

WHERE DOES YOUR CONCEPT OF GOD COME FROM?

What is your major source for your concept of God? This seems like a very straightforward and easy question to answer. For many years, my answer would have been the Bible but...

An Introduction

For the past few months I haven't written much that I could send out to all of you. Writing articles has been a struggle though the struggle isn't due to a lack of things to write about. To some degree, the problem is the very opposite. In some ways, I feel like a sponge that has absorbed so much water, I desperately need to squeeze some out. The other dilemma is where to begin.

There are many things that I would like to share but some of them could be rather controversial - what a surprise! Let's be blunt, fundamentalism has a long list of "taboo" topics, some of which I now find myself exploring. To simply start writing about some of these topics and expect you to be willing to read the articles would be really unfair. In some cases I spent days and weeks researching and studying these subjects in order to decide if I felt comfortable pursuing them. And yet I feel that I do need to lay out some kind of foundational position so you can understand to some degree why I would be willing to delve into some of these controversial subjects.

Let me give you an example. Our home page on our web site includes the quote from a nun in Sue Monk Kidd's book, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* in which this nun says "it is high time people realize that God is more than two men and a bird." I laughed when I read that quote but I agree with it 100%. Apparently this nun has a different concept of God than many Christians.

There is no question that God is far more than a "Father, Son and Holy Spirit which is often portrayed as a dove." Today, among other things, I find myself studying and embracing a concept of God that restores the "divine feminine" into our concept of the ultimate Creator. That is a somewhat non-controversial way of saying that I am embracing the restoration of the "Goddess" into my concept of "God."

Many fundamental Christians would say that God isn't really male or female (note that I said many and not all because there are Christians who argue vehemently that God is male). They would say that "God is spirit" but if that is true, then what is the problem if I chose to pray to the "Goddess" rather than "God?" Let's be honest, whether it was so originally, today the word "God" has a male connotation. If we speak of gods and goddesses and a goddess is female or feminine, then it seems rather obvious that a god is male or masculine.

In discussing this in our little group, most of us have acknowledged how strange and difficult it would be to pray to the Goddess or address God as Mother even though we mentally acknowledge that "God" is either neither or both but God is definitely not one or the other. Despite our departure from the fundamental world, the voice of fundamentalism still impacts us.

Let me address another issue that comes up regarding God and Goddess. The instant you speak of a God and Goddess you are viewed as believing in polytheism, i.e. multiple gods, and that of course is idolatry according to fundamentalism. My response to that comes in the form of a question. If the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, 3 supposedly distinct and unique "persons" are only ONE God, then why can't a God and Goddess or dare I say, even gods and goddesses, be ONE God as well? If within the ONE "Godhead" you can find a Father, Son and Holy Spirit, why could you not find a God and Goddess or even Gods and Goddesses within "ONE Godhead?" In

fact, Elohim, the Hebrew word translated as God is actually plural and literally should be translated as GODS!

In the next couple of days I hope to send out an article dealing with the Goddess in the Bible and yes “SHE” is definitely there. You will discover that males have tried over the centuries to eliminate HER but that may be far more about the implementation and enforcement of a male dominated religious system than the avoidance of idolatry.

Let me state unequivocally that I am not trying to create confusion in your lives or lead you into heresies. My goal isn't to turn your faith or spirituality upside down but in seeking the truth, that is often a result. I am really trying to do the exact opposite but that often requires the confusion and inconsistencies inherent in current fundamental beliefs to be confronted. Jesus certainly did this over and over. For example, we read him saying “you have heard it said... but I say unto you....” When it comes to “teaching,” my passion is to do nothing more but also nothing less than follow Jesus' example and so I am going to continually say to you, “You have heard it said that.... but I want to say to you that....” which by the way is no more than your pastor, Bible study teacher, evangelist or current prophet is doing.

I am very aware that some of you may choose to say “good-bye” and leave our e-mail list due to the topics we will be exploring. That is okay. It simply means that we are on different paths at the moment. As much as I would hate to see even one person leave, I need to reach out to those who are searching and open to a new spiritual path that transcends fundamentalism. In his book *The Sacred Romance*, John Eldredge talks about the inner voice that tells us that “there is something missing in all of this, there is something more.” In another of Eldredge's books, *The Journey of Desire*, he writes about a desire within us, “the desire for life as it was meant to be.” If those words resonate inside you, I hope you will give me a chance to share some of our journey with you.

I would like to take the time to share the following with you before actually addressing “Where Does Your Concept of God Come From?”

