

WHAT ABOUT GOD?

PART I - Introduction

My reason for writing this is simple: to begin to answer the question whether the word 'God' points to anything real, and if so what. Where do we look for evidence of this sort?

1. "Good Gawd!"

I once saw a cartoon of creatures from Mars landing in the U.K.
In the distance was a crowd of people.

- Above the crowd in 'speech bubbles' were
'Oh Gawd!' 'Jesus!' 'Oh Lor!' 'Chrrrist!' 'Good Lord!' 'God Almighty!'
- One Martian turns to the other and says:
"It sounds as if they're having a religious meeting!"

Non-religious folk use the word 'God' more than the religious do! (They feel freer with such words because they have no meaning for them.)

If you say ‘Oh Gawd!’ when you hit your thumb with a hammer – you're not being religious but *angry!*

In section 3 I'll explain the three ways in which the word 'God' is used, but first let's look at a familiar description of God.

PART II – Some of the Questions

2. Bearded Old Man in the Sky?

Ronnie Barker in his autobiography said that he didn't believe in "a bearded old Man in the sky". I'm not surprised. Some *children*, who are too young to know what is picture-language and what isn't, certainly do. But few adults who have ever really thought about it would believe such a thing.

- You'll have realised immediately that a 'bearded Man in the sky' is **picture-language**; The 'Bearded Old Man in the Sky' is a *symbol* - in the way that John Bull might symbolise patriotism, a bear might indicate Russia, or love might be likened to a rose. They're all useful *pictures*, but they're only pictures – not to be taken literally.

We are all used to picture-language. A sports team might be 'lions' or a regiment might be 'desert rats' and we do not find that difficult.

If a person likens **love** to a **rose**, we know instinctively that it is picture-language, chosen to stir us into realising how **beautiful** love is. (We do not take such language literally and believe that love could be *put in a jam jar but would die within a week!*)

- Whether we are religious or not, we need to bring to the picture-language of 'God' (being likened to a *bearded old man in the sky*) the same instinctive common sense that we bring to reading that love is like a rose. We ask ourselves 'What is it saying?' 'Why was this particular picture-language chosen?'

If God is likened to a **bearded old man in the sky**, it is no good taking the language literally, as the Russian astronauts did, and claim that God doesn't exist because there is no Father Christmas to be seen in outer space!

Common sense says that the words are 'pointers'. In fact, they suggest some very important things that I shall be touching on later -

- man** – suggests a God who is *personal*, rather than just a force like, say, gravity.
- beard** – symbol of extreme age, and perhaps that God existed *before you and I did*.
- sky** - hints at being 'above' or 'beyond' the ordinary and everyday.

3. The Word 'God' in Everyday Speech

There are THREE WAYS in which we use the word 'God'.

1. Non-Religious use
2. Semi-Religious use
3. Religious use

- **The Non-Religious use of the word 'God'**

'O Gawd!' as we have seen, is how the word gets used in a non-religious way, simply to express emphasis, shock, protest, anger, etc.

(Some might choose to say 'Good Heavens'. Throughout history there have always been those who, for various reasons, have felt uneasy at using the religious word 'God' in a non-religious way, and have used 'nearly-God' words instead.)

- **The Semi-Religious use of the word 'God'**

Politicians and military leaders drag the word 'God' into their speeches in an attempt to add weight to their remarks! 'With **God's help**, we shall win!' is a useful trick of oratory. It implies that God is on the speaker's side, and is giving moral support for the task ahead! It generally means little.

Goodbye was originally *God be with you*. Some entertainers are putting the clock back, and never leave an audience without a *God Bless!* (Perhaps it is sometimes said in an attempt to offset the godlessness of their material!)

People who say 'God willing, I'll never be ill', probably use the word more religiously than politicians and entertainers. It may carry with it a vague hope that there might be a something/someone 'up there' on their side and influential enough to change or check events in their favour.

Have you noticed that in this semi-religious use of the word 'God' there tends to creep into our language the possibility that God might **do** something, like *helping* us, blessing us, or *protecting* us?

- **The Religious use of 'God'**

The fully-religious use of the word 'God' occurs every time religious people pray or worship together. But this use should not be confined to the religious experts!

In *Brideshead Revisited* [A novel by Evelyn Waugh, later televised] Charles Ryder prays- '**O God, if there is a God...**'

How good, and how natural, that he began to use the word 'God' at that stage, while he still strongly doubted God's existence!

4. 'He makes a god - of his Garden!'

I think everyone is religious at heart. They have an inner hunger to find the meaning of life in general and their part and purpose in it.

Some deal with this reality by trying to deny it, ignore it, or cover it up. Others find a 'god' of some sort; some find 'God'. You'll notice that I think that the written distinction between 'god' and God (with a capital G) is a useful one.

Religious people find life's meaning in worshipping and serving 'God'.

Those who would *not* want to be called 'religious' often find things or causes that they give themselves to and which give their lives some meaning. This 'god' may be a sport, a hobby, success, status, pets, wealth, a charity, a religious denomination, service to others, possessions, in fact almost anything that we decide to *live-for*.

