

Has God a Future?

Why worry about how the Cosmos was born or when it will die?

Worry rather about yourself!

That is the lesson emphasised by the Scriptures; "Know thyself!".

Once you know yourself, everything will be automatically clear.

You are ... a microcosm in the macrocosm.

Just as the knowledge of one single clay pot is enough to know about all clay pots,

when you know yourself, all else can be known.

Sri Sathya Sai Baba
(in *Sathya Sai Vahini*)

The title for this introductory chapter comes from Karen Armstrong's last chapter in her book '*A History of God*' (1993). In some small way this book carries on perhaps, from where '*A History of God*' leaves off. The following is the initial text in that chapter:

... it seems likely that the world that we know is passing away. For decades we have lived with the knowledge that we have created weapons that could wipe out human life on the planet. The Cold War may have ended but the new world order seems no less frightening than the old. We are facing the possibility of ecological disaster. The AIDS virus threatens to become a plague of unmanageable proportions. Within two or three generations, the population will become too great for the planet to support. Thousands are dying of famine and drought. Generations before our own have felt that the end of the world is nigh, yet it does seem that we are facing a future that is unimaginable. How will the idea of God survive in the years to come? For 4000 years it has constantly adapted to meet the demands of the present but, in our own century, more and more people have found that it no longer works for them and when religious ideas cease to be effective they fade away. Maybe God really is an idea of the past. The American scholar Peter Berger notes that we often have a double standard when we compare the past with our own time. Where the past is analysed and made relative, the present is rendered immune to this process and our current position becomes an absolute: thus the New Testament writers are seen as afflicted with a false consciousness rooted in *their* time, but the analyst takes the consciousness of *his* time as an unmixed intellectual blessing'. Secularists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw atheism as the irreversible condition of humanity in the scientific age.

There is much to support this view. In Europe¹, the churches are emptying; atheism is no longer the painfully acquired ideology of a few intellectual pioneers but a prevailing mood. In the past it was always produced by a particular idea of God but now it seems to have lost its inbuilt relationship to theism and become an automatic response to the experience of living in a secularised society. Like the crowd of amused people surrounding Nietzsche's madman, many are unmoved by the prospect of life without God. Others find his absence a positive relief. Those of us who have had a difficult time with religion in the past find it liberating to be rid of the God who terrorised our childhood. It is wonderful not to have to cower before a vengeful deity, who threatens us with eternal damnation if we do not abide by his rules. We have a new intellectual freedom and can boldly follow up our own ideas without pussy-footing gingerly round difficult articles of faith, feeling all the while a sinking loss of integrity. We imagine that the hideous deity we have experienced is the authentic God of Jews, Christians and Muslims and do not always realise that it is merely an unfortunate aberration.

¹ Interestingly, however, *The Independent* (Andreas Whittam Smith leader on 27th September, 2004) stated that a French magazine commissioned a poll into attitudes in the Church. 48% said that the Church raises important questions and that 40% thought that the answers are interesting. Only 15% thought that the Church had too much influence in French society and that 33% thought it should have a greater say while 32% were content with its present standing. There were also other interesting questions and responses in the poll. The writer thought it unlikely that the Church of England would illicit such interest if a similar survey were conducted in England! (The writer's article was about the role of politics in religion and the differences in this respect between French Catholicism and the C. of E.).

There is also desolation. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80) spoke of the God-shaped hole in the human consciousness, where God had always been. Nevertheless, he insisted that even if God existed, it was still necessary to reject him since the idea of God negates our freedom. Traditional religion tells us that we must conform to God's idea of humanity to become fully human. Instead, we must see human beings as liberty incarnate. Sartre's atheism was not a consoling creed but other existentialists saw the absence of God as a positive liberation. Maurice Merleau Ponty (1908-61) argued that instead of increasing our sense of wonder, God actually negates it. Because God represents absolute perfection, there is nothing left for us to do or achieve. Albert Camus (1913-60) preached an heroic atheism. People should reject God defiantly in order to pour out all their loving solicitude upon mankind. As always, the atheists have a point. God had indeed been used in the past to stunt creativity; if he is made a blanket answer to every possible problem and contingency, he can indeed stifle our sense of wonder or achievement. A passionate and committed atheism can be more religious than a weary or inadequate deism.

And...

We have seen, however, that not all religious people have looked to 'God' to provide them with an explanation for the universe. Many have seen the proofs as a red herring. Science has been felt to be threatening only by those Western Christians who got into the habit of reading the scriptures literally and interpreting doctrines as though they were matters of objective fact. Scientists and philosophers who find no room for God in their systems are usually referring to the idea of God as First Cause, a notion eventually abandoned by Jews, Muslims and Greek Orthodox Christians during the Middle Ages. The more subjective 'God' that they were looking for could not be proven as though it were an objective fact that was the same for everybody. It could not be located within a physical system of the universe, any more than the Buddhist nirvana.

