

GOD'S Facebook

**Creating a Friendship of Civilizations
in a Terror-ridden World**

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God of the Future

“I boasted among men that I had known you.
They see your pictures in all works of mine.
They come and ask me, ‘Who is he?’
I know not how to answer them.
I say, ‘Indeed, I cannot tell.’
They blame me and they go away in scorn.
And you sit there smiling.
I put my tales of you into lasting songs.
The secret gushes out from my heart.
They come and ask me, ‘Tell me all your meanings.’
I know not how to answer them.
I say, ‘Ah, who knows what they mean!’
They smile and go away in utter scorn.
And you sit there smiling.”

—RABINDRANATH TAGORE (1861-1941)



STATUS UPDATE

- ❖ God of Humanity arrives at the ruined temples of tribes, nations, and religious groups and waits for man to make his new altar with love and compassion, not with disdain for the followers of other religions.
- ❖ Men and women realize the role of geographic luck in determining their destinies, and seek to build the *House of Friendship of Civilizations*.
- ❖ Man's universe is made anew with a compassionate God, who rules ever after.

THE FUTURE...

In the beginning, God spoke. Then Man spoke and Woman spoke. Then God, Man, and Woman all kept speaking for thousands of years. The words they spoke were thoughtful, vibrant, and variegated, offering a kaleidoscopic panorama of dizzyingly confounding expressions, which captured the fascinating metamorphosis of God in human consciousness through the ages. Some of these words were recorded, while some were lost. Some words have been interpreted, and some misinterpreted. Some words generated love, some words hatred. Some words made peace, some wars.

Today, as we reach the zenith of our technological world, we are still exploring who God is and what God wants. No end is in sight in this eternal quest for God. In *Why God Won't Go Away*, authors Andrew Newberg, Eugene D'Aquill, and Vince Rause argue, "As long as our brains are arranged the way they are, as long as our minds are capable of sensing this deeper reality, spirituality will continue to shape the human experience, and God, however we define that majestic, mysterious concept, will not go away."

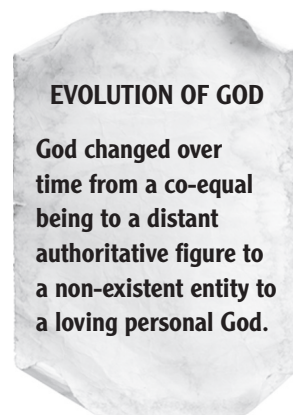
DOES GOD HAVE A FUTURE?

In March of 2010, *ABC News Nightline* hosted a debate titled, "Does God have a future?" at the California Institute of Technology, where Michael Shermer, Deepak Chopra, Sam Harris, and Jean Houston faced off in front of a packed audience of 1,000. Shermer is a former fundamentalist Christian turned anti-religious skeptic and the founder of The Skeptics Society; Chopra is a New Age spiritual counselor, medical doctor, and author of several bestselling books; Harris is a neuroscientist, an outspoken atheist, and the author of the bestselling book *The End of Faith*; and Houston is a teacher, author, and philosopher.

Nightline had a provocative take on the issue, asking the audience: "Are we at a time in history when the argument can now actually be settled? Given all that we know today about the cosmos and life on Earth, is science killing God—or can it bring us closer to him? Does God—or should God—have a future?" Sam Harris answered the question, "Does God have a future?" in this manner: "Yes, as a fictional character." Jean Houston answered: "Yes. I am not sure about human beings having a future, but there is no issue around God."

The debate ended without any conclusion, as each participant promoted his or her own viewpoint rather than actually answering each other's.

Aside from these spirited debaters, there are those who take issue with the versions of God, not necessarily the notion of God. For example, Ophelia Benson and Jeremy Stangroom, who together wrote *Does God Hate Women?*, want the version of God that originated in a period when male superiority was taken for granted to go away, because in their opinion, that version is a historical God who hates women, and "[that] God has to go."



THE SAME OR A NEW GOD?

Therefore, our imagination is challenged when we ask ourselves: What will the God of the future be? Will God be more benevolent than belligerent? Will the God of the future be fairer and more tolerant than what we have seen in the past? We need to look into both our hearts and minds for the answers to these fundamental questions. Otherwise, we would be like ignorant armies clashing in the darkness of mindless religious affiliations, as depicted by Matthew Arnold in his famous poem “Dover Beach”:

“The world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.”

It is evident from *God's Facebook* that five thousand years of recorded human history is not enough to capture the innumerable ways in which humans can understand who or what God is. There were new ideas in the past and there will be more new ideas in the future; there were old religions in the past, and there will be more new religions in the future; there were numerous old interpretations of scriptures, and there will be more new ones. The only thing that can be said with certainty is that the human understanding of God is at best approximate, provisional, and corrigible. The more we came to know God at different periods of history, the more we realized the inadequacy of our understanding. As a result, our God has been constantly changing from one generation to another. As a matter of fact, this is somewhat true also about science, the “God”, in a rhetorical sense, of modernity. The “truth” of science today is only an explanation or description of the universe as we understand it today; this “truth” is approximate, provisional, corrigible, and often “false” from the viewpoint of later generations of scientists.

