

First Unitarian Church

March 13, 2016

This is the history of God in 20 minutes. And... go! (We've got this.)

God, Human, Chicken, Egg... which came first?

Well... of course... the problem with a question about pre-history, far off history like that, is that no one was there to blog about it.

Besides that, the answer to "which came first, God or humans," depends...

What in tarnation do you mean by "God?"

Do you mean [this](#)? The white grandpa god.

[This](#)? That's Hindu Mother Kali. Fierce, but richly meaningful. I have a statue of her in my office.

How about [this](#)? Something from the natural world.

Or [this](#)? Just kidding. That's the Prime Minister of Canada.

On [a sweatshirt](#). With Canada Geese. Riding a moose.

You get my point. We can't answer the question unless we know what we mean by God. But that's something that has never been static. It has changed and changed over the generations.

We don't even know exactly when humans began thinking about something one might call "God." Maybe, it was before we were even humans.

There is evidence that our pre-human ancestors—the Neanderthals— held religious rituals. We know that mythology—story telling to make spiritual meaning of life— dates way, way back, also. Could Neanderthals have created myths? Some archeologists and historians of religion think so.

Archeologists have discovered bear skulls ritualistically stacked into pyramids near altars with the charred remains of animals, presumed to be animal sacrifices, in high mountain caves, dating back to Neanderthal times.¹

There are also burial sites in which Neanderthal remains are together with precisely arranged tools, weapons, and other objects, not as though the person— Neanderthal—fell dead with them in hand, but as though others who cared about him or her thoughtfully arranged them during some kind of burial ceremony. It seems to suggest belief in an afterlife.

¹ Newberg, Andrew B., Eugene G. D'Aquili, and Vince Rause. *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*. New York: Ballantine, 2001. Print. (55)

The remains of these ancient, apparently religious objects and graves date back 200,000 years. Interestingly, these sites pretty much coincide with signs that Neanderthals were beginning to use complex tools and make pottery, which is to say, they were beginning to act like humans.

When they began to act like humans, they began also to behave religiously.

Animals do not devise religious rituals and create myths. Brain researchers link this to a peculiarly human brain function. While other animals respond to danger only as it happens, or through conditioned responses to a particular context, humans are able to consider the phenomenon of danger.

A rabbit in the woods will be completely at ease until it hears a rustling in the distance, and even then will not dart off unless the rustling continues or there is other further evidence of danger.

But a human sitting at the kitchen table within the safety of a house can stress out right there about the idea that life is uncertain and that we will all eventually die.

Ironically, a human who falls into despair over these things does, in fact, risk living a shorter life, as a result of unhappiness and stress. So it's important that we find a way to cope with it—some kind of spiritual framework.

This is why the religious scholar Karen Armstrong says “it is far more important for a particular idea of God to work than for it to be logically and scientifically sound.”²

That doesn't mean spiritual frameworks have to *contradict* logic and science. (And of course, for some of us, when they aren't logically and scientifically sound, that means they don't work.)

Armstrong is just pointing out that function is more important than form, when it comes to our *reasons* for being religious creatures. Because we have consciousness, we are hardwired to also need a way to cope.

It is imperative, because we are conscious beings, that we experience some sense of meaning. But does that indicate that meaning is made up? A random byproduct of consciousness?

Well, that is another way of asking which came first, chicken or egg. I'm going to come back to it. But first, let's reflect for a few minutes on what happened after those Neanderthal ceremonies, because it provides a richer context for contemplating the question.

I'm going to draw a lot today from Karen Armstrong's book, promisingly titled, [A History of God](#).

² Armstrong, Karen. *A History of God: The 4000-year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1993. Print. (Xxi)

Two of the oldest sacred texts we know of are the Enuma Elish from Babylonia, which is present day Iraq, and the Rig Veda from the Indus Valley, which is now India.

