

## God Yesterday and Today...Part 1

One definition of an atheist is “a person with no invisible means of support”. You may have heard of the dyslexic atheist who said he did not believe in a dog!

Belief in gods has been a part of civilization for as long as we know. Sometimes those who say “I don't believe”, do not clarify what it is that they do not actually believe. A good question to ask someone who says “I don't believe in God”, is “what kind of God don't you believe in?” Often you would find yourself agreeing with them, when they answer that question.

People within common faiths have believed very different things, about their god, and what that god wants, demands, calls for or promises. Exploring what this means for us today might be challenging, but it does not have to be unsettling. Throughout history people have had to make big shifts in their thinking about their god or gods, whenever their culture has been challenged by new discoveries and especially when they have met the gods of other cultures. What seems secure and makes sense at one moment, can suddenly be exposed as insufficient.

We are living in an age when science has made so many huge discoveries that offer explanations for ‘how things work’, that we can sometimes be overwhelmed. Our own Catholic tradition underwent enormous upheaval following the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council (1962-1965). Many people felt rudderless, many felt excited.

If we can appreciate just a little of the journey our fellow humans have travelled in seeking to understand their world, who or what created it and sustains it, and how they have expressed this, we can more bravely face the issues of this generation, and how the message of Jesus calls us to recognise his God among, around and within us. In turn this can help us see how Passionist Family Groups can help us live our faith in Jesus' God in a unique way.

Since the period when humans moved from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to agricultural settlements 11,000 years ago, belief in gods has been ‘recorded’ (carvings, pottery images, funeral rites etc). Particular gods reflect the physical world that surrounded people and what they needed to survive and in different eras and at different times of need, particular gods dominated.

At one time, nearly every culture worshipped the sun (or suns) and in fact Christianity borrowed the December 25<sup>th</sup> festival of the sun from Roman civilization. No modern culture worships the sun because scientific discoveries have revealed its true nature.

Belief in gods led to organised religions and cults. Opposing cultures often mocked each other's gods (beliefs), fought battles against them and sometimes destroyed them.

The story of Elijah and the 850 Priests of Baal in 1 Kings 18 is a wonderful example of what can happen when one's image of the divine changes. In this case, Elijah came to discover that his god was not to be found in power and destruction, but in silence

When belief in a god changes, weakens or is lost, it affects the religion and its adherents, and the church is experiencing something like this today, and it has been partly caused by the new god of global consumerism, the many questions of science that challenge traditional beliefs and the apparent irrelevance of much of the church teachings and liturgy. Younger people also question the relevance of the Biblical God. These realities are affecting our Passionist Family Group membership and invite us to reflect on some fundamental questions and re-examine how our everyday faith can be lived and witnessed

Every culture has sought to address the fundamental questions of life that they have experienced. (Who am I? How did I get here? Why am I here? Where am I going?). People of the land have different interpretations from people of the sea. All of them experience suffering and death and seek to explain it to their themselves and especially to their children. They live around a natural landscape and they seek to explain how it formed. They seek to understand the place of animals and their relationship with them. The snake was despised in Biblical Israel yet considered sacred by Aboriginal Australians. People have always sought to clarify their obligations with one another and towards their neighbours or enemies.

Religious traditions are being challenged by modern science to reconsider their understanding of the divine, and theology needs to re-examine its obsessive focus on the human, and consider instead, the interconnected relationships of all life. In the twelfth century, Thomas Aquinas suggested that "*A mistake about creation will necessarily result in a mistake about God*". Belief is affected by our worldview and this affects everything we do and why we do it.

Developmental psychologist James Fowler proposed that our development in faith undergoes changes according to our human development and that this is usually related to our age. The first stage is fantasy or vibes (until around age seven) where we pick up or believe what we feel, sense or are told by adults. God is like a magician. Between age seven and twelve we become literal and see things in a black and white manner. It is common at this stage of life to see things in terms of fairness, so at this stage of life one usually expects God to be fair. Many adults never grow out of this expectation.

