Who is God?

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Before I start I'd better make it quite clear I'm not seriously proposing to answer that question. I don't know who God is any more than anyone else does: all I do know are some of the ways that people (including myself) invent 'God' for their own purposes, anything from 'God wanted me to win that table-tennis match' to 'if you do that again, God will punish you'. It's easy to see these Gods are phoney, but I know from bitter experience just what a hold they can have over a moderately suggestible and guilt-ridden mind. In fact it has probably taken me the best part of twenty years to see that God — who or whatever He, She or It is — does not equal Guilt with a capital G.

When I was a child, God was someone who made all sorts of rules and regulations. He said you mustn't eat bacon or shellfish, you mustn't write or go by bus on the Sabbath, and you had to light the candles and eat chicken soup every Friday night. My mother always used to cover her head with a tea towel when she lit the candles, because God said you were supposed to. Not that we really kept all the rules and regulations. My father used to buy bacon (trying to pretend to the Jewish neighbours that he didn't, while they were busy doing the same thing), we went on Saturday outings on public transport, and my father said he was an atheist and rationalist and didn't believe in religion. Later my mother said she didn't believe either, and I felt far more hurt and betrayed at her pretence. She said she only kept up the traditions and sent us to religion classes because it was good for us. As she had married a non-religious man, she didn't feel obliged to practice religion herself. Had her husband been an orthodox Jew, she would have kept an orthodox house — without in the least believing in what she did. I found this attitude confusing, belittling to women — my heroines from *Girl* comic would have made up their minds in their own right — and ultimately cynical. If there really was a God who made all these rules and regulations, surely that God should be taken seriously and not merely appeased. And if there wasn't a God, why pretend you thought there was?

When I was small I had an illustrated book of the Psalms with a picture of billowing clouds that was meant to suggest God. I can't remember when this picture ceased to be God for me — certainly not till after my uncle died and the grown-ups said he had 'gone to heaven' which I knew they didn't believe. God was also the person we learned about in classes at the synagogue and school scripture lessons. His existence was taken for granted like that of any character in fiction: the God

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who said 'Thou shalt not kill' or parted the Red Sea had about as much or as little reality as David Copperfield. Less, in some ways, as the parting of the sea seemed literally impossible. As I got older my parents explained to me how all such phenomena had natural explanations. Either that or else people must have imagined them. So I came to believe there was no need for mystery and nothing was really too big for our comprehension. Except nobody ever does quite believe that. At the same time, reading the Ten Commandments, I would be terrified that I had broken one or another of them. The one that bothered me most was 'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour' as I didn't understand what it meant. I know I thought I had broken the commandment by something I had said about somebody, and I remember my aunt reassuring me about it, but I don't remember what it was I thought I had done. Even though nobody really believed in God, they all seemed quite anxious to keep on the right side of him — and to make sure I did.

As I grew into my teens I came to admire girls at school who said they were atheists and refused to take part in assembly. There was a separate assembly for Jewish girls which I did take part in for most of my school life. At the same time, paradoxically, I admired people who were religious and took their religion seriously — they were usually Christians rather than Jews. Perhaps I felt they had an innocence and wholeness that I seemed to lack; but this didn't stop me trying to argue against their beliefs as my father had taught me. Once I had discovered the word I described myself as an agnostic and not an atheist. I knew I didn't really know what I believed, though I felt incredibly wishy-washy at admitting it. Some of the things I loved most at school were connected with religion: Christmas carols, the cellophane stained-glass windows, made by one of the art classes, that decorated the hall at Christmas, and the sound of the choir in assembly singing 'God be in my head' every Friday and 'Lord dismiss us with thy blessing' at the end of term. I would be standing outside the hall with the other girls who didn't 'go in', ready to creep in at the back for the notices after the singing, moved near to tears by the harmony of those pure voices. Perhaps it didn't matter whether 'God' existed or not: in a way the music was enough in itself. I was always surprised that some of the teachers seemed genuinely devout, and even more surprised it didn't make them nicer people. I never liked being moralised at, God or no God, and I secretly resented anyone who thought religion gave them the right to do it.

