

SOFiA

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

Believing in God

I am sitting at the Tree Protection Centre on Mt Albert Auckland, together with another volunteer. We are publicising the threat to chainsaw all 345 trees on the mountain and endeavouring to encourage public opposition to this action, which will cause unnecessary degradation in a time of declared climate emergency. As is often the case, we are engaged in an increasingly deepening conversation. The other volunteer turns to me and asks whether I believe in God. I am completely flummoxed. I don't know how to respond. Fortunately, after a time, the conversation moves on to other things, leaving the question unanswered. I know that my conversation partner is a Baptist and that she has rather outlying ideas, such as supporting Donald Trump, but my problem has little to do with this. I don't want to say "No" because I'm not a sympathiser with the new atheists. I don't want to say "Yes" because that would imply a commitment that I don't try to live. After long subsequent reflection, I've concluded that the best answer would have been to say, with the Baptist theologian Harvey Cox, that we need to move beyond the Theism/Atheism divide.

Now that is the sort of question that no polite adult would ask of his or her parish minister, and so I have only been asked that question once before, by a teenager, and I was similarly flummoxed. Now she wouldn't guess from that answer that I've spent a lot of time

thinking about the concept of God. I early on abandoned any idea of a "grandfather in the sky" but still thought of God as some sort of transcendent reality "up there" or "out there." Bishop Robinson's book *Honest to God* was a real revolution for me in that it consciously abandoned such imagery and instead, went for Paul Tillich's contrasting image of God as "the ground of being." This, it seems to me, is connected more with meditation than prayer, and with a meditative deepening into the source of our consciousness. Nor can I say that I have had much in the way of an experience of God. I looked for this as a young teenager, hoping that this would provide some evidence of the reality of God and of what preachers in a Billy Graham style were saying, but to no avail.

Many years later, when I was explaining the problems in my marriage, I had a sense not just that the other person loved me but that I was loved, in a comprehensive and universal sense. That is about the closest I've come to an experience of God.

Although personal prayer is something found widely in many religions, it is not something that played a role in my life. On the other hand, I spent a lot of time reflecting on corporate prayer and trying to formulate appropriate prayers for public worship. The theologian Dietrich Ritschl said that addressing God in prayer and listening for God in the

message by the preacher as he makes present again the Word encapsulated in a biblical text was central and wondered whether there was any need to speak about God.

A large part of this issue takes a look at the question of God from various angles. It's been on my mind to do this for some time, but I have hesitated to take the plunge. Many SOFiAns have concluded that they are atheists but for me this is not so simple. The concept of God has changed in the past and will continue to change in the future (think of Lloyd Geering's name for our highest values, or Don Cupitt's totalising word). I was in conversation with a young man at a Sunday Assembly and he told me that he was an evangelical Christian until he suddenly realised that he had no grounds for believing that God existed. With that, the whole religious edifice promptly collapsed for him.

The new atheists would rejoice at such an outcome, but I am disappointed at such a superficial understanding and I'm grateful in particular to John Gray (the English philosopher, not the American pop psychologist of "Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus" fame) for the delightful way he punctures the pretensions of the new atheists and their polemic against "religion."

There is an assumption that the Middle Ages were an age of faith and that everyone simply believed in God. I think it was more like this: The great majority tilled the fields or laboured at their craft. The world of the divine was something they did not pretend to know about or understand. Instead, they delegated this to the appointed authorities, the priests, who through prayers and rituals handled all the negotiations with divine powers on their behalf.

Today, as Charles Taylor so clearly points out, belief is far from automatic. Indeed, the default assumption is not to believe, and so it requires a particular effort to go against the conventional

wisdom and affirm something, anything, beyond the everyday and empirical.

The Editor

Drewermann on God

I believe in God in two ways. First, I believe that science is about to develop a new picture of theological thinking. It reveals the necessity of respect for a self-organising system. We can no longer speak of spirit and matter in the way we are accustomed in the Christian west. We acknowledge that spirit is a structural property of all complex systems. Consciousness creates itself on the path of evolution. God in this sense is something that unfolds itself in the world and with the world. That is a concept that reminds one of pantheism, but it is a concept of high poetry and creativity, of wisdom too, in which our communal life together with the creatures at our side is understood anew. Following 8000 years of development since the Neolithic age, which detached humans from nature and separated spirit from body, a religion will only be believable if it undertakes to create religious meaning for the human and the natural realms and which understands body and soul as an inseparable unity. It will be a religion that doesn't represent itself as aggressive and exclusive, but as integrative and dialogical.

