

GOD

*A Psychological
Assessment*

GARY M. BAKKER



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God: A Psychological Assessment

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*He? he? She?
It? God?
god?*

Because religions have been so culturally influential, even the form of expression in those cultures has been affected. In the West, Christianity has held such sway, that conventions have arisen such as capitalising not only God's

name, but even the words 'He' and 'Him' when they refer to God.

It is also assumed by most that God is a man. Feeble ethnocentric arguments have been advanced for this, such as pointing out that God is the provider and the head of the human family, and therefore must be male.

But God's masculinity was assumed and asserted back when females were regarded as barely human. This was the original reason for God being male. It wasn't even an assumption, as there wasn't an alternative. Back then it would have been just as necessary to point out that food is edible, and rocks aren't, so rocks aren't food. No one bothered with this argument, and no one gave the 'God is a man' issue a second thought.

Now that females are accepted as human, the question arises, what is God? Of course the most logical answer is that God is both or neither male or female. God is an 'it'. God has no sexual organs, indeed no body at all. God doesn't have XX or XY chromosomes or testosterone or oestrogen or a brain hardwired with a gender identity. These are the criteria we apply to individual humans to determine their gender. But we can't apply them to God.

If we ever needed confirmation that Man created God in his own image, rather than the other way around, it comes from the ascription of maleness to God.

To sidestep as much of this awkwardness as possible, this book will use 'God' as a capitalised proper noun, but refer to 'he' or 'him', simply to ease flow of reading, not due to any theological stance.

Introduction

I am a clinical psychologist. For thirty years it has been my job, every day, to look at what people do and say, and to work out what they are like, what they want, or ‘where they are coming from’. If someone cries every time they mention their children, I start forming

an understanding of them. If someone gets angry whenever I ask how their work is going, this tells me something about them. When I sit down with someone in a consultation and ask them how their week has been, or what's bothering them, what they choose to focus on in their answer tells me something about their preoccupations, priorities, or preferences. The answers to open-ended questions like these give information not only through the details provided, but also through the areas voluntarily chosen to focus on.

God's words and deeds are like this. God *could* have done and said *anything*. He is omnipotent (all-powerful). He knows the consequences of everything he says or does. He is omniscient (all-knowing). *What* God has said or done and not said or done tells us lots about him.

If Bob chooses to take up boxing, and Bill opts for Tai Chi, or if Mary buys a huge four wheel drive, while Bridget selects a Toyota Prius hybrid, I can make confident guesses about their character and views, and how I can get on well with them and please them.

For a few thousand years people have been trying to do this with God. They have used God's deeds and words to make conclusions about what he wants, what he's like, what's important, what isn't, and how to please him. Many claim that our eternal futures depend on these guesses.

So if you want an insight into the mind of God, don't ask a theologian or a priest or a philosopher. They all play with words. They try to apply some logic, but generally with a bias. They don't study God as a scientist would. They aren't objective. They

construct arguments to support what they already believe. That's why 100 of them will give you 100 different answers.

Ask a psychologist. Psychologists are professional, trained mind-measurers or assessors. And they do it objectively and scientifically – not from a prejudice rooted in their own 'faith' (belief without evidence).

(Not all psychologists operate scientifically. Those that are into Freudian psychoanalysis are a clear exception. Sigmund Freud's theories and therapies weren't based on scientific study of people's problems. He didn't conduct one controlled experiment in his whole life. He looked and thought and theorized and wrote – much as theologians and philosophers do – and constructed a story much closer to religion than to science.)

"GOD"

Any report of a psychological assessment must first identify the subject of the assessment. 'Joseph Bloggs is a 43 year old married civil engineer with 2 children who lives in Canberra, Australia.' I need to identify my subject similarly.

Of course different people have made various claims about who God is, his deeds and words, and so differing religions have resulted. But the differences have been smaller than the similarities. For example, three of the most populous religions make very similar claims about God's words, actions, and therefore his personality. Islam's Koran, Judaism's Torah, and the Christian Bible all say very similar things about God. They all claim an all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present, benevolent God who made

BOX 1**LEIBNIZ'S LAW**

...says that if there is no possible way to tell the difference between X and Y, then X is Y, and having two words for the one concept is redundant, and can be confusing or misleading.

the Universe and us, and is now interested in us, is testing us, listens to our prayers and intervenes now and then. Just this basic profile tells us a huge amount about a very widely accepted God.

So, if the question is ‘Which God does this book deal with?’, the answer is: The most relevant and interesting one. The God options can be called pantheism, deism, polytheism, and monotheism.

