

## WHAT IS GOD? - As personal view

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### INTRODUCTION

Religion has been part of the life of communities across the world throughout history. It has provided coherence to societies and to people's lives. It has also provided a hierarchical social structure of power and control – and a source of comfort through its ceremonies and rituals.

Religion has been used to justify community actions in defence of their version of their religion. This has resulted over the years in wars between Christians and Muslims, Muslims and Hindus, Muslims and Muslims and Christians and Christians – and any of these against the Jews!

A central feature of all religions is a God – or Gods. God is some sort of personification of a guiding and judging entity that knows everything and can choose to influence the course of events, the environment and the actions of people.

The dictionary and Wikipedia definitions of 'God' may define the meaning of the word, but that does not clarify what the concept means to people. That is what I want to try to do.

I am not going to attempt any history of the development of the various forms of religion across the world or of the Gods involved. I am a scientist, so I look for evidence to support propositions and coherence in the way the universe seems to work. I want to address the basic question of what do we in our western societies mean and understand by the concept of God. If we have a clear, or clearer, appreciation of what we mean by the term, then we are in a better position to discuss the implications of a belief in God and the value and nature of religion.

### WHAT IS GOD?

From the scientific point of view there could be justification for believing in a God in terms of a creator of the universe. The characteristics of fundamental particles and parameters need to have been very closely defined for the universe to have developed to the form and with the features as we perceive it today – the 'Goldilocks' idea. It therefore seems very reasonable to say that this universe could not have arisen without involvement of some super intelligence. An anthropomorphic justification perhaps in line with our experience of the world where all effects arise from causes!

That may justify the belief in 'a' God, but it does not necessarily provide any route by which we can communicate to 'him' or be communicated to by 'him'. The basic model for the universe could be that this was set off and has developed in the way that it has because of the very clever initial conditions and characteristics. If God started things like this he could then have stood back and left the universe to its own devices to see how everything panned out. We are able to perceive the universe just because conditions developed to allow the creation of sentient life - and once that started then we, and the rest, is history! History and evolution do not need to have a purpose – they may be 'just one damn thing after another'!

There is no reliable independent evidence for the interaction of God in the development of the universe, in the world or in our human history. It may have occurred, but we do not know about it. Such 'evidence' as may be quoted is based on the experience of the particular individuals involved who inevitably have an agenda and/or may have been influenced by sensory illusions or delusions! There are no clear independent witnesses. Even if God has intervened in the conduct of the world and people there is no evidence that communication from individuals, or groups, have actually changed the course of events. Events may have happened as requested, but they may have happened like that anyway!

In the light of the above thoughts the question remains: what is God? It is a term that has been used throughout history and in different ways by many different societies. These 'Gods' are different. Different philosophies and moralities have been developed to match to the requirements attributed to these Gods.

One explanation is that each God, and the associated religion and morality, developed to reflect the conscience and aspirations of people having the feeling of belonging to a society. For this approach God is then a 'social construct'. This does not detract from the value of God in this form and the associated religion to individuals or to their societies, but it does remove the involvement of any supernatural element. Also it removes any absolute claim to one religion being necessarily true and all others false. One would argue rather for the value of religions in the terms of the best suitability to match to the needs of people and their societies in the world as they find it. Thus religions can be appreciated as dynamic and developing understandings of the world and the social environments we find ourselves in, rather than adherence to some historical or predetermined protocol of belief and behaviour. Such a societal view of God provides a valid basis for the assessment and development of personal and social morality and conscience.

Religions have involved a structure of power for individuals to provide guidance and help to those members of the society lower down the power structure. This power structure has often paralleled the political power structure and been closely associated with it. But there have been times, such as during the reformation, when in several European countries there was more than one religious structure: catholic and protestant. Antagonism between different versions of nominally the same religion (whether Christian or Muslim) has caused many wars over the years with little benefit to the populations involved.

Yes, societies have their laws by which judgements are made on the behaviour of individuals. These values have been associated with the religious beliefs of the society. In the modern world societies are not isolated, so questions and problems have arisen about commonality of values between different societies across the world.

Religions have grown up to provide a supposedly coherent description of how the world works – physically and socially. With advances in science religions have been under pressure to continually adjust their description of physical features of the world – some adjusting more easily than others. In many cases a history of the world has been handed down together with requirements for activities and a social structure that need to be accepted. No scientific or philosophic justification is provided for this. It is required to be accepted. While a variety of societies have developed around the world, in this day people look for some rationality and some fairness in structures of their societies and in their personal relationships. This has been an endeavour for a number of philosophers over the centuries. While a variety of approaches have been outlined and made useful contributions none individually has become fully dominant. As regards the Christian religion, it seems there is a growing disparity between the beliefs and requirements (as exemplified by the high Anglican and Catholic approaches) and our present social attitudes and the scientific information about the world now available. In particular, such aspects as the birth of Jesus by a virgin mother and the inability to accept women as equally valid members of the church hierarchy. (There is a view that the term 'virgin' is a mis-translation, and the originally meaning was young woman!). My own view is that society would benefit greatly if the Christian churches were able to return to the basic reported teachings of Jesus and recognize that much of the material written in the bible was presented in a form appropriate and relevant to its own time. It is not wrong to seek to reassess and interpret the relevance and utility of this material to the world as have it today. Such an assessment would show the churches open to discussion – and this might help improve social relationships and political decision making.

## **CONCLUSION**

Where does this leave us or lead us? What can we conclude about God? My own view is that there may have been some entity that we can, if we want, call God as the instigator of the whole universe. This would indeed be something supernatural. But I feel decoupled from any such God. This does not worry me, as I see no evidence for his continuing involvement in the actions in the world – and I would respect such a hands-off approach. I can accept the concept of God as a 'social construct' – and this is not a supernatural God. The question then arises as to

how does a social construct God provide a basis for morality - is it just via what has proved by experience to work in the society? It is here I make a shortcut to say that for me that the basic message of the teachings reportedly associated with Jesus seem to provide a sound basis for relationships between individuals and for the fair and encouraging operation of society. Having been brought up in a society reflecting basic Christian attitudes I recognise that I cannot be fully independent of this influence on my thinking. However, I do not now feel able to believe in any supernatural being having relevance to the conduct of our lives. So, I guess I do believe in some sort of 'social construct' God and not in a God as described or implied in the Christian Bible. Maybe a 'social construct' God is a way to fill in the gaps in our appreciation of how society works and what aspirations it has, and should have, and what the nature is of such human attributes as love.

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