

## Like God

Man can never know God. If we have really known God, there would be no need for religion, which some defined as “different ways of seeing God.” The problem is there are so many different ways, but no one seems to be really making the journey.

We tend to think of God as a ready-made being or fixed eternal thing. No eternal thing can really exist. They are at best imagined. That is why the different religions often quarrel and hurt one another. Even within the same religion, different groups and persons often quarrel and hurt one another. One encyclopaedia of religion quips that they swear by the same God, and swear at each other by the same God, too!

Some believers try to claim *my* God is the true one, all else false. Some try to say, all Gods are the same; there is only one true God. This only worsens things. Once we put something in the plural, it means that there are many different things; so we contradict ourselves!

The question as to whose is the true God remains unanswerable. There is a bigger problem. God does not speak for himself. We only have claims from different groups of people that someone they knew had met God personally. Is only *one* person right; or, could *everyone* be right? The problem still remains: we are only acting on hearsay down through the ages.

The easiest way out seems to be that of not asking any more questions: simply believe. *Believe that we might understand*, an ancient thinker advised.<sup>1</sup> Leave the difficult details to the religious specialists. This approach seems to work as long as we do not question the preachers or ourselves, as long as we have unquestioning faith. Or, our faith is in other things.

In fact, most people seem comfortable with this last approach: we don't need to think about it. It simplifies our lives and we be together as a group. To be accepted by a group is very empowering, so that the sociologist Emile Durkheim famously proclaimed in 1912 that "God is society, writ large." Interesting or useful as this idea was, it remained at best a sociologist's God.

Scholars are often better at saying things than doing them. Then again, many, if not most, of us think we know better than the scholars, at least concerning God, especially “our” God. There is also “the” God, the one that everyone must believe in: this is the God of the powerful.

One vital and interesting thread of religious history is man's struggle to free himself from the God of the powerful. Or, some might say, to free God from the powerful, so that we can see him and worship him each in our own way. Here, the French Revolution (1789-1799) is one of the key events in the progressive liberation of the human spirit: man is free to see God and worship him (or not) in his own way.

Apparently, despite all these wonderful ideas and events, the “God” problem is still with us. People keep on committing tragic and widespread atrocities, killing and maiming those they hate, mostly innocent people. With modern technology and communication, we are getting better at destroying ourselves – and we also drag God into our quarrels.

Isn't it best to rightfully and respectfully leave God in his heaven? From the misuse and abuse of God in man's hands, we must agree that such men's wisdom is only foolishness in the eyes of their victims and sensible people.

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<sup>1</sup> Compare “May I understand so that I may believe.” In Buddhism, this is called wise faith. Its opposite is called “unrooted” or foolish faith.

The point is that we can never *own* God. No religion has a sole copyright to God. No group, no matter how powerful, must own God. If we cannot own God, then we must also not speak for him. Perhaps, we might venture, God might speak for himself. How is this possible?

The Buddha examined this issue over 2500 years ago, and his simple answer is: look within ourselves. Of course, he explains in great detail about this important issue. God is not a person or an idea to believe in. We could, for convenience, say that God is “spirit” in the sense that he is Love, in every wholesome sense of the word.

More exactly, the Buddha teaches that God, as a start, is “unconditional love.” The supreme worship begins, at least in our moments of silent prayer, with out accepting others as we accept ourselves. “Unconditional” means that we must show an all-embracing acceptance of not just humans, but also animals, plants, the environment, our planet, the whole cosmos itself. This is the first step to live in Godliness: we need to love others as we love ourselves.

When others (meaning people, animals, plants, nature, etc) are in any kind of trouble, we need to respond in a compassionate way. Compassion means kindness shown to others *even when they do not deserve it*. When we understand that all life are interconnected, and what we do somehow affects others in some way, then this notion of compassion makes great sense. We need to be kind to others *unconditionally*.

After all, in the eyes of others, we are the “others.” Compassion is not limited to only club members: it is an appreciation of being, rejoicing in all beings that they are all capable of goodness. This is the second step to a Godly life: we need to be kind to others even when they do not seem to deserve it.

See how happily children often play with one another, enjoying the goodness in each other. There is that child of goodness in every one of us. If we just allow it, people will be able to show their good side, so to speak. Often enough, people seem to enjoy showing their happiness in their work, or relationship, or a windfall. Let this external joy light up our own joy. Let us be happy at the happiness of others, and show it, if you like (that’s a bonus!). This is the third step in a Godly life: rejoice heartily in the goodness of others.

Yes, you are right: all this sounds idealistic (meaning here, only happening in our minds). That’s just the point: Godliness begins in the mind, or better, in the heart. As we think, so we are; as we feel, so we act. Even after following these three steps, we still see much more Godliness and goodness to be done, it means we are really looking with care around us. We may not be able to change the world here, but we can begin with the steps of love, compassion, and gladness right from where we are. This is the fourth step in a Godly life: no matter how much good we have done, there remains much more to do. Yet we must rest so that we are better prepared for the next step.

We may not be able to change the world, or even change others. But we can begin by changing ourselves with these four steps of Godliness. This is the divine way to touch the lives of others.

Revisioning Buddhism 53

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

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