- If we say ‘*He makes a god of his garden*’, that's an extremely accurate statement. First it explains that this 'god' is man-made. Secondly, we mean he lives for it, and it gives him a sense of purpose, joy and fulfilment (just as a Communist lives for his party or a Christian lives for Christ).

What happens when family circumstances mean a move to a flat without a garden? What happens when age or illness makes gardening impossible? That's - the trouble with 'gods'!

Folk may live years unaware that they have made a 'god' of something. Often it takes a misfortune like ill health or unemployment to make it clear. This can be a *very* painful and confusing period when that which has always given our life **meaning** is suddenly gone or not available. (It often prompts the important questions: did I make the right choice? Did I rely on something that was not reliable? Did I seek support from something that would one day be removed?)

We have seen that one way of coping with the religious side of our humanity is

- **hoping to supply an answer**, by finding a 'god' to give life meaning.

The opposite way of coping with our religious side might be described as -

- running away to avoid the question.

One way to do this is by being over-active, in the hope that you'll escape those nagging questions about life's meaning. This over-activity can range from the compulsive drives that appear admirable (because they breed success and wealth and win approval and admiration from society), to an over-activity in constantly living for 'kicks', and indulging in every sort of 'escape' or distraction that life has to offer.

5. The Crunch Questions

If 'God' exists, is 'God' a fairy-tale? an **idea**? a **force**?

- Is 'God' a - **thing**? or something **personal**?

a) God as a fairy-tale character

If 'God' is a fairy-tale then he belongs to pantomime and ballet in the same way that Father Christmas belongs to children.

Stories can be vehicles of great truths. A fairy-tale 'God' may symbolise for us important things about good and evil, but the fairy-tale 'God' is make-believe. It doesn't exist. We cannot relate to him/her/it any more than we can relate to Cinderella, and a fairy-tale 'God' is no more relevant to life than a pantomime Fairy Godmother.

b) 'God' as an idea, or a theory, or a concept.

This has its appeal. Humans need theories to account for things (I don't expect animals do).

- If I was walking through a wood and found six coins scattered on the path I would naturally form a theory that someone was there before me, and that they were probably dropped by accident.

- But if I found the six coins in a dead straight line and arranged in ascending order of value, I would not entertain a theory that they were there by *chance*. I would have a theory that someone put them there on *purpose*.

If you or I would do that over half-a-dozen coins, little wonder that men and women when faced with the incredible variety and complexity of our world and universe have, throughout history, wanted to hold theories of chance or of purpose to make sense of it all.

These theories may need some god-like mind or 'First Cause' to make sense of things as we see them. In this 'God' is another name of 'X' the unknown factor that is necessary to complete the equation, but about which we know nothing.

An X-factor or First Cause has no religious role. No one would worship it, serve it, relate to it, or be martyred for it.

c) Is God Personal?

The difference between you and a newspaper is that the paper is a *thing* and you are a **person**. You can think about *it*, it cannot think about *you*: you can like it or hate it, but it cannot feel anything about you. You could have a purpose for a newspaper; it could not have a purpose for you. You would make a newspaper; a newspaper couldn't make you. This is the difference between being a thing (which we usually term 'it', and being a person (which we term 'he' or 'she')

A person has a will and a mind, and can use them to think and feel, decide and respond. We call God 'personal' because our experience of him suggests that he is more like that than, say, a thing like a stone or gravity. (The familiar phrase in the Lord's Prayer '*Thy will be done*' is not something you would speak to gravity or to a stone!)

- Because God is more like a parent than a stone, God tends to get addressed in *personal* terms, sometimes 'she', but more usually 'he'.
- 'He' is a word we use of God, it points to 'God', but does not literally *describe* him; God is not an invisible *male*!

Most religious activities, e.g. worship, prayer, etc. make a great deal of sense if God is **personal**, but must appear as complete *nonsense* to anyone who thinks that God is not, and who sees worshippers talking into space!

d) If God is personal, is he good or bad?

To say that God is 'personal' does not necessarily commend him.

Hitler was *personal*! It immediately raises the question –

- is the 'personal' God **good** or **evil**?

a) If God is *evil*, the existence of good is a problem!

b) If God is *good*, the existence of evil is a problem!

However, we can by-pass the first issue by saying that if God is *evil* then he should not be the object of service or worship. In short, drop your religious enquiry like a hot potato! and leave an evil God to evil people.

But if God is not a fairly-tale or a force, but a 'someone' who is *good*, then it would be wise to take notice. For you may be part of his good plans.
Don't be put off by evil and suffering, any view of God being good has to come to grips with that in one way or another.

PART III– Finding the Answers

6. Witness is above Opinion

It is increasingly assumed, especially on the telly, that finding the **majority opinion** is a way of finding the **truth**. This is not so.

Take gravity, for instance. It existed for countless centuries before anyone had any theory that it did! Majority opinion for most of history had no theory of gravity. Gravity didn't become real and true for the first time when the number of those who believed it rose from 49% to 51% and made a majority!