The second point: The anxiety that broke out because humans became individuals cannot be banished. It belongs to us, it is part of our personality and freedom, our capacity for self-reflection. I regard faith in a personal God as an essential postulate in answer to human anxiety. I believe that that was what Jesus meant when he wanted to give us courage to walk on water and to feel that the abyss supports us, if only we are able to trust.

These two pictures of God, the personal God and the self-unfolding Spirit of system theory and evolution, are antithetical. But I regard it as possible, that the old Christian doctrine of the trinity is able to connect such polarities with one another.

Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung 3/5/91.

About SOFiA

SOFiA (The Sea of Faith in Aotearoa) is a network of people interested in the non-dogmatic discussion of values, meaning and spirituality. We want to explore for ourselves what we can believe and how we can find meaning in our lives.

SOFiA is not a church: it is a forum for discussing ideas, experiences and perspectives. SOFiA itself has no creed; its members come from many faiths and from those with no attachment to any religious institution. If you are in sympathy with our aims, you are most welcome to join us; receive our Newsletter, attend a local group and/or come to our Conferences.

We follow similar organisations in the UK and Australia in taking our name from "Sea of Faith", the 1984 BBC TV series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

Committee

Our national Committee oversees the work of SOFiA.

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Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Ian Harris, Suzi Thirwell, Yvonne Curtis and Peter Cowley. Also Fred Marshall, Noel Cheer and Norm Ely (deceased).

Publication deadline for the next Newsletter is 7 April 2021.

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SOFiA News

Conference 2021

'Spirituality for a Sustainable Future'

- Sir Lloyd Geering Lecture: **Ian Harris**
- **John Thornley** on Black Theology in African-American Music – illustrated by blues, gospel, soul, reggae and soul tracks
- Youth panel and speakers, core group discussions, refreshment times and socialising

Fri 5 Nov 12.30 pm to Sat 6 Nov 4.30 pm

Venue: St Andrews on the Terrace, Wgton

More details to come in later Newsletters

Remembering Eliane Cowie



It is with sadness that we report the death of one of the original Auckland Sea of Faith group's founder members. Eliane Marie Cowie nee Van den Bussche, born in Blankenberghe, Begium 17 October 1926, died at Hatfields Beach 8 January 2021.

Eliane and her husband Keith were very faithful attenders at the Auckland meetings and were the sort of members who gave texture and character to our group – the sort of people one instinctively expected to be there and from whom you got a genuinely warm smile and greeting. Eliane was a very definite person who sat on the front row and almost without exception contributed

interesting views and questions in her very distinctive Belgian accent.

Eliane, with her family spent most of WW II under the German occupation of Belgium. In the late 1940s she married her first husband, who served in the British army, and they had two daughters, Yvonne born in London and Suzanne born in Blankenberghe. They emigrated to New Zealand in 1953, but the marriage did not last and Eliane was left to raise her children alone when he returned to England.

She was endowed with a lot of courage and, despite having asthma and a lung dysfunction from an early age she did not let these limit her physical activities, which included tramping five of New Zealand's national tracks during her second marriage. Eliane always tried to expand her knowledge and attended art classes as well as taking a Correspondence School course in botany. She had many of Lloyd Geering's books and these persuaded her to become a Sea of Faith member when the family moved to Auckland.

She was dedicated to her family and the welfare of her children, seven grandchildren, fifteen great-grandchildren and a great-great-grandson. She died peacefully and was farewelled by her family and close friends in a very informal gathering.

We will miss Eliane, and we honour the memory of a valued member who was always a pleasure to meet. Thank you for the memories Eliane and your contributions to SOFiA.

Auckland Group Occupies Church

At its first meeting for 2021, on the 21st of February, the Auckland SOFiA group occupied St. Luke's Church, Remuera.

You might think that this was some kind of protest. For example against the failure of churches to critically rethink their tradition or to clearly speak out against climate change and environmental destruction. Or against some

churches' support for Donald Trump. But in fact, it was nothing like that.



