuer who provides a way out of the dangers and toward the path that leads back home. This theme, repeated many times not only in Eastern Europe but all throughout the world, is the stuff of fairy tales, most of which take the child protagonist on a journey into and out of a dangerous place. Most fairy tales have a figure who helps the child along the way or literally rescues the child from danger. This might be in the form of a fairy godmother or elf or even the more human hunter who appears in "Little Red Riding Hood," cutting open the belly of the wolf to rescue the devoured grandmother.

It appears that children who are raised in families where a traditional religious God is not present will create a god-like figure to play out one very important psychological task, one that every child needs—to protect and rescue, to ensure that fears and dangers can be overcome.

Several of the Czech children presented a more traditional view of God. Six-year-old Petra, from a Catholic background, draws a church in the middle of the forest. God hovers on a cloud alongside the church, a cross on his chest. The crucified Jesus is on the other side of the church. God is a moral taskmaster whose enemies are those who do not love others.

Tomás, at ten, also a Catholic and a believer, offers another point of view:

I cannot draw God because he cannot be seen. The best way to see God is to let the paper be clear, empty. Although we cannot see God, he is around us, in the earth and in heaven at the same time.

In playing God, Tomás attempts to persuade the nonbelievers to convert to Christianity.

I discovered two other strong Christian images from these children. One was from a nine-year-old girl, Darja, who identified herself as an evangelic Christian. She sees herself as God's servant and places God and his angels firmly in heaven. In her drawing, a faceless God sits on a radiant bright yellow throne. Before him are angels and servants. Darja's picture glows with a spiritual light.

The second image comes from Erik, a ten-year-old Catholic Gypsy boy from a poor family. Erik draws a heart radiating a bright spiritual light. Inside the heart are the faces of Jesus and Mary, as well as a cross adorned with flowers and two blue flower petals. For Erik: "God lives in our hearts together with Mary and Jesus. God is the heart." Erik also takes a highly moral position. As God, he would help dissuade people from taking drugs. Erik sees God's enemies as communists and nonbelievers.

In just a short space of 50 years, there were so many enemies in Eastern Europe. During the war, it was Jews and Nazis. After the war, it was Catholics and capitalists. And after the Cold War, it was communists. Within specific cultures, as the regional decks were reshuffled in the 1990s, the enemies became Serbs and Croats and Albanians, Muslims and Catholics and any number of cultural and religious scapegoats worthy of vilification. In all this confusion, how difficult it must be for the children to locate a moral compass and to navigate the treacherous, dark woods all around them.

As can be seen, these children present many different images of God, representing the different stressors and cultural strains intruding upon their everyday lives. And yet there is a common denominator present throughout Eastern Europe and indeed throughout the world—the children need security and protection. Whether it comes from Ares or grandfather or nature or a fairy tale genie or a traditional Christian God, it will come. And when it comes, the children will feel safer in knowing that they are not alone, in believing that a true moral order is possible—certainly in heaven, hopefully on earth.

## GREECE

I end my discussion of Europe at the beginning of Western civilization. When I was ready to travel on my own, Greece was one of the first places I

wanted to visit. I imagined vistas right out of the classical Greek dramas, dramatic monuments and sculptures and an array of sensual pleasures surrounding the sea. What I was unaware of at 21 years old, however, was that I was drawn to Greece for spiritual reasons above all else.

The Greece I have encountered on several occasions over 30 years is, on the surface, Christian and orthodox. Many people are named after the Christian saints and instead of their birthdays celebrate the saint's days. Yet, on a whole other level, Greeks also embrace the pagan and the sensual. The naming of a child after a classical god and goddess is as prevalent as naming a child after a saint. The ancient pagan monuments are at least as prominent as the Christian ones. From most quarters of Athens, the towering Parthenon sits fully in command of the city on top of its Acropolis, higher by leaps than any soaring church steeple.

The profane Greece was always available to me as I sailed to the sensuous islands and wandered through the ruins of splendid ancient cities, cruising the winding streets overstocked with assorted trinkets. Less available were the more sacred parts of this island nation. On an extended visit in 1986, informing my Greek colleagues that I was on a spiritual journey, I asked where I should go. Each one replied the same: "As a man, go to Mt. Athos." I knew nothing of this place but quickly learned enough to take the challenge.

Mt. Athos is an ancient orthodox monastic community, settled by ascetic monks. It is one of three fingers of a peninsula, each jutting out into the blue green Aegean. It is far removed from civilization and requires a two-day journey from Athens by plane, bus, and boat. There are 20 monasteries on the Mount, some dating to the early part of the first millennium. Scattered throughout the landscape are monastic cottages and cells, decreasing in size according to the increasing need of the monks for isolation and solitude. The most extreme dwelling is the *hesychasterion*, a small cave carved into a remote cliff, inhabited by monks seeking a direct communion with God. Only pilgrims are allowed on the Holy Mount. And all pilgrims must be male.

On the final leg of my two-day journey from Athens to Athos, I sat in a small boat with a small group of pilgrims and orthodox monks—Greeks, Slavs, Russians. The sun beat down on us mercilessly. The bearded monks were all dressed in black. I felt frightened, out of my element. I was a Jew entering not only a forbidden land, but another dimension beyond my grasp. As the boat rounded a bend, I caught my first glimpse of a medieval monastery perched high on a sheer cliff.

The moment of rounding was as if someone had suddenly punched me in the stomach. My muscles tightened so that I had to catch the side of the boat to regain my balance. As much as I tried, I could not fully straighten up. The only clear thought I could retain was that time and place had shifted. The

feeling was more of fear than of awe. I lost my moorings.

I stayed four days, sleeping in four different monasteries. I would wake early with the monks to attend the first service in the chapel. The early ritual lighting of the lamps was the most calming of all, a good preparation for my journey into the woods in search of a new spiritual shelter.

On the last night, I found myself in a monastery built into a sheer mountain face high above the Aegean Sea. Outside my small room at dusk, I stood at the flimsy wooden railing and peered down at the water. I began to breathe deeply, as if for the first time. As I looked out, I had the sense that I could see forever. The colors and the expanse of sky and sea altered everything. For the first time in days, I felt my body relax. The tightness in my stomach was gone. A cool breeze soothed my sun-burned face. From down below, I could hear the chant of the monks, beginning their all-night prayer service on this special holiday, The Night of the Cross. It was rumored that they would display their most sacred relic, a piece of the true cross of Christ. I felt open in all my senses, taking in the soft, floating colors in the sky and sea, the Byzantine chant below, the cooling breeze, the salt air and incense wafting through the early evening mist.

I remained until the sun set, breathing evenly and fully. Then finally I descended to the tiny chapel crowded with old men to witness the all night service in all its mysterious splendor. Although I was an outsider and forbidden to approach the inner sanctum, I was present that night, witness to the presence of Christ, even though the fragment of his true cross never materialized. Or maybe it did and I didn't even realize it. Somehow, the presence or absence of that particular relic did not matter. Although I heard no resounding voice from the heavens, I had discovered the reason why I had journeyed so far and so fearfully to Mt. Athos—to learn how to be present to the spirit that exists outside time and place.

The journey back to Athens was a blur. My four days felt like a lifetime. Back on the mainland, among the sunbathers and bouzouki players, I again shifted to the pagan. It began in the small boat from the Holy Mount. Looking back on Athos from the boat, I focused upon the highest peak. Instead of thinking about the ascetic monks in their eagle's nests, praying for their souls to be taken by Jesus, I conjured an image of Mt. Olympus and the gods at play. Way on top, intersected by a wispy white cloud, I envisioned Zeus, bear-chested and black-bearded, arms out-stretched and mouth wide open, thundering mightily.

### **God Speaks in Ancient Greek**

The very first drawing I received from Greece was created by Pavlos, a

seven-year-old Greek Orthodox boy. He draws God as an orange figure wrapped in some sort of a red toga (see **Plate 23**). He has a black beard and a shock of red hair. Both arms are extended, the fingers on his right hand pointing upward, the middle finger on his left pointing straight out. God stands front and center above a line of blue clouds extending across the picture. Two bright yellow lines appear at the bottom left of the drawing, as if Pavlos attempted to draw the sun.

When asked to speak as God, Pavlos replies: "I can't do that. God speaks in ancient Greek." I wonder which god Pavlos has in mind—the ruler of Heaven or Mt. Olympus. It occurs to me that in his own ingenuous way Pavlos has resolved the spiritual doubleness of Greek culture, combining elements of Christian and pagan in one image and one language. It seems reasonable to think that Zeus spoke in ancient Greek. It seems just as reasonable to think that the earliest residents of Mt. Athos spoke the same to their God who presumably understood their every word.

The interviewer persists: "But if God were to speak like you and me, what would he say?"

"He would ask me if I was a good boy and if I was well."

Pavlos responds in the affirmative.

This parental God speaks directly to the boy in very basic moral language that he can clearly understand.

Pavlos' story is as follows:

God sits on top of the clouds and he walks about looking down at the world to see what the people are doing. He changes all the bad things he sees are happening into good things.

And then, in response to the question about God's enemies, Pavlos says: "God has no enemies in the clouds, but a long time ago he had. His enemies were the Jews who crucified him. Now he has no more enemies."

This is the clearest echo of the words that propelled this entire project: "You Jews killed Christ." In some ways, it is a relief for I found in the world at large what I had already discovered in my own kitchen. Anti-Semitism exists in the minds of children. And yet I still felt perplexed. Why was I so eager to discover a fairly obvious reality? And then I remembered an early interview in New York when one black boy in the role of God said to the devil: "You are not going to be king because you are black." The suspicion and even hatred of the Jew by the gentile, of the black by the white, is one thing. The self-hatred of the Jew who internalizes that attitude is more insidious. I had spent too many years hiding out, internalizing all the anti-Semitic sentiments. It was time to let go.

What if it doesn't matter who did the actual killing of Christ? Are the

ancient Romans any different from the Nazis, the Stalinists, the Kymer Rouge, and all ancient and modern perpetrators of ethnic cleansing and genocide? What if the important point is that human beings have a need to target and scapegoat, to hold somebody else responsible for all the bad things that happen in the world?

In spiritual terms, this is an argument about whose god is better and how to hate those who pray to a lesser god. It does matter when children see their God as lesser than or greater than another. It does matter if they think that one Jew or some Jews killed Christ. It matters for my children and for all children. It matters in Northern Ireland and Kosovo. It matters in Israel and India and Rwanda.

But I seem to have moved far away from Pavlos' God who in his story changes all the bad things he sees into good things. This is the God I want. This is the loving God. But is this a God to be trusted? If the Jews are bad, wouldn't this God change the Jews into something else—Christians perhaps? This God worries me.

In the end, however, I am very drawn to Pavlos' Jesus in a Zeus costume. Pavlos brings me closer to an understanding of anti-Semitism from the outside and from the inside. And he affirms my belief in paradox. In Pavlos' Greece, I am face-to-face not as much with the spiritual nature of Christ as with the earthly passions of the pagan gods and tragic heroes who periodically succumb to fits of bigotry and violence. All too human, they perpetuate the legacy of intolerance even though they wish things to be different.

### **God with Maria**

The next creation by Konstandia, age six, brings me back from the passions of Greek mythology to the peace and calm of the orthodox Christian tradition. Konstandia says: "God looks like a big light. He lives in a house of straw." Konstandia draws God in his house with long yellow hair, brown arms and feet, and black dots on his face. He smiles. God says: "I would like the world instead of having cars and roads to have grass and flowers."

In her story, Konstandia says simply: "God lives in his house with his wife, Maria, and they stay there." She asks if she can add Maria to the drawing and, once given permission, draws a dark-haired female dressed in a way similar to God. Maria, however, is fleshed out in much greater detail. Her feet and arms are more shapely, her facial features are richly drawn with red lips and blue eyes.

Konstandia calls her picture *God with Maria* and notes the following details: "The house is made of straw and mud. The black dots on God's face

are his hairs. I don't want anyone to think he has freckles!" As to God's enemies, Konstandia says: "There are some bad people and some unfaithfuls, but God is not afraid of them."

I note several things about Konstandia's picture. For one, it is a family picture of a married couple in their home. This is not a lonely God. Although God is the first to be drawn and actually appears in the center of the house, the female, Maria, is the stronger of the two. She is given more substance; she is larger and more prominent. Konstandia's drawing is down to earth, suggesting the birth of Jesus in the manger. The straw roof of the house, however, has the quality of a canopy reaching upward toward the heavens. Konstandia's God desires a return from industrialization to nature. Although he has no enemies, there might be a bit of trouble in paradise as some non-believers exist. This God, however, is fearless and like the general tone of the drawing, he and his wife, Maria, appear safe and calm.

As Pavlos brings me to the paradox of pagan and Christian and of man and God, Konstandia brings me to the paradox concerning gender and family roles. Is God male or female? male and female? Is Maria the mother of God or the wife of God or both at the same time?

Looking at the drawing, I see two female figures and find it hard to know which one is God. My first inclination is to choose the stronger, dark-haired one as my bias has been to see women as light and men as dark. I am also very aware of my sense of God as male. It is not the hair color that most confuses me, but the femininity of the two. Perhaps all Konstandia's drawings have a feminine quality as they are in some fashion self-portraits. She might even be aware at some level that her blond God appears too feminine for she adds a touch of the masculine by giving him the black stubble of a beard. In drawing the female Maria, Konstandia might even be making a statement about the center of power in her family. The woman is strong, clearly defined, visible, the kind of person God would want to live with.

I am left with the question: does the real center of spiritual and domestic power reside in the feminine? It certainly does for Konstandia and many other girls from all around the world. In the Old Testament that I knew as a boy, there was no question that God was male. And when I think of the archetypal Christian God, I envision the powerful male figure on the Sistine Chapel ceiling with the pointed finger.

Recalling the most spiritual images of my childhood, it was the men who covered their bodies in prayer shawls and laid *tefillin* in the morning, thanking God that they were not born female. It was the men who approached the bema in the temple and read from the Torah and shook each others' hands after completing their honored task. It was the men who chanted *Kol Nidre* on Yom Kippur, who presided over the Passover seder and

the prayers over the bread and wine each Friday night. It was always the men, and in my family, they were silent, uncommunicative, distant in their secret communion with God.

In their remoteness, the men, most particularly my grandfather, seemed to be a mirror image of God, himself. This is how God must appear to mortals, I thought. He must be remote and silent, modest and serious and male, totally absorbed in his secret language and secret rituals. This must be God's business, I thought, the most holy commerce of men. As my grandfather prayed, embodying God, I found my attention drawn to him. He was my role model and not only was I learning how to be an orthodox Jew, but I was also learning how to be a man.

I was so focused upon my grandfather that I often missed the women. In the background, scurrying from kitchen to dining room, they silently took care of the business of running a family. As I grew older, I began to see that my grandfather was powerless when it came to the art of living in the world. It was the women, precise and detailed, who saw to it that the chores were done, the children were fed and bathed and clothed, the bills were paid, and life progressed as if all were well.

I grew up in a household of women. As a child, with my father newly returned from the war, I was moved through my paces by the women, the only ones around who knew how things worked. Even though they did not appear to know how to pray, in the house of bricks and mortar they reigned supreme. In my adult life, I have chosen to be with strong and powerful women. Their presence continues to be large in my house. On occasions, I attend religious services in a reform temple led by a woman rabbi. Whenever the liturgy calls for a reference to a masculine God, she alters it. This is not only the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, she says, but also of Sarah, Rebecca and Miriam.

I have come full circle. It might be that the God that lived through my patriarchal grandfather was equally present in the matriarchy that less dramatically but more carefully proceeded with the business of taking care of the living and dying.

In contemplating Konstandia's *God with Maria*, I see two feminine figures, one stronger than another. The male God is feminine to me despite the stubble of beard which might as well be freckles. Konstandia's drawing shows me what I knew all along but could never clearly see. Despite the iconography of Michelangelo and Cecil B. DeMille, it is plain—God is female. Or perhaps, referring back to the concept of paradox, God is a shapeshifter, capable of changing gender with no effort at all, like the classical Dionysus.

As I look at Konstandia's drawing, I think that God is with the more defined and the more powerful Maria, because he needs her definition and



clarity, he needs her strength and earthiness in order to find a way into the lives of mortals. He needs her presence in order to become less absent and less distant in the lives of human beings. As for me, I need the feminine in order to see the domestic world under the straw canopy more clearly. For God resides there as well as in the clouds, and it is in the small rituals of everyday life where she reveals herself.

### **Gypsies**

Gypsies, known in Europe as Romani or Roma, are a historically nomadic people with a poorly understood culture and language. Although the group does not represent a single, unified culture, Gypsies originated in northwest India, settling in Eastern Europe by the eleventh century. Their population, estimated to be more than ten million worldwide, was decimated by 500,000 during the war as the Nazis targeted Gypsies for the gas chambers at Auschwitz.

One mark of their traditional belief system was the worship of the goddess Kali. In recent generations, they have taken on the religions of their host countries, with the majority seeing themselves as Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox. For many, however, the Christian practices are blended with traditional beliefs in supernatural spirits, healing rituals, curses, and talismans.

Gypsies have been scapegoated and brutalized throughout history. Because so many were blacksmiths in the early part of the first millenium, they were rumored to have forged the nails used in the crucifixion of Christ.

Like the Jews, Gypsies were easy targets with their dark skin and strange beliefs and tendency to avoid assimilation. In Europe, they are often villified as thieves and beggars. In some instances, they are openly harassed and persecuted.

The following five interviews took place in a state school in Greece in a neighborhood populated by many Gypsy families. Four of the children interviewed were in first grade. In fact, their teacher said that these were the only children in her class because 24 others had dropped out since the beginning of the school year. The high drop-out rate of Gypsy children, she said, was expected and predictable. She noted that it was quite extraordinary that some of these children actually attend on a regular basis in that their parents are generally unsupportive and suspicious of public education.

Because of cultural bias and poor attendance, teachers have very low expectations for the academic achievement of Gypsy children. The school itself provides very few resources in the service of their education and development. The first grade classroom door, noted the interviewer, was always locked.

All of the children interviewed were considered by the school personnel to be Greek Orthodox. The school was grim and stark, the only decoration a single icon of Jesus on the classroom wall. The atmosphere in the school was chaotic and noisy.

These particular children are in their first year of school and not likely to remain more than a year or two. Although they are attractive children, they are all undernourished and unkempt. They come from poor homes with few amenities other than a television. They tend to be shy and tentative, often lost for words.

It is hard for the children at first to visualize God. In fact, when one boy is asked to draw a picture of God, he requests to go outside and looks up in the sky. Many of their pictures and stories are flat and lacking in detail, and yet they reveal a poetic and spiritual intensity quite unique among the children of the world.

The interviewer noted that the children had great respect for the felt tip pens she brought with her. At the end of each interview, they were careful to replace the tops. "It was obvious," she said, "that they had no intention of taking any."

### ***God's Belly Button***

George is eight. He takes a bright yellow marker and draws a primitive god with no arms, ears, or feet. His body is a rectangle with a belly button prominently displayed. He has a beard and empty eyes. Pointing to the sky, George says: "God lives up there with his Mommy and his Grandma."

George believes that God speaks to him but when asked to speak as God, George replies: "He doesn't say anything." He tells the story of his picture in one sentence: "That is God and that is his belly button."

George is silent. He can't think of a title for the picture. He does not believe that God has any enemies. But as an afterthought, he says: "I love him because he gives us money."

I think of Bertolt Brecht's famous line from *The Threepenny Opera*:

*Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral.*  
(Food comes first, morality follows after.)

George's God is lovable if first he provides for the material needs of human beings. But like those who need feeding, he too appears hungry with a thin belly, defined by a yellow belly button. He is a meager God, indeed. Without ears or hands, he can neither listen nor touch. He has a mouth and can speak to George, but he has nothing to say.

Yet George's God is vibrant. He glows with a yellow light not unlike the

luminous drawings of other, more fortunate children. He serves as an umbilicus that anchors George in the world and provides him with an identity—part dim and part radiant. I wonder what George sees when he looks at his creation? Are the missing limbs and eyes and ears his own? Is this god's silence the same as George's? I note that God lives in a family with two generations of women. He is connected like George who surely can see the light that shines through God's belly button.