Many of you know that I am a voracious reader. I have more than 250 books sitting on a bookshelf 5 feet away from me as I type this, many of which have appeared over the last 2-3 years. I have other books in boxes, in a filing cabinet and stacks on the floor. I would hate to think of how many books I have passed on to others or donated to non-profit groups. I have nearly 300 books on my computer saved as PDF files and that is after I deleted quite a few. Our public library has a limit – you can only have 40 items out at any one time. It is embarrassing when you go to check out books and the librarian tells you that you can't take all the books you want to check out because you will exceed your limit, not that it has ever happened, well okay maybe it happened once or twice. As I write this, I ONLY have 27 library books checked out so a visit to the library in the next day or two could definitely be on the agenda.

Why share this with you? Because I want you to know that what I write about and teach only emerges after a lot of research, study and thought. I don't set aside long held beliefs frivolously. It takes a lot to convince me initially. It takes even more to change my convictions. Deciding that a doctrine or tenet needs to be challenged and ultimately dropped from my personal beliefs, or deciding to delve into some subject that was “off limits” not all that long ago is not something that I do flippantly. You can be sure that what I write comes about after hour and hours (sometimes hundreds) of study during which I try to unearth as much information and knowledge as I can to help me make a decision or come to a conclusion. Right or wrong, I think I could be described as obsessive compulsive when it comes to being competent, especially as it relates to teaching anything having to do with spirituality.

WHERE DOES YOUR CONCEPT OF GOD COME FROM?

What is your major source for your concept of God? This seems like a very straightforward and easy question to answer. For many years, my answer would have been the Bible but... For the most part, fundamental Christianity claims that its view of God and Jesus come from the Bible. In fact, many doctrinal statements start with a belief in the Bible and not a belief in God or Jesus. These statements begin with the acknowledgment that the Bible is the inerrant, divine, infallible Word of God and it is supposedly the sole source of authority for fundamental Christianity. (At some point I will undertake to show how little of fundamental Christianity's doctrines are "biblical" but we will save that for another time.)

Most of Christianity would say that the concept of inerrancy and infallibility is only true of the "original" writings (of which we have none) but in practice, the Bible we have today is treated virtually the same. In fact, some Christians do believe that the King James Bible is inerrant and infallible.

For nearly 25 years the Bible was inerrant and infallible to me and it was the major source for my concept of God. To consider anything else was virtually incomprehensible. To adopt any other view of the Bible would shake my spiritual foundations more than a 8.0+ earthquake.

For 25 years, the Bible was my life and believe it or not, that was the problem. To a great degree I was living my life based on a "written word of God" instead of the "living Word of God."

To adopt a different view of the Bible was something that I wrestled with a great deal. The idea that I could view the Bible as holy and sacred and yet not inerrant, infallible or completely divine bordered on the impossible not all that long ago. Then God/the Universe intervened and sent me Marcus Borg's book "Meeting Jesus Again For the First Time." Somewhere in the reading of that book, I had an epiphany and a lot of baggage fell off me including the need to see the Bible as inerrant and infallible as well as the need to read it literally.

Do we ever stop and think that there was a time when Bibles as we know it, didn't exist? Where did the peoples of ancient civilizations get their concept of God? In fact, where did those in the Bible who existed before the Bible came into existence get their concept of God? Where did the "early New Testament Christians" develop their concept of God and Jesus in the years preceding the writing of and the canonization of the New Testament? Do we realize that having a Bible wouldn't have done 80 or 90% of the people in the Roman Empire any good? They were illiterate.

The Bible as we now have it came together over a few centuries before and after Jesus. The "powers that be" over that time period decided or, perhaps more accurately, debated what books would be in the Bible and which ones would be left out. Jewish religious leaders assembled the Old Testament which is predominately a history of one nation in which the writers (all men it seems) present their concept of God. The New Testament was assembled by leaders (it would seem all men again – I see a pattern developing) within the "Christian" world. The list of books to be included was debated and changed over the years which might make one wonder how "divine" the process actually was. In fact, this debate lasted far longer than many realize. It is suggested that Martin Luther advocated removing the books of Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation from the Bible in the 1500s. Apparently one of the greatest of Christian theologians didn't see those books quite as inerrant, infallible or divine as some others. By the way, those same "Christian powers that be" that picked which books would make it into the New Testament also did their best to destroy as many of the books that they excluded as possible, something the "Church" continued to do wherever it went to "preach the gospel." For example, all that we have left from the amazing Mayan civilization are about 3 or 4 Mayan codices thanks in large part to the efficiency of the "Church" in destroying Mayan writings.