PANTHEISM

To some people, God is the universe. When they say this, they can mean one of two things:

1. God is made of atoms and the four fundamental forces of nature we know about (electromagnetic, weak nuclear, strong nuclear, and gravity), and that's it. Unfortunately even though this allows them to say all sorts of profound-sounding fridge-magnet-mottos, like ‘God is all around us’, ‘God is in all of us’, and ‘God is Nature, so we have to take care of the Earth’, this version of God is really quite meaningless. If God is the universe, we don't need the word “God” (*see Box 1*). The extra word (“God”) just confuses and is redundant. Inasmuch as it adds anything to the word “universe”, it is misleading or false. “The universe is all around us” tells us nothing new. If “God is all around us” tells us any more, it's an unjustified more.
2. Sometimes pantheists mean that God is the ‘force’ or the ‘life force’ or the ‘spirit’ within or behind the universe. If they mean the four fundamental forces of nature, this is as redundant as the pantheism above. If they mean something else, then this is a separate and different thing from the physical universe (matter-energy) and so it's not pantheism at all. It must be one of the following:

DEISM

Some people admit that there are big problems in arguing for a relevant, intervening, interested, personal God. They may have been moved by the Problem of Evil (*see Box 2*). This argument basically points out that if God is all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient), and all-good (benevolent), then logically evil and suffering should not exist. Feeble attempts have been made to get around this logical contradiction, such as claiming that Good only exists in contrast to Evil, and suffering is necessary to appreciate happiness, and this is the “best of all possible worlds” that God could have created. You can drive an ambulance through the holes in this argument. It’s a pretty weak God who couldn’t make a world without leprosy, Hitler, stillbirths, or child slavery, or else we wouldn’t appreciate health, freedom, and people being nice to each other. I don’t starve my child so he will be more grateful for the ice cream I give him. Even I, a mere mortal, can think of several better possible worlds than the one we endure now. (*See page 92.*)

So, some people have been impressed by the Problem of Evil, or other problems (*see Boxes 3 & 4*) with the idea of an all-powerful Being who watches how people have sex, or randomly answers only some prayers, or does a miracle so one child

BOX 2

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

“Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?”

— Epicurus
(341-270 BCE)

BOX 3

OMNISCIENT OR OMNIPOTENT, BUT NOT BOTH

A much-neglected problem with the very idea of an omniscient, omnipotent God is that these two terms are logically contradictory. God can’t be both. If he is omniscient, then he knows everything, including what he’s going to do next. But then he can’t change his mind, or else he wasn’t omniscient. If he changes his mind, then he wasn’t right with the first prediction; that is, he wasn’t omniscient. If he doesn’t change his mind (because he can’t without making his prediction false) then he isn’t omnipotent, he isn’t all-powerful, he can’t do everything. He can’t change his mind.

BOX 4

If God is omnipotent, then why did he make a world that continually needs fiddling with, in terms of visits or miracles or prayers answered. Why not set it up right in the first place?

And if he is the Christian God, why did it take him 4,000 years (if you believe it all got going about 6,000 years ago, which is what the Bible describes) after Adam and Eve’s sin to cajole his son down to Earth? What was the point in waiting? Omnipotent beings don’t have to wait for anything.

survives a bus crash, while 37 others perish.

However, people still feel an urge to answer questions like ‘Where did it all begin?’, ‘Who made the universe?’ and ‘Why is the earth just right for us, and not a dead planet like Venus?’. The Cosmological Argument for God says that everything has a cause, the universe must have a cause, there has to be a first cause, and God is this first cause.

These people are called deists. They see God as the maker of the universe. But that’s all he is. He isn’t interested any more. And that includes not interested in us.

This isn’t the God I’ll be discussing. He is irrelevant to our lives. He didn’t make the universe for us. We don’t know why he made the universe. He just did. He has neither said nor done anything since, that we know of, so he could be dead.

There is no point praying to him. There’ll be no miracles. He is not on any army’s side. So all religions are pointless. Your behaviour and beliefs have nothing to do with this God. You have nothing to do with this God.

He is a philosophical hypothesis.

His alleged existence relies solely on some people’s psychological need for a ‘first cause’.

Even though this is only an argument for a very specific, probably-irrelevant, hypothetical God, there are several major problems with it. One is illustrated by the story about what the (flat) earth rests upon. The old Greek philosopher answered ‘Four turtles’. ‘But what do the turtles stand on?’ he was asked.