The Enuma Elish dates back to at least 1100 BCE, and possibly as early as the 18th century BCE, or nearly 4000 years ago.³ It begins as many mythologies do, with the creation of the gods themselves. They come, not from nothingness, but from formlessness, boundarylessness. The elements from which they emerge are like a swamp—chaotic, messy.

“Sweet and bitter” were “mingled together,” the Enuma Elish says, and “the gods were nameless, natureless, futureless.” From the chaos emerge first Apsu and Tiamat, whose names mean something like “abyss” or “void,” and Mummu, the “womb of chaos.” Armstrong says that—as their names suggest—these first gods were too undefined, and needed improvement, so from them came a succession of other gods.

There emerged gods of sky, sea, the heavens, earth, and sun, and eventually one of them creates humans by mixing divine blood with dust. So humans, according to the Enuma Elish, contain something of the divine. This would have helped listeners of the ancient story understand how it is that people seem to have spirits that can contemplate the matter we are made of.

Meanwhile, in the Indus Valley in the 17th century BCE, people known as Aryans, had just moved in.⁴ Today Aryan makes us think of white supremacists and prison gangs, but the original Aryans were from what is now Iran. Aryan is a word that means noble. The way it’s used today is like calling a bald guy Curly, or a sewer rat “Kitten.” Back then it was a different group.

The ancient Aryans moved from the land we can Iran into the land we call India, the Indus valley, and brought with them the religious teachings that are found in the Rig-Veda, one of the oldest known scriptures on the planet.

That scripture, like the Enuma Elish, contains a multitude of gods, but it also includes an explicit acknowledgement that no one can know for sure the origin of the universe.

“Only he who is the overseer in highest heaven knows. Or perhaps he does not know!” the text exclaims.

Eventually, the indigenous religion that the Aryans had suppressed started to gain traction again, bringing with it the idea of karma and the practice of yoga that are still a big part of India and Hinduism today. People also began to think that all these specific gods might really be representations of one higher reality.

³ Armstrong 8

⁴ Armstrong 28

The Aryans, like the Babylonians, had never intended for their myths to be taken *literally*. They were always understood to be imaginative ways to make sense of life. Now the people were going to turn their attention inward, to see if they could discover that higher truth. A multiplicity of gods would remain, as deities—Mother Kali, who you saw earlier in a slide—is one of them. But they like signposts pointing people toward the higher reality. They are not themselves the highest truth.

Buddhism, which arose out of Hinduism, also took this perspective. Worshipping deities is not prohibited, but the path to enlightenment lies within.

The time of the Buddha marks the beginning of the Axial Age, when Confucius, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Zarathustra, Plato, Socrates, and the prophets of the Hebrew bible all hit the world's stage within 600 years of each other, changing history forever.⁵

600 years sounds like a long time, but in the history of the world it is an almost imperceptibly tiny blip on the timeline.

Confucius, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Zarathustra, Plato, Socrates, and the prophets of the Hebrew bible... men, men, men, men, where were the women? Where would we be today if their minds and voices, the potential of a full half of humanity, had not been squelched?

We'll never know. We are doing better now, but one still wonders how many brilliant minds are stranded by economic oppression far away from education in fields and deserts and brothels. Let's keep insisting that all people have inherent worth and dignity.

The Greeks who made their mark in the Axial age had a tradition of myths and stories involving many Gods, and like the Hindus and Buddhists, moved toward a philosophy of cultivating wisdom or knowledge within.⁶ Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were familiar, of course, with the ancient Greek myths, and even wrote responses to Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, which were written centuries before their time. "Poetry speaks of what is universal, history of what is particular," Aristotle said. Socrates taught Plato, who taught Aristotle, who arrived at a view of God that we can still see playing out today: the idea that God, at the top of a cosmic hierarchy, is perfect, eternal, and unchanging.

Likewise, the Hebrew scriptures start out by speaking of God in the plural, as in "We gods." That's how god speaks in the story of creation. God says, "Let us create these things..."

Later in the scriptures, God speaks in the first person but continues to reference other gods, saying, for example, that the Israelites should not worship any of them.