On the one hand there was religion. On the other hand, as I started to fall apart emotionally, I also became aware that there was something called mysticism. Some people, I gathered, had had some sort of direct experience of joy or beauty — or God? — which came from themselves and apparently had little to do with religion as I knew it. In English lessons we were told that poets were a special kind of people who experienced things more intensely than we ever could, and this intense experience seemed to have some connection with what I read of the mystics. As I sank deeper into depression, alienation and meaninglessness the possibility of mystical experience became a

lifeline although an abstract one. Such realms might forever be beyond me, but the fact that they were there to be experienced by others somehow helped me find the remnants of meaning. I became greedy for mystical states and thought of taking drugs to help me find them. In fact I have never taken LSD — in my later teens I was doped up to the eyeballs with anti-depressants — and have only once smoked cannabis, with little effect. Naturally I read *The Doors of Perception* by Aldous Huxley, and he became one of my heroes. When I tried to talk about such things to my parents their reaction was predictable. My mother said something like 'Well of course it's all sex really. These people go a bit funny'. My father took the line that Aldous Huxley was all very well in the early days, before he started to get mystical but even so his brother Julian was a much more interesting writer. Time and time again, usually over Sunday lunch, I would try to argue with my father about it. But it was hopeless because I was not speaking from real experience of my own — except perhaps of some of the negative states that Huxley describes in *Heaven and Hell* and my father was too entrenched in what he thought Marx had said to listen to me. He (my father) claimed to be scientific in his outlook and a rationalist, which more or less implied that anyone who wasn't must be a fool.

Going to university and getting away from home meant I had more freedom to try out some of my own ideas. I was passionately interested in Virginia Woolf and the mystical states she describes — even more interesting now in the light of a Buddhist approach — and eagerly read mediaeval mystics like Julian of Norwich. I don't know how much I could really understand or even take in, but I continued to be drawn to such writings and long for those states of being, though I was completely unable to let go of my mind on even the most mundane level. At the same time, more or less, I fell in love with someone who didn't love me and succumbed to the gentle but firm pressure of a friend who wanted to convert me to Christianity. Here then was God again, in the tangible form of the God-squad — a group of people with whom I knew I didn't really have anything in common. Lured by the promise that the mystical union I longed for was to be found within the church, I was persuaded to 'give my life to Christ' whatever that meant. In practical terms it meant going along every Sunday to a hearty evangelical church, signing up for Bible studies, meetings and courses whose simplistic content secretly appalled me, trying to have 'fellowship' with people I had nothing to say to, and feeling that I should model my lifestyle on one deprived of art, music, culture and even intelligent discussion. I didn't conform and covertly had no intention of conforming: how then did I get myself into a position where I felt I should?

The answer of course goes back to the other big G — Guilt. I was guilty about being the person I was, guilty about my own neuroticism and 'mental illness', guilty above all about the homosexual feelings that I could no longer hide from myself. And one of the first things that became clear to me was that God didn't like those feelings and thought I ought not to have them. Sex generally was frowned upon unless you were married — God obviously didn't like that either. And I was

caught up in guilt about my own materialism, vanity, over-concern with worldly things such as my course work, and inability to be nice to people, especially my family. I read a number of improving books for Christian young people which laid down pretty narrowly how one ought and ought not to be, and though they made me furiously angry I could never stop feeling they were right. I wasn't a nice person, I had always known that, and I was depressed, which was something God said you weren't supposed to be. And I didn't want to go round converting other people to something in which my own belief was fundamentally so shaky. Yet that was what God was supposed to want all Christians to do. Having been saved from eternal damnation by letting Christ into your life — how you were meant to know you had done so was never really made clear — you were then expected to go round giving other people the 'good news' so that they wouldn't be damned either. That was the bottom line, the ultimate guilt trap: either you believe this, do this, think this or damnation is your fate. *And we are right* and everybody else is wrong.

Before I sound too much like the White Queen trying to believe six impossible things before breakfast, I must say there were other sides to my embracing Christianity. Of course there was the element of rebellion against my family. They hated anyone who 'got religion', but my mother summed it up by saying 'if you have to have a religion, why can't it be the Jewish one?' She was hurt and angered by my desertion of the Judaism she no longer believed in. My father's reaction, as I remember it, was to shrug his shoulders and say 'You're meshiggeh', the Yiddish word for crazy. But above and beyond my rejection of my family's beliefs, or non-beliefs, which had repercussions for years afterwards, there was a genuine desire to find a more real spirituality than any I had known in a Jewish context. For a long time I didn't find it. Christ the liberator had done away with the legalism of the scribes and Pharisees, only to find himself in the twentieth century in the company of conservative, literal-minded, emotionally undeveloped hearties. I know I'm being unfair to a lot of the people I met in the church at that time by describing them in this way, but that is the overall picture I had. And obviously something in me must have wanted and needed that environment as well as rebelling against it.