‘Four-elephants.’ ‘And those elephants?’ ‘Four more elephants.’ ‘And those elephants?’ This went on for a time, until the philosopher got annoyed and interrupted with: ‘Look, it’s elephants all the way down!’

Another problem with the ‘first cause’ argument is simply that we don’t need a first cause. We have never witnessed a true creation from nothing. People 300 years ago believed in it. They thought maggots spontaneously materialised in carcasses. They thought lightning appeared out of nothing. So the god Thor was invented. We know better now. The law of conservation has even formalized this knowledge for us in physics. But the ancient Greeks had an inkling of it too (*see Box 5*).

The simplest explanation for the existence of the universe is that it has always been here. To complicate this with extra unnecessary factors goes against a principle of logic we all accept – consciously or unconsciously – which has been variously called the Law of Parsimony or Occam’s Razor. This principle, briefly stated, tells us not to multiply our explanatory entities unnecessarily. If you can explain fire by reference solely to chemical processes, then don’t bring spirits into it, or sociology, or the rules of badminton, or Byzantine architecture, or Christian theology for that matter. Any of these would be an unjustifiable, unnecessary complication when explaining what fire is or where it comes from.

If it’s a choice between: ‘The universe has always been there’, and ‘The universe was made by God, and God has always been there’, then it has to be the first explanation. The second one is like the fairies at

BOX 5

THE LAW OF CONSERVATION

“The sum total of things was always such as it is now, and such it will ever remain.”

— Epicurus
(341-270 BCE)

the bottom of the garden you can't see, hear, smell, taste, feel, or measure with any instruments in any way, but which we blame for the frost stunting our vegetables.

So deism is hard to justify. But more importantly for this book, the deists' God is irrelevant, uninvolved, disinterested in people, and for all we know may be dead – whatever that means for a god.

POLYTHEISM

The ancient Greeks and Romans and modern Hindus have had much more fun with their supernatural leanings than the Judeo-Islamic-Christian religions have. They recognised a whole bunch of gods. This makes for lots of soap opera drama between the gods, and between them and us.

But these gods are equivalent to modern Superman or Spiderman or The Incredible Hulk stories. They have special powers compared to us, but they are not omnipotent. You can pray to them, but you have to pick the right one, and another one could interfere with the result.

If it's hard enough to argue for one invisible, universal, omnipotent, omnipresent, benevolent, creating God, then it's really hard to find supportive evidence for a whole bunch of different human-foible-ridden, supernatural, arbitrarily authored, unseen-but-allegedly-relevant gods.

A book about the character of these gods is much less an analysis from observation of the gods' words and deeds, than it is an enthralling fantasy novel. I won't attempt this.

MONOTHEISM

This is the idea that has taken off the most. It's the one that Christians and Muslims and Jews believe in: That there is one God (sometimes in 3 bits – the Trinity), who has been there forever, is omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent, and who made the universe, including us. But he made us special ('in his image'), and we, unlike animals, plants, and rocks, are being tested. God is interested in what we do. He has given us guidelines, and depending on how we go with these, there are consequences. Heaven and Hell usually feature here, although complications like Limbo or Purgatory have been proposed by some.

But now we're getting into details that religions can vary on a lot. Let's stick with the bits they have in common.

"A PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT"

God is revealed by his deeds and his words. (Though some have claimed direct experience of God. *See Box 6*).

God's deeds are clear. He made the world. He made this world. Not an all-pink one, not an all-jelly one, not one three miles across, not one without the moon, or without oceans, or hurricanes, or ovarian cancer. But this one, with all

BOX 6

DIRECT EXPERIENCE OF GOD

Some people claim to have direct experience of God – mystical experiences or near-death experiences. Many of these people prove to have a mental illness. Such experiences can also be induced by a psychoactive or hallucinogenic drug, or can occur in temporal lobe epilepsy. In near-death experiences the blood flow to the brain is compromised or stopped. This doesn't make for an alert, reliable, rational witness. Furthermore, the God or heaven that white born-again Christians see is very different from the one Hindus in India, or devotees of Voodoo in the Caribbean, see. Some argue that God doesn't have an 'appearance', and so different people will see different things. In that case, what any of them see is of no import at all.

So people telling us they have direct experience of God is not very convincing without some corroborating proof. Such proof wouldn't be very difficult. They could tell us tomorrow's Lotto numbers. Or even what thought I had yesterday while I was brushing my teeth. Such people clearly want to believe their experience has something to do with a God, but I have had similar experiences (brain quirks) and have no desire to ascribe them to anything supernatural.

