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Evolving Concepts of God

JORDAN E. MCGEE

REL 2040: The Bible, Qur'an, and Western Culture, Fall 2016

Nominated by: Dr. Sharon Showman

Jordan is majoring in Organizational Leadership at Wright State University's Lake Campus. Jordan lives in Celina and manages the local restaurant, C-Town Wings. Most of her spare time is spent on music, arts, and reading.

Jordan Notes:

I am interested in learning about different religion as well as getting more in-depth with my own. This project opened my eyes to the similarities and differences of theology throughout history. I hope that people will take away new knowledge about the evolving concept of God and develop a desire to continue learning about religion.

Dr. Showman Notes:

Jordan's paper reflects a personal and theological journey many serious students who take REL 2040 *The Bible, Qur'an, and Western Culture* embrace during the semester. Many of their long-held religious ideas or beliefs are brought into focus as they engage with the content of the course. This is a significant paper in that Jordan is able to challenge her own thinking about the concept of God and seek to understand how that developed over time. Using the material from the class textbook and the Bible used for the class, she is able to exhibit an understanding of how the thinking about "God" has evolved over time by looking at three key areas, which she explores in her paper. These three areas are not only personal for her but also academically relevant for the exploration of this topic, as she does not shy away from controversial topics such as gender and God. In reading Jordan's paper, it is clear that the academic material and her reflections upon that material has challenged and, at times, comforted her thinking and understanding concerning how humans have evolved in our understanding about who and what God is and is not.

Finishing my semester examination of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, I am left searching for answers to questions I had never thought to ask. Investigating these faiths has forced me to discover facets of religions that had never been brought to my attention. While reading *Understanding the Bible*, by Stephen Harris, as well as *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, by Karen Armstrong, I could not help but wonder: How did we get from the pagan, polytheistic views of yesteryear to the religions we experience today? From the beginning of existence, people have believed in some form of heavenly being. In early times, specific deities were worshiped for explicit purposes. A person may pray to one god for harvest, another for health, and even a third for fertility. For me, certain aspects stand out from my study and research. While Armstrong furthered my understanding of the subject at hand, Harris brought to my attention the themes of how the Bible stories I was taught as a child relate to ancient narratives, the masculine-feminine debate, and how new information alters the way people worship.

Ancient civilizations in Syria worshiped multiple gods. The textbook tells us that “In both Hebrew and Canaanite languages, 'El' is the generic term for 'divine being,' but when used as a proper noun, it refers to the head of the Canaanite pantheon” (Harris, 2010). El was the sacred patron who ruled the heavens and all of creation, while his son, Baal, was responsible for the weather and rains. In Mesopotamia, more polytheism was thrown into the mix with the archaic views of Marduk, Enlil, and Ea (Harris, 2010). I found these narratives extremely engaging, as they are so different from the creation stories I grew up reading. Both variations of the Genesis story show Yahweh creating the heavens, Earth, plants, animals, and even man. According to the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation chronicles, Marduk created the universe out of the butchered body of his enemy, Tiamat (Harris, 2010). These epics also depict Enlil as a vengeful, destructive god whose plot to destroy humanity is foiled only when Ea warns man of his plan (Harris, 2010). Enlil’s flood story is reminiscent of the tale of Noah’s Ark, which was told to me as a child, when Yahweh/Elohim (dependent on the account) chose to bring the rains upon Earth, and a select few were saved by Noah, with his ever-famous ark. I agree with Harris when he suggests that during the transition to monotheism, it is probable that all of these deities were rolled up into one divine personality. Harris (2010) supports this thought by reflecting on the deluge account:

The ancient polytheistic version of the Flood story, in which two opposing deities, Enlil and Ea, take opposite rolls of destroyer and savior, thus makes reasonably good sense. When the Genesis writers

revised and adapted the Mesopotamian traditions to fit their emerging monotheism, however, they assigned the actions of three different deities- Marduk, Enlil, and Ea- to a single all-powerful divinity, Yahweh/Elohim. (pg. 496)

To me, this explanation of the almost bipolar choices made by the sometimes compassionate, sometimes merciless deity in the Hebrew scripture is plausible.