### ***God's Willy***

Apostolis, also eight, draws an even more vibrant, colorful God. This God is a large circle, with eyes and ears and a smiling mouth. There is no body but stick arms reaching out, stick legs extending down from the head, and an appendage also extending from the head that appears to be male genitalia. Surrounding God is a swirl of colors—yellow, green, purple and orange (see **Plate 24**).

Apostolis says: "God is smiling. He had some problems which have now left him and now he is happy." He is able to create a basic dialogue between God and himself. God says that he is doing fine and asks Apostolis if he is happy.

Apostolis then tells this story:

God is up in the sky with the clouds. He has clouds all around him. God is happy. He lives with his wife. She doesn't argue and she doesn't make problems for him.

Apostolis calls his picture *God* and adds the following detail: "That is his willy. He is not naked. I just drew it to show that he is a man."

As for enemies, Apostolis offers: "His best friends are his enemies, now that God has little Jesus with him. I don't know why they make problems for him."

Even though this picture and story is more detailed, I am left with a great sadness. Although Apostolis characterizes God as happy, I have my doubts. He can only be happy at the expense of his wife, by shutting her down. He needs to display his genitals in order to demonstrate his masculinity. In fact, the only indication of a body beyond the head and limbs is the genitals and even they are misplaced, appearing where the neck should be. Furthermore, his best friends are his enemies. There are many problems, it seems, in the life of this God.

In both boys' drawings, there is a center—the belly button and the penis. I wonder if both boys see God's power emanating from these centers. To me, that makes sense as both contain abundant spiritual energy—the belly button as a mark of one's transition from the womb to the world, and the penis as a

mark of the man, as an object that carries the seed from which new life will grow.

### *Going Around in Circles*

Yiannis, at nine, is the most regressed of the boys. His God is a large circular head with smiling mouth, wide eyes, and wild hair. There is no body at all, only four stick-like appendages extending from the head. Most of his responses to the interviewer are: "I don't know." And yet he is able to take on the role of God and speak to Yiannis: "You must go to school so that you can learn to read and write." Being an obedient boy, Yiannis answers: "Yes, I will go to school."

Yiannis tells the following story about his drawing: "God is looking at us. He is up there, and he spends his time going around in circles." God has enemies, but Yiannis does not know who they are. He calls his drawing, simply: *A Picture*. Yiannis mentions one final thing—he believes in the existence of God.

Aside from the mouth and eyes, there is very little human about Yiannis' drawing. It looks like a child's toy—a human head on top of bird legs. But then, I remind myself, this is a picture of God. Why should God look human? The main reason is that most children steeped in the Judeo-Christian tradition learn that human beings were created in the image of God. Yet as I review so many of the pictures, it seems that God is created in the image of human beings. Is this, I wonder, how Yiannis sees himself—as lacking a body, as so terribly deformed? Or is this his unique vision of God forged in his young unconscious mind and in his collective cultural tradition of spirits and ghosts?

Lost in my thoughts, feeling again saddened by this drawing, I happen to turn it over. On the other side of the drawing, I notice that Yiannis had begun another. In this one, two eyes and a smiling mouth are visible. There is no attempt to draw a body or any boundaries at all. The eyes and mouth are yellow. Eyelashes appear to surround each eye, although they look more like rays of light. As I look carefully, each eye appears to be a sun, dotted with a nucleus. The twin suns are high up on the paper and the curve of the mouth sits underneath. Perhaps this is a more accurate rendering of Yiannis' God. This figure has no boundaries. This figure radiates light. This figure is not noted for what is missing but for what is implied—that is, infinite space.

The first-drawn God figure is parental and tells Yiannis to go to school. Yiannis responds in the affirmative. It is hard to believe that this scenario will actually be played out. I get the sense that this is a repeated conversation between Yiannis and his adult caretakers. It is a circular argument that goes

nowhere. But the more abstract God on the other side of the page is unfinished and silent. Perhaps he, like the suns, goes around in circles for another reason—because he is light and power and spirit and that is how these forces move through time and space.

I am aware that my interpretation of Yiannis' unfinished picture is beyond the artist's intentions. But I hold on to the thought that there is a God for Yiannis, as there is a God for all these children whose everyday lives are so difficult. So I turn the page and I search. Sometimes, these children teach me, God is hidden. You have to look everywhere in order to find him.

### ***A Picture of God and the Virgin Mary and Christ and All the Saints***

Panagiotis, another nine-year-old boy, draws a more complex version of God. The central figure in yellow seems to be struggling. He has a body, feet and what appear to be arms. He has all facial characteristics except ears. Above him is a sun with a face. On either side of him are black clouds. The entire image is framed by a silver border, extended all around the picture (see Plate 25).

When Panagiotis is asked to take on the role of God, he makes it clear that he can talk to God. Instead of creating a dialogue, he offers the following story:

God spends his time talking to the bad guys. He tells them when Christ was nailed God told Christ to curse the bad guys, but Christ didn't curse them because he was sorry for them. And then God cursed them and they all died.

And then:

I will tell you another story. Christ was nailed and then he died, but God was with him and then he resurrected.

Eager to respond to God's story, Panagiotis offers this:

I will tell him that some kids are pestering me, some grown-ups, too. They curse me and I ask them why are you cursing me? Have I cursed you? I have nothing against you. I will tell them all that.

In direct reference to his picture, Panagiotis says:

God appeared and is sitting there with a stick, because he has a backache and he doesn't want to fall over.

He calls his drawing: *A Picture of Christ and the Virgin Mary and God and all the Saints*, even though only one figure is apparent. In ending his interview, Panagiotis notes that God's enemies are "the Judases." Panagiotis identifies

the red hairs on God's head as thorns and says: "They put thorns on him. He was also hurt on his tummy and the bruises show in the picture. Judas gave them to him."

So God is struggling in this picture. Panagiotis, unlike the others, creates quite a rich scenario. This God is wounded in the head and the belly and he is shaky. He needs a stick for support. I get the sense that Panagiotis has drawn Christ. The sun above might represent God. It is unclear. But in the stories told, it becomes clear that God is punitive and Christ is forgiving of the enemies. Panagiotis, too, has enemies, kids and grown-ups who curse him. Like Christ, he will turn the other cheek. Panagiotis seems to be forgiving, but how can he be when there is such cruelty directed toward him? If God cannot forgive the Jews for murdering his son, how can Panagiotis forgive the Greeks for their curses?

When I look at Panagiotis' picture, I see the sun as blowing away the black clouds. God seems to be untangling a rope that is wrapped around his body. He is angry and frustrated. He needs the help of the sun to blow away the dark forces that keep him bound. Holding it all together is the silver line, perhaps a property of each dark cloud. "Every cloud has a silver lining," I was told as a boy.

*Pennies from Heaven*, which keeps playing in my mind, is a song of hope. *Don't you know each cloud contains pennies from heaven?* When I am struggling with all the darkness in my life, feeling tangled up, sick in my belly, I still hold onto the hope that the clouds will pass and that things will change. That is one way that I conceptualize God. In my experience, trouble and conflict can be more of a challenge than a defeat. I would like to think this is also the case for Panagiotis. I would like to think there is a God in heaven or a guide on earth to help him untangle himself. I would like to think those who curse him and scorn him will stop because he forgives them and obeys the Golden Rule.

But I doubt that hope springs eternal for Panagiotis. Panagiotis, like his fellow Gypsies, is an outcast and that is his main similarity with Christ. In his world on the streets of the cities of Europe, few behave like the holy figures named in Panagiotis' drawing. As he grows up, perhaps he can find the figures of the Virgin Mary and all the saints somewhere within his spiritual world. Perhaps he can hold on to the image of the gentle and forgiving Christ and learn how to avoid the blows of the bullies and the bad guys. Perhaps he will be able to find the silver lining of the dark clouds that hold together the images of struggle. This is the hope, one persona of God.

### ***Nothing or Maria***

The only girl interviewed is eight-year-old Christina. Her drawing is

notable for its absence of a human-like figure, although there is a small sun with a face and a second angel-like figure on its side, also with a penciled-in face. The rest of the drawing is of abstract shapes and Greek letters.

God speaks to Christina. He asks if she is well. He says “good words,” but she does not respond. Her story is minimal: “This is where God lives up in the sky with the clouds and the letters.” When asked to entitle her picture, she responds: “My picture is called nothing, nothing, or maybe her name is Maria. It is a nice name.”

As the interview ends, Christina offers a final thought: “God gives us bags and takes them to our home. The bags are full of clothes and money.”

Christina’s sentiments are similar to those of George—food and in this case clothing must precede morality. God is a charitable organization. His function is to provide material necessities.

But I sense there is much more here. There is a certain graphic beauty to Christina’s drawing. The letters and made-up Greek words become another visual element, pieces of the godhead. I think of the opening line of the Gospel According to Saint John: “In the beginning was the word and the word was God.”

Upon closer examination, the clouds are complex forms. In the center of the picture is a yellow cloud outlined in green. Inside is a figure that looks like a fetus in a womb. This figure is also outlined in green and colored in with bright orange. A silver line descends from the right of this figure, like a shooting star. And just to the right is what appears to be an angel on its side. This certainly seems to be a picture of something and, according to Christina, the topic may be Maria, the Mother of God.

Could it be that this is a picture of the birth of Jesus that occurs within a disembodied womb, a spiritual womb, that of Maria? Surrounded by the mysterious letters and words, by the shooting star and angel, by the sun and clouds, this could well be a depiction of the divine. Unlike the image of the penis at the center of George’s drawing, Christina’s is the female womb. Christina seems to say that God was born of woman or maybe even that God is female. If this is her intention, it is in keeping with the traditional faith of the Gypsies in a divine goddess. God is not nothing but the something that is Maria. God is female as well as male. God is the word and the image. God is the provider of material comforts and spiritual ones.

In the end, these naïve, unadorned renderings in word and image are at least as charged as those created by children who grow up in more secure mainstream circumstances. These Gypsy children, like all others, expect certain comforts from God. Perhaps they have not desire more of the material—first we need to feed our stomachs. But thinking about God, they also desire a clear and strong sense of morality. Like all children everywhere,

they look for spiritual sustenance, for hope and compassion and love. They look for these virtues most especially to fill the spiritual void that often proliferates in the face of poverty and the reality of being thrust in the role of outcast.



## Chapter 5

### THE GODS OF ASIA

I take a giant leap across continents, landing in Asia. I decide to save the middle for last as that will be a place of personal epiphany. Recognizing my limitations, I chide myself for all the cultures and spiritual traditions unrepresented but console myself with the thought that there will be more journeys and more time to talk to children and attempt to enter their spiritual universe.

My leap to Asia is exciting and jarring. Although the world has become a global village in terms of technology, East is still East and West is still West in terms of things spiritual. The one God of the West becomes the many gods of the East. The transcendent god standing outside his creation becomes the pantheistic god that endows all aspects of the material world with his or her spirit.

In the East there is more of a blur at the borderline between natural and supernatural, science and superstition. These domains, not quite contradictory, seem to coexist along the sinuous S curve of the yin-yang symbol of harmony, synonymous with many Eastern beliefs. Even where Christian missionaries have been most successful in establishing schools and churches and converting Asian people, cultural and spiritual traditions remain intact and appear in the drawings and stories of children. Even as I present some of these unique images, I also see the common bonds shared with children the world over who yearn for comfort and live at significant moments in the presence of the spirit.

### INDIA

I have never been to India, although I have entered its exotic splendor many times in films and books and myths, in restaurants and spice shops, in art, music, drama and dreams. I was lucky to sample its culture as a guest at a class in traditional Indian dance, reported earlier, where I learned about the trinity of Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver; and Shiva, the Destroyer, and where I first heard the story of Ganesh, the boy god with the

elephant head. In my mind's eye, India is a crowded mythic, spiritual landscape, presided over by a vast pantheon of gods.

Two women, both educators, conducted the interviews in India. The first worked with a group of middle-class children, all of whom responded to the questions in English, and offered a running cultural commentary. The second worked with a group of poorer children of lower social status. These children responded to the questions in Hindi, their native language. This interviewer also offered commentary which helped me understand some of complex issues of the spiritual lives of Indian children. I begin with the former.

The interviewer, Uma (named after the graceful form of Shiva's wife), informed me that her sample of children come from relatively affluent homes, study in convent schools, wear Nike sneakers and watch Cartoon Network on television. She was rather disappointed with the children, finding them too self-conscious and distant from their spiritual heritage. Uma did note, however, that the interviews had a strong effect upon the parents whom, she said, do not take much responsibility for the religious education of their children. As the parents saw the creations of their children, they were reminded of the conflict in their culture between secular and religious factions. They spoke of their fears of the rise of Hindu fundamentalism and its intolerance toward those who believed in other gods.

As I listened to Uma, I was reminded of the latest in a protracted series of military struggles between India and Pakistan, both of whom recently tested nuclear weapons, both of whom claimed their bomb was detonated in the name of their respective Hindu and Muslim gods. And I was reminded of the recent violence between Hindus and Christians which resulted in the destruction of a Baptist settlement in the town of Ranalai. The headline of an article in *The New York Times* of March 23, 1999 read: "Shiva vs. Jesus: Hindus Burn Homes of Christians." This did not seem too different from other struggles I noted in Northern Ireland, in the Balkans, in the Middle East, and to a lesser extent, in the small suburban community where I live with my children.

In turning to the children of India, I discover a variety of images as well as the comforting thought that most share the same humane political and moral points of view, well represented in the following interviews.

### **God Is in the Temple**

Ten-year-old Nitish, a Hindu and son of a police inspector, offers a very open response to the sectarian violence in India. He draws a picture of a Christian church and says: "I drew a church and not a temple because God is the same for everyone, everywhere." He continues: "I believe in all the

gods.”

A second boy from a similar background, Nitesh, also drew a Christian church, but alongside it are a Hindu temple and a Muslim mosque. Children and images of nature are also present. Nitesh says: “God is in the temple, the mosque, the church, but he’s also in children, trees, the sun and the sky.” When Nitesh plays God, he says simply and directly: “Everyone should love each other.”

Many of the children drew pictures of temples, presenting an indirect image of God. Sheena, a ten-year-old middle-class Hindu girl, draws a temple with open doors. On the side is a shop. Nearby is a man washing his hands before entering the temple to pray. Sheena calls her picture *God Is in the Temple*. She sees God as Krishna, one of the primary Hindu deities. Although Krishna does not appear directly in the drawing, he is a presence whose function is to help people solve problems of daily living.

These drawings are quite different from the Muslim drawings of the children from Bangladesh who were prohibited from creating a direct image of God. The Indian children grow up with images of many gods all around them not only in temples, but in books and all possible media.

Bejon, an eight-year-old Hindu boy from an upper-middle-class family, draws a popular cartoon figure of The Pink Panther dressed in trousers. He has no feet and he wears a walkman with earphones. To his right is the syllable *Om* in Sanskrit which stands for the divine principle. Although he is not God, The Pink Panther, according to Bejon, is a searcher of God. I wonder if God’s voice can be heard over the headphones? And if so, what is God saying?

Virraj, age six, also from a Hindu upper-middle-class family, draws a scene of war among the gods. Like Nitish, he admits many gods into his spiritual world. This is his explanation of the war:

A scientist makes all the gods fight and all the demons, too. Jesus is in his church. Ravan is finally removed from his temple and killed by Shivji who sits on top of a new giant which Ganesh made for him. Durga is on top of her lion and kills a ghost.

Virraj believes in God and says: “God lives above the attic, in the sky.” God’s enemies are Ravan and ghosts and devils and demons. Virraj adds: “No one fights with Jesus.” The title of the drawing is: *The Heaven of All the Enemies of All the Gods*.

I am taken with the combination of science and religion. A scientist is responsible for the war. Could this be the god of technology who makes the bombs? And I am taken with the mix of Christian and Hindu gods and with the rarefied position of Jesus.

### The Faithful God Who Listened to His Mother

A number of children, however, focus directly upon Hindu gods and goddesses, playing with their mystery and wonder. Ten-year-old Mondira draws a picture of Durga with a third eye on her forehead, rings in her nose and ears, an orange necklace and crown and ten hands (see **Figure 13**). Mondira describes Durga as the energy of the universe and offers this poetic statement:

People give God all these jewels. God does not need them. God has a lot of jewels in her heart. Hands are really important for the mind. They carry out the mind's ideas. Hands help you climb trees and catch stars.

Anamika, also ten, draws a picture of Shiva or Shivji, one of the supreme Hindu gods. Shiva represents both the destructive and the creative forces of the universe. Anamika calls her drawing *Narayan Telling His Complaint to Shivji*. Shivji is drawn in the traditional blue, sitting cross-legged under a tree. Anamika tells this story:

When Narayan came to God he told him all about the people of the world and about all the bad things. Then Shivji got very angry and he did the Dance of Death, Tandav Nritya. When this happens, all the bad ends.

For Anamika, God's enemies are the evils which teach people to do wrong. Anamika sees the struggle between good and evil as an internal one: "There is one god in ourselves, but there is also an evil in ourselves. We have to fight our evil."

As to her faith, Anamika says: "I believe in God, but I get very angry with him, especially when my sister fights with me." Like many children worldwide, the daily problems of living are easily projected upon the divine. And the supernatural beings become models for human beings who so desperately need to find a way to liberate themselves from their dark impulses.

And finally, Shreya, 11 years old, draws a beautiful picture of Ganesh, the remover of obstacles and son of Shiva (see **Plate 26**). Shreya draws Ganesh in yellow sections. Below Ganesh is a small figure which Shreya identifies as a mouse.

Shreya tells this story:

One day Kartik's mother asked him to go around the world. So he encircled her thrice and sat down. She asked him why he did not do as he was told. He said he'd gone around her thrice. She was the world.

In the traditional Indian story, the parents of Ganesh organize a race of three times around the world between Ganesh and his brother. The brother is the better athlete and proceeds speedily on his marathon journey. But Ganesh is smarter and completes his laps around the girth of his parents.



Figure 12. *Joanna—God Stays in the Soul, Bulgaria*



Figure 13. *Mondira—The 10 Hands of Durga, India*

When finished, he tells them that because they are his world he needs to travel no further.

Shreya calls her drawing *The Faithful God Who Listened to His Mother*. She says that she believes in God and prays to him when she feels very sad. I wonder if she feels like a mouse at those moments. The praying works because, says Shreya, “it helps me get happy again.”

The Indian children move with ease between myth and reality, deifying an elephant boy as well as a mother. The image of the divine feminine whose circumference envelopes all the world is especially powerful to me as I was born into a household of three generations of women. They were worlds within worlds and my legs were too shaky to carry me around their formidable girth. That may have been why I held on so tight to my grandfather and his God which seems in retrospect to have been a straighter path, a shorter distance around.

### Sikhs

India, though primarily Hindu, also is home to other religious traditions—Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jain and Sikh. Uma interviewed several Sikh children. The Sikh religion, founded in the 15th century by the guru Nanak, combines elements of Hinduism and Islam. Unlike Hinduism, the Sikhs worship a single God with whom they can unite through meditation on the word, *Nam*, which means *the name*. The Sikhs observe strict rules of behavior and dress. The men are noted by uncut beards and hair and colorful turbans. As is the case with other religious groups in India, there have been violent clashes between Sikhs and Hindus.

The first Sikh child, Prithvi, a six-year-old boy, tells an unusual story of God:

One day God was going into the forest. On the way he killed a jackal. When he went ahead, he came to a house. He knocked on the door. There was no reply. So he forced the door open. It was a dirty house, full of dirty animals. God looked after the animals.

God seems to embody conventional male and female qualities. He is the destroyer of predatory animals and caretaker of needy ones. In Prithvi's drawing, God takes a walk into the forest. Prithvi comments on the picture in a poetic way: “The sun walks behind God. The lamb runs after him.” He walks in harmony with nature.

Meher, a nine-year-old Sikh girl, says very little in response to the questions posed by Uma. Uma comments that many Indian girls are reticent when interviewed. Meher, however, does make it clear in her brief story how she sees God: “I learned to recognize God because of the top-knot on his

head.” Meher sees God as a male Sikh.

Meher expands her vision of God eloquently in her drawing of a large flower, all in orange, with a large circular nucleus. When Uma asks Meher to take on the role of God, she speaks to the flower: “You are very beautiful.” I am reminded of the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament when God looks at his creation and sees that it is good.

From these two children, the vision of God expands in India—God is destroyer and protector of nature. He is creator of beautiful flowers, if not a flower himself. And God is a Sikh with top-knot and turban.