I was once punched in the face in a football game, and 'realised' soon after, that I had dreamt the entire event, including the perpetrator's facial expression, the night before. What a precise and vivid premonition! Of course, what really happened was that the force that concussed me affected my brain such that the memories of the experience appeared to be coming from last night's dreamstore. A concussed brain is not a good witness. If I wanted to believe in premonition I suppose I could, from this direct personal experience. But it's no evidence at all really.

those features. God is omnipotent, so he could have made any world. That he made this one should tell us things about him.

Many claim that he has done other stuff too. He claims he has done other stuff. He sent prophets. Even his son? He's done miracles, helped armies, answered prayers. He may have made angels and devils. He made Heaven, and maybe Hell. (Fewer people believe in Hell than in Heaven!) He gave us rules. And is testing us. These are all voluntary acts by God. They can tell us a lot about him.

God's words are also claimed to be clear. They are in the Christian Bible, the Jews' Torah, and the Muslims' Koran. And these three have quite a bit in common. The Torah is basically the Old Testament's first five books, while the Koran includes the following biblical characters: Abraham, Adam, the 12 apostles, Cain and Abel, David, Goliath, Isaac, Jacob, Jesus, John the Baptist, Joseph, the Virgin Mary, Moses, Noah, and Solomon.

Given God's revealed deeds and words, can you or I judge them to be weird? Or loving? Or reckless? Or cruel? Or vague? Or anything? How can I, a mere mortal, evaluate or even understand God's actions and statements?

If I can't, and nor can anyone, for some absolute reason of logic – like that God is infinitely intelligent, and I'm dumb, so I should stop trying to make any sense of him – then all human religions have the same problem. Either God's words and deeds make some sense to us, so we can use them as a guide, or they are so far above our intellect that we shouldn't try to understand them. I suppose we could be capable of

understanding what God did, but not why he did it. This is a common problem for a psychologist. But we don't only have examples of God's deeds, we allegedly have his words too. When God spoke to us, it is absurd to suggest he didn't want his words to make sense. And in his statements he told us his reasons for many of his actions and assertions. Examples abound. Just one is given in *Box 7*.

So God either acts, or he does nothing. It is claimed that he acts. Either there are reasons for his actions, or they are random, or will appear to us as random. If they are, or appear as, random then we can make no sense of him and should stop trying, which means the end of all religions, theology, or sensible talk about God. Either his words make sense or they don't. If they do, we need to study them to draw the sense from them. If they don't, then it's back to deism and the end, again, of all sensible claims about God.

A crucial revelation in all three of the books listed earlier is the Ten Commandments (*see Box 8*). Exactly what God chose them to be tells us huge amounts about him. These are his summary rules for living.

For example, the first four (nearly half of the Rules of Life) are about him; about 'no other gods', and not taking his name 'in vain', etcetera. This shows very clearly that God wants us to fuss over him. (That minority of us who, through an accident of birth, happen to know he even exists.) And this puts the lie to claims that all we need to be is good people, and heaven and the rest will take care of itself. This is definitely not what God says. He starts with four rules about himself.

There is no mention in God's commandments

BOX 7

GOD GIVES HIS REASONS

"The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession; out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all the peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers."

— Deuteronomy 7:6-8

BOX 8

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

...are referred to in these words by Christians. Jews call them the Ten Sayings. In the Koran, they all get a mention, but not together as part of Moses' story (*see www.submission.org/quran/ten.html*).

of any problem with slavery. So it is clear that being born into a Japanese Shinto family ('You shall have no other gods before me'), or uttering 'God' when you stub your toe, or failing to keep holy the Sabbath Day (Rule Number 4) is much naughtier than keeping five hundred slaves in bondage. This is weird.

Such a claim about God, about weirdness, is a psychological claim, about God's logic or his personality. I have already argued that if God isn't logical, we may as well stop all consideration of him right now. If God isn't logical, then we can get as much sense or truth or logic about what he wants, and what's true, and how to live, from alphabet soup as from the Bible or Koran or Torah.

But what about his 'personality'? Can this word apply to God? All religions do apply it. For example, they say he is 'good' or 'benevolent' or 'all-knowing' or 'merciful' or 'jealous', and so on.

Psychologists assess 'personality' by measuring behaviour, cognitions (beliefs, self-talk, attitudes), and physiology. We can't do the last of these with God, but we have lots of behaviour and attitudes to look at.