⁵ Armstrong 27

⁶ Armstrong 37

By the time you get to the Christian scriptures, there is a monotheistic theology—only one God exists.

While Christianity was taking root and beginning to flourish, the Arab world was about to undergo a religious revolution of its own. Like other ancient peoples, Arabs up until that time worshiped many gods, with one supreme god above them all: al-Lah, which means, simply, “The God.”⁷

Muhammad, who lived in the busy city of Mecca, a hub of trade and commerce, had met Jews and Christians, and believed that their God was the same god as al-Lah. When he began to have terrifying mystical experiences, in which an overwhelming messenger of God would seize him and not let go until Muhammad had received the intended message, he was so upset he flung himself onto his wife, Khadija’s, lap. Was he going crazy? Was he turning into one of those disreputable spiritualists whom, as Karen Armstrong tells it, people consulted when their camels went missing?

Khadija reassured him, and suggested that they visit her cousin, who was a Christian and well versed in the scriptures. The cousin confirmed Muhammad’s vision without hesitation. He had received a message, the first in Arabic, from the God of the Christians and Jews. Within one generation, this new, Arabic monotheism took hold.

You can see a trend emerging in the history of God now. A movement from polytheism to either monotheism or some kind of ultimate oneness. But it did not come easily, or without a cost.

Early Christians—and early Muslims, too— were called atheists by their pagan neighbors for having an overly limited, seemingly blasphemous idea of God as a single entity.

Later, when religious intolerance was tearing Europe apart in the 1600’s, the philosopher John Locke said that overly limited ideas of God were at the root of religious violence. He suggested we should think of our ideas of God as one piece of the truth.

He said that only when all of the ideas are put together, do we begin to get a glimpse of the true God’s infinite nature. And we remember that polytheism often worked in just that way—with deities imaginatively representing a higher reality, but none claiming to have a monopoly on it.

The al-Lah, God, of the Qur’an is transcendent, impersonal, and yet part of everything in the world. The Qur’an teaches Muslims to apply reason and intelligence to interpreting the world and seeing God’s meaning in it. While Europe was experiencing the dark ages, science and mathematics flourished in the Arab world. Science was never considered by Muslims to be a threat to their religion, as it was by Christians.

⁷ Armstrong 132

The fact that Christians did see science as a threat is indicative of a huge change that happened within Christianity—one that, as far as I can tell, was unprecedented in the world.

Remember the whole thing about myth—that ancient peoples never expected them to be taken as historical fact? Myths were meant to be interpreted like poetry, art, or music. They were meant to move the soul, and offer a sense of meaning. Myths were told and retold in different ways according to context, and cultures borrowed from one another's themes. The story of Jesus reflects this ancient norm, as it borrows themes that were prevalent in other cultures at the time, like the theme of a messiah being born under a star, for example.

Religion, back then, was about imaginative stories and ritual. It was experienced and acted out. It wasn't a matter of creeds.

But gradually, Western thinkers—especially Christians—switched gears. First, what had been an oral tradition, adaptable and changing, got written down and reproduced by the printing press. Now it was much more static.

Then, the Enlightenment happened. "I think therefore I am."

We started emphasizing reason. We developed the scientific method. And we started speaking less in myth and metaphor, and more in terms of facts and truth claims.

This is the time in which the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, *Gott ist tot*. God is dead! In fact "myth" became synonymous with lying, and untruth.

Theologians, clergy, philosophers, and scientists who did not want to lose their religion bought into the notion that reason and scientific truth were superior to myth and tradition. And so they insisted that the scriptures were *factual*. Actual historical truths.

At that moment, Armstrong writes, "they began to understand concepts such as faith, revelation, myth, mystery, and dogma in a way that would have been very surprising to our ancestors." In particular, she points out that people were now expected to accept a set of truth claims or beliefs if they wanted to be part of a certain church.⁸

The problem was... it took mental gymnastics to try to make it square with scientific facts. Like creationist Richard Ham attempted when he debated Bill Nye a couple of years ago, and insisted that the bible's two stories of creation in Genesis, despite their internal contradictions and the fact that they suggest the earth is only 6000 years old, are fully supported by modern science, and any evidence that contradicts them—like carbon dating or those Neanderthal remains I mentioned earlier—were simply created by God to look that way from the outset, 6000 years ago.