So how far can we go with this realization of fallibility in our understanding of God or of the universe through the lens of science? Do we turn to the human heart in search of the “truth” of our humanity that transcends religious, cultural, and national boundaries? The endless procession of diverse human beliefs captured in this book demonstrates that our personal understanding of God cannot be justified as absolute truth, and therefore we should be respectful and tolerant about other viewpoints. In order to achieve our own God, we do not need to denigrate the God of others. But does that mean that we equate all Gods and try to create a universal God? Is that approach viable, or will it doom interfaith dialogues? Efforts to show that the God of Islam and the God of Christianity are, in essence, one and the same, may sound ideal and may be highly desirable in a conflict-ridden world—but is this goal realistic and sustainable?

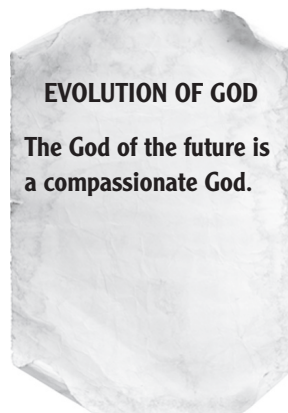
*In order to achieve
our God, we do not
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The major world religions share many similarities, but also exhibit many fundamental differences. Then why ignore those differences and create an artificial aura of sameness? In *God Is Not One*, bestselling author Stephen Prothero argues against the “Godthink that lumps all religions together in one trash can or treasure chest.” Prothero creates a new context for understanding the world’s religions and proposes a pragmatic approach, whereby the acknowledgment of religious diversity will be a building block for peaceful coexistence in the future. He argues: “The Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century popularized the ideal of religious tolerance, and we are doubtless better for it. But the idea of religious unity is wishful thinking nonetheless, and it has not made the world a safer place. In fact, this naïve theological groupthink—call it Godthink—has made the world more dangerous... Every day across the world, human beings coexist peacefully and even joyfully with family members who are very different from themselves. In New York, Mets fans and Yankees fans have learned to live and work alongside one another, as have partisans of Real Madrid and FC Barcelona in a football-loving Spain. And who is so naïve to imagine that the success of a relationship depends on the partners being essentially the same?... What is required in any relationship is knowing who the other person really is. And this requirement is only frustrated by the naïve hope that somehow you and your partner are magically the same. In relationships and religions, denying differences is a recipe for disaster. What works is understanding the differences and then coming to accept, and perhaps even to revel in them.”

Therefore, these differences should be recognized and accepted, but ought not be given too much value, as Indian President (1962–1967) and philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan once advised: “The name by which we call God and the rite by which we approach Him do not matter much... The doctrine we adopt and the philosophy we profess do not matter anymore than the language we speak and the clothes we wear.”

A NEW PARADIGM

Can we therefore create a new paradigm in this age of propaganda, where the agents of terror, bigotry, and violence are working hard to create and sustain a *Clash of Civilizations*? The realists among us may say that this clash is inevitable because of the nature of things as they are. But the poet in us knows that ‘reality’ is in fact a ‘creation’.” Age after age, the visionary men and women of religion and science alike proved that their faiths guided them to attain what seemed impossible by all the evidence of fact. Today, in a terror-ridden world, we are in need of a greater call of faith, which will say to us: Let us change the course of history by changing our mindsets about God and religion; let us turn those forces into “force multipliers” towards building a *Friendship of Civilizations* and altogether stop our march towards a *Clash of Civilizations*.



GEOGRAPHIC LUCK

The first change in our mindsets is to remind ourselves every day, by means of some active self-talk, that our God and our religious affiliations are an outcome of geographic

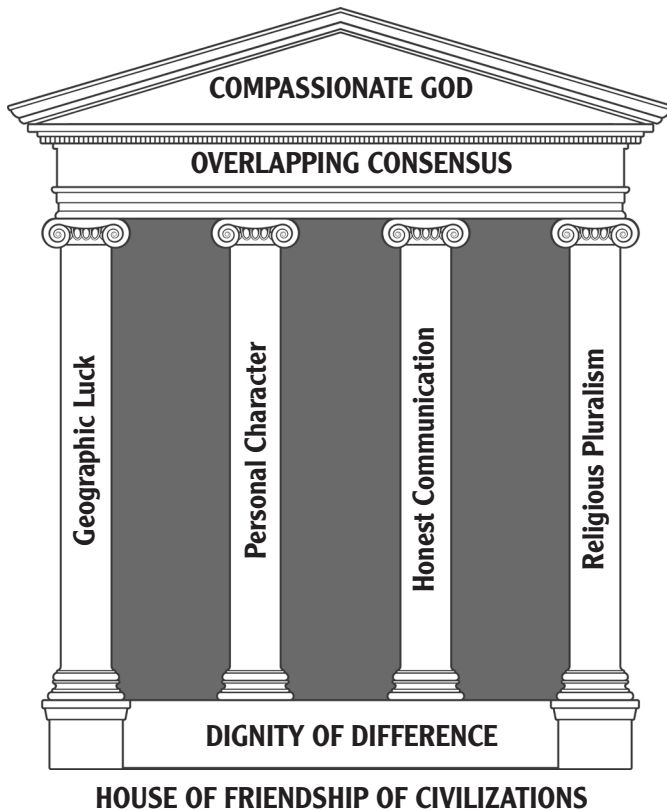
- Active pursuit of understanding of other religions without having to sacrifice our own identities and deeply held religious beliefs;
- Respectful dialogue with the practitioners of other religions about what social and moral problems unite us, not what divide us.

