



Our Changing View of God

by

Victor A. Meyer
Founder of ExistentialGod.org

In this presentation, I am going to present an overview of how mankind's view of God has changed over time, and how this changing view is now causing us to rethink our relationship with God.

Evolution of the Genus "Homo"

Biology classifies the human species as *Homo sapiens* (i.e. our genus is "homo" and our species is "sapiens"). Anthropologists researching our human ancestry believe that the genus "homo" evolved from the lower life forms over three and a half million years ago. The earliest discovered species of this genus was *Homo habilis* which evolved in Africa.

Over the next two million years, *Homo habilis* evolved into *Homo ergaster*. This species spread out across Asia and Europe, but only the group that stayed in Africa survived. The Asian component of *Homo ergaster* evolved into *Homo erectus*. The European component evolved

into the Neanderthals. But, it was only the Homo ergasters that stayed in Africa that evolved into Homo sapiens, or modern man. This occurred around 150,000 years ago.

These Homo sapiens also spread out to the other continents. The Homo erectus species in Asia, however, became extinct before the Homo sapiens arrived. But, the Homo sapiens that ventured into Europe did meet up with the Neanderthals, and the two species co-existed there until the Neanderthals became extinct around 30,000 years ago.

As each new species of hominids evolved, it had a larger skull capacity than the species that came before it. This allowed for bigger brains to evolve which led to an increase in higher reasoning skills.

Ancient Hominids Had No Belief in God

There is no evidence, with the possible exception of Neanderthals, that species prior to Homo sapiens had any belief in a God. Anthropologists point to the fact that these ancestor's of mankind did not bury their dead. If someone died, they were left on the ground where they died while the tribe just moved on. The dead were eaten by scavenger animals just as is done today by all species of animals, except humans.

While there is some evidence to suggest that Neanderthals might have also buried their dead, the earliest confirmed burial site is in a cave in Israel. In this graveyard was discovered the 130,000 year old skeletal remains of Homo sapiens along with some grave goods.

This grave site suggests that the need to bury their dead may be the defining attribute that separates Homo sapiens from the earlier hominids.

The Significance of Burying the Dead

One may ask, "What is the significance of burying the dead"? The answer is that this is a ritual not performed by any other life form on

earth. It represents a need felt by early man to not let the body just be eaten by scavengers. But, why does the body need to be preserved? The presence of “grave goods” in these early burial sites suggests the beginnings of a belief in an afterlife. With the larger brain of the Homo sapiens, there developed a line of reasoning that one’s existence does not necessarily end with death. As part of the ritual for burying the dead, early mankind placed grave goods in the graves to assist the dead in their journey to an afterlife.

A Logical Path to Belief in Gods

How did a belief in an afterlife transition into a belief in gods? Since we are dealing with the non-physical entity of the human mind, we can only conjecture on a possible path.

The belief in an afterlife may have started out as just wishful thinking. However, the continued finding of “grave goods” at burial sites suggests that early mankind may have felt a deep need to provide the deceased with things they would need in their afterlife. So, even though the deceased were dead to this world, early mankind felt that their ancestors somehow lived on in spirit in another world.

The next step in this emerging view of gods was probably the calling upon the spirits of the deceased to help the living. A typical scenario would be the calling upon the spirit of a fallen warrior to help lead the living warriors to victory over their enemies.

Then, as stories of leaders and warriors were passed by word of mouth from generation to generation, it was only natural for these stories to become embellished with tales of super-human features and abilities. Eventually, these great leaders and warriors became immortalized in the tribe’s folklore. Over time, the key figures in the tribe’s folklore eventually turned into gods. By the time civilization started 6000 thousand years ago, each tribe had their pantheon of gods.

Pleasing the Gods

This pantheon of gods was not revered in the same way that we revere God today. For example, these gods were not worshipped. Also, these gods were not all-everything deities. Rather, the gods served more as protectors of the tribes. Each god in the pantheon protected the tribe in a unique way. For example, one god protected them in battle. Another god brought the spring rains so that crops could grow. A third god would help the deceased in their journey through the afterlife.

These gods had human traits and were very emotional. If tragedy struck a tribe, it was because one of the gods was angry. To keep a god from becoming angry, it was necessary to perform some action that was considered pleasing to the god.

But, how does one please a god? God's are pleased by the same things that please humans. However, gods exist in another world. The only way early man knew how to get something to the other world was by killing it so that it passed to the other world. Hence, sacrificial offerings to please the gods became a common practice throughout the ancient world.

The Axial Age

The paradigm of pleasing a pantheon of gods began to change during what has come to be known as "The Axial Age". This period of time between 800 BCE and 200 BCE was a time when men like Socrates in Greece, Confucius in China, and the Buddha on the Indian subcontinent were developing their philosophies. These philosophies were spread and exchanged by a growing number of travelling scholars. It was called the Axial Age because it identified a pivotal time in mankind's history when philosophies changed. I like to think of it as a time when the human mind evolved to the point where it could reason out a new type of relationship between mankind and God.