⁸ Armstrong, Karen. The Case for God. P xv.

Into the twentieth and now this century, religious literalism has perplexed rational people, and since myth continued to be poo-pooed too, it was assumed that religion would eventually go away, and with it the concept of God.

And yet... that hasn't happened. Why?

Andrew Newberg wondered the same thing. In fact, he is the author of a book called *Why God Won't Go Away*. Newberg is a physician in the radiology department and a lecturer in the religion department at University of Pennsylvania: what an interesting combination! He and his colleague Eugene d'Aquili did an experiment.⁹

They invited experienced monks and nuns to meditate or practice contemplative prayer in their lab. The subjects were alone in a room, but held a string in one hand that went under the door, into another room where Newberg and d'Aquili were holding the other end of it. When the subject reached what Newberg calls the "climax" of their meditative state, they were to pull the string.

At that moment, Newberg and d'Aquili would start an IV flow of radioactive material into the subject's arm, where it would travel to the brain, and linger long enough for the subject to be whisked into a radiographic imaging machine, for a little snapshot.

That would show what areas of the brain were most active at the moment the IV flow began. In other words, it would show the researchers what was happening in the brain during that meditative "climax." That strikes me as such an odd choice of words. I can barely say it without laughing.

Here's what they learned:

There is part of the brain that perceives the body's location in space and separateness from other objects. The posterior superior parietal lobe. In normal circumstances, it's lit up. Our brains are always having to do the work of telling us where we are in regard to, say, a table or rock or wall, and that we are not part of the table, rock, or wall. But during intense meditative states, that part of the brain goes quiet. Allowing us to feel... one with everything.

Newberg and d'Aquili call this "evidence of a neurological process that has evolved to allow us humans to transcend material existence ... and connect with a deeper, more spiritual part of ourselves perceived as an absolute, universal reality that connects us to all that is" (9).

The experience of oneness with all things is a very ancient one, and transcends religious traditions. Not only Hindus and Buddhists, but also mystics from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all speak of union with the divine, and of being caught up in a unifying love. Something greater than ourselves.

⁹ Newberg and d'Aquili (3)

The comparative religion scholar Rudolf Otto called it the sense of the numinous, and said it is what precedes any religion.¹⁰

The Rabbi Lawrence Kushner also notes this similarity across traditions, and says, "Whatever it is that makes religion religion, mysticism has more of it."¹¹

Which is truer: our brain's perception of separateness or of oneness? Is one truer?

I am a subject who can act on an object (knock on pulpit) suggesting that we are two different things.

Yet it the more we look inside ourselves and the world, the more we see into atoms and learn what is happening within everything around us, the more it does start to look like existence is a dance of space and energy. That things may not be quite as separate or different from each other as the posterior superior parietal lobe suggests.

The notion that everything is part of a unified whole is very much related to what some people—like mystics—mean when they speak of God. When the ancients spoke of formlessness birthing form, and this was the reality behind the later procession of colorful god characters, was that not an eerily fitting way to describe what we now think really happens?

So which came first? Have you figured it out?

I suppose the real question is: Does a story exist before there is someone to tell it?

Because whatever we humans are, we are storytellers. We are that part of everything that tries to figure out what it all means. The universe wanting to make sense of itself.

I have answered a question with a question.

Therefore, I will close, for now, with the wisdom of one of the mystics, Rainer Maria Rilke, who said, "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

¹⁰ Armstrong, History (5)

¹¹ "Lawrence Kushner- Kabbalah and the Inner Life of God." Audio blog post. *On Being*. American Public Radio, 10 Mar. 2016. Web. 11 Mar. 2016.