### **The Glory of the Gods**

The second interviewer, Urmila, worked with several children who attend municipal schools, live in servants quarters and represent the urban lower middle-class. In their schools, lessons are taught in the native Hindi language. These children mention a number of local gods and goddesses who are not universally worshiped. They also refer to a guru named Sai Baba, a holy man with a large national and international following, whom they imagine lives in a peepal tree, the same tree identified with Buddha’s mystical vision. To the children, Sai Baba is a tangible and visible form of God.

Sai Baba is part of a long tradition of god men and gurus in India dating back to the early epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Recent examples include Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, guru to The Beatles, and Osho Rajneesh, who had a large following in America. It is often difficult for children and ordinary people, alike, to grasp the complex teachings, rituals, and pantheon of Hindu gods. God men like Sai Baba provide a bridge between the abstract Hindu theology and everyday existence.

Urmila interviewed four children and translated their responses from Hindi. They all created beautiful, elaborate drawings.

Pooja, a nine-year-old girl, makes a complex artwork that includes painting and collage. In the upper left is a warrior figure standing on a bank of clouds under an arch. Two classical Indian male and female figures are pasted in on the right. They sit near the sun. Below them is a house and to the left is a postcard, an abstract swirl of colors and shapes. There are other images in the picture which are unclear to me and I hope that Pooja’s words will be clarifying. She writes a title for her composition, *My Idea of God*, and tells this story:

We worship God. We believe in and worship Santoshi Ma and also believe in Shankar. I have seen God in the form of man, and God can also be seen in children. God lives in the sky. God lives in our minds. And I have also seen God in a dream. Sai Baba sits in a peepal tree. We also worship Lord Ganesha. We can do anything for God. God talks to me. A teacher is also a

kind of God. We revere our mothers and fathers. That's all I know about God.

Pooja's beliefs are similar in some ways but also quite different from those of Western children and even different from those of more affluent and privileged Indian children. Like many other children, Pooja sees God as an inner figure in dreams and as an external figure in the natural and supernatural worlds. Yet Pooja looks through a broader lens. In her polytheistic world, gods are everywhere— in mythical figures and holy men, in teachers and parents. So many aspects of her personal experience seem to be included in her drawing. There is a flow between realms of existence as if dream and not dream were a continuous plain. Pooja's spiritual vision is pantheistic—god takes the form of any number of figures in her everyday life.

The other children express similar sentiments. For example, Hemlata, a ten-year-old girl, writes:

I like God a lot. We worship God in the form of Shankar. God is in our mind. We see religious plays like Shiva the Great, Hanuman, and Krishna. God is the master of us all. We respect our mother and father as God and fast so that all our wishes come true or in case of a problem in the house we are protected from harm. God can come in any form—as a priest or as a man. I have seen God in a dream. He was talking to me. When I pray to God I ask him to pass me and my brothers and sisters in our exams and that my mother, father, brothers and sisters are spared from pain and sadness. God lives in heaven and treats us like his children. We have never seen God. We can see Sai Baba. Teachers are like our gods and we should do the work they give us and listen to them and to our parents.

Like Pooja, Hemlata draws a house and pastes in two pictures of classical Indian gods. She draws one prominent god figure, probably Shiva, sitting in a lotus position and holding a trident. She adds images of a flag, a rainbow, and a lotus flower.

Urmila interviewed two boys whose responses were similar to those of the girls. Sonu, at ten, draws a large figure of Shiva surrounded by nature (see **Plate 27**). Sonu speaks about the genealogy of Shiva and notes that God also takes the form of children and parents. Like the others, Sonu refers to the divinity of Sai Baba whom, he says, lives in a peepal tree.

Sonu, like his peers, experiences God in dreams. He says: "I have seen Lord Shiva in a dream and I dreamt that when I got entangled, then Shiva was able to free me from the tangle."

I look again at Sonu's drawing, trying to find the tangle. These children's pictures have become so obscure for me, their gods so foreign. Although I could not find the tangle, I did notice that Shiva's hair is blue and that it rises up from his head into a kind of stream that flows through the mountains and



on through a field of flowers and birds. And rereading Sonu's interview, I discovered this: "God lives in our whole body. The water of Shiva flows throughout Hardwar and in all the rivers."

What does Sonu mean? Many images race through my mind—the waters of Babylon, the River Jordan, the baptismal font—and still I felt the tangle in my mind. When I turn to the final drawing by nine-year-old Neeraj, I see a yellow man on a diagonal under a rainbow. Below him is another Shiva and to his right are three pasted-in images. The first is of an Indian peacock goddess. The second has a vaguely Chinese feel, although the painter has a Slavic name. There is a bird and purple flowers in the foreground, leading to a village in winter. And the third, with a feeling of the European Renaissance, is of a man warming his feet by a fireplace, a pot cooking over the fire. This image brought to mind the Christian God of Fabian from Austria who sat by the fire of his country farmhouse warming his feet.

Neeraj's picture helps me untangle some of my confusion. His story adds further clarity:

I have seen God in the form of man and in my dream I thought God was standing in front of me. I worship Bhole Nath and also goddess Parvati, and also Santoshi Ma and Ram, Laxman, Sita and Ganesh, and Laxmi. We also worship Sai Baba. I pray to God to keep my mother happy and to listen to my parents and do the work given me by my teachers. Glory to God Shankar! Glory to God!

The pantheistic world is full of spiritual beings, some in the shape of humans and some in the shape of gods and goddesses. The landscape is teeming and open. There is always room for more. Hinduism, whether religious or cultural, incorporates imagery from many diverse sources. The peacock goddess, the village in winter, the man warming his feet by the fire are all part of the divine mystery of being. The dream and the waking are not separate but contiguous states of being.

And so I have found my way into an understanding of the gods of India. It is based in an acceptance of a myriad of contradictory forces fully at play in the cosmos. God is a nuclear bomb and a flower. God is a scientist who engineers a holy war against his enemies and a holy man whose message is love. God is singing through the headphones of a panther's walkman and silent in the temple. God is a destroyer of jackals and liberator of the dirty animals. God is a guru who lives in a peepal tree and a teacher who gives tests. God is a woman with ten arms and a boy with the head of an elephant. God is mother and father. God is Brahman and Mohammed, Christ and Nanak. God is creator, destroyer, and preserver. And God flows like the blue river emanating from Shiva's head throughout Hardwar and all the rivers of the world.

At the end of Neeraj's story, he writes: "Glory to God!" The glory of the gods is present all over India, in abundance. Even though it coexists with the technological and material forces of the walkman and the sneakers, I imagine that when I arrive some day, it might just knock me off my feet.

## CHINA

When I visited the classroom in New York City's Chinatown to interview young children, I was surprised to discover how many had little or no conception of God. The strongest representations of God were Christian. Aside from one girl who drew a Buddha sitting on her television set, I got little indication of the spiritual traditions of China. I received several interviews from China and when I examined them, I discovered more of the same. The interviewer reported that many of the children could not respond to the questions. The concept of God was quite foreign to them.

Of the children from China, several came from families with no religious orientation and several came from Christian families. Of the former, the children made sense of the questions by expressing moral values. As an example, one 11-year-old girl told this story: "Once upon a time there was a god. No one knows what he looked like. He always helped the poor and punished the evil ones."

The Christian children were much more specific. Eight-year-old Ling Ling imagines herself as a sinner and sees God's enemy as Satan. She also asserts her faith in God: "I believe in God because I can become his beloved child and have eternal life."

In many ways, especially outside the specific Western Christian orientation, it is difficult to find God in China. One could argue that this is the case as so much of the Chinese belief system of the past 2500 years has been based in the teachings of the humanist Confucius who, when asked by a disciple to explain the afterlife, replied: "We have not yet learned to know life. How can we know death?"

And yet it could also be argued that the more spiritual strains of Buddhism and Taoism, as well as ancient ritual practices around the worship of nature and ancestors have also played a profound part in shaping the spiritual consciousness of Chinese people. From Buddhism, the people inherited a formal system of prayer and ritual and a pantheon of gods. And from Taoism, the people inherited a way of seeing their lives as an inexplicable journey and the world as a play of opposite principles, yin and yang, striving toward a harmony that can never be completely realized.

The Communist Party, in rule for nearly half a century, attempted to

systematically destroy these traditional structures. The state was successful in demolishing temples and prohibiting certain religious practices. And yet, even the most repressive campaigns of Mao could not obliterate a cultural tradition that is so very much spiritual, where the contemplation of nature and the expression of Chi, the life force, reveals a sense of the sacred. Whatever the future might hold, it seems clear that even if the word god is foreign to many Chinese children, their spiritual heritage remains intact.

One poignant and odd example of this spiritual heritage is the sudden appearance of 10,000 people, members of a Buddhist-Taoist sect called Falun Gong, just outside the Forbidden City in Beijing in April, 1999. Their aim was to protest against the policies of the government through silent meditation. The group, inspired by a guru who lives in exile in New York City and preaches detachment from the world of politics and economics, is not unique in Chinese history. Over thousands of years, great and powerful governments led by emperors and warlords have been threatened by similar groups who clearly represent a spiritual yearning within the Chinese people. Today the Communist Party has outlawed Falun Gong. It seems clear, however, that the forces of the spiritual will continue to battle those of the material as long as there are latter-day warlords who ignore the principle of harmony and paradox so central to the people.

## TAIWAN

I most directly experienced Chinese culture on a visit to Taiwan in 1995. I imagined children in Taiwan to be closer to the traditional gods of Buddhism and Taoism than their counterparts on mainland China as the Taiwanese, developing independent of Communist rule, preserved more of the traditional Chinese culture. I came to Taiwan to teach a group of actors, students, and social workers about drama therapy and to create and direct a public performance based in a Chinese theme. After numerous long-distance discussions with my hosts about the content of the performance, I agreed to create a play about the figure of the popular Chinese trickster god, Ji-gon, about whom I knew nothing. I had hoped to prepare for this daunting task before I left home, but discovered that the only information available on Ji-gon was a book of stories untranslated from the Chinese.

At some point shortly before I left, while in a state of high anxiety, I recognized that I had to let things go and trust that I would find the form of the play when I arrived. And so I embraced the Taoist concept of *wu wei* or nonaction, the idea that one overcomes obstacles through yielding.

During the rehearsal process, group members would tell me stories about

Ji-gon, and as a way of shaping the play, we would dramatize several of these stories. I learned that Ji-gon is a Taoist monk who first appeared in Chinese folklore in the Sung Dynasty. He is a reincarnation of another monk of extraordinary power, one who slays dragons. Ji-gon is quite an anomaly among holy men as he disobeys the rules of his religious order and, unlike his colleagues, he leaves the monastery to engage in street life with the common people, often those down on their luck.

Like his spiritual forefather, Ji-gon also has supernatural powers of healing. He is not only a healer, but also a trickster, one who is independent and carefree. His favorite targets are the affluent and well-healed. To many working class and poor people, he becomes an heroic figure, an Eastern Robin Hood who takes from the rich and gives to the poor.

Ji-gon lives simultaneously in the material world, helping the dispossessed, and the spirit world, from which he draws his magical powers. He is both holy and profane, monk and profligate, child and elder. In fact, Ji-gon often appears in stories, drawings, and even on a popular Taiwanese television program as a childlike figure dressed in colorful robe, fan, and hat. I was beginning to see that Ji-gon embodies many of the paradoxes inherent in Chinese culture.

After each workshop and rehearsal, I would wander the back streets of Taipei City in search of traditional Chinese culture. On the other side of the storefronts, restaurants, and banks, many with fancy Western names, I would follow the winding lanes and find the old street vendors and merchants in tiny shops selling roots and herbs, snakes and sea creatures, hand-dyed papers and baskets and colorful lanterns. But what captured my imagination most of all was the temples.

Whether Taoist or Buddhist, each temple displayed a profusion of gods painted on the doors, sculpted on the rooftops, sitting behind glass on altars, standing in long rows. As I contemplated their many forms and colors and shapes—some with wildly colored faces and long beards and eyebrows, others with round, smooth, and serene faces with elaborate hairdos and golden robes—I could only think of the thousands of Hindu gods tucked away in all their temples. I remembered that Buddhism began in India, evolving from Hinduism, and that the two traditions are closely linked. As in India, the Chinese gods take the form of so much that is human and material. I was continuing to see the very thin line in the East between dream and not-dream, sacred and profane.

Wandering through the alleys of Teipei, I looked for some representation of Ji-gon, but I found none. Then, speaking with one of my actors, I became aware of my short-sightedness. Ji-gon is a god of disguises and is present in many forms. He might have been the old woman selling potatoes on the

street who told my fortune. Or he might have been the beggar in rags outside the Lungshan Temple whom I avoided but could not shake from my mind. He might even have been the young Elvis impersonator at the Chinese Opera school where I prepared my play about Ji-gon.

Long after the performance and return home, Ji-gon remains with me. He reminds me to look beyond the surface of things, to be mindful of oppression, to live happily with paradox, and above all, to be playful. When contacting my colleague in Taiwan to help with the interviews, I hoped to rediscover the spirit of Ji-gon.

My former student and Taiwanese host, Hsiao-hua, graciously agreed to interview children for me. They were primarily from middle-class families and from several religious backgrounds—Buddhist, Taoist, and Christian.

### **The Fat, Laughing Buddha**

The first interview was with a seven-year-old boy, Sunny, from a Buddhist family. He was very cooperative and engaged immediately in the role-play, speaking to Maitreya, the fat, laughing Buddha. As Maitreya, Sunny says:

I am a helper of people in trouble. If a house collapses, I would be sure that they were not crushed to death. Except if an evil person lives inside. I would let him be hurt or dead and then the bad guys couldn't catch the children and kill the good people.

For Sunny, God's enemies are those who kill others. Sunny believes in gods because his sister told him that they exist and she never tells a lie.

Sunny draws a picture of his dialogue with Maitreya. Behind the two figures is an altar with fruit and incense, a typical offering to the Buddhist gods.

### **The Goddess of Mercy**

E-Fan, an eight-year-old Buddhist girl, draws a picture of a female Buddha sitting on a lotus flower (**see Plate 28**). Her name is Avalokitesvara, the Goddess of Mercy. Just as the laughing Buddha protects the good people from falling houses, the Goddess of Mercy protects the earth from those who would hurt it. As to the bad guys, E-Fan's thoughts are similar to Sunny's: "In the night, the lightning will strike and kill the bad people."

E-Fan tells a story which gives some detail concerning Buddhist worship. She speaks in first person, as the Goddess of Mercy:

At the beginning I sat on the throne. When I looked at the alarm clock I knew it was time to pray. So I left the throne to go to the meditation room. I chanted Buddhist sutras and fingered Buddhist prayer beads. I could not move because chanting the sutras has to be silent. I had to concentrate in

my mind. After the meditation, I went back to my throne and sat straight. When it was time to rest, I went to bed.

Like the Hindu children in India, these Buddhist children live with the consciousness of many gods who serve a highly moral purpose in the universe.

### **A Crucifixion**

The Christian children focus on the figure of Jesus, the son of God, but as I look at their pictures and read their words, I see a similarity to the gods of Sunny and E-Fan. Theirs is a personal god, a kind of guardian angel who protects the good. For example, Brian, eight years old, draws a crucifixion scene (see **Plate 29**). An orange Jesus is on an illuminated cross surrounded by armed soldiers, also in orange. In Brian's world, Jesus speaks to his disciples and tells them to help the people in the village who are in need. But Brian is also concerned with the soldiers who are not quite the enemies of God, rather the guardians. Brian says that the soldiers keep watch over Jesus "because they are afraid that other people will come and take him away." I would imagine that the other people are Christ's disciples and that the soldiers are in the service of Christ's murderers.

When asked whether he believes in God, Brian replies: "Yes, because when I have a problem, I pray. After praying, I feel better than before." Even though Brian creates a scene where Jesus is unsafe, at the end of his interview, Brian appears safe, his prayers answered by a personal god.

### **All About Eve**

A young Christian girl, five-year-old Haur, focuses upon female figures rather than the male God. Her story is rather unique:

Eve is praying. Princess Snow White is praying. God is walking with a loud noise. Eve looks at God and says: "Oh, how big you are! You are so huge, how can you see me?" God answers: "I have special powers so I can see tiny people."

Haur images Eve, the first woman, as a goddess who lives beside God in the sky. She says: "You can't see her but by praying you can. Reading the Bible you would know all about Eve."

Like the others, Haur thinks that there are bad people who kill, steal, and lie. They are the enemies of God. Although she generically names them Satan, they seem to be similar in kind to the bad guys of the other children.

One pattern that is becoming clear among children from all over the world is that the younger children tend to mix various elements into their

conceptions of God. Pieces of fairy tale, dream, cartoon, myth, religion are easily mixed into the stew. Haur's Christianity is one element—we see Eve from the Old Testament and Satan from the New. But we also see the Western fairy tale figure of Snow White and the Eastern notion of a balance of spiritual power.

### **The Laughing Grandfather**

I find Haur's drawing especially intriguing for different reasons. She draws two human figures, one in pink, one in yellow. The yellow figure is enclosed within a huge head. She calls her drawing *God's Neighbors are Quarreling*. The drawing seems to have no relationship to her stories about Eve, Snow White, and Satan. The title also suggests a different preoccupation than the spiritual. Looking back at the interview she says: "Some of the neighbors are quarreling about who could live next door to God. They all want to. So God tells them to take turns living next door to him."

I am baffled. What does this all mean? I wonder who God's neighbors are and why they are quarreling. And then it occurs to me that the god I was searching for in Taiwan was Ji-gon, but I did not know his stories. I needed the group of actors to tell them to me, just as I need Haur and all her peers to show and tell me about God.

As it happened, one of the major stories of Ji-gon, which was dramatized in the play I directed, was called *The Laughing Grandfather*. At the beginning, a storyteller introduces us to a happy, harmonious family. Three generations live together. They are all good-natured. Suddenly, the storyteller challenges the domestic tranquility by taking on the role of demon and casting a spell upon the family. He brings bad temper and divisiveness to the family. Before long, all are quarreling. The Taoist harmony is destroyed. But one person is spared—the wise grandfather. He reveals himself as Ji-gon and teaches the others to laugh. Having learned laughter, the family rediscovers its harmony.

In Haur's story, God resolves the strife among the neighbors just as Ji-gon does among the family members. From God's vantage point, as drawn by Haur, the people are small, perhaps so small that they reside inside God's head. In this small sphere, there is strife and quarreling. Harmony is toppled again and again. But the children suggest that there is a great harmonizer larger than all the neighbors combined. For Haur, it is God, a friend of Eve and Snow White. For others, it is Jesus and the Goddess of Mercy and the Laughing Buddha. For me, it is the laughing grandfather, also known as Ji-gon.

Just for a moment, I reflect back on my grandfather, the orthodox Jew who rarely laughed. He was very much a man of God and yet my clearest

memory was of his silence and sadness, especially on the high holy days when he would call my mother to wish us all a happy new year and he would cry. My grandfather was my spiritual teacher and I learned my lessons well, one of which portrayed God as a messenger of bad news—worldwide oppression for thousands of years, pogroms in Russia, holocaust in Poland and Germany, terrorism in Israel. He never told me these things directly. I had to glean them from his tears.

Somewhere in Taiwan, working in the spirit of Ji-gon, it occurred to me that God could be different—lighter, funnier, more playful. How I wished I could be a child again in the family that learns to enjoy life from the godlike energy of the laughing grandfather.

### **God Is a Soldier**

In keeping with the spirit of Ji-gon, I discovered a whimsical interview from Chang Mong, age ten, the son of an army colonel. Chang Mong comes from a Taoist family and draws God as a warrior in traditional warrior costume (**see Plate 30**). Below him are two flags and one soldier. Chang Mong tells this story:

God lives on the clouds, very high up where no one can find him. There is a long sword in his hand. No blade or spear can hurt him. There are many soldiers who protect him. When devils attack, they will be defeated.

When asked more about the devils, Chang Mong says: “the demons frighten people by showing their fangs and claws. They commit every crime with no regret—killing people, setting fires.”

And then Chang Mong, the doubter, says: “I don’t believe in gods, but in ghosts, because many people have seen ghosts.” But he covers himself by adding that if it so happens that there is a god, then he, for one, should be obedient: “If I disobey god, he will turn me into a soldier.”