Between ages twelve and seventeen or slightly older, we go through a stage of conforming as we seek to build our identity. As friendship becomes a real part of our lives many begin to experience God as a friend, and a relationship with Jesus can make this more real. Throughout these stages, faith develops outside of our own reflection, and in fact many adults (e.g. fundamentalists and literalists) never grow past this or the earlier stage. Many later adolescents adopt a single model form of faith to which they become committed. It might be within the tradition they grew up with or something new.

At an age of life when maturity starts to suggest simplistic options are not adequate, a person can take up a broader 'many models' stage which involves flexibility and respect for other view points. God then be truly appreciated as both close and personal as well as ultimate mystery.

No one person has all the answers. There is a well known parable that tells of several blind men who had never come across an elephant before. They were invited to feel a part of the elephant and explain what it was. The one who felt the trunk said, an elephant is like a snake. The one who felt the tusk said, an elephant is like a spear. The one who felt the ears said, an elephant is like a fan. The one who felt the tail said, an elephant is like rope. The one who felt the one of the legs said, an elephant is like a tree trunk. The ones who felt the body said, an elephant is like a wall. None of them separately, could describe an elephant.

If we reflect on where our ideas of God came from, they are a mixture of what we learned from within our traditions(s), the influence of others and our own experience. Throughout history, life events have led many people to take up a totally new belief. Unless we refuse to be open minded, this always happens when our worldview changes and traditions are forced to update to reflect the changes. We are living in such a time.

Perhaps we have never thought about it, but before any humans existed, what was God's relationship with life? There are several periods to consider. First, the long period of 13.8 billions years ago when the first flaring of light occurred (Big Bang) until Earth came into being 4.5 billion years ago. It was not until 460 million years ago that life on land appeared. 245 million years ago, eighty-five percent of species on the earth (most of them in the sea) were extinguished. The first birds appeared 160 million years ago and the dinosaurs became extinct 67 million years ago. It was less than 150,000 years ago that Homo Sapiens appeared. What was God's relationship with earth at these various stages? How might God be imagined, before humans existed?

How might God be imagined during the early times human existence: of ancient hunter gatherers; of agricultural humans; of the first urban humans; of early and large civilizations; of the people of Israel; of early Christianity; of 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific humans; of modern humans; of future technological humans? Perhaps it would be like the blind men and the elephant?

While we cannot be religious in the same way as early peoples, we can identify with their experiences. There have been significant changes in humanity from hunter-gatherer, to agricultural, to village and then city dwellers, to scientific-technological and ecologically minded humans. Throughout these changes, it has not been possible to retain the same views of God. We can note changes throughout the development of various peoples and the myths they held. As people developed new forms of life, their need for a particular god sometimes lessened and became weaker and more remote, Sometimes the god was abandoned. That is still happening today.

Our Church as we have known it, is dying. To put this in perspective, the forty thousand churches in France were reduced to one hundred and fifty following the French revolution! Something new will emerge as it did in France. Our PFGM is one clue to what is possible, but even PFG's as we have known them are dying. The younger generation is becoming religionless.

Their desire for community is strong but their sense of the sacred is dull. They live in a technological age that promises many of the things that religion either once promised or has failed to satisfy. Religious language and belief systems do not resonate with their worldview, which seeks pluralism and inclusion.

What we know about the universe was not known to previous generations. To be a part of the future Church we must have relevant, not 'outdated' images of God. At the same time, we have to be mindful that we cannot fully understand or describe God. It proved difficult for single deity religions to achieve their kind of belief, other than over a long process. As people developed a more personal relationship with the forces around them, they began to identify these forces as deities, attributing certain forces to particular gods. In this way, a multitude (poly) of gods (theism) emerged. Such believers were later referred to as pagans. Polytheism was popular because people felt their gods were accessible. The designation of the gods was not dissimilar in intent, from the patronage of Catholic saints, each with a particular area of 'responsibility' (Anthony when you lose things, Jude for hopeless situations etc). St Fiacre is patron of gardeners!