- Evidence is based on **witnesses**.

There is a very important distinction between **witness** and **opinion**.

Suppose you return home from holiday and find that you've been burgled. The burglar was a professional and tried to ensure that no one knew about it.

So 300 residents in your road witnessed nothing, and, unless told about it, hold the **opinion** that there was no burglary.

But, against that majority opinion, if there appeared just one paperboy and a milkman who **witnessed** the burglar, then their **witness** would *completely outweigh* the **majority opinion** of the three hundred residents.

- The witness of the two who *did* experience the burglar cannot be undermined or disproved by the opinion of those who *did not* experience him; although, if voted on, the result might be:

For : 2

Against : 300

- That principle is true for the evidence of everything else, including God!

The witness of those who **do** experience God cannot be undermined or disproved by the opinion of those who **have not** experienced him. At first reading it may appear as if I am 'fiddling the books' to get the result I want, so I shall give another example of the principle involved.

Terry Waite

In 1980 when I wrote the first version of this article, the Archbishop's envoy, Terry Waite, had been taken hostage years before. I wrote -

- No one knows for sure if Terry Waite is still alive or not. Suppose ten million folk now believe him dead. What would happen if three people appeared in the media and all claimed to have met him just last week? Only the witness of a few who *had* met him would count; the opinion of the millions who had *not* met him would count for nothing.

The opinion of those, like myself, who assumed he was dead, was proved wrong but put right by the witnesses.

It is only the **witnesses who have experienced God** that count in considering whether God exists or not. (The testimony of these **witnesses** cannot be undermined by the **opinion** of those who have *not* experienced God, however sincerely they hold their views, however large the number that holds them, or however brilliantly the views are promoted.)

This is in keeping both with legal evidence, ordinary everyday thinking, and with common sense.

Past Witnesses are important too

If we were examining a subject, like, say, space travel, we would not assume that the only witnesses relevant to our study were those in space *at the moment*. We would turn back to the last century, and take evidence from the past as well as the present.

7. Today's Two-Thousand Million Witnesses

Who are today's witnesses?

- There are millions of folk today,
- **in fact some two thousand million of them,**
- who believe that there is one 'personal' God.

Each of these individuals stands within a religious tradition that goes back thousands of years if we were to take account of witnesses from the past. The Jewish tradition is into its 5th millennium, and the Christian has just entered its third.

Not all religions believe in one personal God. The Hindus believe (as did the ancient Greeks and Romans) that there are many gods. Life is evil or good depending on which one is around at the time and what mood he/she is in!

Those whose experience is that God is one and 'personal' are the three major religions: the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims.

Their experiences of God differ. Those who witness to his 'closeness' will not have their witness undermined by those who have only experienced him as 'distant'. In the same way, my very very distant experience of the Queen does not disprove the witness of those who know her more intimately.

- In **Islam**, it was Muhammad, (in a.d. 610) who realised that God was one and 'personal'. He had the insight that God was Creator and Judge. (It was nothing new, since the Jews had already held it for the previous two thousand years.) In Islam, God remains **distant** from our history and us.
Evil in Islam is simply accepted, and so is not regarded as problem. Whatever-will-be-will-be is the attitude. The Islamic religion does not, for instance, create hospitals because God is detached from history, so suffering must just run its course.

- In **Judaism**, by contrast, God is not distant, but is experienced **active in our history**. The **Hebrew Bible** (known to many as the Old Testament) is a witness to this. God wants to enter into a relationship with his people, whom he guides and who serve him. The problem of evil is, for Jews, eclipsed by the goodness and greatness of God; a conviction that horrendous persecution has never shaken. The 3,000 year-old Jewish Psalm 23, still provides comfort today when it declares ‘*The Lord is my Shepherd*’. Jews await the **full** intervention of God in history in the person of their Messiah (*Christ* in Greek).
- **Christianity** is a development of the **Jewish Faith**. Jesus was a Jew and was believed by other Jews at the time, e.g. Peter and Paul, to have been the long-awaited Christ/Messiah because he was raised from the dead. Christmas celebrates the fact that the coming of Jesus meant the stepping of God into our history.

The problem of evil and victory over it is demonstrated in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. God shares the suffering of humanity, but those united with Christ (Christ-ians) may go through suffering but share in his victory over death with the gift of eternal life..

Christians accept, of course, the Jewish Bible recording God’s dealings in history, but have added a ‘New Testament’ recording God’s greatest act in history – becoming one of us in the person of Jesus. God’s reason according to the New Testament was this:

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but may have eternal life’ [John’s Gospel, chapter 3 verse 16]

The witness of Christians is not just that Jesus was alive on Easter morning, but that he **is alive**. The Christian witness is that in meeting him we meet God, in knowing him we may know God.

PART IV– What Next?

*God, if there is a God,
and if you care for me,
not because I'm good, but because I'm ME,
find a way of letting me know that that is true
- and then we'll take it from there.*