

What is God?

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Under the word "God" all that is highest and lowest in human life stands before us: everything from exalted manifestations of love and genius to the most despicable manifestations of hatred, cruelty and barbarism. In our present time of global crisis, the idea of God more and more inflames our world even as in countless hidden corners it nourishes tenderness toward all of life. Is it any wonder that so many of us, especially in the rising generation, stand bewildered in front of the question of the nature and existence of God? -- a bewilderment made even more painful by the intensely conflicting "certainties" on all sides of this question.

We need to think in a new way about God--in a way that can diminish the conflicts and divisiveness caused by the idea of God, and not, necessarily, by God Himself, whoever or whatever God may or may not be. And even to put the question that way is to stumble across a very fundamental clue to the direction our understanding needs to take. The "idea" of God originated, perhaps, in the minds and hearts of exceptional men and women in very ancient times. But, among many of us, it eventually became, and becomes, covered over and infused with refinements and inventions created not by the mind and heart working in unison, but by intellect alone, disconnected from the wisdom of the heart; or by emotion alone, disconnected from the power of the intellect.

And that disconnect is one of the chief sources of the damage that the idea of God has brought to mankind. The intellect, disconnected from the higher feelings of conscience, can develop into a monster; just as the power of emotion and feeling without the guidance of thought can become an out-of-control locomotive crashing through human history.

Therefore, it is first of all necessary to recognize that the question of God is one of those fundamental questions of human life that cannot be answered by only a part of the human mind. Much, if not most, of the violence and divisiveness associated with religious teachings derives ultimately from the failure to understand this truth and all that it implies. This may at first seem to be an extravagant claim, but once we look at it closely we may appreciate how much it explains and how it can direct us toward the reconciliation, at least in principle, of the conflicts between the various religions of the world as well as the sometimes severe conflict between religion itself and science.

So it was with me when I first encountered this notion as a young undergraduate in one of my first philosophy classes. I clearly remember the day, some sixty years ago, on a bright September morning, sitting on the broad steps of Harvard's imposing Widener Library. I had just purchased a copy of the book that was to serve as a textbook for this course--nothing other than one of the most influential and profoundly difficult books in the history of modern thought: Immanuel Kant's legendary Critique of Pure Reason. There, on the first page, the very first sentence stopped me cold and flooded my brain with light: Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which. . . it is not able to ignore, but which, transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer.

For Kant, the nature and existence of God was just such a question. Human reason can never answer this question, but neither can it ever stop asking it. For many people of Kant's time, and for many who have followed up until today, Kant's dictum and all that was associated with it sounded a grim death knell for mankind's dream of ever objectively knowing things as they are in themselves. The modern world's wave of relativism and what is called "post-modernism" washed over our culture like a tsunami caused in large measure by the earthquake of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason.

Such a notion, along with the labyrinthine arguments by which Kant attempted to prove his assertions, justified both my youthful atheism and also my yearning to understand the deepest nature of the human mind. But it was only some years later that my encounter with a scholar of Buddhism showed me the larger meaning of

Kant's dictum and the hope it can bring to our world—a world gravely threatened by both scientific knowledge and religious belief when they are cut off from all the sources of real understanding and genuine faith that beat their wings in vain within us.

The point is that the human mind, its powers of reason, comprises far more than what is exercised in what we call rational thought. And the human heart, the emotional source within us also in its own way comprises far, far more than the dark and blinding passions that rule so much of our everyday lives; it also includes the higher feelings, such as those that orient us toward the ultimate meaning and purpose of life and personal identity. The point is that the full exercise of reason requires a harmonious contact with deep feeling; and the full exercise of the function of emotion requires in its turn a harmonious contact with the serious power of thought. We need the whole mind to think about God and we need the whole mind to live according to faith. Extraordinary discoveries in the field of neuroscience studies are showing us more and more that there are immense untapped and unrecognized parts and powers of our human brain. We really have no idea what the whole human mind is or what it can do when it is consciously active in us. We do not know the mind that we have been given! And now it is or can become clearer that this fractioning of our mind, this fragmentation of our given potential for thought and feeling -this profound lack of self-knowledge (for that is really what we are speaking of) is threatening our whole life, not just personally, but collectively, as our planet reels under the onslaught of amoral science and irrational religion.

And just as such intensely relevant extraordinary studies are being made in the neurosciences, so also extraordinary information is opening up about the until now largely forgotten teachings of the great religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and, for that matter, all the sources of all the great religious teachings that have guided human life through the centuries. We are discovering that at the experiential heart of all religions there exists a profound knowledge of the human mind and heart, a profound knowledge of the meaning of love in the very structure of our human organism. The power to love, we may soon realize, is not a mechanical adaptation geared to physical survival of the human species, but a completely unknown capacity written into our structure of the power to give and serve the Good.

Human reason often becomes destructive and even murderous when it exercises the powers that come from only one part of the mind, one part of the self. And religious faith can equally and does in fact become destructive and murderous for the very same reason.

Our very lives and the life of our world depend entirely on grasping this truth and discovering the help to become whole human beings, a help that is out there waiting to be found. How to search for it? That is another question and deserves a careful, balanced response.

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