In addition to personality, the gender of Yahweh is an issue of confusion for many. According to Harris (2010):

Most biblical writers who describe sessions of the heavenly court depict its members- whether archangels, cherubim, or seraphim- as exclusively male. By contrast, the author of Proverbs 8 portrays a feminine figure- lady wisdom- as God's first creation and hence his preeminent counselor. (A feminine noun in both Hebrew [Hochmah] and Greek [Sophia], the figure of Wisdom is appropriately referred to as she.) (pg. 504)

Preilic Israelite women worshiped a mysterious goddess of whom we know very little. This “Queen of Heaven” could have been any number of beings from El’s partner, Asherah, to the Babylonian Ishtar, to a possibly female version of Yahweh (Harris, 2010). I had always been raised to believe that God was a strong, powerful man, devoid of the presumably weak instincts of women. I was fascinated to discover that the Bible itself has passages manifesting God in a compassionate, feminine light (Harris, 2010). The choice of evincing God, the creator, in a womanly context is one that is easily understood by me. During my reading, I noticed many times that a simile is used to depict the relationship between God and various matronly roles. For example, the author of Deuteronomy explicitly states, “You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth” (Deuteronomy 32:8, NRSV). Statements such as this paint a clearer picture of God in the feminine, while muddying the view of those who believe God is strictly male. I, personally, do not have a difficult time envisioning the amalgamation of several primordial deities, male and female alike, to create the God we worship today.

In addition to conflicting views of the gender-identity of God, it is also easy to write off the ideas of previous generations as crazy because they do not fit in with modern times. What we have to remember is that our idea of God is describing all of the things we do not have the technology to

explain. When I was a toddler, I was astounded when the sun came back every day after disappearing each night. Was I dumb or crazy? Of course not. I simply did not have the scientific knowledge to understand Earth's rotation. The Cargo Cults in Melanesia built runways and practiced military drills under the false idea that doing so would bring provisions. They saw military personnel working and cargo planes bringing supplies. Because they did not understand what was happening, the cargo cults believed that these movements pleased God, who would then send sustenance in the form of cargo. It is the exact same principle. Not only does technology shape the way we worship, but progressive changes in our society and the passing of time produce a new form of devotion.

In opposition to evolving technology, the words of the Bible, with the exception of variations in translation, have stayed the same for thousands of years. How we interpret these words, however, has not. The Bible tells us “You shall make for yourselves no idols and erect no carved images or pillars, and you shall not place figured stones in your land, to worship at them; for I am the lord your God” (Leviticus 26:1, NRSV). This passage clearly states that the followers of God should not be worshiping idols. Today, however, many believe that worshiping idols is a commandment reserved only against the idols of other religions. It certainly could not pertain to our crosses, pictures of God, nor statues of Jesus, could it? This is a gray area in religion. Many churches, especially the Catholic Church, are finding themselves in the midst of a paradigm shift concerning socio-political issues. New liberal attitudes in the world are causing once staunch religions to tolerate, if not accept, theories like evolution, and agreeing that science and the church can coexist. Acceptance of gender-identity disputes and same-sex marriage are matters for which views are also presently changing. The openness for interpretation of the holy works, although great for encompassing different groups of people, is the origin of turmoil for those who believe their analysis is the only one with any merit. This search for elucidation is the catalyst for an ever-changing perspective on religion.

The evolving concept of God is, in my opinion, one of the most enthralling topics I have explored in a classroom setting. This research has brought to light my understanding of the Bible, as well as the religions that helped create Christianity, as we know it. I was challenged by the understanding of the gender-nature of God and how new information alters our interpretation of these things. It is thought provoking. The realization that the concept of God has been changing for as long as humans have existed and is continuing to do so, is fascinating, challenging, and comforting.



References

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