

# The IDEA of GOD

THOUGHT FOR THE MONTH (#8)

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A belief in God or gods has been with us at least as far back as history can take us, rising independently from all corners of the world. Today, according to Wikipedia, at least 80% follow an organised religion. Add to this the unknown number of private believers.

Where does the concept of God come from? Even atheists and agnostics, when confronted with a daunting fact of life, are sometimes heard to involuntarily utter, *Oh, my God!* Where does this OMG reaction come from?

Perhaps it begins with the realisation that certain forces control our lives. We take for granted the mighty but predictable facts of life – like the seasons. We also encounter forces we are less able to predict, such as droughts, floods, plagues, conflicts, accidents and wars. But we do not doubt that there are systematic, if not fully understood, causes at work.

Experience teaches us that life is not random, that we live within an **almighty** order that we cannot always predict but also cannot deny. Humans have learned about life from raw experience. An early example: carefully plucking a nutritious nut tree (rather than pulling it out by the roots), would enable more bounty next year. Or, taking a social fact of life: generosity, rather than treachery, will generate future trust and co-operation.

Imagine that life was a random chaos of sensations, emotions and events. Imagine that nothing made any difference to your fate, your well-being or your mental state. In that case, there would be no point in hypothesising a God. Instead, we find that life has an inbuilt structure. We live in a system – ranging from the law of gravity to the law of karma. There is reward – by way of fulfilment and serenity – for those who grow their awareness of the enduring facts of life (not just the fads of life).

Looking back as far as we can, we know that people prayed to their god of fertility to make it rain. We prayed to our god of war to support our warriors. Similarly, there were gods of love, wisdom, healing and others.

Some gods were visible, such as the life-giving sun; or audible, such as the angry thunder. The gods didn't (and still don't) precisely respond to our prayers and sacrifices.

Nevertheless, calling upon gods has long given comfort, and strengthened people's ability to accept and endure human reality.

3500 years ago, Hebrews made a great leap forward, saying there is in fact **only one God**, which is not a physical thing (like the sun).

Thus "God" became a proper name and we use the capital G. This one-God idea implied that the whole universe that humans experience comes under one authority, one karma, one integrated system of reality, one true science.

This idea spread; most humans today follow a monotheistic (one God) religion. Indeed, Christianity and Islam both recognise the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament. Along with Judaism, they are sometimes called "religions of the book".

Organised religions evolve practices and edicts which strengthen identity and conformity. Sometimes there is great competitiveness or hostility between faiths. This can only be attributed to the more primitive instincts of loyalty to one's **tribe**, or divisive indoctrination by state or church to manage their followers.

There is no **rational** justification for the believer to adopt this us-versus-them attitude. Most religious followers do not select their faith by comparative research, but ingest it by sheer accident of birth into the organised religion to which their family belonged.

A big upheaval for traditional organised religions has occurred, especially since 1914. Many nationalities have encountered “alien” cultures through international war, trade, travel and migration. Much of what was locally believed as “holy scripture” clashes with equally-firmly held doctrines of rival religions. Some post-moderns deduce that **all** such beliefs are useless fairy tales. This is a natural reaction to **fundamentalism** – the belief that every word of every legend is **literally** true.

Some texts are just the obsolete politics of an ancient time. But some texts are truly wise, the fruit of centuries of experience. If we ignore the wisdom, we have to learn from mistakes all over again. The trick is to figure out what these stories actually mean.

Let me introduce the concept of **rational** religion. This is where one refrains from slavishly following or mocking religions – as if we belonged to rival football teams. One can draw enlightenment from various faiths and develop a richer armoury of ideas for coping with **the divine regime** – or invisible God – within whose realm we find ourselves.

There are helpful stories, teachings and practices to be found amongst religions, some of which are thousands of years old. Sometimes we can't comprehend a scriptural text. It may have been written in a context which is long-gone. Even a modern religious teaching may not pass muster according to your rational brain. Your mind and intuition is your link to the divine or universal order.

It makes no sense to say you believe something if you don't understand it, or if it contradicts what you have learned first-hand from life. Avoid the distortions of both pessimism and wishful thinking. Beware of recruiters who want to “own your soul” and insist you believe everything they say.

Why bother with old teachings at all? Well, because human wisdom takes a long time to accumulate. Learning from scriptures,

exemplars, prophets and great philosophers can save one much personal trial and error.

Some great scriptural stories are **allegorical**. A literal tale may be fanciful, but the underlying message may be useful and true. Some atheist entertainers enjoy mocking spiritual stories which make no literal sense. But they are ignoring a valuable source of wisdom. Let me give you an example. Take the old story of *Jonah and the whale* (from the Book of Jonah). This is a favourite candidate for mockery; it involves a man surviving being in the belly of a whale!

*Jonah studied God, and used his pastoral gifts to share his knowledge with others. He believed that the next city that would benefit greatly from hearing his words was Nineveh. But there were scary people there. Jonah believed that God wanted him to go to Nineveh and teach. But, scared, he decided to go the opposite way and catch a boat that was heading all the way to Spain. The rest of the story simply teaches that if you turn your back on what you believe is your life's mission, your will experience all sorts of turmoil. And you will tend to be delivered right back to where your conscience says you were supposed to be. There were mad storms that were blamed on Jonah. He was thrown overboard, eaten by a big sea-creature, and spat out on a beach near – you guessed it – Nineveh. This is a melodramatic and colourful way of saying that you can't successfully run away from your deepest beliefs and values.*

The idea of God and a greater awareness of his/her/their/its ways is a profound advantage for a human being. Yes, cross-cultural religious conflict is an embarrassment, but a human's “salvation” still comes from their growing trust in the all-encompassing order we inhabit.

Yes, we could say all of this without using the word “God”, but the name packs a punch; it links us empathetically with the struggles of our fellow humans around the globe – in our time, and since time immemorial. POC