I don’t get the sense that being a soldier is a real punishment as Chang Mong comes from a military family. Further, Chang Mong portrays God as a soldier himself, or rather more like a warlord or general, with common soldiers to protect him from the demons. If Chang Mong were to become a soldier, he would indeed be re-created in the image of god, or at least of his father. Chang Mong’s beliefs in demons and ghosts reflect the old spiritual traditions still found readily in Chinese culture. Although Chang Mong’s god is not quite Ji-gon, whose main weapon is wit, I do notice that he does have a broad smile on his face.



### **The Buddha-to-Be**

The final interview from Taiwan is with an eight-year-old Taoist girl, Pei-zo. Although she, too, claims not to believe in god, she draws what appears to be a traditional Buddha sitting in a meditative lotus position, with long earlobes, signifying longevity, and a third eye (**see Plate 31**). She refers to the figure as Tathagata, which means the Buddha-to-be. She says very little about her drawing, only that god has no enemies and spends his time in calm meditation. I notice a small figure in the upper left which Pei-zo refers to as a bird whose function is to amuse Tathagata.

And so I leave Chinese culture with an image of a peaceful god at rest, accompanied by a bird, a poetic evocation of the spirit. I am reminded of Sandro's pettirossa and Georgie's birds of peace. Pei-zo, hardly a full-blown woman, has not created a full-blown god. Hers is a Buddha-to-be, a novice, a work-in-progress. Tathagata is a good companion for Ji-gon, the contemplative icon that balances the restless iconoclast, the healing energy that compliments the one who heals. Tathagata plays yin to Ji-gon's yang. If Tathagata is the Buddha, Ji-gon is the bird.

### **JAPAN**

Two great religious traditions have dominated Japan for many centuries. The earliest one, Shinto, literally the way of the gods, was based upon the belief in the divinity of nature. The *Kami*, or pantheon of gods, became figures representing the sun and moon, the winds and the rain, the earth and the sea. Ancestor worship also became part of the faith and later, the official State Shinto led to the belief in the divinity of the emperor, a faith that ended when Emperor Hirohito renounced his divine lineage at the end of World War II.

The second tradition, Buddhism, imported from China, integrated the Shinto gods into the Buddhist pantheon. Elements of both religions intermingle freely in contemporary Japan where there are several hundred sects with elements of each and both.

Christianity is also practiced in Japan by a small percentage of the population and as is the case in other Asian countries, elements of the older animistic beliefs are readily mixed in.

I depended upon others for the interviews and had a difficult time locating interviewers and subjects. I had hoped to find powerful examples of the Shinto *Kami* and of ancestral gods, perhaps even a laughing grandfather who would further help me to reconnect to my spiritual mentor. But as I looked through the predominantly Christian drawings, I found little of this and even for a time thought of omitting Japan from my sample. Having persisted,

however, I again felt rewarded and enlightened by the creations of the children whose spiritual visions often reflected my own.

### **God and Hotoke-sama**

Keita, a ten-year-old Catholic boy, draws a rich scene that is culturally diverse (see **Plate 32**). The Christian God with wings and halo is in the center, but he is surrounded by a Buddha-like figure, sitting in a meditative lotus position, and several mythological figures taken from stories passed on from parents to children through the generations.

Keita's story is very male and moral. God is a man. The Buddha figure, also a man, is called Hotoke-sama. God is praying and talking to people who come from earth to heaven. Keita specifies that God talks with them about "fun things." The ones he speaks to are strong and hard-working—all good people.

Hotoke-sama also talks to people, but they are immoral, having just climbed up from hell. He assures God he will save the bad people, so that God can then talk to them. It appears that the more traditional Japanese deity, Hotoke-sama, has the harder job—cleansing the soul of impurities. Once the dirty work is done, the newer Christian god can offer fun things and a ticket to heaven.

I wonder if Keita's story is an Eastern interpretation of the relationship between Jesus, the Son, and God, the Father as Christ saves so that God can offer eternal life. Even if this is the case, Keita proceeds to make further spiritual distinctions between the East and West.

Both God and Hotoke-sama have enemies. God's enemy is the devil who is drawn with wings, green tattered clothes and a ball and chain. A crow is perched on his shoulder. Keita says that the crows attack God. The devil lives in rocks between heaven and hell.

Hotoke-sama's enemy is Oni. He is larger and scarier than the devil with horns and fangs and an imposing spiked club. According to Keita, Oni makes people walk on needles, drowns them in a pool of blood and eats them.

A fifth figure is present in Keita's drawing, a small man with red beard and staff. Keita calls him the spirit of Jizou-sama. Jizou-sama protects Hotoke-sama from Oni.

Keita names his drawing *God and Hotoke-sama* and says that he has always believed in both deities as he has heard stories about them from his mother and grandparents. Although he has well integrated the old and new, it is the more traditional deities that are prominent in his drawing and story. They not only do the dirty work, they seem to have the most fun. God can only talk about it.

### **Mari-chan and God**

The next group of children, five and six year olds, all attend a Christian-sponsored preschool. Their families see themselves as either Christian or of no particular faith. Six-year-old Ichiko draws a female version of the supernatural world. God is a woman with blue hair and purple dress. She holds a wand. A young girl angel is by her side. A playground and a house surround the two figures.

Ichiko's story is very simple: "The angel called Mari-chan and God are playing. They have this wand to turn bad people into nice people."

In her dialogue between God and the angel, Ichiko notes that the young one cannot use her magic power until she grows older. Even though there are bad people in Ichiko's world, there are no enemies of God. There is a great calm in the spirit world. Little angels frolic in the playground, all the stars are out and the mother goddess patiently teaches the novice how to use her power for good purposes.

Like so many other children, Ichiko sees God as herself, a young girl who can play and have fun but whose power is limited and dependent upon that of her mother. Her vision is one of harmony, in heaven and in the family.

### **The Emperor of Ice Cream**

Kyōhei's interview is more elaborate than most of his peers. He draws a colorful angel holding a thick wand that looks like an ice cream cone. The angel hovers over a house that seems to be floating above a road. The sky is wild with flashes of lightning and heavy rain. The sun is present, but it is enveloped in a cloud. On the ground are four figures and a car.

In his story, Kyōhei tells of a change of weather. The rain starts to come into his home and his family begins to run inside. Thunder and rain are the enemies of God. Kyōhei ends this way:

God ordered the rain and thunder to stop, and so the rain started to stop.  
God was in a rush when he stopped the rain, so I got a little wet on my face.

Kyōhei sees God as standing above nature and in control of it. There is danger in Kyōhei's world. As I look at the stick figures he has drawn, they appear frightened, overwhelmed by the forces of the sky. Their house is floating, perhaps succumbing to the flood of rain. Even the sun seems overtaken by the forces of the storm. God prevails, however, and reestablishes order. And yet all is not completely well. God is imperfect, so anxious to finish that he overlooks a detail. Kyōhei gets wet.

When I was six, I would sit at the counter in the drugstore on the corner and eat a dish of ice cream. Many children did the same. Each day I prayed

that the man behind the counter would remember my name. Most often, he did not. I was just another kid from the neighborhood who sought refuge in his store. I don't remember his name now, but then it was godlike, as he was, as many adults were who had the power to scoop ice cream or turn off the rain. It was only the best of them whom I now see as worthy of great respect, those who took their time to notice the small people at the counter and outside the house.

All the other children at the Christian preschool draw a single figure as God. He is often surrounded by nature—flowers and birds and sun and the image most common to all children—clouds. But these images do not bear the marks of divinity. Rather, nature serves God. I am again surprised that in so many of the drawings there is little indication of the traditional aspects of Shinto and Buddhism. But many of these children are learning to be Christian and proudly express their visions.

In looking at their drawings, I begin to doubt my developing assumption that culture is more powerful than religion in determining our ways of seeing God. But then again, these children are very young, five and six years old. As they get older, one of two things might happen—either their belief in a single Christian God will be enhanced, or a belief in a more culturally-based sense of multiple gods and diverse traditions will prevail. The latter is well represented by Keita, who sees the Christian God and the Buddhist Hotoke-sama as coexistent. The former point of view is beautifully represented by the last interview I will describe, that of Emi.

### **Lost in America**

Emi is just five years old and it is difficult to predict how she might see God as she grows older. It is especially difficult as she is so reticent. Her story reads like a haiku:

God arrived. God arrived in America. God's country is white and big. There  
isn't anyone else except God.

Emi draws God as a little angel with long green hair and a green halo. She seems to be floating in a space that is white and big. As in Emi's story, God is alone. Emi's drawing is unusual because there is no other representation at all. God is one. Because this God arrives in America, I think of the pledge of allegiance—one nation under God, indivisible. I wonder if Emi's story is a parable about a Japanese immigrant to America who finds herself alone and isolated in the vast country. Or maybe it is about a little girl who sometimes feels alone in her world. Or maybe it is what it appears to be—a story of the oneness of God, and the loneliness.

There is a part of me that feels lost and confused within the spiritual

traditions of the East, within the complicated and sometimes frightening names and shapes of the gods. And there is a part of me that feels comforted in the East because there are so many gods around. It is as if the early creators of the faiths knew that they might feel less alone in the world if their gods were surrounded by other immortals who would surely be around for a time beyond counting. When I contemplate Emi's tiny green god, I am touched by its simplicity and starkness, at the way it seems to rise up in the empty space. But I am also saddened by its isolation. Looking back at the interview, I notice that Emi had initially forgotten to draw a mouth and only added it at the encouragement of the interviewer. She drew a mouth so God could speak. Emi gives God three words: "I'll protect you."

Little girls need protection and so do little gods. All creatures large and small are vulnerable. When I see God as small and alone, I am drawn to its mirror. Looking into that mirror I am back at the drugstore at six, hoping that the man behind the counter will remember my name. If he does, I will feel tall and special, a boy among other boys with names. And then I will have arrived.

## KOREA

The final destination in Asia is Korea. Like Taiwan, China, and Japan, Korea has experienced rapid industrialization during the last two decades of the 20th century, a reality that has affected traditional religious structures. The spiritual background of Korea is similar to China, with a mix of Confucianism, Buddhism, and a belief in nature and ancestral gods. Further, as in other Asian countries, a Christian presence has developed, leading to the establishment of Christian schools and churches.

Korea also has an old tradition of shamanism, the belief in individual healers who have the power to commune with the spirit world in trance states. In recent years, women shamans have grown in number, especially as women have taken it upon themselves to seek ways to counter traditional male oppression. Ironically, as a new level of consciousness develops, these women return to the past for traditional means of healing and worship. But perhaps the simultaneous move forward and backward is to be expected in traditional cultures whose spiritual identities are challenged by the vast material forces so entrenched in the West. Korean people embrace the contradictions in life in a way similar to the Chinese people. In fact, the symbol of the Korean nation, emblazoned on its national flag, is that of the yin-yang, the eternal paradox, the mark of a culture in search of harmony.

### **Fathers and Daughters**

I will report on three Korean children. The first is Yeha, a six-year-old girl from a nonobservant middle-class family. Yeha draws a picture without color of a female figure with long hair, sitting on a chair. A bird is beside her and under the bird is another female figure. Above and below are clouds.

Yeha describes her drawing as follows:

The tall one with long hair is God. God looks half human and half something else I am not able to describe. God will grow old without a wrinkled face and is immortal. God lives at the end of the sky. The other one next to God is a dead child. She died by accident falling down the stairs. She has just come up to the sky. There are beautiful clouds below God and castles and clouds above God. The bird in the picture died too. People and animals who died before stay in other rooms of the castle. You can always meet God when you arrive for the first time to the sky or when you want to ask God a favor.

As God, Yeha speaks to a human down below who represents Yeha as a grown-up, and says: “I will reward good kids with good luck and give bad kids bad luck. And I will order the judge to perform it.”

Yeha calls her picture *God and Souls* and comments on her choice of a pencil drawing: “I can’t color God because God doesn’t have any color of this world.”

In the drawing, the dead child and the bird look content. God looks alarmed. It might be difficult to make moral pronouncements. Or it might be more difficult to usher another delicate young mortal being to heaven. I wonder if there could be another source of God’s alarm.

And then I turn over the picture and there it is. Two frightening red devils, a grown-up and a child, mirroring the two good figures on the other side, float above red pointy mountains. The grown-up devil wears a black cape. Yeha’s story continues:

There are devils who always make troubles and bad things. The devils want to steal God’s treasure. But God’s army and angels are always around God so the devils can’t steal the treasure. The red things below the devils are lava. The iron thorns are melting in lava. The king devil has the greatest evil power and his face looks old because of his bad-tempered character. I drew the devil on the back page. I didn’t want to draw the devils on the same page with God because the front page is happy and peaceful.

I wonder what God’s treasure is? Could it be the precious dead child and bird? Could it be life itself? At the conclusion of the interview, Yeha affirms her belief in God, “without reason.” And then she says this:

God always obeys people’s wishes if they do good things. I wanted to play with my Daddy and God obeyed my wish.

God's treasure is all the precious moments in life, especially those between a little child and her father. No wonder the devils want to steal it. I am struck by the symmetry of Yeha's picture. God has her child, the child has a bird, Yeha has her Dad, and even the king devil has a little companion. The heavenly castle is above and the fiery lava and iron thorns are below. There is a balance to life and death, to good and evil, to youth and age. Sitting with Yeha's creation, I am full of wonder that such a small child can see such a far way across the boundaries.

### **The Magic Sticks**

The next two children are sisters, both Catholic and both connected in some ways to the traditional spirituality of Korea. Sang Min is eight. She makes a painting of a large God in yellow with long black hair in a blue sky (see Plate 33). God wears a cross around his neck and holds a rod in each hand. Sang Min says: "God lives in a house built in the sky near where we live." Her God is both near and far.

Sang Min tells this story:

God holds conducting sticks with stars and colored dots. He is on his way to his friend's house to play. God can be friends with the cloud. His conducting stick with stars is the most powerful weapon of all. It can become a sword or shield or any modern weapon. The stick with colored dots can grant any wish and can become a yeoubong, the stick that had magic power in the ancient times. Sometimes God shouts the chant: "Yahoo!"

Sang Min's God is very robust and playful. Although he wears his cross as a mark of his religion, the other mark of his spiritual identity, the yeoubong, leads me to see him as a shaman.

In the role of God, Sang Min tells the child that she might feel lonely without her older sister. "You need a friend like my cloud," says God. "When you are at a dead end, you will shout the chant: 'Yahoo!' and then the great man will come and help you and your sister. The great man is an unusual person but not as strong as myself."

It seems that this god is one among many. Is he a god in relation to great men, I wonder, or to other man-like gods? I suspect that other gods are lurking. Just as Sang Min does not want to be without her sister, I think this god also needs companions, at least a cloud.

My suspicions are affirmed as Sang Min tells more: "God told Sang Min that he will show her around his village. He is proud of Sang Min. I wish he would introduce her to the other gods."

Sang Min says very little else except that she names her drawing: *Magician*

*God Who Rides the Clouds.* God is a magician, a shaman, because he has magic sticks that can be used not only to fight, but also to heal. God is alone and in search of companionship, someone with whom he can practice his art and share his exuberant spirit. As with other children, there is a thin line separating the spirit world and the material world for Sang Min who feels lost without her sister, a companion in her magical world.

### **The Red Cherries**

Her older sister, Sang Mi, is ten and more connected to the rituals of the Catholic church. Her drawing of God is more anthropomorphic than Sang Min's, with God in nature, dressed in a long white gown and holding a vial of sorts. Above the vial are two cherries, a star and a number of colored dots (see **Plate 34**). Sang Mi gives this description:

God lives in a place with clear clouds and fresh air to keep the soul clear. It might be like a pleasant park with bountiful fruit and fresh flowers.

And then Sang Mi tells her story:

God can do anything with the magic powder in the jar. The cherries and flowers smell very sweet. God's crown is made of green leaves. The crown shows that nature is still green and fresh. If nature becomes polluted, God's crown will become dirty. God throws the magic powder and the cherries appear which means that god will gladly grant Sang Mi's wish. If Sang Mi's wish is not for herself but for others, the cherries will shine more brightly. Sang Mi prayed to make her mind peaceful and not to fight with her younger sister, and it will be granted.

In her dialogue, Sang Mi sets up a conversation between God and bad people, those who would abuse nature. God tells them to be more respectful, to work hard and "always have a joyful mind." The bad people pledge to do better and ask for God's help when they slip. They tell God that although Sang Mi has made a lot of mistakes in her life, she could always speak to God.

Sang Mi elaborates on other aspects of her drawing. The tree behind God has two apples. "Two apples mean myself and God are friends now." The blue dots around the clouds represent God's mind which is "as clear as the clouds." The white dot near the cherries represents the gate where Sang Mi and God meet to talk. The red dot is for the thoughts Sang Mi has about God. She continues:

As I think deeper, it gets more reddish in color, so I will get a more joyful mind. One more thing. Repentance also has a meaning in the picture. If I don't repent, the white dot, the gate of dialogue, will disappear.

Sang Mi has a direct line to God. On the one hand, she is a mystic. On



the other, she is like most young people growing up in a culture that has traditionally accepted the continuity between the natural and supernatural worlds. God, gods, and spirits are everywhere. Just because her faith is Christian and she feels the need to repent her sins does not necessarily contradict the idea that her god is a nature deity who casts spells with magic powder.

As we see in Sang Mi's drawing and story, it is nature that holds the mystery of God. There is an expression of pantheism in so many of the drawings and stories of Eastern children. And there is such an easy integration of nature and the supernatural that I almost forget about a main theme of this book—spiritual intolerance. Feeling drawn in, I desire more and more of the Eastern consciousness. But just as I am about to condemn my fellow Westerners for their spiritual bigotry, I recall a small moment in the back seat of a car in Taiwan just days before Christmas. I was with a group of young people in my play and one asked me if I needed a church to go to on Christmas eve. When I told her that I wasn't Christian, she asked: "Then what are you?" When I responded that I was Jewish, she was astonished and said: "But I thought that in America Jews ran the government!" Her candor was refreshing in a way. At least she didn't search for my horns. At least she didn't accuse me of killing the Son of God.

I leave the East with a certain feeling of sadness. Sang Mi's picture is of another time that has faded away in the Western-style economic earthquake of the past decades. With many exceptions, ever since Nixon visited China, it is becoming harder and harder to distinguish East and West. *Death of a Salesman* was a big hit in Beijing. I can rent 100 different titles of Chinese and Japanese films at the local video store in my small town. Those Easterners who believe that the Congress of the United States is predominantly Jewish send their children to Christian schools.

With my Western eyes, I transpose Sang Mi's drawing to ancient Greece. I see Plato contemplating the ideal forms or Aristotle measuring the empirical world or Socrates engaging in his own version of yin-yang dialogue.

As my mind wanders off into other planes, I look back at the picture. The cherries shine brightly. I breathe in the magic powder and pray to the gods to grant me a joyful mind. I'm not even sure to whom I am praying. Certainly not to the Greek gods or their human equivalents, the philosophers and the poets. Certainly not to the Western gods of commerce. Maybe to the godlike presence of the children, to Sang Mi and her sister, Sang Min, to Yeha, to all the children who seem to have such a direct line to God, whatever her name and wherever his house of worship may be.

"Do you believe in God," asks the interviewer at the end of the session.

Sang Mi responds: "Yes, I do. God is always with me and makes my mind

sincere.”

I look again at the picture. The cherries shine even more brightly and I believe in God, gods and spirits. The profound and playful spirit of the children has led me there. The last thing Sang Mi tells her interviewer is: “I believe in God because he helps me to be patient when my feet get really cold in the winter.”

The season is changing and as I sit down at my desk in the early morning, the air is chilly. I warm my feet in the glow of the cherries and I smile as broadly as the laughing grandfather.

It is time to head back. But before I do, there is one more stop I must make. This time I need to do the interviews myself. It is not East or West, but in the middle. It is to the spiritual home of my ancestors.

## Chapter 6

### THE HOLY LAND

#### ISRAEL

There is an old Hasidic saying that God dwells wherever man lets him in. When I first visited Israel at the age of 25 in 1970, shortly after the Six Day War, I imagined that this would be God's true dwelling place and that I would feel his presence everywhere. My first fantasy was that God would somehow greet me in the airport. He would reveal himself to me and I would know who I was as a Jew and what was expected of me. Once that happened, I fantasized, an old Jewish bubba would greet me on the street and take me home for a good Jewish meal and a joyous married life with her beautiful daughter.

