

# On Gods...

by Plato Mamo

**A**pologists for religion make much of the fact that beliefs in supernatural entities, in souls and unseen personal powers occur in every social group, in all societies and all times. There appears to be a need for such beliefs in the human psyche. Someone recently suggested that there is a *gene* for religion. The explanation is, of course, very simple. All humans, before the rise of science, were totally ignorant of the nature of things. Primitive man lives in a social milieu. His life is one constant interaction with others. If he finds one of his possessions missing, he knows that someone took it; he tries to find the culprit and punish him. Similarly, when he sees fire coming from the sky with a terrible noise, he – naturally – thinks that *someone*, a hidden, human-like agent, is doing it. True, we cannot see him but he must be there. Knowing nothing of electricity, that is the only explanation available to him. So the ancients filled the world with gods, goddesses, nymphs, demons, and ancestral spirits. Any natural event that impressed them had a personal, hidden entity behind it.

Herodotus (Book 7, Ch. 35) tells an amusing story. The Persian king, Xerxes, is on his way to attack Greece. He has to cross the Hellespont so he gets his men to build a bridge across it. But a big storm comes up and wrecks the bridge. Xerxes is very angry and orders that the nasty sea should be given one hundred lashes, be branded with hot irons and have fetters put on it. He addresses the stream thus: “Thou bitter water, thy lord lays on thee this punishment because thou hast wronged him without a cause, having suffered no evil at his hands.” Xerxes then, a true barbarian, executes the overseers!

It is even more bizarre to see the “religious” dramatist Aeschylus (*The Persians*) accusing

Xerxes not of stupidity but of impiety. His acts have offended the god of the sea, the great Poseidon himself!

It was only when some Greeks started *thinking* that nature lost its invisible denizens. But then the good Christian emperor Justinian closed the schools and we had to wait for the recent advance of science to understand something of the nature of things and to know that neither Zeus nor Jehovah throw the thunderbolts. The case of the human soul is a little different. One sees this extended body made of flesh and bone like so many other such bodies. But one is always conscious of fleeting thoughts, images, feelings. One can have such images even when the body is at rest and the eyes closed. Knowing nothing of the physiology and function of the brain, it is natural to think that the conscious mind is not the body but another entity inhabiting the body. So philosophers from Plato to Descartes opted for a mind/body dualism. But then how can these two different substances interact? How can that which is material affect that which is immaterial? This dualism was adopted, indeed stressed, by the Christians and it gave rise to the “sinful flesh” doctrine and a contempt for the body which, no doubt, made the killings and burnings easier.

And yet, even now, when we do know so much about the brain, the old idea of a soul persists among some people. This is partly due to ignorance and partly due to the traditional belief that humans are the lords of creation and they cannot just die as animals do. Most people cannot comprehend or accept that all their memories, their thoughts, their emotions will just disappear at death and it will be as if they had never existed. Naturally all these stories of eternal life, of resurrection, of transmigration are very welcome even if they require a detachable soul.

Is this the reason that so many thoughtful, educated people still go to church, and try to be “good Christians”? I think there is more than that. Science shows us a world very different from the cozy world of the past. It shows a vast universe not governed by Divine Providence, one wholly indifferent to human aspirations and feelings. It is much like the world of the Pre-Socratics, of Heraclitean flux where nothing really *is* but everything is constantly becoming. Things “exist” for a moment and then pass into the non-being of the past. Or it is like the world of the ancient atomists where bits of matter come into various combinations for a time forming objects and then fall apart. It shows us a world the ancients could not have imagined, a world of billions of stars and an unknown number of planets. On one small planet life began. Living things came into being and perished. Some apes grew bigger brains and began to talk. They also sharpened some rocks and began to butcher each other. In spite of this they multiplied and, after some millennia, went about trying to destroy their own planet. Full of their delusions they think that their works and they themselves will never disappear. They have not learned the only lesson: All things come to an end, individuals, species, civilizations and even stars. Old Heraclitus said it all: “This world none of the gods has made; it was and is and shall be an everlasting fire....”

Perhaps this is too bleak a picture for some people. It is so comforting to think that there is someone who cares for us, that there is a purpose in our life, that there is something beyond the ashes. As if one could go from “this is comforting” to “this is a fact.”

I am amused by people who claim that science has nothing to say about values, morality, and spirituality. Science, they say, tells us how things *are*. It does not tell us *why*! For this we need religion. Religion deals with morality, spiritual values, purpose! Are they really saying that religion deals with morality, or even that it defines morality? As if the barbarous tyrant of the Old Testament or his hypocritical and vindictive son<sup>1</sup> could teach us anything about morality.

In fact, there is value and morality in the bleak picture. Along with speech and the making of tools we developed an appreciation of the awesome beauty displayed by the natural world. We were so impressed that we tried to preserve it by painting these striking forms on the walls of our caves. Beauty, fleeting as it may be, affects us deeply. We want to preserve it, to possess it even. The bearer of beauty becomes a being of worth. Our attitude to it is something akin to love. We do not wish to harm it; rather we enjoy its thriving and blossoming. We *respect* it as a being of value.

This is the whole of morality and spirituality and it is rooted in the nature of things, not in the will of an imaginary despot. The “ought” springs from our estimation of value. We ought to respect the humanity of our enemy, though we cannot love him. Our respect involves an attempt to understand why he acts as he does and then try to instruct him, to change him if at all possible. We ought, also, to respect all bearers of beauty from a butterfly to a gorilla.

If a man is not afraid to contemplate his own demise, if he is thankful for the beauty he has seen, he will not need the “consolation” of the absurd stories found in “sacred” books; in fact he will find them quite repulsive.

#### Endnote

1. This may seem too harsh. Yet is it not hypocrisy to tell *us* not to judge while *he* is going to judge the living and the dead? As far as vindictiveness goes, one is advised to read the gospel of Mathew. There we read that “whosoever shall say ‘Thou fool’ shall be in danger of hell fire” (5:22), and the assertion that this fire will be eternal, where the “everlasting fire is prepared for the devil and his angels” (25:41). Only a very vindictive person could conceive of everlasting torture and think that it is appropriate punishment.

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