Minus printing presses, it is virtually impossible for individuals to have Bibles. Even with the emergence of printing presses, the “Church” still prohibited individuals from reading Bibles, especially in their own language. At the Council of Toulouse in 1229 Canon 14 states ***“We prohibit also that the laity should be permitted to have the books of the Old or New Testament; unless anyone from motive of devotion should wish to have the Psalter or the Breviary for divine offices or the hours of the blessed Virgin; but we most strictly forbid their having any translation of these books.”***

Further at the Council of Tarragona in 1234, we find in its second canon the following. ***“No one may possess the books of the Old and New Testaments, and if anyone possesses them he must turn them over to the local bishop within eight days, so that they may be burned...”*** - The Church Council of Tarragona 1234 AD; 2nd Cannon - Source : D. Lortsch, *Historie de la Bible en France*, 1910, p.14.

Hard to believe, isn't it? Here we see the “Church” willing to burn Bibles so the people wouldn't read them on their own. The reasoning was that there would be too many individual interpretations arising so it was better if the “Church” simply told you what to believe. The “Church” was right in its assumption that a myriad of interpretations would arise. The proof can be found in the thousands of Protestant denominations that have come into existence over the past few hundred years, formed for the most part because of doctrinal differences despite the fact that they all claim to be using the same book to come up with their doctrines.

Recently someone presented me with following concept to show me the error of my ways when it came to my new understanding of the Bible. This person believed that God would not allow the Bible, His Word, to be corrupted over the years thereby protecting it for His followers. I have two comments regarding that view. First, his view contains no proof. It is pure subjection, assumption and presumption including the idea that the original writings were inerrant and infallible. Secondly, when thought out his reasoning leads to the following scenario. An omniscient, omnipotent God intervened and watched over this one book but apparently didn't care and chose to do nothing in regards to all the other so called “holy” books that have come into existence which supposedly lead humanity astray. God was willing and able to protect the Bible but either was unwilling or unable to stop the proliferation of false books purporting to be sacred. An omniscient, omnipotent God apparently chooses to allow these unholy “holy books” to be written and spread about despite the supposedly horrific consequences that result from following them while at the same time, has apparently exercised his omniscience and omnipotence by making sure the Bible remained inerrant, infallible and without error through out its assembly and subsequent numerous translations. Dare I say that this is one more example of the “God of the entire Universe” apparently loving some people a lot more than others and it reinforces fundamental Christianity's claim of exclusivity and specialness when it comes to “God.”

Are you aware that an article published in 1975 in *Theology Today* acknowledged that there were long periods of Christian history in which the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible were not major issues within Christianity and that it has only become a major issue in the last two centuries. The number one doctrine based on many fundamental Christian doctrinal statements is only a couple of hundred years old!

SHOCKING BUT TRUE!

If the Bible is inerrant and infallible and meant to be read literally, then the following is true. If you were a nursing mother who happened to be born “on the wrong side of the tracks” and your people ended up in a war with Israel, after Israel killed all of your men, you and your baby would then be slaughtered as well and that was done based on “orders from God.”

Did I write that to shock you? Yes. For too long fundamentalism has gotten a “free pass.” It is time that its literal, dogmatic, fundamental approach to the Bible is challenged and one way to do that is to point out what one must believe if one insists on an inerrant and infallible Bible read from a literal viewpoint.

Bluntly, I wouldn't mind if you squirmed a little bit as you read what follows. I wouldn't mind if you felt somewhat uncomfortable with this passage from Deuteronomy 20 when it is interpreted literally. I am not going to bother with the feeble and dare I say rather pathetic explanations Christianity often throws out in an attempt to explain away the contradiction of how “God” could do this back in Old Testament times only to have Jesus tell us to love our enemies in the New Testament.

If you read Deuteronomy 20 you will find that if you were a woman or child but you were NOT a Hittite, Amorite, Canaanite, Perizzite, Hivite or Jebusite and you found yourself at war with Israel, all of your men were to be killed by the Israelites but your life and the life of your baby would be spared. It seems you and your child would become the “property” of some Israelite but at least you and your baby would be alive.

If, however, you were one of those “Ites,” your life is over and so is the life of your baby. After Israel killed any men who survived the battles, they would then slaughter you and your baby as well if they followed “God's commandment.” Anything and everything that breathed was to be killed. See Deuteronomy 20:16-18.

Most Christians don't believe in reincarnation or pre-existence so you didn't choose where to be born. In fact, if anything an omniscient and omnipotent God determined into what race, nation and tribe you would be born. God determined if you were to be born into one of the “Ite” nations mentioned in Deuteronomy 20 and because you were born into one of the “Ite” nations, you were doomed if you ever lost a war to Israel unless Israel disobeyed God and let you live.