The scene at the airport was chaotic. It was stiflingly hot. Every Jewish bubba in sight was pushing and shoving. Each simple act of clearing customs, claiming baggage, organizing a means of transport to Tel Aviv and procuring a hotel was monumentally difficult. The concept of a line had no meaning. All movement was random, rapid, anxious, and aggressive. The most holy appearing men, dressed in 18th century black coats and fur hats, were more rude and ungodly than the rest of the pack, little different in behavior than the adolescent boys in soldier fatigues, carelessly swinging automatic weapons from their shoulders.

Even the holy city of Jerusalem was chaotic to me. There was too much confusion and without a guide, I felt lost and overwhelmed. At the sacred Western Wall, so recently captured from Jordan in the Six Day War, I felt bullied more than anything else. A young Hasidic man in black thrust a pair of *tefillin* at me, hastily strapped them on my arm and head, and demanded that I recite the morning prayers after him. Caught off guard, I followed his lead, all along resenting the intrusion and my own inability to say no. If I refused, I reasoned, I would be passing up an opportunity to let God in.

Finding no relief from my disillusionment, I volunteered to be a laborer on a kibbutz. If God was nowhere to be found in the cities of the holy land, perhaps the rural, socialist side of Israel would offer its own spiritual pleasures. Once settled in my tent with other young people from around the

world, I caught my breath. Life was orderly on the kibbutz. We worked hard for a purpose and we did it together with others. But the others were not Israelis whose God I thought was also mine. They were French and German and Swiss, Europeans searching for adventures, friends and lovers. As I engaged with them, I found myself relieved of a burden. We were all young and full of idealism. It was a good time to be alive.

Many years later, having returned from a summer of working in Israel, I had a dream. I am on some sort of a journey with a group of people. They are discussing the nature of God. They say that he is made of many parts, but that there is a central part located just below the neck. An old friend who, in fact, died young of cancer, is present. His name is Maurice and he is fatally ill and in pain. I provide a resting place by asking him to lie back against my chest. I touch him just below his neck and explain that here is the central place of God. I call the place the aorta, and I tell Maurice that God is in many places. Not in nature, I add, but in the many places of the body. The aorta is his central location, I say, because it carries the heartbeat. Maurice relaxes and his pain diminishes. At that moment I realize that God dwells in the body and that it takes an act of friendship and love to let him in.

I returned to Israel in 1996, shortly after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and a number of suicide bombings that helped sabotage the peace process and the Labor Party's bid for reelection. Israel was radically changed. Ironically, the airport was calmer. Tel-Aviv was booming economically. The buildings and the people appeared significantly more prosperous. Despite the tensions and fears between Arab and Jew, there was a civil war brewing between secular and religious Jews.

My friend, Avi, drove me from the airport to the spot where Rabin was killed by a radical orthodox Jew who believed that by making peace with the Arabs, Rabin was selling out God's holy covenant with Israel. A makeshift memorial of wax and metal, dark and shapeless, marked the place of death. The concrete walls all around were inscribed with poems and messages of regret, sorrow, guilt, despair, and hope. A large book fair lined the plaza adjacent to the poetry wall. The plaza was crowded with people as it was on the night that Rabin was killed. My friend bought a book of poetry. I scrutinized the crowd, carefully scanning the faces for possible terrorists. The majority of people looked a lot like me—pale-skinned Askenazi Jews of European descent, going about their business, buying books and increasing their knowledge. Who dwells here, I wondered?

Then Avi took me for a ride to a restaurant on the sea. He steered the car carefully. He was my guide. Along the way, we navigated a dark, narrow, winding road. On either side, prostitutes hawked customers. Several cars stopped and negotiated a fee. Avi told me to look carefully at the drivers. One

was dressed in the black of the ultra-orthodox. I was shocked.

I returned two years later to do research for this book. Shortly after my arrival, I sat by the sea and talked to several parents about their children's early experiences with God. One told me that she is fully secular and has never spoken about God with her daughter. Yet, at two years old and without prompting, her daughter began to tell her all about God's wonders. "He created the animals and the sky and the earth," she said, and proceeded to go into great detail about the divine creation of nature and human life. She was very animated and clear. Surprised and dismayed, her mother asked: "How do you know all this?" The daughter replied: "Because God told me."

This reminded me of a similar story I reported earlier told by a British mother about her four-year-old son who asks permission to go into his newborn sister's room all alone. As the mother listens in, she hears him say: "Tell me, please, what God looks like. I forgot."

Back at the sea, I heard another story told by a mother who had adopted an Ethiopian Jewish girl. The mother kept a basket of stones in the living room which she had collected from special places she had visited over the years. The little girl, at two, was very drawn to her mother's stones. One day the mother observed her daughter taking each stone out of the basket very carefully and weighing it in her hand. She would press it against her forehead and say: "Stone." Then she would press it to her chest and say: "Doctor." She repeated the ritual many times until she came upon a stone that appeared to agitate her. After holding it to her head and naming it "Stone," she proceeded to place it against her chest. This time, she yelled: "Bad!" and flung it to the ground. Quickly, the mother intervened and disposed of the noxious object.

These stories touched me. Children talk to God, children are aware that growing up removes them from the direct presence of God, and children know that objects in nature hold the powers of good and evil. But these were stories told by grown-ups. I wondered what I would find in the drawings and stories of Israeli children. I was especially curious in that the orthodox Jewish religion, like the Muslim religion, prohibits the creation of a visual image of God.

Early in my journey to Israel, I met a woman named Rina who offered to help me with my research. She was a children's rights advocate and worked hard to ensure that Arab and Israeli children were well served by the state in terms of education, health, and welfare. Rina was instrumental in organizing a meeting with an Arabic school principal who would later invite me to his school. Her husband, a scholar, was writing a book about how secular Jews have come to terms with the figure of God. His name was Yedidya, which means in Hebrew *friend of God*.

Meeting Yedidya led me to an awareness of Hebrew names that refer to

God. But more importantly, Yedidya led me to a startling discovery. As a scholar of the Kabbala, the mystical book of Jewish knowledge about God, Yedidya showed me a kabbalistic drawing of God or, I should say, of man created in the image of God. In the drawing, a supposed likeness of the biblical King David, the human body is depicted as housing the most significant qualities of being—wisdom, intelligence, beauty, love, justice, foundation, firmness, splendor, and eternity. Having had the dream mentioned above, I was struck by the spot just below the neck, which depicted the aorta as the center of God. In my dream, the center was connected to friendship and love. In the kabbalistic diagram, that center is called beauty and it stands between love and justice. If God dwells wherever one lets him in I reasoned, wouldn't such a place be full of beauty? If we could see into the heart of God, the main artery that holds the divine substance, wouldn't we see images of love? Could this be one meaning of *God is love*?

Yedidya informed me that the Jewish mystical teachings point to ways of seeing God. And he told me that according to these teachings, God gave up a part of himself when he created the world. The ultimate spiritual question then became how to restore the unity of God. Man was created as one means of restoring the heavenly order. But this did not work as man was sinful and disobedient. The only hope for God's salvation seemed to rest in the coming of the messiah. Yet, as I learned from the children's drawings, human beings might still have that power, especially those who are young and less tainted by experience in the world. One stunning example was offered earlier by Andrea, a young Mexican girl, who said that a little girl with a full heart has the power to repair an imperfect God. The restoration occurs through the heart, the center of beauty and love. The restorer is one who is very close to God.

### A God Party

Many of the Israeli children interviewed did not depict God in human terms. Their drawings tended to be among the most abstract of all that I collected. Some would draw objects in nature and others would draw scenes or characters from the Bible. The first group of children I interviewed was gathered at the home of a friend who had two children, ages four and seven. To make this a joyous occasion, the son, Noam, characterized the gathering as a God party. Refreshments were served and the children, when not being interviewed, played freely throughout the house.

The first child I interviewed was Natalie, age eight. Both her parents were sabras, born in Israel. They were divorced and Natalie lived with her mother who characterized her religious background as between secular and

traditional. Although she did not practice the Jewish rituals on a daily or weekly basis, she did celebrate the high holy days.

Natalie drew a scene from nature, with a tree, flower, and grass. In the sky were two clouds and a bright sun radiating rays of orange and red. The most striking aspect of the drawing was gray lines shooting through the sky. Natalie told me that the gray lines are God. Then she offered: “God is in all things. Sometimes he’s here.”

Natalie’s God is wise and loving. He tells her: “Love your family. Love yourself.” He also tells her that people who are unwise can change by learning to behave better. This is a forgiving God.

As Natalie answered my questions, she proceeded to draw further lines in the sky, this time in green, red, and blue. The sky became more alive with movement and power. She referred to these lines as wind, a kind of spirit that blends in with God. Then she added two animal figures, a panda bear and a dog. The animals speak to God and say: “Thank you for creating us.”

I asked Natalie why she didn’t draw God directly, and she responded: “God is in everything—in me, in plants and animals, in the wind—everything.”

Natalie is a believer. For her, God’s only enemies are the unbelievers. Yet having said that, she qualifies her statement—“Well, *maybe* they are enemies. I’m not sure.” When I asked her to tell me who were the unbelievers, she responded: “Lots of people—a boy in my class . . . We can’t know who believes and who doesn’t.”

All I could do was nod my head. Natalie at eight seemed so wise. How can we know? And for that matter, why should we know? Can’t one be a good person and a nonbeliever at the same time? Natalie and I did not explore these questions, but I did get a clue in asking her to give a title to her picture. She called it: *God in His Place*. When I asked what is his place, she responded: “The Garden of Eden.” If this is the Garden of Eden, I reasoned, it has no traces of sin.

There is a balance to her drawing—one sweet animal on each side of the picture, one flower, one tree, one swath of grass, one bright sun, two clouds. And there is a presence of spirit, a movement that infuses all the figures. There are no enemies, no dangers, no divorces or wars, no one even for God to forgive. This is a picture of the world before the fall. Natalie was very happy with her work and so was I.

Lihi, age ten, also attended the God party. Like Natalie, she lived with her divorced mother. Her mother characterized the family as secular for the most part, although, like Natalie’s family, observant on the holy days. Although Lihi was not very verbal, her picture was eloquent and full of movement (**see Plate 35**). She drew a sky in several shades of blue which appears agitated, in great motion. Six clouds are present as is a menorah-like object in colors

of flame—orange, yellow, and red.

Lihi characterized God as “a ray of light that shows us the good way.” When I asked about the fiery object in the picture, she told me that it is God and that all the other images—the sky and the clouds—are also God. “God is everywhere,” she said. “No one knows how he looks.”

When I asked Lihi to speak as God, she created a brief political allegory. God speaks to the president and says: “I want peace.” The president is eager to comply but somewhat tentative. “I’ll try,” he says, “to make it as fast as I can.”

God’s enemies, according to Lihi, are people who are not Jews, those who do not believe in God. Her answer echoes Natalie’s, and like Natalie, Lihi believes in God.

At the conclusion of the interview, Lihi again reflected on her picture. She told me that the clouds cover God so nobody can see him. Then she offered this observation: “If someone saw God, God would die.” As hard as I tried to get Lihi to say more, it was no use. The party beckoned and she responded by joining the festivities.

There are a number of similarities between the responses of Natalie and Lihi. Both see God in nonhuman terms, as light and air. His presence is noted by his absence. Lihi is well aware of the political situation in Israel, as are most all children, and comments upon the difficulties of making peace with the Arabs. God wants the president to make peace, but all the president can do is try. He is limited. In an odd way, God, too, is limited in Lihi’s story. He must protect himself from human beings by hiding behind a cloud. Could this be reflective of Yedidya’s story of a wounded God in need of restoration? But in Lihi’s story it is humans who can destroy God, simply with a gaze, rather than restore him. Cleverly, Lihi has discovered a way to explain the second commandment prohibition against graven images. The reason one cannot depict God is that God will die.

I also note that in Lihi’s story God’s enemies are the gentiles. Given this point of view, it is little wonder that the peacemaking process in the Middle East is difficult. In contemplating Lihi’s picture, I feel a sense of unrest. The movement of the elements is intense. But then I am drawn to the bright light of the central image. Lihi says that God is “a ray of light that shows us the good way.” I reflect upon my initial response to the image as a menorah. The menorah, a symbol of Chanukah, the festival of lights, has become symbolic of the Jewish people. In Lihi’s drawing, it is surrounded by clouds, and according to Lihi, behind the clouds is God.

When I was young and someone died, all the mirrors in the house would be covered with white cloth. Some say the custom dates back to the Spanish inquisition when many Jews were forced to convert to avoid persecution and



death. When a loved one died they covered the mirrors to avoid looking at a false image of themselves. Others speak of the mourning process as a time to turn away from personal vanity and to reflect upon the unseen spiritual realm.

As a child, I had no understanding of the custom. I wondered if shutting out the image of people also shuts out the image of God. I wondered if God abandoned us in death or if not, if he resided somewhere behind the mirror ready to take us when we die. And I still wonder why there is so much prohibition against seeing. Why should we be afraid to look in the mirror? Is it the same as looking behind the clouds?

It occurs to me that Lihi's picture, like many of the children's pictures, are mazes. They conceal God as much as they reveal God. Lihi teaches that God needs concealment for the most profound reason—his existence depends upon it. I wonder if this is also why we human beings choose so often to hide—because if we dare to be seen, we might cease to exist.

### **The Mouth of God**

The host of the God party was seven-year-old Noam, like the others, a middle-class boy from a secular family, observant only of the high holy days. I should add that each child comes from an extended family where at least one set of grandparents is orthodox. Noam's exuberance energized the party. He was in perpetual motion, running through the house and garden, singing and dancing and, not incidentally, applying paints to his body to better take on the role of God. Noam's drawing was the most abstract of the three. A large golden shape with gray and white and orange markings suggesting eyes and nose and mouth floats in a blue mass. A gray swirling line is attached to the shape and also seems to float out there in the blue.

Noam identifies the orange and gray object as God. He says: "The orange is the big mouth of God. I made it big because God has to help people and you help people through the mouth. There are also other ways that God helps people."

I wondered what other ways Noam had in mind. He, himself, was highly verbal throughout the evening. It was natural to ask him to take on the role of God and speak. His God said: "I am happy to help everyone, and I ask people to stop fighting so much in the world." I noted another political statement and recalled that Noam's mother told me that when he was a baby during the Gulf War, he participated in various gasmask drills. All Israelis, young and old, especially those living in the Tel-Aviv area, faced the possibility of being attacked by Iraqi missiles armed with chemical or biological warheads. All were required to practice wearing gas masks and

some children were terrified by the experience. Noam, like many others, had trouble breathing under the mask. And like many other young children, he heard the missiles fly through the night sky and land in his country. Given the short and intense history of real and potential wars in the Middle East, it is no wonder that the God of so many children asks for peace.

Noam, playing all the roles, set up a dialogue between God and two kinds of people—those who are generous and those who are snobbish. The generous people respond positively to God's request for peace: "We always try to stop the fighting, but when the snobs come around, it's not easy." The snobs, seeing themselves as better than God, not only reject his appeal for peace, but reject his reality: "Stop behaving like a crazy person and saying you're God. We're better than you. You are not God."

Noam, being sensitive to my quest for images of God, reassured me that his drawing was indeed a picture of God. He also informed me that he is a generous person and not a snobbish one. In the most open way, Noam stated that his picture does not have a story. "Anyone can invent his own story about God and that would be OK."

But Noam has a short story to tell after all, in response to the question about God's enemies, before his energy propels him away from the table. The story is about war between the generous people and the snobs. God's enemies are the bad people, the snobs and all the wars past, present, and future. So he turns to his allies, the generous people, and he asks them to stop the wars. They would like to comply and agree to try as hard as they can but, sadly, they say: "We don't know if we can manage."

Finally, I ask Noam if he believes in God. "Sometimes yes, sometimes no," he replies.

"When do you believe?" I ask.

"When I think it helps me."

"How?"

"When I fight with my friends. I want God to help me make peace."

The connection between the personal and the political is very strong, I note. I remember that Noam's first reference to the picture was of God's big orange mouth. The way God helps the world is by uttering the word *peace*, *shalom* in Hebrew. This is when Noam can believe in God's existence. Noam's hope is that the whole world will hear God's words, especially those who doubt his existence. Those who are generous of heart will try as hard as they can to carry out God's will. But the forces of denial are hard to fight. It is unclear who will win the great moral battle.

Long after the God party, I sat down with Noam's drawing. I saw a very frail clown-like mask that appeared to be made of tissue paper, floating in the air. I could still imagine Noam singing his God songs as he runs through the

house in joyful play, painting his face and arms and body in reds and blues, enticing the other celebrants to play God with him. The gossamer kite of God floats somewhere in my mind's eye. It tries to speak the greeting so ubiquitous in Israel—*Shalom. Shalom.*

### **A Family Looks for God**

Three children in a family from a middle-class suburb of Tel-Aviv each see God in a unique way. Erez, at six, is a self-proclaimed atheist. He draws a primitive red, robot-like figure floating in space. Above him is a line of circles, one of which appears to be the sun. Red markings are on either side of him. Two black figures appear on his left side. Below him is a red line. Underneath the line are more circles and underneath the circles is an even more primitive robot-like figure.

Erez tells the interviewer emphatically that God is blind and deaf and that he doesn't really exist. People only believe that he exists. Yet he has drawn God and knows that God lives in the sky. Erez resolves the contradiction when he takes on the role of God and speaks: "Once I existed. Today I do not exist."

Erez makes it clear that there can be no dialogue with God because although he can speak, he cannot hear. Erez offers: "Once I talked to him when I was in kindergarten, but he didn't answer me."

Although this God is remote, Erez seems to know quite a bit about him. He knows that God creates the rain with a funnel. He knows that God is unhappy in the sky because he has no friends. He knows that God has a body, but that God is blind and deaf and perhaps mute.

Contradicting himself again, Erez creates an elaborate dialogue between himself and God which begins with God speaking: "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 and Erez argue about the means of making rain and then, unexpectedly, God says: "You know, I'm very sad."

"Why?" asks Erez.

"Because I have no friends. Do you want to be my friend?"

Through the dialogue, it becomes clear that God is bored in heaven. Erez invites God to earth. Yet Erez doesn't know the fun places to take God. God offers this observation: "So maybe it's not so much fun in your world after all."

God has a problem: "If I come to you, I'll feel uncomfortable if everyone calls me God. What should I call myself?"

"Why not God?" Erez responds.

"Because God is a name no one else has, and I don't want people to make

fun of me.”

“I can’t make up a name for you,” says Erez.

“So what shall I say—I have no name?”

“Yes,” says Erez, “that you have no name. That is the best.”

Ironically, Erez entitles his drawing: *God*.

The naming of God is a crucial point in orthodox Judaism as I mentioned earlier in the discussion of Dominik. Just as one cannot depict God, neither can one speak the name of God directly.

Given the nature of the dialogue, I wonder if Erez’s concern is less about God and more about his own sadness and search for friends and activity. The one without a proper identity might well be Erez whose name means *cedar*, the strong, fragrant tree that grows in the Middle East.

Erez’s God is wounded in many ways and needs all kinds of restoration. All he has is a body, but without the capacity to see and hear and speak and call himself by his name, he seems very lost. I wonder why Erez creates such a dark figure? The end of the interview provides a clue.

When first asked about God’s enemies, Erez says: “God does not have enemies because he lives in the sky.” But then we learn that there are little people on earth who shoot at God. When asked what will happen to God if the little people shoot into the sky, Erez says: “God will die.” The conversation continues:

—And did the little people shoot God?

—Yes. They injured him.

—Did he die?

—Yes.

—So, does God exist?

—No, he’s dead.

—Do you believe in God?

—Yes.

—If God is dead, how do you believe in him?

—I don’t believe in him anymore.

—So who creates the rain?

—There is no rain anymore. Only sun.

—All life long it won’t rain anymore?

—It won’t rain.

—From now on, only sun? So we can throw our winter coats away?

—Yes.

And as an afterthought Erez offers this story:

People shot God and the fire became coal. Nobody believes in God. In kindergarten they told us stories about how God created the sea and the sun. When I talked to God in kindergarten, he didn’t answer me. I was mad at God.