Let me explain how it came about. Our intrepid chairperson, Marion Hines, had invited Emeritus Professor Peter Lineham, with the suggestion that he speak on something to do with religious support for Donald Trump. So we had a combination of a gifted and experienced lecturer and a topic of considerable public interest. As a result, it turned out that the room at the community centre was far too small. At the last minute, the decision was made to move into the church itself, although this meant that Peter could not show the visual presentation he had prepared. He has subsequently generously made this available to us by email.

Aretha Franklin

Icons of Rock was title to three talks given during 2020, taking place in the Palmerston North city library. The series was co-sponsored by the Palmy Vinyl Club (PVC) and local access radio Manawatu Peoples Radio. The latter provided sound equipment that would do justice to the enhanced sound quality of vinyl recordings.

Talks covered Johnny Cash, Aretha Franklin and Bob Dylan. In earlier issues of the Sofia Newsletters I covered Bob Dylan (January 2020) and Johnny Cash (August 2020). This article covers Aretha Franklin.

At 2 pm on Sunday 8 November 2020 I began my presentation, pointing out that at exactly this same time President-Elect Joe Biden was announcing the Democratic victory in the US elections. It was a moment of serendipity. As the diva for Black Lives Matter, Aretha sang the victory anthem for this election result.

With a wry smile I couldn't resist saying that while Biden's speech would be replayed and replayed in the virtual world, this talk was a unique event –

kanohi ki te kanohi, face-to-face, in the actual and real world.

I pick out highlights from the Queen of Soul's life and music.

A Gospel Opening

'People Get Ready', a cover of the Impressions' Civil Rights anthem, opened the show. It's a song about physical and spiritual freedom, available for all who genuinely seek it. The freedom trip is a ride to a better deal in daily life in the large urban cities – for improved education, health and employment. It's a hymn for Grace, the spiritual gift of faith. But for those who have no faith, there is no room on the train:

People get ready
There's a train a comin'
U don't need no baggage
U just get on board
All U need is faith
To hear the diesels hummin'
U don't need no ticket
U just thank the lord

So people get ready
There's a train to Jordan
Picking up passengers
Coast to coast
Faith is the key
Open the doors and board them
There's hope for all
Among those loved the most

There ain't no room
For the hopeless sinner
Whom would hurt all mankind
Just to save his own
Have pity on those whose
Chances grow thinner
For there is no hiding place
Against the kingdom's throne

Creative Relationships – in music and performers

The talk on Aretha covers a short period, late 1960s to 1972. These were the albums recorded for Atlantic Recordings. They are the high point of Franklin's artistic career. All came before her gospel record *Amazing Grace* 1972.

I share a story about the first Aretha hit song: 'I never loved a man (like the way I love

you)'. I do not go into technical information, such as defining key musical terms or the history of the blues. Let's just stick to the story.

Aretha's singing career began when she was 12, performing in her father's churches. Her first collection of gospel music was released when she was 14. From 1961 to 1966 she recorded for Columbia, in a variety of styles – musical show standards, jazz, blues, doo-wop and Rhythm and Blues – with some individual highlights, but a steady decline in record sales. When Columbia would not renew her contract, Jerry Wexler of Atlantic Records took her from her home in Detroit to Muscle Shoals, a town beside the Tennessee River in Alabama, set amidst former slave plantations. In the late 50s, Rick Hall founded Fame Studio, in a former tobacco warehouse. He said 'It was a dangerous time, but the studio was a safe haven where blacks and whites could work together in musical harmony.' The white musicians were familiar with black and white music traditions: They blended them into what they described as 'Rhythm'n'Blues with a country looseness'.

On January 27, 1967, Aretha and Jerry Wexler with the Muscle Shoals musicians are in Fame Studio for the first session. Aretha is sitting at acoustic keyboards, playing gospel/blues chord progressions. Spooner Oldham is on electric keyboard, Jimmy Johnson rhythm guitar, Chips Moman co-producer and guitar, Tommy Coghill on bass, 3 horn players, and 3 vocal accompanists: Sisters Carolyn and Erma, and Cissy Houston, mother of Whitney. While they face each other, soloist and chorus with the accompanists, anxiously awaiting a lead, Spooner Oldham comes up with a rolling rhythmic riff, and Aretha explodes with her churchified vocals, 'I never loved a man (the way I love you)'. The backing musicians were, to quote the *Rolling Stone* writer David Marsh, 'savvy enough to follow her lead vocal to the end of the earth'. Listen out for the guitar lick from Jimmy Johnson. This song was her first million-dollar seller. In her mid 20s, Aretha's years in Soul stardom have begun.