Early humans were nomadic hunter-gatherers. They lived in small family groups and were dependent on finding food. Nature was beyond their control. They observed the rhythms of day and night, sunrise and sunset, thunder and lightening, rain and rainbows and for those who lived near the sea, they would have observed the changing tides. Not surprisingly, their sense of a greater creating power was hidden in the sky as they tried to comprehend how these various forces interacted with each other and what or who controlled them. This has been referred to as the sky God.

As humans moved from hunter-gatherer societies into the agricultural age, fertility was regarded as a mysterious and highly valued power. Humans began to create figures of pregnant women and many developed a Mother Goddess cult. Sun worshipping developed as did the idea of offering the 'first fruits' of the harvest, during this time. While fertility gods, like the Sky god, have receded in the minds of modern people, there are also traces of both that are still evident today, even among Christian believers.

In subsequent developments such as that of settled village life, and then the movement into urban cities, awareness of the sacred was structured into a variety of religious activities. This sacred presence was revealed or experienced in a variety of ways, such as in nature, historical events, art, music, dance and ritual. It was felt in inner peacefulness and outer healing and through the whole range of human experiences, including suffering, pain, love, beauty, grief and death. It seems their early religious experiences were 'spirit' experiences such as animism

which is still strong in some present day cultures. To express this belief, the spirits and energies of nature were commonly personified as animals.

Archaeological evidence suggests that as fertility became better appreciated in Neolithic or New Stone Age village life between 5,000 and 10,000 years ago, expressions of the earth as Mother, began to appear, extending the Mother Goddess image.

As civilizations developed and other lands and their peoples were conquered, the warrior image became more popular for depicting the divine. In turn, as kingdoms arose, cultures included references to King, Lord and Almighty, to denote God. These are still the most commonly used terms in Christian prayer today despite the millennia of change that occurred and the fact that many modern Christian cultures have never known a king.

The first Biblical creation account was probably written around 560 BCE and throughout it, God is mostly referred to as Elohim. Humans were not seen then not servants of the gods, but an image of God, trustees of creation and superior to other forms of life. The second account of creation is an older account, possibly edited around 900 BCE. It identifies God as creating heaven, which as in other nearby cultures, was considered to be a solid dome. Then God created the Earth and the seas. Next God created vegetation, then the sun, moon and stars. Next were sea animals and birds and finally land animals and humans. There was no attempt to be scientific in telling this story. God then breathed (God's) life into the man through his nostrils so he now possessed God's spirit. The woman was formed later, from his rib, so that the man had a companion.

In this Genesis myth, all of creation is a revelation of the sacred, and humans are connected to all other life. It admits the reality of sin and death and developed an explanation for this. The myth includes a flat earth supported above chaotic waters. Over the earth was a solid dome, the firmament, which protected the earth from the chaotic waters above. Beneath the earth was a cavity, called Sheol where all the dead were assembled.

The Hebrews came to a unique understanding that God was 'one'. This implied that that the universe was created and cared for by a single God, and that people were not at the whims of many gods, each governing their own province (fertility, harvests, victory etc) according to their own laws. At the same time it is important to appreciate what a struggle monotheism has been, and to appreciate this, especially within our own Judeo-Christian tradition. It is also necessary to understand something of the effect the cultures surrounding the people of Israel had on their beliefs.

Both in Babylon and throughout the Middle East, myths developed that spoke of the competing gods, most of whom had their own 'area' of responsibility. These myths influenced the people of Canaan where Judaism, Christianity and Islam

have their roots. The supreme Canaanite god was El and the Bible often makes mention of El (e.g. El ohim, El Shaddai and Israel-el), as it does of Baal (El's son), the god of fertility and storms. In fact the Canaanite myths which reflected the death of a god and that god's return to the divine realm (which happened to Baal) appear in many cultures, including Christianity.