I wonder if this is why Erez' God is so wounded and lost. Did Erez shoot him as a punishment for his silence? When I reexamine the drawing, I notice that God does not have a mouth. How different this is from Noam's drawing of the mouth of God that speaks *shalom*. But I also notice that it is raining where God lives, above the line that separates heaven from earth. Even as the sun shines, it is raining. If this is an allegory, it is a complicated one. Many in the desert that is Israel understand the importance of rain and water to provide sustenance for the people. Many are confused as to the existence and power of God. Can he hear? Can he see? Can he speak? The confusion is fueled by the fact that traditionally God could neither be seen nor called by name. In a country that bears so many wounds past and present, an unnamable, unseeable God may be difficult to embrace, especially if you are six years old.

Erez attempts to wrestle with the contradictions of divine existence. His images may be obscure and primitive, but his words fly up. He speaks most eloquently, way beyond his six years.

As I prepare to move from the picture, I notice that the God figure in red wears a *kippa*, the traditional skull cap of the orthodox Jew. The figure below, at a more earthly level, is bare-headed. And so it goes in Israel—the believers and the nonbelievers on different sides of the border, attempting, often painfully, to forge a dialogue, a country, a culture.

Erez' older sister, Adi, age eight, also draws a picture that is separated into two parts, which I assume to be heaven and earth. In the top portion, God is depicted with a head and body, no limbs. Brown dots line the body. Three clouds float beside him, each with figures that I imagine to be angels. Four figures are in the bottom portion. One is drawn without a body. Adi tells this story:

One day when the sun was shining, God looked at all the people to see if everything was OK. He saw an old woman with a yellow shirt and a little nice girl with a ribbon on her head. But then people appeared and attacked God in the sky. They were little insects who could crawl into God's body and it hurt him. They are God's enemies. God tried to come down to earth for awhile. He can do that because he has magic powers. He also does good things for people with his magic. I ask God for all kinds of wishes, like to shoot some balls in a basket and to get magic power.

"Do you believe that God can give you magic power?" asks the interviewer.

"Yes," says Adi, "I do."

Like her brother, Adi believes that little beings from earth can injure God. God is vulnerable, hardly the omnipotent figure depicted in the Old Testament. Judging from the drawing, God is sorely in need of restoration. He

is missing arms and legs, just as Erez' God was missing mouth and feet. This God is magic and can use his magic to do good, yet he doesn't seem to be powerful enough to protect himself from the insects. I wonder if both children have created gods who are representative of the state of Israel—on the one hand powerful and magical, on the other wounded and vulnerable to attack?

In contemplating Adi's drawing, I wonder who is taking care of whom? In that the two planes of heaven and earth are separated, it doesn't appear that anybody is helping anyone else. The people cannot stop the insects from attacking God's body which is already decimated, and God cannot protect the humans from bad luck. Perhaps God can provide a magical solution to problems, but if he is incapable of defending himself, how can he help others?

Before moving from Adi's drawing, I notice that the figures in the sky with God resemble sperm cells, though with two tails instead of one. Or maybe they are not tails but legs so that God may stand on his own two feet and protect himself. Adi's picture is disturbing to me. Too much is missing and creation does not seem possible. All does not seem to be OK in heaven and earth. For me, God's smile belies a certain impotence. The greatest solace I take from this drawing is the fact that two sperm-like figures remain on the loose, outside any cloud. I wonder whether they can propel any action?

The third member of the family, Erez' six-year-old twin sister, Omer, distorts the body of God in another fashion. She sees God as a cow. This God appears half-human, half-animal. In the center of God's body is a large brown heart within a green circle. Above God is the sky and to his left is a cloud. Omer, like her brother, says that God doesn't speak.

Omer, like her brother and sister, envisions God in human terms. He eats and drinks like people do and lives in a house in the sky. In responding to the question, "What does God do in the sky?" Omer replies, ironically, "What do you think—he watches television?"

In a more serious tone, she offers: "He had a baby. But it's not exactly his boy. The Christians believe in the little boy and the Jews believe in God. I don't remember the little boy's name."

Omer calls her picture: *God floating in the sky*. Her God has no enemies. She not only believes in God, but talks to him sometimes. God does not respond but that does not bother Omer.

So who is this half-human cow god with the big heart who gave birth to Jesus? It is certainly a being that holds together several opposites—human/animal, mortal/immortal, Jew/Christian, male/female. Omer's God is very complex even as it is simply depicted. Unlike her brother Erez, Omer is a believer. Somehow she is able to put all these pieces together and trust in the existence of a loving, big-hearted God with whom she can speak, even if he does not answer back. This God is a creator, fulfilling the promise that Adi

only hinted at. Perhaps the sperm-like figures in Adi's drawing at last have found a host. As I look at the heart within the circle, I think that this could be God's womb, and that the divine being is about to give birth to the messiah, the true Princess or Prince of Hearts. Like the cow that gives milk, this God exudes love. He is intact in body and spirit, a true procreator. As Erez and Omer tell their stories about the wounds of God and country, Adi tells hers of the other side—the birth of love.

### **God and the Wishes of Man**

As I gathered the children's images from Israel, I became more and more aware of the diverse ways of seeing God. It was not surprising as there was such a mixture of cultures and traditions within this tiny Jewish state.

Many of the children interviewed came from families with mixed cultural backgrounds. One, Naama, a ten-year-old girl, drew a particularly striking picture (**see Plate 36**). She portrayed God as a kind of Turkish pasha, wearing a fez and sporting a rolling moustache. He rests on a cloud that floats through the sky. His cloud, looking a bit like a magic carpet, is supported by balloons. Each balloon carries a wish. She writes upon the cloud: *A List of Wishes*. God, all in blue, is surrounded by other clouds colored in lavender. Below him is the sun, with a neutral face, radiating rays of yellow throughout the picture. The drawing has a special luminous quality as Naama created her images with oil paint.

In her story, Naama tells how God was created:

One day, many years ago, there lived a man who went up to the sky, to heaven, and he became God. Ever since that time, people would send him balloons with wishes written on them. God tried very hard to fulfill each wish. Sometimes he was successful and sometimes not.

This God is not a creator or a procreator, like those we have seen above, but a creation. This reversal of the accepted Biblical story of creation is charming. For Naama, like so many of the children, God is made in the image of man. He is a hard worker, attempting to fulfill the wishes of human beings. But I get the sense that he doesn't work too hard on his majestic cloud. It is the wishes that buoy him up. Perhaps if he were to grant them all, his cloud would tumble down. He is a lonely God, Naama says, who only has the dead people to talk to.

Naama's story reminds me of the most compelling story I heard about God in my young life, a story I referred to earlier in the book. It was told to me by my grandfather. On Rosh Hashanah, marking the first day of creation, he said, God sits in heaven with a large book. The book contains the names of all the people in the world. And in this book God writes down the fate of

each human being for the coming year—who will live and who will die, who will be happy and who will be sad, who will experience loss and who will prosper. Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, said my grandfather, Jews from all over the world ask God to forgive them and to write good things about them in his book.

As I child, I prayed hard and asked God to grant many wishes. I tried not to be too selfish and wished for the health of a sick relative, a good business year for my father, calm between my sister and I. And I always wondered how many wishes God would grant. How would he know which were the most important? Would there be room for mine? Would I be courageous enough to ask for what I really wanted?

Naama tells us that God cannot fulfill all wishes. There are just so many balloons that he can accept on his lonely cloud. I try to imagine the situation from God's point of view. How could he possibly manage to grant so many millions and millions of wishes and satisfy all those human yearnings for a better life? What if he wants to bask in the sunlight and enjoy his elevated status as a god? Or maybe he is simply overwhelmed by the magnitude of human suffering and when overloaded just goes silent.

At a recent Yom Kippur evening service, when the beautiful and mournful Kol Nidre prayer was chanted, I brought along a friend who was terminally ill. It was uncertain whether he would live through the coming year. At the end of the service, we spoke about prayer, and he told me he hadn't prayed since he was a child, but recently he began again. I asked him what he prayed for and he said: "I pray that I will be healed and I pray that my wife will be less mentally tormented and that my children will be cared for."

"When you pray," I asked, "do you think that God hears you?"

"No," he said.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I don't feel anything coming back. It's so different from the way it was when I was a child," he said.

I was overcome with sadness at that moment but tried to conceal it as I felt I needed to be strong for my friend. I wanted to tell him that God hears prayers and does respond. I wanted to tell him that so many of the children I have interviewed have found ways to speak to God who might be silent but is at least present. I wanted to tell him that God exists and therein lies the possibility of dialogue and answered prayer.

"It's not me that I'm worried about. I'm not afraid of dying. It's my wife and kids. The hardest part is not being around to watch them grow up," he said.

As I thought long and hard about this conversation I became aware that even as I prayed in the synagogue alongside my friend, I felt distant from



God. I did not fully know if there was a listener.

On the way home, my friend asked: "So you're writing this book. You must have your own idea about God. Tell me, what is God?"

"I think," I responded tentatively, "God is a presence. He is there when you let him in."

"I don't know if he listens to my prayers, if he answers them," he said. "I just don't know how to get to him."

"Maybe you don't have to get anywhere. If you are willing to let him in, he'll find you," I replied.

He took a deep breath and fell silent. Then he said: "I'll have to think about that."

### God's Golden Chair

Nine-year-old Gil, born into an orthodox Jewish family, has no doubts about God's presence. Like many others in the Middle East, Gil grew up believing that it is forbidden to create a visual image of God. During the interview, he resolves a dilemma—to draw or not to draw—in an interesting way. He creates a biblical scene of Moses on top of Mt. Sinai receiving the ten commandments (**see Plate 37**). Below Moses is the Golden Calf, an idol worshiped by the impatient Jews, fearful that their leader and their God have deserted them. High above Moses on Sinai is a horizontal line demarcating heaven. In the center of this heavenly kingdom is a lone chair, outlined in green and gold. The absent, invisible chairman is God.

As he draws, Gil says: "He sits on a chair of gold and he is seeing but not seen. From the chair, God manages the world in his ways—the animals and the human beings—as he wishes."

Gil's God is quite present in a moralistic way. Taking on the role of God speaking to Moses, Gil offers, emphatically: "Break the tablets of the law! Do not forgive the children of Israel!"

At this point, Gil adds a house to the picture and names the picture: *Moses looks at the sons of Aaron and is embarrassed*. The house, according to Gil, belongs to Aaron, Moses' brother. God is embarrassed because Aaron's sons have betrayed him by worshiping an idol, the Golden Calf.

From a description of his drawing, Gil launched into a more theological discussion which, like many Middle Eastern stories, is tinted with the colors of the politics. Gil believes that it is the obligation of observant Jews to keep God's commandments and laws and "to study Torah each second so that the world will not be destroyed." Then he added: "Studying Torah gives God a reason not to kill us because of the *goyim* (a pejorative Yiddish expression for gentiles)."

Gil appears to be saying that the study of the holy books is a matter of life and death. Religious Jews become the most important people in the world as their action—the study of Torah—insures its existence.

Furthermore, studying Torah affects God's actions. For Gil, study is equated with prayer. When Jews pray, God will protect not only them, but also the gentiles. Gil sees the gentiles in a negative way, characterizing them as capable of doing bad deeds, uttering curses, and worshiping inferior gods. When asked why God spares the gentiles, Gil answers: "Because we pray for them." The *we* apparently refers to the observant Jews.

Gil is asked: "Why does God want to destroy us (the observant Jews) and not just the gentiles?"

Says Gil: "We do bad things, too, but we fix it by our prayers."

Thinking that God also might need restoration, the interviewer asks: "Do we only pray for ourselves or do we also pray for God?"

Gil responds: "Both. We pray for us and for him."

"What does our prayer give God?" she persists.

"When we pray, he feels more secure. And when he feels more secure, he will not kill us," he answers.

"And what about the secular Jews?" she asks.

"Our prayer protects them, too," says Gil.

And finally, the interviewer asks: "What gives *us* that power?"

"We are the chosen people," Gil explains. "We have to be responsible for everything that happens in the world."

It seems to me to be quite a leap from the traditional notion of the scholarly Jew chosen by God to receive and interpret the Torah to that of the Jew as soldier, policeman, and savior. And yet this revision is so prevalent in contemporary Israel.

Gil's God is an emotional being, angry and insecure and in need of help from the Jews in order to suppress his murderous instincts. This God is much like Gil's version of Moses—profoundly disappointed and angry when he is disobeyed and disrespected. Who is really angry, I wonder? Is it all Jews or *some* Jews? My mind races back to my friend Sue's comment to Georgie: "It wasn't all Jews who killed Christ. It was some Jews."

Perhaps more than in other regions, God in the Middle East is as much an agent of war and revenge as of peace. In some respect, ironically, this God bears resemblance to the Satan depicted by the Arab children, as we shall see below. And like the Muslim God, this one is not directly visible. We see the seat but not the sitter. We see the commandments but not the commander. And so we humans, Jews and gentiles alike, give to this absence our presence, the moral laws we need to justify our existence.

### **God Created**

In contrast to Gil, I offer another point of view from a younger seven-year-old boy also from a religious Jewish family. The offering is from Ofer who hedges on the prohibition against depicting God. His God is a man in flames, a kind of spiritual burning bush, floating in the center of a blue clouded sky. The man within the fire appears to be smiling. He wears what seems to be a business suit.

Surrounding God are his enemies—Hitler, Pharaoh, Haman, and Goliath. They are large figures, the most prominent of whom is Hitler, sitting on a chair, his legs touching the outlines of God. Hitler has a tiny head and a circle in his chest.

Ofer says: “God looks like a man made of fire, like the sun, and he lives in the clouds and everywhere.”

Like Gil, Ofer sees Moses as a key player in God’s drama. He tells this story:

One day Moses was walking and looking at the sky. He saw a fire in the sky and some clouds fell down on him. God said to him: ‘Take off your shoes. You are on holy ground.’ Moses could see God as a fire and God showed his home to Moses.

Moses, however, is not present in Ofer’s drawing. The figures added by Ofer are all God’s enemies. Three are classical biblical oppressors of the Jews—the giant, Goliath, who is defeated in hand to hand combat by the diminutive future king, David; Haman, the wicked Prime Minister, who ordered the execution of the Jews only to be outsmarted by Queen Esther; and the Egyptian pharaoh, who succumbs to the power and persistence of Moses and is forced to allow the exodus of the Jews from Egypt. The fourth presence, Hitler, a monolith in a massive chair, is for many Jews the personification of evil.

Ofer says: “God’s enemies are very strong, but God can defend us from them.” He has to admit, however, that he is overwhelmed by the number of Jews slaughtered by Hitler. In the picture, it appears that Hitler can boot the fiery God right out of the heavens. But even though he is surrounded by formidable enemies, Ofer’s God does not need help or restoration.

God stands in the center of his enemies and is the one who keeps the children safe from the giants and from the anti-Semites. Ofer says: “It’s very complicated to know God because I don’t see him. I know he is good and can protect me. I am not afraid of God, never.”

Like many Israeli children, Ofer is afraid of those who would oppress and kill the Jews. Like most children of all faiths, Ofer sees the Satanic forces of evil as alive and present in the world. These presences seem so much easier

to see and to depict than the godly ones.

Ofer is one of the only children interviewed to counter the question about God's enemies with a statement about God's friends. He says: "God's friends are the angels and our fathers and mothers." And then he adds: "I am God's friend, too. I love God just like I love mother and father and all my friends."

Ofer is secure in his family and in his faith. Although aware of evil in the world, he is protected by a loving God. In his own way, he is *Yedidya*, a friend of God. He is different from my scholarly friend in that he does not believe that human beings are the creators or restorers of God. Creation is the business of God who restores and protects children like Ofer so that they can enjoy the pleasures of childhood.

I note that Ofer calls his picture: *God Created*. I wonder if, in Ofer's mind, God has created evil? Or does God create the opposite of evil—a peaceful, bounteous universe? And I wonder how the same God who created Hitler could also create a safe, peaceful world of loving families. Then I remember my image of Ofer's God in a business suit enveloped in fire. Maybe he is a negotiator, a shuttle diplomat who moves rapidly between the spiritual and material worlds. Maybe God has created all possibilities because that is how creation goes—without the shadow there could be no substance.

God is a creator whose creation is complicated in ways incomprehensible to seven year olds, no less mature grown-ups. When let in by human beings, this God dwells in the world even though his motives are hard to fathom. He is not only the God of Abraham and Isaac and Moses, but also of Hitler and Haman. The good offering by Ofer is that God stands in the middle of his enemies, keeping them at bay. And he has friends, and they are good.

### The School

I was very anxious to speak with Arab children living in Israel and to learn of their visions of God. It was difficult to arrange the interviews, but with the help of my friend Rina, I contacted the principal of an Arabic public elementary school located in a small village. The principal, whom I will call Mussa, invited me to the school which, although part of a poor neighborhood, was beautifully situated right by the sea. It was a walled concrete structure, institutional yet bright and airy. I was ushered into Mussa's office through a thick inner door with many locks. Mussa was an imposing man, large and round, with a dark stubble of beard and an intense gaze. He was dressed in a white shirt, blue jeans and black boots. He was clearly in control. I had heard from my Israeli friends that he was recently the subject of a news story where he was criticized for using corporal punishment on his students. He justified his position by claiming that this was a traditional practice in

Muslim families and the government of Israel had no business criticizing his methods of discipline.

Within minutes of entering Mussa's inner sanctum, a tray arrived with traditional breads and Arabic coffee. I briefed Mussa on my project and he asked to see my interview questions. I sipped my coffee from a delicate China cup and waited. I expected at any moment to be dismissed. I recalled my experience with the Islamic teacher in New York who revised my questions before interviewing her students.

I certainly anticipated that Mussa would reject my request for visual images of God, and I expected that he would disallow the question about God's enemies. When he looked up from the paper, he offered no judgement but said: "I'll translate these into Arabic. Of course, I'll have to change some of the meaning. Arabic children are not allowed to speak for God."

"Fine, great!" I exclaimed, "anything you want." I was ready to accept any revision, recognizing that this might be my only chance to interview Muslim children in the Middle East. After he translated the questions, he read them back to me in English and to my delight, they seemed quite similar to the originals. The most heartening thing was that Mussa did not dismiss the drawings. The children could draw things spiritual, with the exception of Allah.

Within seconds, the assistant principal appeared, a handsome man who spoke no English and kept a distance from me. Mussa asked me where I wanted to wait, inferring that the assistant principal would do the interviews alone. "But I want to do the interviews myself," I implored. "I'd like to be with the children." The assistant principal must have gotten a sign from Mussa, because he immediately beckoned me to follow. I never saw Mussa again.

I was led through a maze of hallways and stairs, until I reached the bomb shelter. The heavy door was opened and I was ushered inside. We walked through what appeared to be the library. In the back was a door which led to the art room. Twenty-five curious students stared at the assistant principal and at me. Their teacher, a pale, thin young man, acknowledged my presence in a quiet way then seemed to disappear as the assistant principal took charge. This was clearly not going to be my interview. He instructed the students to begin drawing and presumably asked the questions translated by Mussa. There was a mix of seriousness and amusement among the students. Between moments of concentrated activity, some looked up at me—curious and suspicious.

As they worked I wandered around the room. The concrete walls were decorated with many colorful pictures drawn by the children, as well as faded copies of Leonardo DaVinci sketches. Old storage cabinets were brightly

colored in yellow and blue. The Hebrew alphabet was posted above the blackboard. Beside the DaVinci sketch called *The Redeemer* was a copy of another drawing of what I imagined to be a Muslim cleric. Bold, hand-drawn Arabic text underscored the portrait. Later I asked the art teacher if this was some famous Imam. He replied simply, "That is a portrait of Leonardo DaVinci."

### The Satanic Verses

At one point, the assistant principal called me over to the desk of a student and beckoned me to look. He was proud of the student's drawing. I learned from the art teacher that this boy, Mohammed, age 11, is the son of the principal.

Indeed the drawing is striking (see **Figure 14**). There is a bold figure in the center with a long beard and wings. This figure appears to me as God, himself. But I later learn that Mohammed sees it as an angel. The bearded face is smooth and detailed, especially around the eyes. It has a feminine quality. Surrounding the angel are images of animals—deer and cats and birds. There are also images of nature—sun and volcanic mountain, clouds and rain. Rather striking are the hands of the angel, drawn with prominent markings, and two other hands rising up from the nether regions of the picture.

Most disturbing is a depiction of the devil, just above the ear of the angel, with sharp teeth, forked tongue, spiked hair, and clawed feet. Mohammed chooses to draw the tongue and inner markings of this figure in a bold red. All others images in the drawing are in pencil.