Here's how Soul music was created: It came from Black Gospel plus Rhythm'n'Blues, the religious and secular music traditions. Further more, a performance of Black women vocalists and White accompanists, a bicultural partnership.

And the words of the song? They describe a passionate love relationship, a powerful expression of sexuality, but with an undercurrent of emotional stress. I will say more about Aretha's love songs under a separate subtitle.

Afterword: There's one further creative relationship in the business world, forged by producer Jerry Wexler, head of Atlantic records. Columbia never allowed Aretha to let her real talents flower. They 'managed' her within a hierarchical White business model, telling her what to play. Jerry let Aretha choose her own songs and lead from the keyboard. Her accompanists heard the song played, and picked up the chord changes from Aretha's piano playing. While some arrangements came later in her career, mostly they are 'head' arrangements, without written scores. 'The medium is the message'.

'Think' and Civil Rights

'Think' is Aretha's response to feminist, racial and worker struggles of the late 60s. It spoke of emotional stress underlying her first hit 'I Never Loved a Man,' in 1967. She was victim of physical and emotional abuse by a husband with alcohol addiction. This continuing abuse finds expression in 'Think'. Her marriage was nearing a divorce. She's telling her partner to think what he's doing to her. And the joy in this song comes from her anticipation of freedom from this loveless relationship. And clearly, she is telling all men whatever the colour, to have respect for women.

In February 16 1968 Dr Martin Luther King, friend and confidant to the Franklin household, flew in to Detroit to attend a Town Hall mayoral function to declare that day Aretha Franklin Day in honour of her musical achievements. Dr King also thanked her for her financial and other services given to his Southern Christian Leadership Conference. She overheard Dr King discuss

with her father a tense situation in Memphis where two sanitation workers had been crushed to death by a faulty truck. The union struck, and King saw this as yet one more battle in the civil rights struggle. On April 4 he was shot on the balcony of the Memphis motel he was staying at. 'Think' challenged Whites to think about how they were treating Blacks.

And in support of a wider consciousness-raising, early 1969 she gave financial assistance to Dr Angela Davis, a radical activist and university lecturer, who founded a sisterhood linked to the Black Panther movement. She faced imprisonment for these beliefs and sought financial help to cover legal costs.

'Freedom' for all people, as proclaimed in the Bible-based preaching of her father, and the socialist and Marxist teachings of Dr Davis, is the repeated call and response in the chorus of the song. These are her own words. The performance is riveting. Her keyboard playing is a propulsive engine, the drummer is stoking hard, while her gospel shouts punctuate the 'freedom' call:

'Think' 1968

Think (think) think (think) think (think)
 Think (think) think (think) think (think)
*Chorus: You better think (think) think about
 what you're trying to do to me
 Yeah, think (think, think),
 let your mind go, let yourself be free*

Let's go back, let's go back, let's go way on way back when
 I didn't even know you, you couldn't have been too
 much more than ten. (just a child)
 I ain't no psychiatrist, I ain't no doctor with degrees
 It don't take too much high IQ's to see what you're
 doing to me

*Bridge: Oh freedom (freedom),
 freedom (freedom), freedom, yeah freedom
 Freedom (freedom), freedom (freedom),
 freedom, ooh freedom*

There ain't nothing you could ask I could answer you
 but I won't (I won't) I was gonna change, but I'm not,
 if you keep doing things I don't

People walking around everyday, playing games, taking
 scores
 Trying to make other people lose their minds.

Well be careful, you're gonna lose yours.

You need me (need me) and I need you (don't you know)
 Without each other there ain't nothing we can do

There ain't nothing you could ask I could answer you
 but I won't (I won't)

I was gonna change, but I'm not, if you're doing things
 I don't

You need me (need me) and I need you (don't you
 know)

Without each other there ain't nothing we can do

Think about - ah me, think about - ah me,

Think about - ah me, think about it.... repeat....

You had better stop and think before you think, think!

Aretha Franklin and Respect – songs of love

In this final section I cover Aretha's love songs, both secular and spiritual, but more often, secular/spiritual, the two joined together like two sides of the same coin. Two of her finest albums are *Spirit in the Dark* 1970 and *Young, Gifted and Black* 1972.

