

When God helped¹

Religion is a record of our attempts to speak for God. This began with the long millennia when we supplicated many gods and spirits whom we thought populated the earth, nature, and the skies. When we worshipped numerous gods, we had a greater and freer choice of whom to worship. Hence, we tended to be more tolerant of the many gods, of how others prayed and worshipped, or didn't.

We even felt a certain comfort in these great sacred numbers, whom we could turn to wherever we were, for whatever needs that we might have. It did not matter that we did not know much about such gods who were the earth, the water, fire, the wind, the rocks, trees and plants, and whatever we felt had some power over life and plenty, or over disease, destruction and death.

In those ancient times, when we lived intimately close to nature, we prayed for the basic needs of life, health, a good hunt or harvest, numerous children, and miscellaneous good luck. We might even pray for the defeat, destruction or death of our enemies or attacking hordes. One thing we never asked for was eternal life.

Being closer to nature, we well understood, no matter which gods we revered, we must one day die. We suspected that even the gods, since they existed, must have arisen somehow. Having arisen in the world and lived, surely they, too, must die. But, while they lived, we could turn to them for succour and success.

Then, came a time when our tribes grew bigger and stronger. We met other tribes, some stronger than ours, some weaker, some about equal. If our leaders on both sides were wise and kind, then our tribes lived happily together, sharing what Nature provided us, what we could cultivate, and perhaps exchange with one another. Meeting a new tribe meant that we also learned of new gods and answers to our human problems.

However, when the harvest was not good, or Nature devastated our crops, or worse, some selfish tribesmen plundered, raped and killed us. When those who took the not-given were caught, they tried to lied their way out. The owners then felt righteous in killing these thieves.² Each tribe then became more self-protective and more insular. They began to reject the gods of the outsiders, and worked to strengthen their own tribal gods.

So, we can see how the tribe created their own gods, and how these gods evolved to become ever more powerful themselves. As on earth, so in heaven. More so on earth, even more so in the tribe. For, without the tribe, we could not live for long. Our ancient leaders knew this well. They also knew that if they had the gods on their sides, they would be more effective.

¹ This is not about the history of religions, but an inspirational reflection based on Buddhist mythology. Besides giving an idea of the evolution of religious ideas, this article is meant for reflecting on how such an idea is likely to arise in most of us over time. A helpful question to ask, as we read this, is: What is religion, especially *my* religion, doing to me?

² See **Aggañña Sutta** (D 27,19), [SD 2.19](#). See also **Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta** (D 26,10.2), [SD 36.10](#), where the thief is not poor or deprived.

It was not too long before these tribal leaders learned that their gods were whom they made to be. So, why not reshape these gods, or even create new gods, in the leader's image? These were the earliest kings, who were also priests who spoke for their silent gods. The populace were too busy with their daily chores of living, cultivating, trading, serving the king, the rich and others, and doing their own things to be really concerned with how these gods came into being.

Schooling was only for the king, his family and those elite who served him and his household. Even then, learning was more down to earth, and not as open and rich as it is today. The point remained that most of the populace were not schooled. Their strength was more in their bodies and numbers than in their minds and persons. The tribe thrived on such numbers and the few that controlled them, or rather controlled their gods.

The tribes grew into bigger tribes. The great kings -- with sweat and blood, with sword and plough -- strengthened their tribes, and grew into nations. This only happened when the king had help from others, and they were his ministers and priests, especially the priests. They were probably the first politicians. For, they knew how to draw power from the gods, and how to use that power.

They learned to speak for the gods. After all, the gods were, since the beginning, silent. There were no one to challenge the priests, even the king needed them. The priests had to serve the king because he had the armies. Priests could be killed by the king, because his power was absolute: he owned everything and everyone.

As the tribes became bigger and stronger, they found great advantages in settling down in a fertile and favourable region. When they settled, they grew even bigger and stronger, and began to organize themselves into villages, towns, market towns and cities. They became civilized.³ Often there were fights, battles, even wars, but humans realized peace was better and more profitable. When there was peace, many good things could be done, and people were mostly happy.⁴

The cities multiplied and they grew, but the most important one was inhabited by the king or emperor (for he had more than just a kingdom now: he had an empire).⁵ If there is only one capital city, why not have only one God, or at least one Great God above all the others. The early Egyptian pharaohs and Middle Eastern rulers had only their power and charisma to proclaim their One God, of whom, of course, the pharaoh or ruler was the Spokesman.

It was only with the rise of learning, especially with the upper classes that the real power of the One God was realized. This Supreme Deity was no more the forces of nature and more distant from the hearts of the common tribesmen. He was the God of the minds of clever priests and theologians in the service of the country's rulers.

No one could see or hear this Almighty God. But the priests and theologians told stories and wrote scriptures about Him. What was written gave Him form. They spoke and sang about Him. What was spoken and sung gave Him a voice. Man had created God. The real power came from

³ See **Aggañña Sutta** (D 27,17), [SD 2.19](#).

⁴ See **Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta** (D 26,21), [SD 36.10](#).

⁵ See **Mahā Sudassana Sutta** (D 26,1.9-11), [SD 36.12](#).

the writer and the speaker. Even greater power than this (most of the time anyway) was in the hands, or the head, that wore the crown. This was a perfectly and mutually beneficial arrangement for the upper classes, as they mobilized others during the centuries leading up to the colonial period in our world history.

The God of the conquerors still rule the lives of many of us today, especially those who are raised to worship power and see wealth as God's blessings. We still speak for God, in more sophisticated ways than all the times before put together. We keep speaking for the gods, for God, for the Buddha – we are speaking so much, so often, that we do not ever hear ourselves.

Remarkably, the Buddha knew about this all along. He refused to speak for God. If God does not or cannot speak for Himself, then no one should. The Buddha is a listener, the great listener, who listens to the soft gentle voices of nature, telling us where to look for God and beyond. These voices are all within ourselves, the voice of our heart's love.⁶ We can only hear them when we are happily silent. Hence, the Buddha is also known as the silent sage (*muni*).⁷

We can understand why the Buddha called his saints "listeners" (*sāvaka*). If we want to follow the Buddha to hear those soft gentle voices of wisdom, we need to stop speaking (and writing), for a while at least, so that we can sit in silence, settling our body and mind in true inner peace. Then, we will hear that silent voice that the Buddha himself heard, that inspired him to give up all the world and its gods, and awaken to everything.⁸

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

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⁶ See **Te,vijja Sutta** (D 13), [SD 1.8](#).

⁷ On the silent sage, see **Muni Sutta** (Sn 1.2), [SD 12.1\(5\)](#).

⁸ See **Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23), [SD 7.1](#).