More dramatic than the linguistic philosophers were the radical theologians of the 1960s who enthusiastically followed Nietzsche and proclaimed the death of God. In *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (1966), Thomas J. Altizer claimed that the 'good news' of God's death had freed us from slavery to a tyrannical transcendent deity: 'Only by accepting and even willing the death of God in our experience can we be liberated from a transcendent beyond, an alien beyond which has been emptied and darkened by God's self-alienation in Christ. Altizer spoke in mystical terms of the dark night of the soul and the pain of abandonment. ***The death of God represented the silence that was necessary before God could become meaningful again. All our old conceptions of divinity had to die, before theology could be reborn. We were waiting for a language and a style in which God could once more become a possibility.***

I have quoted the last three sentences in heavy print, for that specific text seems to me a reasonable way of looking at the matter of God or no-God in today's world. Firstly, perhaps we need to sweep clean our old preconceptions and training to 'believe' in a specific way; to unshackle the fetters that previously led us on a course close to disaster via two World Wars and the subsequent threat of nuclear holocaust. We are not yet clear of all the dangers, but perhaps we are slowly on the way, despite the different kinds of threat that have emerged in the past twenty or thirty years.

Having thus cleared our heads, hearts and minds, perhaps we would then turn to looking at how that leaves us. We might be worried as to whether we have enough 'equipment' left to face life and deal with its various 'problems'. Perhaps we should then do a little self-analysis before trying to pose too many further questions, particularly those based on survival and fear.

Perhaps encouraged by our peers, many of us are so engrossed in this so-called Rat Race that we lose all our self-respect; we often feel little or no noble love for our fellow sentient beings. We become selfish, greedy, violent, and some of us end up losing complete sanity. Partly stemming from all this there is also much injustice in the world that has created much misunderstanding between continents and religions.

What is the real difference between you and me? Think about that in putting aside the physical aspects. There should be no difference, in fact, up to the point of physical comparison. But, in practise, we are basically very egotistic animals. Yes, "animals" would be an apt description of most of us, considering the way we fight amongst ourselves in this Earth to attain all those worthless material wants. We participate in a senseless fight for social recognition and material

acquisition, pushing and tossing all moral values aside, forgetting that we are sentient beings and not knowing (or forgetting) why we are here on Earth, or where we go from here.

Many would say that if it can be helped, they would not want to be part of this mad world. They claim that they cannot resist being drawn into the whirlpool of insane material desires. We claim that we live in a materialistic world, and once in the mainstream of life's constant struggles, we have to do what the others do or be crushed. In the wake of this struggle, who emerges the victor? In reality no-one is the victor. Win or lose in this struggle, everyone is the loser. Why are we fighting for all these then? Are we fighting to be in this place called Earth, and to continue to suffer?

We have aspirations, but each aspiration is invariably a worldly aim that is laced with hopes and inevitably decorated with worldly success. But whatever knowledge and material gains we acquire, they are superficial, for we came into this world empty handed and we will depart in the same way.

Who am I? Who are You? Where do we come from and where do we go when we die? If there is so much suffering here on Earth, then this must be Hell and any place other than this must be Heaven. How often do we ever contemplate on these questions?

Attempting to find answers for these conundrums may convince some of us of the need to follow a specific religion. Others may reject formal religion and seek a more practical route or knowledge. All these are valid options.

Time and tide wait for no man. All too soon we shall be on the threshold of our twilight years, and we shall then realise how short a life is, here in this world. Through the period of physical existence, how many pause and ponder on what our true aim in life is? Surely there is a beneficial form of life that provides for greater benefit than merely the needs of this physical life and this lifetime?

In this book there are various tempting 'morsels' on life's deep spiritual questions. These are presented in an attempt to bring some clarity and unity of view about the significant spiritual paths and their common purpose in an introductory manner. The theme is that there is one God that we all believe in, though the paths may differ.

The blind men and the elephant

Not far from Ghur once stood a city tall
Whose denizens were sightless one and all.
A certain Sultan once, when passing nigh,
Had pitched his camp upon the plain hard by,
Wherein, to prove his splendour, rank, and state,
Was kept an elephant most huge and great.
Then in the townsmen's minds arose desire
To know the nature of this creature dire.
Blind delegates by blind electorate
Were therefore chosen to investigate
The beast, and each, by feeling trunk or limb,
Strove to acquire an image clear of him.
Thus each conceived a visionary whole,
And to the phantom clung with heart and soul

When to the city they were come again,
The eager townsmen flocked to them amain.
Each one of them—wrong and misguided all—
Was eager his impressions to recall.
Asked to describe the creature's size and shape,
They spoke, while round about them, all agape,
Stamping impatiently, their comrades swarm
To hear about the monster's shape and form.
Now, for his knowledge each inquiring wight
Must trust to touch, being devoid of sight,
So he who'd only felt the creature's ear,
On being asked: 'How doth its heart appear?'
'Mighty and terrible,' at once replied,
'Like to a carpet, hard and flat and wide!'
Then he who on its trunk had laid his hand
Broke in 'Nay, nay! I better understand!

'Tis like a water-pipe, I tell you true,
Hollow, yet deadly and destructive too';
While he who'd had but leisure to explore
The sturdy limbs which the great beast upbore,
Exclaimed: 'No, no! To all men be it known
'Tis like a column tapered to a cone!'
Each had but known one part, and no man all;
Hence into deadly error each did fall.
No way to know the All man's heart can find:
Can knowledge e'er accompany the blind?

by SANA'L trans. by E. G. Browne