The reason is as follows – As one of these “Ites” you would lead Israel into idolatry. Pardon me but there is something absolutely wrong here. Using that “logic,” we could conclude that we should kill any and all women who may possibly seduce a married man. Doesn't that “logic” ignore one important fact? It takes two to tango, so to speak, and if the man is unwilling to participate, then nothing is going to happen. Killing women because men are too weak to resist is ludicrous. It doesn't say much for the man and killing women (and children) because poor Israel can't resist their charms doesn't say much for Israel either. Apparently following and obeying God isn't all that great if Israel is so easily led astray. And this approach doesn't say much for a Church who has done similar things, i.e. Exterminating thousands and thousands of women deemed to be witches. Taking it to another level, I don't think it says much or does much for the image of God either.

Actually there was a movie starring Tom Cruise that used this very premise. It was called Minority Report and in it people were arrested before they committed a crime based on supernatural knowledge that they were going to commit the crime in the future. We see the same thing here. Israel is instructed by God to kill women and children based on what they are apparently going to do sometime in the future.

Can you imagine American soldiers killing defenceless Iraqi women and children based upon the premise that they may grow up and become terrorists and attack America sometime in the future? The world would be in an uproar and those soldiers would be charged with war crimes.

The Bible is apparently in error when it says God is no respecter of persons. God clearly respects some women and children more than others despite the fact that these women and children had no choice when it came to the nation they were born into. I find it strange that

you could be an Egyptian and therefore part of the nation that apparently enslaved Israel for 200+ years and be spared but being part of one of the “Ites” carried a death sentence.

Another concept found in the Bible is the idea that God doesn't change. If God had no problem killing “pagan” women and children back then, one could argue that He would have no problem doing the same thing over the years and even today and so in the “name of God” thousands and thousands (some say millions) of defenseless women viewed to be witches were tortured and slaughtered by the Church, actions perfectly justified by the Bible in the eyes of the Church.

I do not write the words above with any disrespect toward God. To be very blunt and somewhat crass, I am not trying to be a “smart-ass.” The image of God is tremendously important to me. It is the engine that drives a lot of what I write about because whatever image of God we, as human beings have, that same image will be mirrored in our lives. We will do what we believe God does. In this case, God kills idolaters and those who may become idolaters in the future. The Church has done the same thing. Radical Islam's God kills infidels. Why then are we so stunned that radical Islam acts in the exact same manner? According to fundamental Christianity, God punishes people for ever in hell, a fate worse than annihilation. God burns people in hell with a fire that never goes out so why shouldn't the “Church” burn a bunch of “witches” at the stake? I realize that things are not as simplistic as those statements appear but I firmly believe that the actions and lives of religious people will mirror their image of God.

So... where should we get our “image of God?” I am going to suggest that there are two primary places where we should look to formulate our concept of God.

Let's pretend that there were no humans on this planet we call Earth but then you mystically appeared on the scene. Where is your concept of God going to come from? There are no Bibles, Korans, or other holy books to mess you up. There are no religious fanatics or theologians to tell you what the Bible “really says,” thank goodness. There is only you. It may be ironic but I am going to suggest that part of the answer to our question can be found within the non-existent Bible in Psalm 19.

“The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun, Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race. His going forth is from the end of the heaven, and his circuit unto the ends of it: and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof.”

One of the two major sources for our concept of God should be our universe including the heavens which include all the heavenly bodies, space itself, our Solar System, Planet Earth and all that we sometimes refer to as “Mother Nature,” a term that I am surprised hasn't been set aside for something more patriarchal. Included would be all the cycles of time including day and night, the seasons, the Great Year. Genesis 1:14 states that the sun, moon, planets and stars are “signs” for us. In simple terms, all of creation is where we ought to find our concept of God.

It is very interesting and possibly perplexing that we have verses in the Bible that seem to state that looking to those same heavenly bodies for signs and guidance is an abomination. For 2 and a half decades I was taught that astrology for example, was an abomination. I would feel guilty if I dared read what it said about Capricorn in my daily newspaper. Somehow I was betraying God despite the fact that God said in Genesis 1:14 that the sun, moon, planets, etc. signs for humanity. Perhaps it is time we stop and rethink our interpretation of those verses. For example, how is it possible that within Judaism, which would follow the Old Testament to a far greater degree than Christianity and would stay away from anything abominable, you find lots

of “astrological” teachings? I have at least two books on my bookshelf that are all about astrology as a component within Jewish spirituality. How do you explain the signs of the zodiac inlaid on ancient synagogue floors? It is possible that those abominations aren’t so black and white as we like to make them out to be?.