One new paradigm that developed at this time was the concept of monotheism. It replaced the pantheon of gods with one almighty God.

This new paradigm also introduced the concept of a soul. The soul was the part of you that continued on after death. Prior to this time, it was believed that all people entered the same afterlife upon their death. What you did during your lifetime had no bearing on what happened to you upon your death. However, a soul can go to different places depending upon what type of person you were during your life. The concept of the soul now made individuals responsible for our actions.

Salvation of the Soul

We first see the concept of monotheism in the teachings of Zoroaster, who was a Persian prophet that lived prior to the Axial Age. While Zoroastrianism as a religion faded away, it had a profound impact on the Judeo-Christian-Islam culture of a monotheistic God.

A main feature of Zoroastrianism is that there exists one God who represents all things good. God, however, is opposed by a devil that represents all things evil. Our souls are the battleground between God and the devil. God wants our soul to come to heaven upon our death as a result of our leading a virtuous life. The devil, however, tempts us to do evil so that our soul joins the devil in hell upon our death.

Over time, Christianity took this story one step further. In Christianity, there was a need for a savior to save our souls from the devil. As a result, God the Father sends His son, Jesus Christ, to Earth. Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary and eventually dies on the cross as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. It is through Jesus Christ's death on the cross that the devil is defeated and we gain entry into heaven.

Clash of Cultures

The paradigm of monotheism and the soul did not immediately replace the paradigm of the pantheon of gods. At the time when Christianity

started to spread out of Judea, the rest of the Roman Empire was still very much entrenched in their pantheon of gods. The persecution of the Christians by the Roman Empire is an example of this clash of cultures.

Eventually, the Roman Empire embraced Christianity and the monotheistic paradigm spread throughout Europe and eventually to the Americas. It is the paradigm to which many people of today subscribe.

As an interesting sideline, the old paradigm of the pantheon of gods has not totally disappeared. Even in Christianity, people pray to individual saints for that saint's intercession in an area for which the saint has notoriety. So, for example, people pray to St. Anthony to help them find something that is lost.

Scientific Revolution Brings New Challenges

The monotheistic paradigm of the Roman Catholic Church has now lasted for two thousand years. Among the poor and uneducated of the world, the Catholic Church still thrives.

Today, however, we are in the midst of a scientific revolution. Modern scientific discoveries are starting to explain things that use to be in the realm of Christian teachings. The most notable of these is the theory of evolution which has been replacing the Christian teachings of the Book of Genesis. As a result, Christianity is starting to struggle in the more affluent societies. Many people are turning to atheism and agnosticism because they can no longer accept both the Christian view of God and what is being discovered by science.

A New Axial Age?

The core problem, here, is that today's educated people can no longer accept the paradigm of a cosmic struggle between God and the devil. The traditional concepts of heaven and hell no longer seem feasible. If

people no longer believe in a heaven, a hell, and a cosmic struggle, then salvation of the soul is also meaningless to them.

It is time for a new Axial Age, one in which a new paradigm of God arises. This new paradigm must define a new relationship between mankind and God. One concept that has been appearing lately is that each individual should develop their own deep and personal relationship with God.

A second requirement of the new paradigm is that it must be consistent with scientific discoveries. For example, the theory of evolution must be embraced. Natural selection must be accepted as a proven process of evolution. However, this does not necessarily mean that God is not involved in evolution.

The concept of the Existential God provides a framework upon which a new paradigm concerning God can be developed. As individuals develop their own personal Existential Gods and then share those beliefs with others, a new paradigm may arise for the masses. Rather than resorting to atheism and agnosticism, this new paradigm will allow people to both develop a sincere relationship with God as well as accept what science is discovering.

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In Conclusion

So what lessons do we take away from this discussion? First, mankind's view of his relationship with God has been evolving, and will continue to evolve, over time. Second, despite what formal religions say, the salvation of the soul is but one paradigm to explain mankind's relationship with God. It has served mankind for thousands of years.

Today, however, the scientific revolution is requiring us to develop a new paradigm for our relationship with God. Educated people of the world cannot accept both what salvation history tells them and what

scientific discoveries are telling them. The failure to develop a new paradigm is causing these educated people to turn towards atheism and agnosticism.

Today, we are free to develop our own paradigms to define our unique personal relationships with God. Developing a personal Existential God is one way to accomplish this task. By sharing our personal Existential Gods with others, a new paradigm may arise that modern educated people can accept.

For More Information

If you would like to learn more about Existential Gods in general, or about my personal Existential God, please visit

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