

The Uses of God

Don Cupitt describes how all our most basic ideas about the human self and the world were pioneered in connection with God.

To avoid misunderstanding of the story that follows, we need a few preliminary remarks about the very overstretched and irritating word 'God.'

In contemporary English there is a common use of 'God' as a convenient synonym for religion in general. The 'god-slot' is the period each Sunday evening in Britain during which the principal television channels are, or were, required to broadcast material that is broadly religious. A recent notoriously loyal and combative Prime Minister's Press Secretary famously snapped at a journalist: 'We don't do God,' meaning that no politician managed by him would ever be allowed to become involved in religious controversy. In much the same spirit, I will need in my new grand narrative to make some use of the word 'God' in a wide sense, especially at the beginning. It will signify the whole supernatural world – at first, a world of archetypal, mythic animals and other beings, then a world chiefly of spirits, then a polytheistic world of gods under the presidency of a Sky-Father, and only then finally the One capital-G God of 'Abrahamic monotheism,' in the common tradition of Jews, Christians and Muslims. Thus the word 'God' at first signifies a complex scrimmage of invisible, obscure beings and powers, and only over several millennia does it become more systematised, centred, and unified, until it culminates in the One God.

Cosmology and psychology developed along similar lines, but were usually a little later. Only gradually, as people settle down in one place, does the world become centred around an *axis mundi*, law-governed and unified. The process has been finally completed only in modern times, and something similar may be said of the self, which began and long remained plural. Even today one often hears phrases like 'Body, mind and spirit,' which indicate that the human self is not yet fully centred and unified.

There seems, then, to be a *prima facie* case for holding that theology was (and in some eyes still

is) the queen of the sciences, in the sense that almost all, or perhaps simply all of our most basic ideas about the human self and the world were pioneered in connection with God.

For example, a major step in human development was the moment when our ancestors gave up being nomadic hunter-gatherers or pastoralists, and instead settled down and became farmers. This was a huge and enormously difficult step for nomads to take, eventually requiring quite new institutions: dominion, territory, law, land, property, inheritance, fixed stone houses, boundaries, money and marketing, and so on. How on earth did nomads ever persuade themselves to take such a leap into the unknown? They didn't yet have the language even to discuss the issues that were before them.

Nevertheless, they did it, because God led the way in a manner familiar to all readers of the Hebrew Bible. God announced through his spokespeople that he would not always be a nomad, marching at the head of his people and living in a tent. He intended to settle down. He had chosen a territory, and was promising it to his people as their inheritance. He would settle: instead of being a winged spirit continually on the move, he would sit still, grandly enthroned in a fixed stone House at the centre of a Holy City. From this seat of authority the Holy Land's entire life would be regulated ... and so on. Thus it was via religious thought that nomads first imagined and were then prevailed upon to accept one of the greatest changes in all human history: civilisation (from *civís*, a city).

This example immediately prompts us to think of many others. For example, nomads carry no chairs with them. God pioneered seating, insofar as the Ark was already a portable throne, and from God's throne all other top seats derive – the top seats of kings, of bishops, of judges and professors, of Presidents (Latin, 'sitting first') and other Chairs and Chairpersons. Similarly, Bronze

Age archaeology reminds us that the earliest settlements had been very untidy huddles. The formal straight street was first invented not for humans, but for the gods to use as a Processional Way, along which they were carried annually when they were taken out to be shown to the people.

There are endless further examples. Curtains are a good one. There is a relic of the earliest curtains, hanging between riddle-posts and screening the altar, in a church near you, for the first curtains shielded a god's holiness. (Remember the Temple veil?) Now, curtains protect your privacy. Modern human privacy and the right to it derives historically from the god's desire for privacy in his 'sanctum,' for every theological term, and every prerogative of God tends over the centuries to become democratised and secularised. In the same way, divine service in time became royal service, domestic service and public service.

We differ from other animals in that we relate ourselves to life with the help of, and we live by, a complex body of ideas, our 'ideal culture,' that we carry around in our heads. We drank it all in as we learnt our mother tongue, and grew up as fully-functioning members of our own society. Originally it consisted of much more than just tribal customs and ways of speaking: it was a complex religious ideology – because religion was originally a highly progressive force. Only religion had the indirectness and the sheer power needed to drag lazy reluctant animals out into the light of our modern language-lit human consciousness of being-in-a-world. Only religion had the power to compel nomads to settle down, and bind themselves to a territory, to a political obedience, to property rights, to festivals and markets and all the rest.

The principle that I have just sketched can now be extended to a much grander level. God, according to the most familiar of all the mythologies that deal with the matter, was the first conscious person, the first to see an ordered, lit-up, unified world and to know that it was his. 'All the beasts of the field are mine / and the cattle upon a thousand hills,' he declares proudly. Yes indeed. Religion was originally a highly progressive institution: it first invented, and then gradually transferred to us, all our most basic ideas about ourselves and our world. It dragged us out of Nature; it made us human. That is the true and

only sense in which God created us. We are still made in his image.