But perhaps the most compelling reason for my 'turning to Christ' was not only a sense of guilt but a genuine sense of sin — not so much having done wrong as having failed to keep faith with something in myself. I understand that the original meaning of the Greek word was more like 'falling short of the mark', a failure or shortcoming. It seemed to me that by asking for forgiveness and accepting Christ's sacrifice I would find again some kind of lost wholeness in myself. Whenever I thought about rejecting Christianity completely, the meaning of the Communion service pulled me back. It was all there: death and new life, forgiveness, reconciliation and an unspoken sense of community. When I allowed myself to follow my own inclination, I ended up in a far less evangelical setting where ritual and sacrament, music and poetry had a proper place and doctrine left some room

for discussion. It took me several years and much agonising to arrive in a suitable church, and even then there was still conflict in me between the inner spirituality and the outward forms of churchiness — the social activities, bazaars and jumble sales, the sometimes meaningless repetition of prayers and hymns.

On one side were my mystical intuitions, such as they were, which didn't seem to conform to any particular religion or dogma. On the other was the belief, which I found hard to shake off, that unless I remained a Christian I would be going wrong, losing sight of God — whoever God was — and would probably be damned. When I began to meet people who meditated and were interested in Eastern philosophies, I immediately knew they had something I needed. But instead of merely listening to what they had to say, my Christian conditioning made me feel I had to argue with them and show them that really Christianity was right. They might think they were saving themselves by their own practices, but I as a Christian knew that only Christ could save them through grace. Yet I could see that the practices — Christian or not — were what enabled grace to happen. So my arguments were unconvinced and unconvincing, and even then I knew how arrogant the position was that I had adopted.

I tried to argue with people of other faiths and viewpoints because at the time I believed this was what God wanted. As soon as I became a Christian, 'God's will' was a central issue. I was told by the evangelical church that 'God has a plan for *your* life', and it was pretty clear the plan might well be one I didn't specially like: becoming a missionary, for instance, or giving up my cherished hopes and ambitions. I couldn't believe that the kind of person I was, with the kind of interests I had, could possibly be acceptable to God. I needed to get rid of all my pretensions, accept academic failure (I got a Second instead of the First I had hoped for) and reconcile myself to my humdrum secretarial job. It was obviously God's will that I should be doing it as He had put me there, so why was I complaining and feeling dissatisfied? Wasn't it better for me to step aside and enjoy other people's success, something I've always found difficult, than try to become something in my own right? And shouldn't I, as a woman, accept subjection to a man as the Bible told me? 'Wives, be subject to your husbands in every thing' was the text, and I both rebelled against it and secretly feared it might be right. My basic assumption in all this was that God's will could not possibly be anything I actually wanted to do: submitting to God's will meant annihilating my own personality. 'Dying unto self' I saw as a total rejection of everything I was. The idea that God might actually be able to use the person I was, with all my faults, neuroses and blemishes, was almost beyond my comprehension. I have fallen into the same trap in other contexts, confusing letting go of self into something bigger with self-destruction and non-being. But if this is what God really wants, then the obvious question is 'Why is He so cruel?'

In recent years I've moved away from Christianity and towards Buddhism — not without a similar struggle against doctrine and fundamentalism in certain contexts. I've also gone some way towards

reconnecting with my Jewish origins, from which I felt I had severed myself. That has been a question of family and culture as much as religion, though again the love of ritual has drawn me back. Latterly the idea of God as someone or something definite has tended to give way in favour of 'the Ground of our being' — a way of seeing Him, Her or It that has always made sense to me. I have always been most comfortable pursuing spirituality by looking within myself, and now I feel more able to do that through both therapy and meditation. There is a sense in which these two paths are beginning to meet together, and I'm beginning to find a way which is more honestly my own. So long as I was a Christian I always felt that my focus should be outwards. Too much introspection was unhealthy and — again — not what God wanted. But the search for my own truth that has continued through therapy has led me towards and not away from the spiritual dimension. And unless I become aware of myself I can't be aware of what's outside me in any meaningful way.

Ultimately of course 'inside' and 'outside' are not separate entities, any more than 'God' is an entity separate from 'myself'. I may know this intellectually or with my intuition, but knowing it in its fullness is more than a lifetime's work. On that level 'Who is God?' is a meaningless question. All I can do is continue to ask who God isn't, and not be afraid of the answers.