OVERLAPPING CONSENSUS

These four changes in our mindsets discussed above will facilitate the building of the “*overlapping consensus*” among different religions. The idea of overlapping consensus was introduced by the brilliant American political philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002) to address the need to guide public political discussion in a pluralistic society. Rawls realized that in a society where citizens are deeply divided by conflicting but well-conceived, comprehensive doctrines, the mere tolerance of each other’s ideology is not sufficient to create a stable and just society. Instead, the citizens must seek an overall consensus and agree to a set of principles, which can be supported on moral grounds from their respective doctrines. This overlapping consensus approach provides a framework for cooperation in a pluralistic society, without compromising its plural character.

The same approach is applicable in the religious domain. Religions consist of well-conceived, comprehensive doctrines that often are mutated by culture, customs, time, and geography. These doctrines contain conflicts and contradictions, are sometimes

incommensurable with one another, and deeply divide the citizens of the world, as evidenced in *God’s Facebook*. The purpose of the *Friendship of Civilizations* discussed above, therefore, cannot be a reconciliation or homogenization of these conflicting doctrines, but an active seeking of overlapping consensus and agreement on a set of principles for a just, fair, and yet pluralistic international society of humans. We must work on what unites us, not on what divides us. Because the common humanity that unites us is far more important than incongruities among the religious and non-religious doctrines that divide us.



DIGNITY OF DIFFERENCE

The four changes in our mindsets that are discussed above will also help us build the house of *Friendship of Civilizations* on a strong foundation of “dignity of difference”, a phrase coined by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, one of the world’s greatest Jewish scholars. Rabbi Sacks argued that in a globalized world with economic and cultural disparity and discontents, it is not enough to search for values common to all faiths; it is necessary to reframe the way we see the differences among all faiths and cultures. If our worldview is to classify individuals according to a single religious or cultural identity, then we are doomed to the *Clash of Civilizations*. On the other hand, if we accept, and perhaps even revel in the dignity of diversity and difference among belief systems, then we can avoid the *Clash of Civilizations*.

COMPASSIONATE GOD

The ultimate questions then become: Can we invoke the wonders of religion rather than its terrors when we find the overlapping consensus and appreciate the dignity of difference? Can we foster peace through compassion and love?

One can easily notice by sifting through the quotes in this book that in all religions and cultures, the compassionate God is highly dominant over the belligerent and intolerant God. Compassion is as fundamental a notion as God consciousness, and we must overcome our differences in the current world through compassion. Compassion is the overlapping consensus.

Karen Armstrong made a unique wish in 2008 when she won the TED Prize. She asked for help in creating, launching, and propagating a Charter of Compassion. In November of 2009, the charter was unveiled to the world, and as of December 2010, some 60,000 people, including the Dalai Lama, have affirmed the Charter.

Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, in his 1930 lecture at Oxford University, talked about this compassionate God, whom he labeled the “God of Humanity.” Tagore forewarned, with unwavering conviction, the inevitable demise of a “ruler” mentality, be it religious, political, or otherwise, in an open society. He declared: “The God of humanity has arrived at the gates of the ruined temple of the tribe. Though he has not yet found his altar, I ask the men of simple faith, wherever they may be in the world, to bring their offering of sacrifice to him, and to believe that it is far better to be wise and worshipful than to be clever and supercilious. I ask them to claim the right of manhood to be friends of men, and not the right of a particular proud race or nation which may boast of the fatal quality of being the rulers of men. We should know for certain that such rulers will no longer be tolerated in the new world, as it basks in the open sunlight of mind and breathes life’s free air.”

Both globalization and the information revolution that have occurred during the last fifty years have proved Tagore was right—the God Divide is not sustainable in a pluralistic, globalized world.

US President Barack Obama echoed the same sentiment in his inaugural address in January, 2009, and reaffirmed what Tagore had said almost eighty years earlier: “We cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself.”

Therefore, it is now necessary to welcome the God of the future, who is a compassionate God of humanity, not a tribal God of holy wars. Let us welcome him with a poem from the great Persian Sufi poet, Rumi:

“Reason is powerless in the expression of Love.
Love alone is capable of revealing the truth
Of Love and being a Lover.
The way of our prophets is the way of Truth.
If you want to live, die in Love;
Die in Love if you want to remain alive.”