The Biblical story tells of Abraham leaving his home city of Ur (in what is today southern Iraq). Ur had a temple dedicated to Nanna the moon god. When he arrived in Canaan around 1850BCE, Abraham made an offering, not to Nanna, but to the local god, as was common practice. It is most likely this god was El. Abraham was introduced to God as El Shaddai, god of the mountain. It was not to be until Moses about 400 years later, that YHWH 'appeared'. It seems likely from the Biblical story, that the patriarchs followed typical belief of the times and worshipped several gods, while recognising El as the superior god.

The Biblical story highlights that it was long battle for the people of Israel to accept the 'One' god. The fact that one of the ten commandments declares that 'You must not have other gods instead of me', indicates that people did believe in other gods, and as if to prove this, while Moses was up on Mt Sinai receiving the commandments for his people, his priest-brother Aaron was helping to build a golden calf, an idol to the god Baal! A thousand years after Abraham, worship of Baal among the Israelites was common. Even King Josiah's pagan wife Queen Jezebel worshipped Baal around 630BCE.

We can also note that Abraham's God, El was very different to YHWH. El appears to Abraham as a friend. Sometimes El takes on a human form and he and Abraham even meet face-to-face. They share a meal and they have an argument! It was typical and understandable, that the gods within various cultures of this time shared the same nature as humans. El offered friendly advice and guided Abraham, as he also did with Isaac and Jacob.

Genesis says that God appeared to Abraham by an oak tree near Hebron. Following his vision of the ladder, Jacob dedicated a shrine to Beth (house)-El and committed himself to Elohim (his only god). Later, he actually wrestled with God (Gen 32: 24) and asked his name. When Jacob is not told God's name this conveys an understanding that God cannot be controlled. Interestingly, Jacob declared "I have seen God face to face and survived". Later, such a proclamation would be considered blasphemous. Following years of slavery in Egypt, a liberator was introduced. Moses received his mission from a very different kind of God to Abraham. When Moses sought to know this God's name, he learns that this God is 'I am who I am'. In other words, "You can't know"!

God continued to be revealed as a powerful tribal God and not yet a universal God. He smashed the Egyptian armies having previously sent horrible plagues that caused untold suffering. The Israelites saw that their God was more powerful than the Egyptian gods and that he was a liberator. It was good to have this God, provided you were an Israelite! The terrible pain and death inflicted on the people of Egypt in the Exodus, highlights the huge price that was paid for a belief in

'election' when this was seen not as election for justice, but for privilege. YHWH became known as YHWH Sabaoth, god of the armies, who initially seemed to show little compassion for anyone other than his own tribe. This mentality reflects human thinking of the time about their gods, and it remains alive today in the vengeance and self-righteousness of fundamentalism.

When Moses went up to Mount Sinai, unlike Abraham or Jacob, he was unable to see God. This was a development in recognition that we cannot 'know' God. This is a difficult step to take for anyone. The resulting image of God from this experience is that God can be displeased, jealous, and changing. These were human characteristics, along with gentleness and compassion, projected on to God. The people were directed not to have other gods, but when they returned to Canaan, they did worship other gods.

It was a long journey to faithfulness when God seemed out of reach. It was the emergence of the prophets that brought a new dimension to the Israelite understanding of God during a remarkable period known as the Axial Age that extended from around 700BCE-200CE. During these centuries the great religions and the Jewish prophets emerged, many of them within one hundred years of each other. It was a time marked by the growth of trading networks, the rise of large cities and extreme violence resulting from increased warfare. Despite their great diversity of culture and geography, there was a common recognition that compassion and social justice were primary values. There are hopes of a similar revival in our day.

