

Closer to God

Our prehistoric ancestors, living in caves, under trees, and close to nature, were ignorant of nature's power – floods, storms, lightning, and earthquakes – so they worshipped these great powers.

There were strong and ferocious beasts, too, who devoured them. Man found that if they used weapons and worked together, they could kill these beasts, and even eat them. And they worshipped the powers of these great beasts, too.

Then, men died. They were not sure what death was, except their dead comrades never talked, walked nor hunted with them again. Then they had dreams of the dead, and thought that the dead must still be living in some form without bodies. So in due course the idea of "soul" arose.

As humans evolved in the ancient world, they formed tribes and countries. To keep the tribe united and safe, the tribal leaders realized they must believe in a single God of the tribe. Their survival depended on this. There were many tribes, and so whichever tribe was more powerful, it conquered others, and its God became the One.

Then came the empires: Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, India, China, Greece, and Rome. Huge spreads of land and peoples came under the power of one man – he must be God. Smaller countries like England decided that God made kings: so they declared the "divine right of kings," who now had absolute power, the lord of lives, and were above right and wrong.

During the colonial period (17th-20th centuries), God was a white man, who had the right to conquer heathens and pagans (but really, they were doing this for "God, glory and gold"). In the 16th century, the Bishop of London was confident enough to declare "God is English."¹ Is God still an Englishman?²

In 1870, the Roman Catholics faced a great crisis over Pope Pius IX's promulgation of the dogma of papal infallibility. Lord John Dalberg-Acton (1834-1902), a renowned Catholic layman, was completely against such a notion. It was in this connection that he famously wrote these words to his friend, the Bishop of London:

I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men with a favourable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption, it is the other way, against the holders of power, increasing as the power increases. Historic responsibility has to make up for the want of legal responsibility. Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.

(Lord Acton, in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, 3 April, 1887)

For many, God is still with "us," but we worship him depending on our needs and inclinations. For many of us, Science is God. For more of us, he is a grand crowded building (modern religion). For most of us, he is mega-wealth (the mega-churches). That is why prosperity gospel is spreading like the plague.

The point is that God is an idea. Ideas can be very powerful, even if they are false. When the powerful spread and enforce such an idea, we might have little choice but to believe in it, or we are forced into thinking that they must be right, since there are so many of them. But this should not stop us from sensible doubt and open thinking.

¹ On Lord Acton's famous 1887 remark to him against Pope Pius IX promulgation of the dogma of papal infallibility, see **Wanderers of today** = SD 24.6b (4.4): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/24.6b-Wanderers-of-today.-piya.pdf>

² See eg Cole Moreton, *Is God Still an Englishman? How we lost our faith*, Little Brown, 2010.

We are enjoying religious freedom and freedom from religion today because many brave and selfless people before us have sacrificed their lot, limb, and lives against the tyranny of religion and injustice.

How did the God-idea lose its power to conquer, oppress, exploit, evangelize and scorn others? Two vital developments broke these godly chains, that is, the human spirit and open learning. We need to be more educated; we need to go on asking vital questions, no matter how impious.

Greed, hate, delusion and fear are the roots for belief in God and gods. What we pray for betrays much of our deepest desires. Often, we find it difficult not to hate others who do not worship or believe in *our* God. So we try to be nice, but we delude ourselves. The point is that we believe that the *fear* of God is the beginning of wisdom. A fear-based wisdom is not very uplifting, even less liberating.

If we understand the nature of greed, we need not ask any “grace” from God. If we have love, God is in our hearts. If we are free from delusion, we know God is merely an idea. If we have no fear, then we have freed God from our minds.

For, man has bound God in the chains of his words and ways, in buildings and conferences, in mega-churches and power-structures. As long as man makes God take sides, he will destroy us and the world.

If God is love, then let us show that love boundlessly, so that more of our voices will harmonize like those of angels and gods. For then God is within us. We can only truly know God when our hearts are open to boundless and unconditional love. To speak of God, even to believe in God, is just that – speech and belief. Only when we have love – boundless and unconditional – do we really *know* God.

If we really feel God’s love (not merely believe), then we would also know that it is unstoppable. We simply cannot stop there; it is a moving faith. It moves us in peace and joy to touch others. We are moved to radiate our unconditional love to our families, friends, the people around us. Our hearts cry in joy to touch the lives of others, even those who are different from us, even those who have hurt or harmed us. We want them to be well and happy; we accept them just as they are, unconditionally. Ultimately, we feel our love pervading the whole universe, the fullness and totality of our being. No greater love has any man than this.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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