The producer Jerry Wexler worked closely with Aretha in those Atlantic recordings that define her greatness. There are quotations from Wexler that sum up the qualities of the personal love songs recorded, in both gospel and blues styles, merging as Soul music. These are Jerry Wexler's words on 'Spirit in the Dark', title song for the first album: 'A blend of the sacred and secular whose lyrical ambiguity appeals to fans of every stripe...It's Aretha conducting church right in the middle of the smoky night club.'

I follow with detailed coverage of 'First Snow in Kokomo', an unknown gem with both words and music by Aretha: 'First Snow in Kokomo' from *Young, Gifted and Black*. This is not Sister Ree's political preaching. It's not a feminist challenge against male abuse of women. It's not in the R&B style but rather a ballad in the style of the Female Troubadours popular at the time: Carole King, Roberta Flack, Carly Simon. She and close friends are visiting Kokomo in Indiana, Midwest U.S. It's winter and snow begins to fall. To those living further south, their first experience of snow was magical. It's an intimate domestic scene, sharing love of music and the snowy landscape with

friends, observed by an outsider who never had a happy home life.

Her mother left home when Aretha was 10, and died a few years later. Her preacher husband abused his preacher's role, having intimate relations with other women. Aretha's Mum was a one-man woman, so she left the family and the children in care of other church mothers. The sisters Carolyn and Erma would say that Aretha never really recovered from her mother's leaving. She suffered further abuse in later relationships with men.

Erma makes this comment on Aretha's romantic fantasies: 'There's something very sweet about my sister's vision of herself as a princess in a fairy tale. She meets a successful and handsome man and, in her mind, turns him into a brave knight on a black stallion. He's going to carry her off, slay all her dragons, and solve all her problems. It's the way a little girl thinks, not a grown woman. In that way, Aretha never grew up.'

Nevertheless, the sisters want to remind themselves and us of a happier sister, capturing in this song the present moment with friends. 'It showed us that Aretha had the quiet heart of a poet. It was a very simple but also a very poignant statement.' The imagery includes Chuck Rainey, bass player, slipping in the snow and asking if he has a red nose, another friend is playing bass and another is expecting a baby. A 'coronet' is a cornet. When Aretha says: 'Could it be done? Yes, I could do it'. I think she's asking can I capture this magic in a song? Indeed, she can. Once again, Aretha leads on keyboard.

First Snow in Kokomo

The first snow in Kokomo...
Off an Indiana highway,
I was on my way to Kokomo...

A funny friend named Chuck
slipped and bumped his head
(ooooops!),
And as we picked him up,
asked us had his nose turned red...
That was the first snow in Kokomo...

Kenny learning to blow his horn...
I was feeling right up to it;

Could it be done? Yes, I could do it...
That first snow in Kokomo...

Jimmy Dee playing a bass
he was learning to play;
Applegate discovered a coronet,
almost right away...
Reggie expecting a baby,
and was Freddie kinda blue!
That was the first snow in Kokomo...

Jimmy Dee has put his bass away,
And I wonder if Applegate
ever learned to play?
Kenny is really,
really blowing his horn,
And a baby named Moishe
has been born... (Pretty little baby...)
Freddie's getting ready
to make things right
... (Right on, Freddie!)
Since that first snow,
that first snow in Kokomo...

Another quotation from Jerry Wexler: 'The songs she chose or wrote were loosely but significantly autobiographical. If she couldn't feel it, forget it; if she didn't live it, she couldn't give it. And although I'm sure five-and-dime psychologists could write volumes on her reliance on unreliable men, she actually broke the chain of songs of self-pity, those poignant masochistic lyrics sung by her mythic soul sisters like Bessie Smith, Dinah Washington and Billie Holiday. Aretha would never play the part of the scorned woman; she wouldn't beg her man to come back no matter what. Her middle name was Respect.'

Aretha Franklin's artistry in song is a rich legacy to humankind. Her contribution of music to march on the streets for human rights was her creation for the public cause. Her love songs, lifting others in reflective or dancing mood, was what she created for her own healing. We are blessed to be witnesses to both her public and private transformative revelations.

1. The three Icons of Rock talks are available on Podcasts, via the Manawatu People's Radio website www.mpr.nz/show/wesley
2. The songs covered in the article are found on compilations of Aretha Franklin's Atlantic recordings, or single CD recordings. For example, 'First Snow in Kokomo' is on *Young, Gifted and Black*.

