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John Bowker

# GOD

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

## God: A Very Short Introduction

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John Bowker

# GOD

A Very Short Introduction

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,  
United Kingdom

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First edition published in 2014

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014936250

ISBN 978-0-19-870895-7

Printed in Great Britain by  
Ashford Colour Press Ltd, Gosport, Hampshire

# Contents

Preface xiii

Acknowledgements xix

Note on transliteration xxi

List of illustrations xxiii

1 Does God exist? 1

2 Why believe in God? 28

3 The religions of Abraham: Jewish understandings of God 40

4 The religions of Abraham: Christian understandings of God 55

5 The religions of Abraham: Muslim understandings of God 72

6 Religions of India 84

7 On knowing and not knowing God 104

Publisher's Acknowledgements 117

References 119

Further reading 125

Index 129



# Preface

Most people throughout history and in all parts of the world have believed in God, as the majority still do. But who or what is it that they believe in? The ways in which people describe God and interact with God are so different that they have led, not just to disagreement, but even to conflict and war. Is God one or many? Is God up there or down here? Is God outside the universe or is the universe the body of God? The variety is so bewildering that any *Introduction to God* has to begin with the question, 'Who or what is God?'

It is a complicated question to answer. Even the word 'God' does not mean the same thing for all people at all times. Should we even use the word 'God'? Why not 'Goddess'? In fact many of the earliest cults and imaginations of Deity thought of her as Goddess, as the Mother who is the source and sustenance of all life. It has even been argued (particularly from archaeological remains) that 'God was female for at least the first 200,000 years of human life on earth'. In India down to the present day Goddesses as well as Gods are recognized and worshipped.

In contrast, in the so-called Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), the Deity is overwhelmingly masculine even though traces of the feminine and of God as Mother remain.

In those religions, people use masculine verbs and pronouns to refer to God, and masculinity dominates what they imagine the nature and character of God to be. That basic characterization of God affects very much how they live their lives: women, for example, have not usually, until very recently, been allowed by men to be rabbis, priests, or imams leading mixed-gender congregational prayer.

Should we, then, avoid using the word 'God' and use the word 'Deity' instead? That seems far too artificial, and in any case it obscures the fact that Deity often *is* described as God with masculine characteristics. So in general the word 'God' will be used in this book, but 'the return of the feminine' after centuries of male domination is already affecting our understanding of God. In recognition of this, and as a reminder of its importance, masculine or feminine pronouns in relation to God are not used except in quotations (which for copyright reasons cannot be altered) and in description or discussion of Indian religions where the distinction between masculine and feminine is necessary.

Of course in the end, whatever God is lies far beyond all human words and descriptions, and certainly far beyond gender. But in the meantime we have to recognize that there are a multitude of different descriptions and characterizations of God, some of them bringing gods and goddesses well within the range of human description. We have to recognize also that through time understandings of God do not remain the same. Even within a particular religion, there will be dramatic changes (and often profound disagreements) in the way in which people think and speak about God.

At first sight that may seem a bit surprising. After all, if God is *God*, surely God does not change? That may be so: 'Change and decay in all around I see: O Thou who changest not, abide with me.' Even so, what *do* change are the descriptions

and characterizations of God made at different times and in different religions.

Take, as a quick example, the movement from Dyaus to Zeus. In ancient India, the Sky was thought to be the source of life and sustenance (sun and rain) and of sudden destruction (storm and lightning). The Sky as the agent of these effects was called Dyaus. But when the different effects were attributed to separate agents (the Sun became Surya), Dyaus became one of the eight spheres of existence in which the gods and goddesses live. Dyaus meanwhile spread to other lands and became, in Greece, Zeus. Once there, Zeus became the Patriarch of the other gods and goddesses who have been described in the times of Homer (8th century BCE) as ‘a bunch of squabbling prima donnas who demand respect and homage from their human followers, and who can turn very nasty if they feel that this respect is not forthcoming.’ By the time of Aeschylus (6/5th century BCE), the characterization of Zeus is different: he has become more remote (the opening Chorus of *Agamemnon* declares, ‘Zeus, whoever he may be, if this name pleases him in supplication, so I call upon him’), and in the Hymn to Zeus written by the Stoic philosopher Cleanthes (4th/3rd century BCE), Zeus has become the only God who brings into being everything that exists and who guides all creation with the universal Word of Reason.

From that brief example we can see how people in different times and places change greatly their understandings and characterizations of God even when they use the same name or alter it only slightly. The often dramatic developments are not so surprising when we remember how much the human understanding of everything moves on from one generation to another. In the natural sciences, for example, the universe is constantly being understood in new ways which correct the past. In both cases, in the sciences and in the understanding of God, there is certainly much that is *unchanging* because it has been tested through time and has been found to be reliable. Even

so, there is much that has not stayed the same. It may well be the case that both God and the universe are what they are, but the ways in which we think and speak about them are transformed as we grow in experience, understanding, and wisdom.

This is fundamental in trying to understand God, and it will be illustrated at much greater length in this book. The point is that even if *God* does not change, the ways in which different people and different religions have described and *characterized* God (that is, have given to God a particular nature and character) are vastly different and actually do change through time. The meaning of God is not fixed. Religions and religious believers are often reluctant to accept this, and their reluctance may well arise from feelings of loyalty and faithfulness. And yet their understanding and characterization of God cannot remain the same (no longer does God have a white beard sitting on a throne just above the clouds). In a well-known quotation from *The Leopard*, Falconeri observes, 'If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.'

God

By now it will, I hope, be clear why an *Introduction to God* has to begin by asking to whom or to what we are being introduced. Who or what is God? The most direct answer is to say that 'God' is the word people use when they want to talk about whatever is the ultimate and absolute Reality. Different religions may identify and describe the ultimately Real in different ways, but they are at least at one in believing that there is such Reality 'in its infinite mystery beyond the scope of the human intellect.'

If that is so, then one might conclude that religions are simply different roads leading to the same destination. A problem, however, is that roads do not necessarily lead to the same destination simply by virtue of being roads. Roads can lead in the wrong direction. Religions speak about God in such contradictory and often mutually exclusive ways that they have led to wars, conflict and persecution.