Confucius and Lao-tzu in China, Gautama Buddha in India, Zoroaster in Persia, Thales and Pythagoras in Greece and the major prophets of Israel, were all filled with this spirit. It is sobering to hear Karen Armstrong speaking of religious people today, suggest that *"the religion of compassion is only followed by a minority; most religious people are content with decorous worship in a synagogue, church, temple or mosque."*

Isaiah became aware that YHWH was no longer a god of war, nor a tribal deity and he was not confined to Israel. His otherness filled the whole world. Rather than attributing the destruction of Israel either to the fault of the people or the power of Assyria (and its gods), Isaiah saw that this was actually the work of YHWH, who was using Assyria to lead the people to something new. As a prophet of the Axial Age, Isaiah had moved past the experience of war, power and might as signs of God's presence. Now God could be experienced in either defeat or victory and through everyday political events. This was a God of history, not just of one people or one kind of experience. This was to be a step away from cultic observances that recognised God in victory, to a God also recognised in sorrow.

Israel's worldview was challenged by the Babylonian exile which lasted for nearly fifty years (587-538BCE) and it seems the majority of the deportees or their descendants did not return to Israel. Those taken into exile were mostly the professional people and priests. They had to practice their religion in a new way, because they had no temple and they had lost the land promised to them. Without

a temple they came to a new recognition - God does not live in temples! Even more, they came to appreciate that God does not live only in their land (Israel) or their city (Jerusalem). Those who returned to Jerusalem took back a different understanding of their faith, which must have been very challenging for those who had not shared that experience in Babylon.

Those who had remained behind had suffered extreme famines and an overall sense of hopelessness which is reflected in any of the Psalms. They too had needed to revise their practices of worship because they had no temple, and no priests! We can better appreciate this experience if we relate it to our own lives today. How would you live your religion without a temple (no parish church or no priests)? Would you have stayed in Babylon after the exile or returned to Israel? Can you see traces of 'your' God in this story?

In 332 BCE Alexander, defeated the Persians and the Greek empire was born. Many aspects of Greek culture were attractive to Jews and some aspects of Judaism were attractive to Greeks, including the synagogue gatherings and their belief in YHWH. Judaism began to be 'Hellenised'. Greek influence became strong in Israel and the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek. Here they encountered the difficulty of one culture trying to interpret the language of another. Many people took on Greek names and learned to speak Greek.

A Hellenist party formed to promote Greek culture and philosophy and to liberalise some of the Jewish laws. The Pharisees being keen to preserve Jewish traditions promoted an idea of the sacred being present in every day life. It was this spirituality that allowed people to celebrate faith and experience the divine presence in their own homes, and at their own meals, as if they were in the Temple. This became necessary during some of the really difficult times, such as when King Antiochus IV from Syria, captured Jerusalem about 203 BCE and deposed the high priest, bringing the long line of succession to an end.

Some years later, Antiochus retaliated against an uprising and desecrated the Holy of Holies in the Temple in a deeply horrific way, killing numerous people. Six years after this event, Judas Maccabaeus led a revolt recapturing Jerusalem and cleansing the temple. Then in 63 BCE Pompey captured Jerusalem for Rome, and as is well known, Israel was still under Roman domination, but with full religious freedom, at the time Jesus was born.

Olympian was the religion of ancient Greece and Rome. It centred on a trinity of deities, Zeus (sky) ruler of the visible world; Hades, ruler of the unseen world and Poseidon, ruler of the waters. Beneath them were twelve senior gods who were believed to meet in Council high above Mt Olympus. There were also many other gods, spirits and other supernatural beings, each of whom had an assigned function and area of operation. The tradition encouraged prayer and sacrifice for favours which influenced early Christianity along with many rituals and devotions that emerged. Ethics and morality were set aside for philosophy but this concerned Greek and Roman 'religious' thinkers and was taken up by St Paul.

At this point of outlining religious traditions (the beginning of Christianity) we can note some points.

- a) Sky gods have not disappeared (old man with a beard?)
- b) Fertility gods have not disappeared (pray for rain?)
- c) Warrior gods have not disappeared (male; Crusades, Jihad?)
- d) Special favour gods have not disappeared (saints?)

It invites some questions

1. What are the most common images of God today?
2. What is your own image of God?
4. What images might emerge by 4000 CE?

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