John Thornley

Interesting Texts

What follows is a thought-provoking meditation based on Psalm 76. Unlike most contemporary ideas of God's judgement, this psalm sees judgement as a positive. It praises God as an awe- and fear-inspiring judge who will give the poor and oppressed justice.

It argues that we belittle God, but that while God's judgement is against that belittling, it nevertheless affirms us.

We have belittled God

We have made God small
Our brains limit His extent
Our judgments take priority over His
Our will avoids His truth
Our narrow hearts imprison Him
Our interests make Him useful
We have made God small.

We have made God small.
Our thinking turns him into theology.
Our prayers prescribe his behaviour.
Our sermons talk past him.
Our liturgies make of him a legend.
Our piety makes him bourgeois.
We have made God small.

We have made God small.
He doesn't fit into our assembly lines
He is not allowed to decide in the Editor's office
He shouldn't say anything in our offices
He mustn't interfere in our laboratories.
He shouldn't teach in our schools.

But God remains God,
Against us and so for us
Names make Him known
Majestic, Eternal, Powerful and Awful,
Terrible and Graceful is He
God be thanked that he remains God.
Against us and so for us.

[Psalm 76: 8 and 9]
The Earth is shocked and falls silent
When God stands up to judge
And help all those suffering on earth.
God be thanked that he remains God.
Against us and so for us.
God be thanked that he remains God.
Against us and so for us. Johannes Hansen

A "God Meditation"

Klemens Tilmann was a German Roman Catholic theologian with a doctorate in philosophy. He specialised in meditation in which he combined the Catholic tradition with more Eastern traditions.

"A young man asked an older man, from whom he thought that he would be able to say something about God: "Where is God?" He answered: "Sit down here – and he pointed to a chair – then I will tell you. The young man sat down expectantly, whereupon the older man began:

"God is *behind* me, because I come from him and he is a backing for me and a power that supports me. God is *in front* of me, because the flow of gifts and tasks comes towards me, above all in the people that encounter me. And I am always on the way towards Him.

God is *below* me; for he carries me in my existence. Without him, I would sink into nothingness.

God is *above* me; he sees me and guides me and allows me to find the right path.

God is *around me*; because I come to him with my mistakes. Then he embraces me like the father did to the prodigal son and holds me fast. Already in the psalms it says "You hem me in, behind and before."

God is *in* me. He gives me inner joy and peace, love and patience, trust and a great expectation.

If you want to experience this, then go into silence, where no-one will disturb you, think about God who is behind you and in front of you, below you and above you, around you and in you and continually say "My God, here I am"; or: "Have mercy". Then you will soon experience what I experience and not only know where God is, but rather how he is there and what he is for us."

*Translated from Klemens Tilman Leben
aus der Tiefe 1979*

Book Review

Seven Types of Atheism

By John Gray

John Gray is often described as a pessimist and a career contrarian. He certainly loves putting a view that counters the conventional wisdom and that is why I appreciate him so much. No theist himself, his criticisms of atheists and particularly the new atheists, I find devastating. While they

While atheists may call themselves freethinkers, for many today atheism is a closed system of thought. *John Gray*

think they have abandoned and debunked religion, Gray thinks that they continue ways of thinking that derive from monotheism and the 'religion' they debunk is largely American fundamentalism, just a small subset of a hugely diverse phenomenon.

Here's a summary of the seven types:

1. **The New Atheism** (Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and many others) regards religions as erroneous scientific hypotheses, a primitive sort of science, when in Gray's view they are not theoretical explanations, but a way of finding meaning. The values espoused cannot be derived from atheism.
2. **Secular Humanism**. This is characterised by a belief in progress, which is a secular variant of Christianity. Before Christianity, history was regarded as going in cycles; sure, things might improve, but then they would go back again. "When secular thinkers tell the history of humankind as a story of progress, they flatter themselves that they embody the progress of which they speak." John Stuart Mill was its founder. It runs on the principle, "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" but provides no arguments for being altruistic when this conflicts with my wants or needs. Secular humanists believe that

humanity can raise itself to a higher level through the exercise of reason. In other words, it continues with a Christian view of morality.