Because I could not speak directly to the children, it was difficult to get their explanations and stories. However, I did manage to speak with the art teacher after the children were dismissed. The art teacher became my guide, willing to interpret and translate the markings on the drawings. I longed to engage directly with the children, but it was not to be, except for one boy who was willing to stay after class and talk with me briefly.

The art teacher told me that for Mohammed the hands represent creativity, the work of Allah who created the world. Nature and the animals, Allah's creations, point to the glory of God. Mohammed said nothing about Satan. The art teacher assumed that this is the enemy of God.

I wondered why the assistant principal drew me to Mohammed's picture. Was it because he was the son of the principal and thus elevated in status? Or was it because this picture carried a message he wanted me to see? And if so, what kind of message was I to glean from this detailed depiction of the spiritual world?

For one, I saw an image of power in the angel with the extended arms and



Figure 14. *Mohammed—The Satanic Verses, Israel*

mighty hands. As I looked further, I noticed that the angel embodied qualities of several faiths. I noted a halo about its head and wondered why Mohammed interjected this Christian symbol. The angel could be, I thought, a rabbi or a Christian saint. It seemed most likely that this figure was a Muslim prophet. Was this supposed to be the prophet Muhammad, the namesake of the artist? Was this supposed to be a self-portrait of the artist as a young man? I recalled my first impression of the portrait of Leonardo on the wall of the art room. To me it was a Muslim cleric with beard and caftan, praying in Arabic. In Mohammed's drawing, this angel holds together a number of contradictions—Christian, Muslim, and Jewish. The latter is most apparent in that a balloon appears above his head holding the title of the drawing, *The Glory of God*, in Hebrew.

Directly above the angel's halo are two English letters, s and v. The s is written backwards. What does it mean, I wonder? I copy the letters on a piece of paper and by chance I see their reflection in a mirror in the room—*vs.* And it occurs to me that perhaps Mohammed is communicating a sense of opposition, as in *vs.*, *versus*. On one level the drawing could be a picture of Satan versus the angel. On another level, it could be a depiction of one religion, one culture, versus another. Or on even another level, this could be a picture of the beauty and delicacy of the world versus its cruelty and evil. Perhaps Mohammed, the principal's son, is communicating a message of struggle and conflict. And perhaps he has positioned the angel in the center to try to contain the contradictions.

As I see it, Satan will not allow containment. He wags his tongue and spits words into the angel's ear, feeding on Mohammed's confusion of class, culture and faith.

As I see it, the temptation offered by Satan is to dissolve struggle and lead the angel to the rigid dogma of many of the ultra-orthodox politicians and clerics in the Middle East. Perhaps Mohammed's inverted *versus* points to another rigid and brutal moment in recent Middle East history when the Ayatollah Khomeini issued an edict of death against the writer, Salman Rushdie, for publishing his book, *The Satanic Verses*.

The hope that I see in Mohammed's picture is that the angel or prophet can hold together the contradictions of this most troubled land and allow the beauties of diversity to flourish in language, in nature, in culture and religion. The message that the assistant principal led me to see is the message of peace. It is most poignant coming from the son of the principal, a man who believes in stern discipline yet welcomes a stranger from far away and willingly translates his questions, freeing up expression and communication. In translating his son's images, as in translating my own son's, I hope to discover a way to better read the many mysteries of this powerful, spiritual region.



Most Muslim children draw images of traditional Muslim spiritual life—of the Koran, of prayer rugs and men praying, of the Al-Aksar Mosque in Jerusalem, and the Kaba in Mecca. As in the drawings of so many other children, these children also see God existing in nature. Consistent with Muslim beliefs, there are no direct depictions of God.

### **The Face of God**

One drawing is outstanding in that God's presence is inferred by a mouth and eyes floating in the sky. Ten-year-old Reem calls her picture *The Face of God* and surrounds the eyes and mouth with lines and arrows pointing to and from the face. A fully formed Satan with face, horns, body, and wings is visible alongside God. Underneath are hills with little people looking heavenward. One tiny man sits cross-legged on the ground in prayer.

Generally speaking, the people in the drawings created by the Arab children are very small. Aside from Reem's face of God, all other images of God are veiled. God's presence is most visible in images of prayer. The most consistent presence is Satan.

### **The World and Satan**

The one unsigned picture in the group is the most disturbing to me (see **Plate 38**). At the bottom is a silhouette of Satan holding his three-pronged pitchfork. He is enveloped in red flames. To his left are three figures with hands raised. A black and brown border separates these figures from the blue sky which holds a blue and green earth. The art teacher translates the scattered text:

This is a picture of night and day. The top part is about God and the bottom part is about Satan. The figures on the top and bottom are believers in God who are tempted by Satan. The artist calls his picture *The World and Satan*.

I feel that this drawing holds a certain mystery, which seems beyond my understanding. As I put the drawing aside, I notice that the artist has illustrated the other side in an astonishing way. Satan fills up the page. He is a cat-like animal with full open mouth and sharp teeth (see **Plate 39**). He is enveloped in flame and appears with a pitchfork ready to strike. Why is Satan so very visible? Is this the other side of God in all its glory? Is this the most paramount image in the mind's eye of this unnamed student? And if so, is it because the image of God is prohibited and children need images? Is evil a stronger presence in these children's lives or are all children simply more attracted to demons than to angels?

### Satan's Dance

These questions buzz through my mind as the buzzer sounded and the principal's voice boomed over the loudspeaker. As the children filed out of the room, I managed to detain one straggler. The art teacher agreed to translate this hurried interview. The boy was 11-year-old Musta who drew a smaller version of Satan who appears as a seductive dancing girl, cloaked in red flame (**see Plate 40**). Musta tells me: "Satan is dancing and God prefers those who pray to those who sing and dance."

Below Satan is a figure that looks classically Egyptian. Musta calls him a man who prays to God. He appears stern and rigid, quite the opposite of the sensual Satan. A flag above the praying man distinguishes day from night. And to his right is a natural scene of sea and mountains and trees which, according to Musta, signify the glory of God.

Musta's picture is a lot more comforting than the previous one, but I am still left with some trepidation. The female is associated with temptation and evil. She is separated from the rest of the picture by an enclosure. The man is a pious figure who looks toward nature and the glories of creation. Yet he appears sullen, unhappy. Could it be because he is separated from his more earthbound desires?

Again I think of Mohammed's implicit attempt to point out the contradictions in Middle Eastern culture—the versus and the verses. As night and day are the two sides of one cycle, could not the same be said for male and female, body and spirit, Muslim and Jew? If the lines and the veils separating one realm from the other cannot be lifted, if one God needs to be superior to the other, what hope will remain for these children? Satan looms too large in their drawings. God's face and body may be prohibited, but his presence is not. In this small school in this small village by the sea, he is present in nature and in traditional imagery. What will it take to tease God out, to allow his glory to truly shine by day and night?

Perhaps these are more political than spiritual questions. But if they are spiritual questions, one version might be: *Where does God live?* I note one answer—*Wherever human beings let him in.*

### In Jerusalem

#### *Where Have All the Rabbis Gone?*

In all my travels throughout the world, I've searched for the presence of God. In all those years, I believed that I would feel the presence once I arrived at a holy site. What was less clear was the thought that I was part of the equation, that is, that I had to do something to prepare myself for a

meeting. God could be all around me, but if I was unprepared to let him in, then the meeting would not occur.

The first time I visited Jerusalem, in 1970, I did not meet God. I concluded that God was not present. In 1998, I returned to Jerusalem with my family. I wasn't expecting to meet God at all and he was predictably absent. Mackey at the time was seven. I was aware of his growing spiritual awareness. He was especially interested in visiting the Western Wall, the site of the ancient second Temple of Solomon. I told him that this was the most sacred place in all of Judaism. Mackey referred to the site as the Wailing Wall, a name used to characterize the behavior of impassioned Jewish pilgrims praying at the wall. One tradition among pilgrims is to write a prayer on a piece of paper and to place it into a crack in the wall in hopes that it would ascend to God.

I told Mackey, like my grandfather had told me, that God answers prayers only if they come from the heart. It was time to send two more balloons up to God, and as Mackey and I munched on a falafel around the corner, we wrote our prayers on napkins. Mackey asked me to write the prayer he knew best, *Shema, Yisrael—Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one*. When I finished, he signed his Hebrew name on the paper—*Meir Natan*, the gift of shining light. I wrote a simple prayer asking God to give me strength to see my family through good times and bad. As we approached the holy site, we parted ways—Katherine and Georgie going to the women's side of the wall and Mackey and I going to the men's. Although politically incorrect in my mind, the parting felt somehow right. It was another connection with my grandfather's orthodoxy, and this time, I could share it with my son.

There were few men at the wall—mostly religious young men hard at prayer, one soldier with a knitted *kippa*, a group of tourists in short sleeves with prayer books. Mackey struggled hard to find the right niche in the wall to hold his prayer. There were so many little folded prayers on so many kinds of papers, all stuffed between the pitted, ancient stones.

The wall was teeming with these secret messages to God. Mackey and I searched and tested out this place and that until we agreed to stack our prayers together in one vacant space. Mackey went first and I tucked my prayer on top of his—a perfect father and son fit.

Before this, when wandering among the Arab souks, Mackey became frightened. He was affected by the strangeness of cultures and languages and was homesick, missing the familiarity of his room and his friends and his dog. I hoisted him up on my shoulders, high above the smell of spice and leather, and searched for a way out of the airless bazaar. From on high, Mackey appeared calmer, safer.

At the wall, I asked Mackey if he wanted to say a prayer. He did and turned to face the wall, putting his hands directly on the smooth, cool stones.

I stood behind him and did the same, my arms circling his. I prayed again for the strength to hold my family. I felt the fragility of the family circle as I had for some time. And then, very simply, I became aware of the presence of the spirit. I had done something, opening something up inside of me and God, who was there all the time, responded. It was a gentle moment—a feeling of heat that emanated from the base of the spine and spread upward—linking me with my son and grandfather and the small group of celebrants nearby.

As we walked from the wall, Mackey asked me: “Dad, what did you pray for?” I tried to avoid the question, feeling myself shutting down. But I caught myself and told him in a stumbling fashion. I asked him the same question and he answered directly: “I said the *Shema*.”

We met up with Katherine and Georgie and tried to hail a taxi outside the Dung Gate. But it was chaos in the blazing sun. Finally, Katherine managed to secure a taxi by fighting off the Israeli who tried to knock her aside. She is the warrior. I try to be the one who prays to God, but I stumble a lot.

Later that night, Mackey drew a picture of the wall and asked me how to spell *wailing*. Absentmindedly, I responded with w-h-a-l-i-n-g. Katherine corrected me, well understanding Mackey’s intention. As I was putting Mackey to bed he asked me: “Where are the rabbis?” I didn’t understand his intention and proceeded to tell him about the role of the rabbis during the time of King Solomon. “No, no!” he insisted, “where are the rabbis?” I told him that many rabbis come to pray at the Western Wall. “Why?” he asked.

“Because this is the most sacred site in Judaism,” I replied. “It stands for the early Jewish faith in one God.”

“Where are the rabbis?” he asked again, growing more and more impatient at my lack of understanding.

Finally, he amended his question: “Are they girls?”

“Who,” I asked.

“The rabbis,” he said.

Ah, now I understood! In our temple at home, the rabbi is a woman.

“In the old days,” I said, “all the rabbis were men.”

“And the cantors?” he asked.

“Also men,” I responded.

He asked many more questions about the men in their *tefillin* and why I refused a Hasidic man who invited me to lay *tefillin* at the wall. This was not my ritual and there are other ways to let God in, I said. How far I had come since I acquiesced to a similar demand some 25 years earlier. I told Mackey that my grandfather used to lay *tefillin* each morning as he said his prayers. And then I told him: “You know, Mackey, all the rabbis that lived at the time of King Solomon’s temple are dead.”

“And the cantors?”

"They are dead too," I said.

"How did they die?" Mackey wondered aloud.

"Of old age," I said.

"Oh," responded Mackey, "tell me again why the Wailing Wall is so important?"

I answered as before and then I sang the *Shema*. He was still unsettled from the events of the day. As he was about to fall asleep, I told him: "You know, Mackey, I love you more than the Wailing Wall."

He responded by saying: "When I walked to the Wailing Wall, I kept seeing it in my mind. I kept thinking about it. I like that you love me better than the Wailing Wall." And then he fell asleep.

Lying awake late into the night, I began to reflect upon my latest impressions of Israel. The old rabbis have died. They were all men. Israel is without a guide. I am without a grandfather. People seem very lost. Could I guide my son? Could I be a good enough Jew, a good enough father, a good enough mediator between my young son and the Lord of all the Jews? The old rabbis have died. We live in new times where women sometimes lead the flock and hail taxis and men are allowed to feel weak. But the Wailing Wall has great significance, not only because it represents a link to ancient Jewry. It is a meeting place. It is where fathers and sons can go to share wishes, to launch balloons up to God, to connect with one another in silent prayer. It is a place where they can discover openings in the stone and in the heart and let in the divine presence and know that they are on this earth for a purpose. To prepare myself to take in this spiritual knowledge at this holy site, I needed to be a father to my son and to hold him as he held me.

### *All About Jesus*

In our connection, Mackey and I were spiritual searchers of many gods, not only the God of the Old Testament. Mackey was the one who accidentally pulled out a spike from a wooden crucifix hanging on a monastery wall and then drew a picture of a Jew in jail surrounded by images of the crucified Christ. After a day of visiting sacred Christian sites around Tiberias where Jesus walked on the water and preached the sermon on the mount and transformed the single fish and loaf of bread into many, Mackey drew a picture called *All About Jesus* (see **Figure 15**). In his drawing, a large Jesus is nailed to a red cross. He displays all the stigmata of the crucifixion. Many lines are drawn to and from the body of Christ. Above him are two small figures, one with a gun and one with a sword. Mackey informs me that the figure with the gun is a Jew and the one with a sword is a Roman. And then he tells this story:

Jesus was walking one day. He went into his tent and opened up his secret book. He saw a Roman coming and the Roman took him away. He put Jesus on a cross with nails. He stuck a big sword in the wall and used it to cut off Jesus' head. The Jew came along. The Roman saw him. He got the big sword and tried to chop off the Jewish guy's neck so he could be put on a cross. The Jewish guy took his gun out. He shot at the Roman to let Jesus free, and he took the nails off with his gun. Jesus' head came off because the gun shot the nails. The Jewish guy caught Jesus' head. Then he got the body. The cross fell and a fire was made from it and the whole place blew up. The Jewish guy escaped with Jesus. He went to bury Jesus so Jesus could rest in peace.

Mackey has come a long way from seeing the Jew as shamed for killing Christ. Not only is the Jew liberated from his jail, but he is the rescuer of Christ. I wonder if it took a trip to Israel to bring Mackey to this shift in consciousness. I imagined that he was impressed by seeing so many soldiers walking the streets of Israel, armed with rifles. I imagined that he was impressed by the apparent power of ordinary Israelis who hardly match the image of the Jew in jail.

Mackey's God is consistent with the kabbalistic idea of the imperfect God and the vision of many children who imagine God to be wounded and in need of help. His story is gruesome. Not only is Jesus nailed to the cross, his head is chopped off. Gun and sword do great damage. And in the end, there is a massive destruction of the place of crucifixion. Jesus and the Jew escape, and Jesus is buried in a peaceful place.

In Mackey's mind, as in other children's, the human being restores the celestial being. The Son of God needs the son of man to free him from pain and save his eternal soul. Maybe that's what all the strings are for in Mackey's drawing—devices to facilitate the rescue from cross to grave. For me, they suggest something else. This Christ could be a marionette. I see another inversion of the idea that God creates and redeems man. It could be that man is a puppeteer and that God is the puppet, a thought mentioned earlier in the case of Anja. Mackey's picture and story appear as a puppet show, and he holds the strings.

Given this idea, how does Mackey see God? As a puppet with fragile parts—a body with holes, a head that can easily fall off—an inanimate object that holds an enormous spiritual power. He sees God as a delicate thing that must be cared for and loved and saved.

But this is not all there is to know about Jesus. Mackey and I require more. So we return to Jerusalem. He urges me to take him back to the Western Wall, and we go. Again, the presence is there. And I ask him to come with me to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the site of Christ's crucifixion and burial.

Images of Christ abound. But the first object we notice is a large

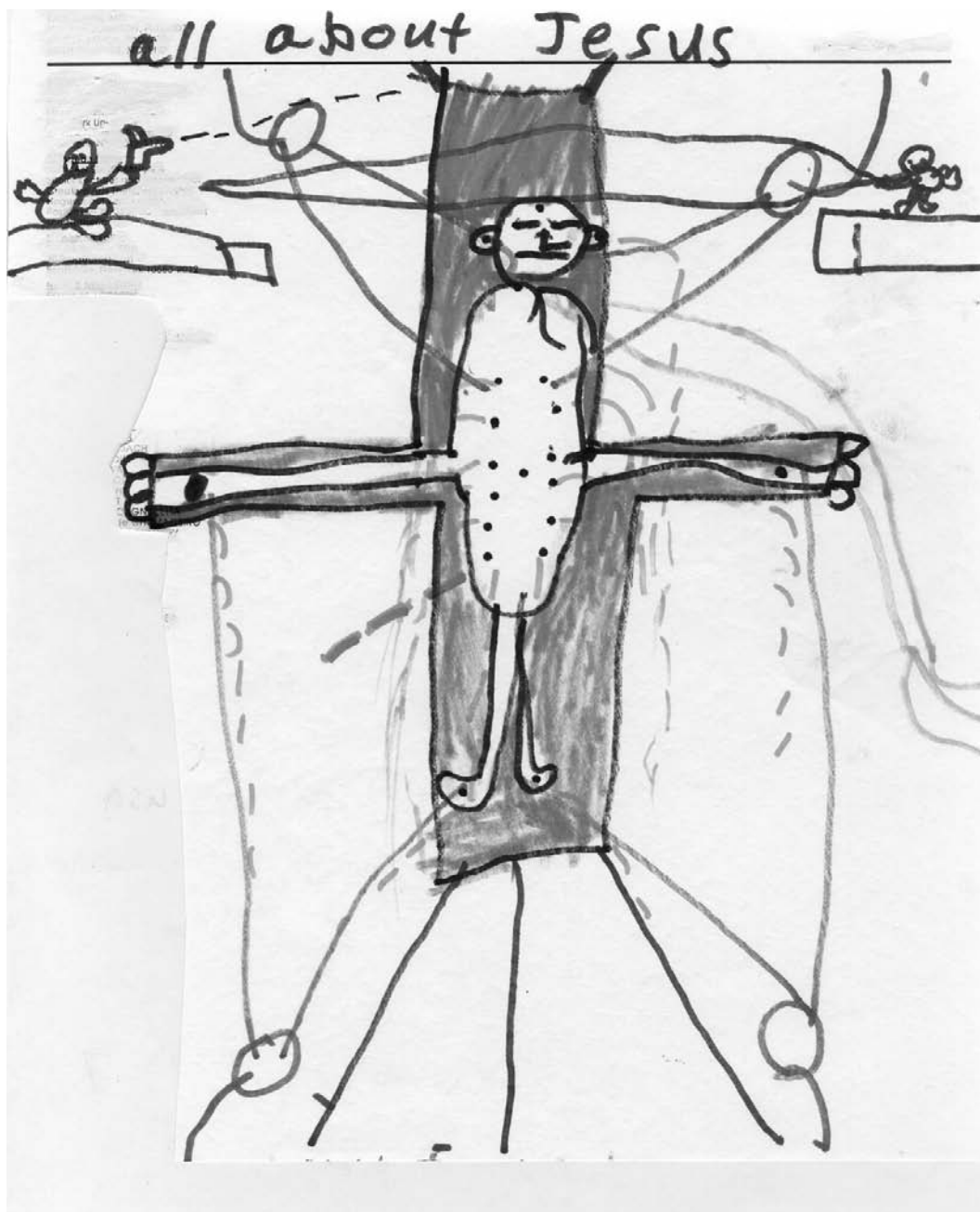


Figure 15. Mackey—*All About Jesus*, USA

rectangular stone, not unlike those in the Wall in texture and color. It appears oily to me. The stone is surrounded by a group of pilgrims kneeling and kissing the stone. Could this be the tomb of Christ, I wonder? Later, we discover that this is the Stone of Unction where Christ lay after being taken from the cross, anointed with oil in preparation for his burial.