In later religious thought God is often described as being both our Beginning and our End, our Alpha and Omega, the Primal Ground as well as the Final Goal of our existence. Looking back to our human origins, stories about God as our 'beginning' may have the function of helping us to see the peculiar centrality and authority of the religious realm. It made us what we are. Looking in the opposite direction, namely forwards, we see that the idea of God continually requires us to criticise and to set aside old ways of doing things, and old ways of constructing the world and the self, and move forward into new and higher levels of consciousness, freedom, and Emptiness. The old ways always seem more solid, and leaving them behind always seems like a loss of faith and a movement into darkness and emptiness. So it is always part of orthodox doctrine that God is incomprehensible: featureless, dark and Empty. Getting closer to God is getting freer and freer, more and more Emptied-out.

Broadly speaking, religion continued to be a progressive force in human affairs until the late sixteenth century. But with the rise of science, it was natural enough that the new scientific theories of the world should be measured up against and compared with the long-established religious doctrines that were seemingly in possession of the field. Galileo, in particular, is famous for having demolished Aristotle's natural philosophy, and for declaring that God was a mathematician and an engineer. Against this background, and especially in the English-speaking world, a very large shift in the way people thought of God began to take place. The old metaphysical God, based chiefly upon the philosophy of Plato and later Platonists, had been the Form of the Good, a transcendent object of aspiration, mysterious, 'beyond being' and dwelling in mystical darkness, ever since biblical times. Since the thirteenth century the classic old metaphysical theism had been somewhat modified by the incorporation of a good deal of Aristotle's metaphysics of Being and his philosophy of nature. But now, with the sudden huge influence of scientific theory, the old Plato-and-Aristotle philosophy of God declined rapidly. To replace it, a new and more scientific God was invented, the God of the Argument from Design. This new God was based on a figure

in Plato's *Timaeus*, by him called the 'Demiourgos.' He was a finite world-architect, a mathematician and engineer. In the new mechanical universe the old ways to God (as formal cause or final cause of the world, etc.) were blocked off, but it seemed that you could still make out a case for the existence of God as an empirical hypothesis to explain why the world-machine was so elegantly designed – and, in particular, how living organisms could be such elegantly designed little machines, perfectly adapted to their mode of life.

In the English-speaking world, this rather novel philosophy of God quickly became very popular, being propagated assiduously by a long line of Royal-Society theologians between Newton and Darwin. It was a very shallow response to the intellectual needs of the time. Its limitations were pointed out, and it was firmly refuted, by Hume and Kant during the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, it was so easy and convenient that Evangelical Protestants cling to it to this day, in spite of Darwin's comprehensive refutation of it. Even yet, few people seem aware of the size of the gulf between the transcendent God of the old metaphysical theism and the finite Designer who shapes the world out of pre-existent matter.

In particular, God had become associated almost exclusively with cosmogony, quasi-scientific theorising about the origin of the Universe in general, and living creatures (including Man) in particular. The side of religion which aspires after, and tries to work towards, the ideal goal of the religious life, was lost; and to this day the Evangelicals reject the application of critical thinking to religious ideas, and have no spirituality (or 'ascetical theology') at all. And yet, amazingly, they manage to present themselves as 'traditional Christian believers.' In fact, their Christianity is as hollowed out and reduced as the 'Buddhism' of the Hong Kong temples, and one can only applaud Professor Dawkins for his attack upon them.



Milton meets Galileo

Oil painting by Solomon Hart (1847). Wellcome Library, London.

Milton met Galileo in 1638 at Arcetri near Florence.

'There it was that I found and visited the famous Galileo, grown old a prisoner to the Inquisition.' – Milton, *Areopagitica* (1644).

In conclusion, the idea of God largely lost its old progressive drive during the period of the scientific revolution. Preoccupied with trying to defend a crudely 'realistic' notion of God as an empirical hypothesis to account for the existence of the cosmos and the adaptation of living organisms to their environment, people largely lost touch with the traditional mystical theology. By the middle of the eighteenth century the old metaphysical theism was dead, anyway – at least in the English-speaking world.

My new great story is more like Hegel's – but in a very English idiom. It will be a sort-of history of our ideal culture, showing how, within the development of religious thought, first God, and then the world, and then we ourselves were produced and developed. We (sort-of) made God, and God then gradually made us and our world what they are –and are still becoming – today.

This article is the first chapter of Don Cupitt's book *A New Great Story* ((Polebridge Press, Salem (USA) 2010). Reprinted by kind permission of the author.