"Humanity is not going to turn itself into God.... The idea that the human species is a collective agent, setting itself 'big projects'....is a humanist myth inherited from monotheism."
John Gray on Homo Deus

3. **Scientific Humanism**. This type of atheism believes itself to be merely following the science, when in fact it is turning it into a kind of religion. Many variants rely on evolution and equate social evolution with progress, even though in Darwin's theory, natural selection is a purposeless process.
4. **Modern Political Religion**. Various atheisms try to bring salvation through politics. You could call this 'revolutionary millenarianism.' A social struggle is seen as an event of unique importance, a cataclysm from which the world will emerge totally transformed. Lenin's communism, Hitler and the Nazis, and American attempts to install their values throughout the world in a succession of wars, are all examples of political religion.
5. **God-haters**. William Empson came to a damning judgement of the Christian God by considering the Christian heaven, in which the just are allowed to see perfectly the sufferings of the damned, rather like Nazi concentration camp inmates, who are encouraged, through small privileges, to torture their fellows.
6. **Atheism without progress**. For example, George Santayana and Joseph Conrad.
7. **Mystical atheism**. For example, Arthur Schopenhauer. Here the boundary is not clear between atheism and an apophatic theism. *The Editor*

A Short History of God

In the old days, the bible was thought to be a single harmonious revelation of God. It was only when modern biblical scholarship began to investigate the bible using the same methods as would apply to any ancient literary deposits, that it became apparent that concepts of God had evolved over time. The following is your editor's amateurish attempt to briefly capture major stations on the way.

1. **Polytheism.** The patriarchs were not united by faith in a single God but rather by clan relationships. This is manifest most clearly when Jacob steals Laban's family gods and Laban chases after him in a vain attempt to retrieve them.
2. **Henotheism 1.** During the time of the 12 tribes of Israel, they apparently shared a belief in Yahweh, but this didn't mean they denied the reality or power of other gods.
3. **Henotheism 2.** When Israel occupied the promised land, they had a choice whether to adopt the agricultural gods (Baals) of the new land, or to keep the god they had. "Choose you this day whom you will serve" was Joshua's message and it reflected a communal society in which the whole group shared the same beliefs. To follow a different set of beliefs would be to exclude yourself from the community.
4. **Monotheism.** It was only with second Isaiah, after the experience of exile, that Israel came to the view that other gods were powerless, even non-existent.
5. **God as creator.** Early on, Yahweh was celebrated as giver of the land in a harvest festival (ceremony in which they brought the first fruits of the land). God gave the promised land but was not responsible for all of creation. Only later, with the prophets, did this emerge as a claim of god's sovereignty against the power of the Baals.

6. **Theism.** Christianity is the result of a blend of Greek philosophy and Hebrew spirituality. That resulted in a more philosophical concept of God.
7. **Deism.** With the influence of Newton's cosmology, some concluded that God simply set the universe in motion in an original act of creation, but has been essentially inactive since. They tended to regard the universe as a vast machine.
8. **Pantheism.** This view identifies God with the world, or with the power manifest everywhere in the world. It denies that there is a distinct personal or anthropomorphic god. *Deus sive Natura* (God or nature), said Baruch Spinoza.

"God did not create the world. God is not really a Creator. It is far better to say: God is the world. God is not the Creator but rather the power of creation. In the East we have always imagined God as a dancer, not as creator. Why? God isn't a painter, for when the painter paints his picture, the picture becomes separated from the painter.... God isn't a painter, isn't a potter, God is a dancer... In dancing the dancer and the dance are one; they can never be separated. The dancer is the dance. And when the dancer is really in the dance, then there is no longer a dancer in him, everything disappears. He is simply pure vibrating energy.... The dance comes to completion when the dancer dissolves himself in it. In the same moment when the dance stops, you can't find the dance anywhere, it isn't separate from the dancer.... God is not the Creator of the world. God is its creative power, its soul. He is in the trees and the rocks, in you, in me, he is everywhere, he is everything. But to get to know this God, you will have to give up your speculations. For if He is in you, what's left to conjecture? Why don't you simply go inwards? Come to a point where no thought exists, and you will know what God is."