The second place we need to look in order to formulate our concept of God is in the “kingdom of God” and Jesus made it abundantly clear that the kingdom of God is NOT some physical locale on Planet Earth despite the fact that fundamentalism seems to think in those terms far too much. The kingdom of God is found deep within in each human being.

I want to suggest to you that when you look for God within yourself and in all of creation, you are looking for God in the LIVING WORD OF GOD! When I consider where I was just a few years ago, I still find it strange to write the following but it is what I believe. Find your concept of God within LIFE, not printed words on a page. The universe is alive, you are alive. Use those words on the page for sure, but do not let them be your ultimate authority. Look inside, find yourself and then find God inside “you.” Then look outside and find God in the sun, the moon, a rainbow, a tree, a bird and let “that God” be your guide.

Putting those things together, stand outside at night when there is a clear sky and gaze up at all the stars and then take that image and carry it deep within you and contemplate the One who could fashion what seems to be an infinite universe. Consider the size and energy of the Sun and contemplate the One who could speak that into existence. Look at a lily or rose and contemplate the One who could create something so beautiful. Look at a butterfly and a blue whale and contemplate the One who could make one creature so fragile and the other so mammoth and yet both able to migrate thousands of miles. Hold a new born baby in your arms and contemplate the One who makes the amazing group of beings we call humanity.

Do that and then try to find the voice of a “God” that tells Israel to kill defenceless women and children because of what they may or may not do in the future, that tells the “Church” to initiate the Inquisition or witch hunts. Find in the glories of the Universe the voice of a “God” that will punish people in hell forever for simply being “human.”

I want to suggest to you that the still small voice inside you that John Eldredge suggests is attempting to get your attention and tell you that there is something missing and there is more to all of this, is not only the voice of your deep inner spirit/soul but it is the voice of God. At your deepest level, you and God or dare I say, you and the Goddess, are inseparable. You are One.

Have you ever really thought about the following? Jesus prayed that you would come to experience the absolute exact Oneness that he experienced with God. That Oneness is a state of being. He didn’t pray that you would experience something similar to, kind of like or sort of like the Oneness he had with God. His prayer wasn’t for you to experience some kind of lesser or second rate Oneness with God. In other words, His Oneness with God wasn’t something unique to him and him alone. To whatever degree Jesus was one with God, his prayer was that you and I would experience that very same Oneness.

Is that part of your concept of God? Does your “God” want to be ONE with you exactly like God was ONE with Jesus? Does your concept of God and Jesus include being in Jesus and in God and in others just as Jesus was in God and God in Jesus.? If not, why not?

If that is your concept of God, can you find anywhere within that Oneness a “God” who mandates the killing of defenceless women and children because another group of people are apparently too weak to resist sliding into idolatry? Can you find as you contemplate a Universe of infinite beauty, power and mystery, a God who will punish and burn people forever in hell because a being that he supposedly created, rebelled and then led humanity astray?

I can't and I am thrilled that is the case! By the way, that version of God isn't in the Bible either! I trust that it is obvious that this doesn't mean I am tossing out God, Jesus or the Bible. In fact, I find myself far more in awe of God than ever before. I will readily admit that I have a lot more questions about God now but the mystery inherent in those questions doesn't diminish God. It only enhances His/Her mystique. When it comes to Jesus, I am, in many ways, just beginning to understand his teachings and for perhaps the first time, the application and experience of those teachings seems to be a real possibility in my life. In a strange way, that "voice" inside me seems to very aware of this new understanding of Jesus. I am not sure I am learning as much as I am remembering.

I end with a final comment on the Bible. In this article I focused on one of the most difficult passages, Deuteronomy 20, in the Bible. You may think that I would like to eliminate Deuteronomy 20 from the Bible just like Martin Luther wanted to do with the books of Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation. I don't!

I will save it for another time but if you can elevate Deuteronomy 20 out from the bondage of a literal, physical and fundamental interpretation, that chapter has a profound lesson in it for each of us. I would say the same thing in regards to the entire Bible. Reading the Bible from a metaphysical point of view is liberating, exciting and challenging.

Rather than curtail the value of the Bible, I have found that seeing the Bible with very different eyes has increased its relevance and meaning in my life. I can read the Bible as a story with ears to hear whatever insights and wisdom I need to hear at that moment. The literalness of any story or event isn't an issue. Whether everything in the Bible is historically accurate isn't all that important. I can simply listen to whatever my spirit and the spirit of God and Goddess want me to "see" in the story.

I can also read and interpret the Bible based on a concept of God that comes from the Living Word, from all of creation as well as the deepest parts of my "self," that part in which God and I are One. When I do that, some doors open that may be rather surprising, as you will see in the near future.

Le Gradh agus Beannachdan

With love and blessings

Doug Trudell