Any intelligence that acts has a personality. This is true of computers, animals, humans, 'superhumans' like Thor or Superman, or God. In fact, just as a person has more personality than a cat, God has more personality than a person.

It is reasonable to argue, though, that an all-knowing, omnipresent, all-powerful supreme being wouldn't have a narrow, biased, petty 'personality'. Such a being would not bother to act in the world. He would be too much above trivial attitudes and actions

in this imperfect petty world. He would not bother to make an earth, let alone bother to choose a colour for leaves, and even more not bother whether someone had burnt a goat, or masturbated, or opened the shop on a Sabbath. This God would not act, he would just be. But this is the deists' God. He/it/she is by its nature irrelevant to us people on earth.

So either God is irrelevant, outside human logic, does not behave in any way, makes no sense to us, and hence can support no religion, or he is relevant, logical, acts, is understandable, and hence is open to best-guesses about what he's like and what he wants. As a trained clinical psychologist, I want to make some such best guesses. What features of God's personality do we have evidence of?

I have dropped plenty of hints already that, when this is done, God turns out to look quite dysfunctional. Following are sixteen ways this happens: Sixteen features of God's personality.



*☞ To watch an
ant walk,
build a solar
system for it*

FEATURE #1

As ‘The Hitch Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy’ says: “Space is big. Really big. You just won’t believe how vastly hugely mindbogglingly big it is.” The distances are incomprehensible. Just from us to

BOX 9

“...why is it suddenly un-American to doubt the prime mover of this unimaginably vast universe of quintillions of solar systems would likely be obsessed with questions involving the dietary and bisexual behaviour of a few thousand bipeds inhabiting a small part of a speck of dust orbiting a third-rate star in an obscure spiral arm of one of millions of more or less identical galaxies?”
 – Hendrik Hertzberg

BOX 10

“The supreme arrogance of religious thinking: that a small carbon-based bag of mostly water on a speck of iron-silicate dust around a boring dwarf star in a minor galaxy in an under populated local group of galaxies in an unfashionable suburb of a supercluster would look up at the sky and declare, ‘It was all made so I could exist!’”
 – Peter Walker

the Sun is 150 million kilometres. From the Sun to Pluto is 40 times that. To our nearest star, Proxima Centauri, is about 40 million million kilometres. That’s such a big number, we start talking in light years from here on. Light travels about nine and a half million million kilometres in a year. Our galaxy, the Milky Way, is 100,000 light years across.

Then there are other galaxies. They can be from 2.9 million to 13 billion light years away from us.

The Milky Way has over 200 billion stars in it (plus black holes and dark matter and lots else). There are over 100 billion other galaxies too, many with more stars than ours has.

Just in stars, the universe has, that we know of, over 70,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 of them.

God made all this. He could have made the universe a kilometre across, or in two dimensions only, or just put 100 stars in it. God could have done anything. He is omnipotent.

But he chose to make the universe immense. And to duplicate our Sun billions of billions of times. We don’t need those other stars. Life can exist on Earth just as well without them. We only need the Sun. Of course, with God’s omnipotence, we don’t even need that. God is quite capable of making a sunless world with life on it.

But he chose to make the Sun for us, and then kept going with the idea a huge number of times.

Being omniscient, God obviously would have known that doing this would make the universe look like we’re not special at all.

The ancients, who didn't know how big the universe is, assumed that we are special, and made God stories accordingly, about a small flat Earth, and a sky that is an up-turned bowl, with holes letting the light from Heaven through (stars), and this whole world – about the size of Europe – being made as an arena to test us, his in-God's-image humans. But God must have known we'd eventually work out that the universe is actually huge, and have our egocentricity challenged. (See also Feature 3, about God deliberately making the world to look like he's not there.) He knows everything. So it is weird for him to deliberately mislead us in this way. All those extra galaxies are not only incredibly redundant, but they make any knowledgeable, intelligent person logically wonder are we really the centre of attention? How many other planets out there are supporting life, even intelligent life like us? Is God's attention split between us and even billions of other worlds? If we're so special, why did God make a gazillion other worlds at the same time? Maybe he's not even there. But if he is, why is he choosing to look weirdly obsessive, inefficient, or even deceptive?



BOX 11

"To sum up:
1.The cosmos is a gigantic fly-wheel making 10,000 revolutions a minute. 2.Man is a sick fly taking a dizzy ride on it. 3.Religion is the theory that the wheel was designed and set spinning to give him the ride."

– H.L. Mencken