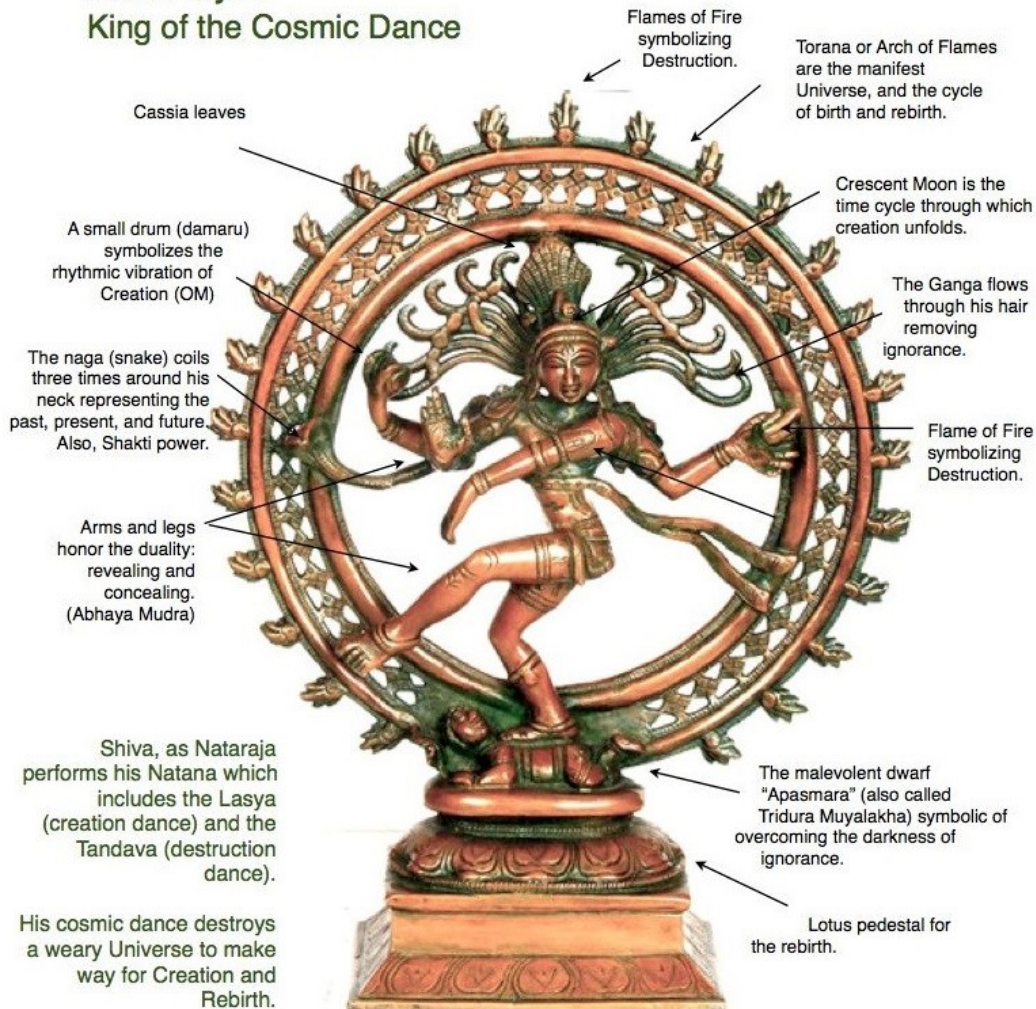
Osho

In researching nature, we are pantheists,
In composing poetry, polytheists,
In morality, monotheists.

Goethe

Shiva

Nataraja: King of the Cosmic Dance



Shiva Nataraja (the dancing Shiva) is an important Hindu bronze image. Shiva is one of the supreme gods and this image expresses the dynamic rhythm of the cosmos – creation, and destruction. Shiva is surrounded by a great circle of flames. This symbolises the cosmos which he sets on fire. Underneath the right foot is a dwarf-like demon symbolising forgetfulness and ignorance. At one level, the image symbolises the repeated creation and destruction of a universe that exists for an inconceivably long time. At another level, it symbolises the wisdom that overcomes ignorance and acquiesces in a world characterised by destruction as much as by creation.

There is nothing here of a comforting heavenly Father who cares for us and looks after us. This image is merciless in showing us the way the world actually is. The cosmos does not care for us. It will eventually destroy earth and any humans who are living on it, without the slightest qualm. Both life and death are part of existence and spiritual wisdom involves coming to terms with this. The dancing Shiva is an expression of a deep spirituality and an invitation to affirm life in all its various manifestations.

The physicist Fritjof Capra sees it as an image for the vibrating atoms of modern physics.

The Editor