The church is a maze of rooms and passageways and people. I feel very lost and hold Mackey tightly by the hand. Without a guidebook, I don't know where to go, or when I arrive, I don't know what I am seeing. We walk a bit and see a long line with anxious pilgrims waiting to enter a tiny room with a very low roof. We join the line and wait our turn to duck into the room. It is stiflingly hot inside. The walls are lined with icons. Candles are burning and a plexiglass window reveals a section of rock underground. We stay for a moment, baffled. Outside, we realize we are in a huge domed space. The tiny enclosure we had just visited is a small church within this larger domed cathedral. We ask another baffled couple to tell us where we are. And we learn that we had just visited the original church built on top of Christ's tomb. I look at Mackey as if to say: "This is where the Jew in your picture brought Jesus to rest in peace."

We move on, following a crowd walking up a flight of stone stairs. Midway up the stairs, I get a sense of presence not unlike my experience approaching the monasteries of Mt. Athos. A jolt of heat flashes up my spine. The room is charged in a way that transcends the human flurry around me. A man lies prostrate on the cold marble floor, writhing in ecstasy. Old women duck into a small cave-like section under the altar, kissing the stones, the plexiglass, all objects that can be kissed. Many stand still, moving their lips in prayer. Others wander, and as the Christmas song goes, wonder as they wander. Mackey and I only communicate through our hands. We hold on tight. This is the place, I tell him, where Jesus was crucified. It is called Calvary Hill or Golgotha. What I don't tell him is its meaning— the hill of skulls. I get a chill thinking about Golgotha. Then I recall a story that has become part of its ancient lore—that the skull of the first man, Adam, is buried on this hill. I read somewhere of the medieval legend that the blood of the crucified Christ seeped into the ground of Golgotha, seeking Adam's skull and bringing it to life for an instant.

Mackey and I stand near a large rock. In all the holy places, there are always rocks, stones, hard things that keep their shape for millennia no doubt to hold the uncontainable, elusive spirit. Above the rock is a likeness of the crucified Jesus. It seems sentimental and ornate, lacking in the power and simplicity of Mackey's drawing.

I chat with a Greek orthodox priest dressed in black with full black beard. He is very serious but has a twinkle in his eye. What does he think of the



human drama before him? Does he experience the presence of God on this hill of skulls?

We walk outside to ease the intensity—too many people, too many images of the divine. I notice a staircase on the side of the building. Curious, I drag my son along. I quickly become disoriented again and rather than stop, I wander further into the labyrinth, Mackey steadfastly by my side. We walk into a prayer meeting of African monks and nuns. It is dark and hot in the small room. The chant in a strange language feels random, as if the celebrants were old Jewish men in my grandfather's synagogue *davining* to their own rhythms.

We move up a back stairway to an open courtyard on one of many rooftops. A small group of Spanish tourists are enacting some sort of ritual. Several carry a huge wooden cross on their shoulders, reciting prayers in the more familiar sounding Spanish language. And we go on, passing the monks' living quarters, entering one more dark passageway adorned with icons of the Black Madonna. Mackey is restless and needs to return to the street. We retrace our steps and wind our way back to more familiar territory. In the courtyard, an old Greek orthodox monk sits with a young Israeli soldier, a rifle in his lap. Mackey's picture again flashes in my mind—the Jew has a gun. He liberates Christ so that he can rest in peace.

Just inside the door of the church is a stone chalice which is said to mark the center of the earth. Nearby is the holy sepulcher, the tomb of Jesus. Behind the holy sepulcher is a small dark chamber. It is said that within this chamber is the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. It was Joseph, so the story goes, who took Jesus from the cross and laid him to rest. But in my mind, it will always be Mackey, the liberated Jew, who rescued and restored the Son of God. Mackey, the Jew, is not in jail. He is in the world, at the center of the world, where he can feel the presence of God in ways that I can only imagine.

### **Across the Jordan**

From Jerusalem, I take a brief trip across the Jordan River to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Although 90 percent desert, Jordan is a surprisingly rich country, epitomized by the ancient city of Petra, carved out of the desert mountains by the Nabateans. Some 3000 years ago, these pre-Roman people built their remote city with a sense of design and color that speaks to a grand spiritual awareness. In keeping with later spiritual developments in the Middle East, the Nabateans shunned visual representations of their god who was believed to dwell within the mountain. When the Romans finally discovered Petra and carved images of their gods into the stone face, the Nabateans were quick to grind the stone down and

erase the false faces of God.

We walk through a narrow mountain gorge. Each twist and turn of the journey exposes secret passageways and carvings in the porous, red stone face. Then, rounding the final mountain curve, there it is—Petra, the red city, flanked by the Treasury Building, a monument of carved pillars and friezes. Through the portals of the Treasury, we enter mysterious rooms with green and pink and ochre walls, dark rooms illuminated in corners by narrow shafts of light. The rooms are empty except for the stone walls and the spotlights.

Around the bend, a short camel ride away, is the glorious city in bits and pieces, most of it buried underground. There are 20 acres of tombs and homes, amphitheatres and enigmatic stone chambers. Taking it all in, I wonder if this, too, could be the center of the earth?

Amman, the capital city, stands in stark contrast to the drama of Petra. On a hill overlooking the city, beyond the squalor of the Palestinian refugee camps which we are not supposed to see too clearly, there is a small, unassuming archeological museum. Each artifact, indigenous to the Jordan Valley, is displayed with great care. Our guide, very well versed in the ancient history and culture of Jordan, draws my attention to three small stone figures. “These,” he says, “are neolithic. About 8000 years old. They are the earliest known sculptures of the human form.”

Two of the figures are rather remarkable, with tiny hands and large heads. But the third is riveting. Two heads each with bright, vibrant eyes sit upon a single rectangular body. The faces are expressionless and childlike. This figure is somehow very familiar even though it comes from an obscure and hidden past, its creator and his intention unknown. In the short time I have, I stand with the two-headed figure. It looks so young and frail even as I see its age in each crack—an ancient body and a newly born face.

This double being holds together so many of the contradictions that I have seen in the Middle East. Most important to me, it is so earthbound in its body and so other-worldly in its double faces. The eyes are like stars. They seem to leap out of the figure and ascend to the heavens. As I leave, I notice that the two faces are different, one thinner, younger, open to the shifts and changes of time; the other fatter, older, wearier, experienced in the ways of the world. Turning my back on the figure, I feel the eyes on me. They watch me depart and move on. I have the sense that should my children or their children or their children’s children visit this museum in the future, the figures will still be there with star-like eyes and earthbound body, welcoming all to the other side of the River Jordan.

About to leave the Middle East, I come across a story told by an eight-year-old girl, Galia, from Israel. It is a creation story:

Once upon a time, when God went out for a walk in the sky to scatter all the stars, he noticed that one star in his bag was crying. When he asked it why, the star said: "I am crying because I am old and soon someone will take my place. I can see him below—a man who has just died. Now he will take my place." "Don't worry, dear star," said God. "I will change this." And God went down to earth and he found the dead man and he said: "You will become a new star. You will not take the place of any star in the sky." And he lifted the man's soul from his body and brought the new star to the heavens and he smiled. The old star started to laugh and rejoice and dance. Then God drew out the new star from his bag and the sky turned violet and the sun set and the moon rose. Angels appeared and served cake and wine in ivory glasses and there was a great party in the sky. Then God said: "Here I crown the new star, one of our beautiful souls that are now in the sky." And so it was. From that day on to the end of the years, there is the old star that wept and asked not to be replaced and the new star, the young and beautiful, that has come and joined the world of stars.

As I leave the Middle East, I am left with this final vision of God's work—to light up the universe and to find in it a place for all—for the strong and the weak, the young and the old, for those whose stars are ascending and those who are in decline. And I am left with the sense that if there is a grand plan, the doubleness of all our lives is part of it.

## Chapter 7

### CONCLUSION

As I was struggling to complete this book, I journeyed to Vienna to attend a conference of psychotherapists from all around the world. My task was to present a speech about my research. I had trouble preparing the speech. Nearing the completion of this work, I did not know what it all meant. With the speech deadline looming, I took a few easy ways out. For one, I extracted particularly imaginative and funny responses to some of my questions. The following are examples:

#### ***What Does God Look Like?***

God's tummy is red and that means he is very holy.

–*Eunan, a five-year-old Catholic boy from Northern Ireland*

God has black eyes so at night nobody will see him.

–*Adam, a seven-year-old Catholic boy from Northern Ireland*

On the back of God's head is a box with a key.

–*David, a ten-year-old Jewish boy from the USA*

God looks like somebody named Miroslav.

–*Vladislav, a ten-year-old Christian Orthodox boy from Bulgaria*

You can look in the nun's notebook. Everything about God is in there.

–*Valentina, a five-year-old Catholic girl from Italy*

#### ***Where Does God Live?***

God lives in glass and is shaped by the wind.

–*Natasha, a seven-year-old Christian girl from South Africa*

God lives seven skies high.

–*Mohammad, an 11-year-old Muslim boy from Bangladesh*

Even I know where God lives. I took an airplane. He lives with the shepherds.

–*Tony, a five-year-old Protestant boy from the USA*

God is in the world but we don't see him. We feel him in the stomach when he knocks.

–*Shakked, a seven-year-old Jewish girl from Israel*

God is in my heart, peeping out and saying hello.

–*Yanna, a six-year-old secular girl from South Africa*

### ***What Happens When You Die?***

God sees to it that everyone who dies and goes to heaven has his own little cloud.

–*Francesca, a ten-year-old Catholic girl from Italy*

Not everyone goes straight to heaven. You can go to hell or puberty or something.

–*Máire, an 11-year-old Catholic girl from Northern Ireland*

In heaven, everything's magical. If you wish for an apple, God will give you a whole tree.

–*Rizwanul, an 11-year-old Muslim boy from Bangladesh*

### ***How Does God Talk to People?***

I can't understand God because he speaks in ancient Greek.

–*Pavlos, an eight-year-old Greek Orthodox boy from Greece*

God speaks in Latin. If he spoke in English, I would ask him if I am on a list for heaven.

–*Philip, a ten-year-old Protestant boy from Northern Ireland*

### ***How Does God Create Life?***

God caused the big bang that formed the earth and the first humans.

–*Kimón, a ten-year-old secular boy from South Africa*

I wonder if God ever gets pregnant? He probably beams babies out of his head and puts them in the mothers on earth.

–*Ben, a nine-year-old Catholic boy from the USA*

God made dinosaurs. Nobody knows how they got killed. He makes new things if they run out.

–*Desiré, a six-year-old Baha'i girl from Canada*

***Do You Believe in God?***

I believe in God but don't pray as the temple is usually shut.

–*Sikander, a six-year-old Hindu boy from India*

I believe in God because there's no one else to believe in England, and I don't want to upset my Mum.

–*Stephen, an eight-year-old Pentecostal boy from England*

When less than 100 people stop believing in God, he dies.

–*Michael, an eight-year-old Jewish boy from the USA*

Another easy way out of my dilemma was to generalize from the many responses of the children. But this was no easy task as their responses were so diverse and often contradictory. So I abstracted a number of descriptive statements about God. In considering each statement as existing along a continuum of paired opposites, I hoped to find a way to specify many of the children's perceptions. This is how I saw their views of God:

1. God is visible and invisible, present and absent, revealed and hidden.
2. God is tangible and mysterious, a force in nature and a supernatural spirit.
3. God is human and superhuman. God is like us and very different from us.
4. God is masculine and feminine. God is both genders and no gender.
5. God is serious and playful.
6. God is calm and agitated.
7. God is domestic and homeless.
8. God is in our hearts and in the sky.
9. God hates and loves. God is punitive and forgiving. God is intolerant and tolerant.
10. God acts in rational and irrational ways.
11. God is silent and communicative.
12. God is one and many.
13. God is whole and in pieces.
14. God is the creator of human beings and the creation of human beings.
15. God is a healer and a wounded being in need of healing. We need God and God needs us.

As I was feeling dissatisfied with a list of descriptors, I made another list, this time offering seven even more generalized findings:

1. God lives. The old Hasidic saying that God is present wherever people let him in held true. With very few exceptions, the children I interviewed

let God in. They see the living God not only in the framework of conventional religious traditions but also in terms of a spiritual consciousness independent of institutionalized religion. The living God is a source of hope, peace, calm, and love.

2. God's presence is everywhere, although some children see God in specific places. Children see God in heaven, in places of worship, in nature, and within the body, primarily the heart. One boy, Joshua, actually imagined God as circulating through the skin, muscle, and bones. Some children see a domestic God present in the home. God takes on many shapes such as clouds, sun and trees, animals, human beings, colors, and abstract geometrical forms.
3. God's enemies are also present. They exist in hell, in the mind and in the world. For most children, the enemies are forms of the devil, Satan and Lucifer. But for some, God's enemies are those who either deny God's existence or who believe in a different God. For a small minority of children interviewed, God's enemies are the Jews.
4. God is a creation of children and indeed, all of us. Throughout the research, I discovered ironically that it is God who is created in the image of man/woman. God indeed lives, but only as filtered through the imagination of human beings.
5. For many children, creating God is a powerful and healing act. This observation has therapeutic implications in that many of the children appeared to be working through concerns and fears about relatedness and loneliness, mortality and immortality, war and peace, bigotry and kindness, poverty and plenty as they drew their pictures and told their stories. It could be that we create God in order to deal with these concerns and fears.
6. God is vulnerable and very human. God has enemies. God gets lost and lonely. God works hard and becomes tired. Sometimes God gets weak and loses heart and requires the special power of the child to make him whole again. Not only is man the creator of God, but also the restorer.
7. How we see God is determined by many factors—our age, our religion, our parents' beliefs, our socioeconomic and political realities. It is difficult to come to any clear conclusions as to which factors are most and least significant in determining our perceptions of God. But I have discovered, however tentatively, that cultural factors seem to be stronger than religious ones. Pavlos' Greek God looks more like Zeus than Jesus. The gods of the Christian Korean children, Sang Min and Sang Mi, resemble shamans. They are not Fathers in Heaven, but forces in nature.

It didn't feel satisfying to start my speech with these summary thoughts.

Nor did it feel right to start with quotations from specific children. I needed some closure not only to this book, but to a large chapter in my life. It struck me that I was returning to German culture for the first time in 20 years and it was time to end my lifelong obsession with the holocaust. It was time to leave behind my suspicion that the anti-Semites were right—the Jews were indeed Christ-killers and therefore had to be punished. And so I decided to begin my speech on a personal note and tell my largely German-speaking audience that I was a Jew whose family was traumatized by the holocaust and that an anti-Semitic remark aimed at my young daughter was the springboard that launched this project. I began by recalling a story:

When I was 22, I studied literature at a prestigious American graduate school. I was surrounded by high-powered intellectuals, many of whom were prominent in their field. They were like Talmudic scholars who devoted their lives to *midrash*, the art of interpreting texts and offering commentary. And like the old wise men wrestling with their holy books, the measured pronouncements of my professors, I believed, would have profound implications on how we lived our lives.

Toward the end of my first year of study, I became distracted, unable to mine the gold of the venerable old texts. It was the 1960s and the world was changing fast all around me. I was losing my sense of balance and needing to break out of the academy.

One night I had a vivid dream. A group of holy men dressed in black are in a room, discussing the true nature of Christ. They are highly skilled in the art of interpretation. I am a young boy hiding behind a chair in a doorway. I feel ignorant as I try to make sense of their words. What do I, a Jew, know about Christ? What do I, a young man about to lose his sense of balance, know about God?

As their debate becomes more and more intellectual, they seem to become removed, distant. As I strain to listen, I become agitated. They believe nothing that they say; they are empty. The intensity builds: the words unintelligible, the figures less visible, my heart racing, my head pounding.

And then, suddenly, I am knocked over by a brilliant flash of light. I awake instantly and sit up in my bed. I am shaking. My first thought was that I had just seen Christ. My second, much more frightening, was that the vision was a trick. It was the devil that had planted this dream, intending to lead me astray and renounce my religion.

On one level, the dream seemed clear to me. I was young and experiencing an identity crisis. I needed a break from the intellectual life which at the time felt false and empty. My spiritual identity was shaky and I was unsure of which god to follow. Even when confronted with a revelation, I quickly became confused. This was, I reasoned, only a dream, and at the time, I had no clue how to read a dream.

At 22, when I had this dream, I lived very much in my mind. The world



outside was for the most part unintelligible. I had no means of building the bridge between the inside and outside, and without a proper guide, I floundered.

After I told the story of the dream to the audience of psychotherapists, I mentioned that it provided a strong motivation for my research as it concerned my search for gods, both real and false. And then I told the story about Georgie as the Christ killer and Mackey as the Jew in Jail. I mentioned that these episodes were even stronger motivators for my work. My voice was strong and I took my time. I was working something out. I even stated that in preparing the speech the general research question, “How do children see God?” expanded. By the end, the question became: “How do we see God and why does it matter?”

I told my audience in Vienna that through my research I learned that it matters very much how we see God. It matters because without the will to see the profound worlds inside and out, we become myopic. It matters because without the motivation to create new life, our old life ossifies. It matters how we see God because we are godlike in so many ways, even as we struggle with our limitations and our shame, yearning to be more. It matters because when we turn a blind eye, we torment others for worshiping false gods and blame them for our loss of vision. It matters because in too many dark moments in history, too many children have been murdered by those who saw their god as superior. It matters because so many children from so many diverse traditions constructed their spiritual worlds in order to find a way to explain the great mysteries—where we come from and why we suffer and what will become of us in life and death. It matters because the act of asking the essential spiritual questions and searching for answers is a mark of one’s humanity.

And it matters how we see God, because my children and I learned something my grandfather could never learn: to accept and respect ourselves more fully by proclaiming the name of our God to the gentile world without shame.

I could feel that the audience was with me. And then I shared with them my favorite story about the four-year-old growing up into the material world who asks his newborn sister to remind him of the presence of God.

Following the story, there was a pronounced silence. I could feel it in my body. I continued, telling them that it can become very difficult to accept one inevitable consequence of aging—the separation from the wonder and mystery of the world as seen by the child. In doing this research, I told them, I have learned to remember. I remembered my grandfather’s tears on Yom Kippur and the lion costume I wore as a little boy to assert awesome power. I remembered the little boy in a dream long ago hiding behind a chair, waiting for the light. And I remembered the powerful epiphany that knocked

me, the dreamer, off my feet. And more recently, I remembered the gentle epiphany of father and son at the holy Western Wall, connecting with one another in silent prayer, discovering openings in the stone and in the heart and letting in the divine presence. I told my listeners that the children have led me back and will lead me forward.

And finally, I said to the audience that it matters how we see God if we see God as the thing most important to remember—the electric presence that exists at walls and in doorways, in dreams and stories, through windows and mirrors, the shadow behind us that can restore peace and harmony.

Time was up. There was applause which I barely heard, several people shook my hand and asked questions and there I was, alone in a room among Germans and Austrians. I had shown a number of slides of the children's drawings of God during my speech and as I began to collect them, I recognized a woman whom I had met the night before. She was an American psychotherapist living in Berlin, a Jew whose parents had been forced out of Vienna during the *Anschluss*. I sat with her for a moment and said: "You know, I could never before talk about being a Jew in front of Germans. I was ashamed. I was afraid that I would be loaded on a train and sent to slaughter."

She asked me: "How do you feel now?"

I responded: "I feel clear and safe. I feel somehow complete."

She smiled, one of the warmest smiles I had ever seen. I looked up and the auditorium was empty. The room was filled with a presence I had rarely experienced. I recalled a Greek poem by Tasos Livathitis I had heard earlier that day:

*For aeons I keep knocking at the wall, but nobody answers.  
I know that behind the wall is God,  
Because only He does not answer.*

This Jew was liberated from his jail. I carefully put the slides of the gods into my bag and smiled back at my radiant guide. It was time to return home.

One final thought. At the beginning of this book, I mentioned that my aim was similar to that of the director of *The Ten Commandments*, Cecil B. DeMille: "to make vivid to the human mind its close relationship to the mind of God." As I come to the end of this part of the journey I realize that what matters most is not that we discover our relationship to the mind of God, but to the mind of the child, for that is the source of the consciousness of God.