

God Is Not Dead. He Is Just Not Who We Think He Is.

By Edwin Eugene Ott, Sr.

Who was God?

In the **United Methodist Member's Handbook**¹, God is described as:

transcendent (over and beyond all that is) and immanent (present in everything);
omnipresent (everywhere at once), omnipotent (all-powerful), and omniscient (all-knowing), and
absolute (perfect) and infinite (unlimited).

These characteristics are consistent with the concept that God is the creator and sustainer of all creation. Such characteristics are generally shared by other major religions which proclaim belief in monotheism, that is, that only one God exists.

However, these super characteristics of God are at odds with all of the other characteristics of God which religions use as the guiding principles of their faiths, such as justness, suffering, mercy, and redeeming. For example, God, having created mankind and actively directing the history of mankind, cannot expect that humans can act in any manner other than that which God has directed. Therefore, God cannot suffer from errant actions of humans or issue righteous judgment upon humans for any of their actions. In other words, **Sin** cannot exist. Perhaps God can love or hate mankind, as in the manner of an artist loving or hating his creation, but such love or hate is not consistent with religious metaphors of God as being a ruler, shepherd, bridegroom, father, or judge.

Indeed, for a Religion to have any reason for existence, it must abandon these super characteristics of God and establish God characteristics which are limited. If mankind does not have the power to disobey God, then there is no need for mercy, justice, grace, redemption, or worship. God can be Lord of Lords, but to be so, there must be at least one other lord. In Christianity, the secondary lord is given the name, Satan. Thus, an eternal contest is established in religion between God and Satan, with the devotion of mankind being the prize. Consequently, Christianity is not a monotheistic religion. Because mankind is described as having the ability to disobey God and Satan, mankind itself is a tertiary lord or god.

How does God reveal himself to mankind?

Theologians describe God as revealing himself to mankind through two methods: Special Revelation and General Revelation.

Special Revelation is described as being a direct revelation from God to special humans, such as prophets and saints. Special revelation is supernatural. For example, God uses his finger to write commandments on stone tablets and gives them to Moses on Mount Sinai. Special revelations cannot be debated or verified; they must be accepted upon faith.

General Revelation is described as knowledge of God revealed through study of his creations. General revelations are dependent upon the intellect of humans. As such they can be debated, verified, and changed.

¹ United Methodist Member's Handbook, Revised by George Koehler (Discipleship Resources, 2006), pp. 72-73.

From a theological standpoint both methods of revelation must be correct, since they are both revelations from God. In earlier days, most knowledge of God was presumed to be in the form of Special Revelation. The commandments were written, taught, and passed on from generation to generation. Along the way, other Special Revelations, such as the life of Jesus, were added. However, although Special Revelations cannot be debated or verified, they can be accepted or rejected. The addition of the life of Jesus to Special Revelation was not accepted by the Hebrews. Thus, the Christian religion was created. Later, the life of Muhammad was rejected by Christians and the Muslim religion was created.

As humanity grew, general revelation through knowledge grew. Many conflicts between special and general revelation developed. For example, the Judeo description of the creation having occurred in six days could not withstand the scientific description of creation in geology.

Today, human knowledge has grown tremendously and conflicts between special and general revelation are abundant. Our theologians and religious leaders wrestle daily with these conflicts.

Conflicts between general and special revelations.

For most of human history, special revelation has dominated. This condition is understandable. In Europe until the Renaissance period, most non-religious knowledge was legal or technical. Much legal knowledge was religious-based or ruler-based. Little general revelation can be discerned from legal knowledge since it is just a form of special revelation itself. Technical knowledge was mostly associated with skill or craftsmanship. Discussion of how and why nature worked was limited to explanations in religious dogma.

General revelation was banned or severely subordinated. For example, Christian religious dogma dictated that the rest of the universe revolved around the Earth. When scientists, most notably Copernicus, began to question this assertion and suggest that the Earth revolved around the Sun, the power of the Church was brought upon them to withhold or withdraw their conclusions. When natural scientists began finding fossil bones of animals that were unlike any known animals, scientists were confronted with religious dogma that God created the universe and God is perfect; therefore, no animals ever living could have ceased existence. Since the existence of these fossils could not be disputed, then God must have put the fossils in the Earth at the time of creation.

The exponential growth in scientific knowledge has now overwhelmed special revelation. We no longer believe that God lives on a mountain top, or in the clouds, or even in another galaxy. Unfortunately, religions are still filled with dogma which is in direct conflict with special revelations. The maintenance of these erroneous dogmas poorly serves mankind. For example, many fundamental Christian churches stubbornly proclaim the literal inerrancy of the Bible. Therefore, man co-existed with dinosaurs and all other ancient creatures. These churches justify their beliefs with a demand for unquestioning faith.

The greatest advantage which general revelation has over special revelation is its inherent ability to grow and change. The scientific method is the most widely accepted method for establishing general revelation. In the scientific method, a hypothesis is proposed and then tested for correctness. If the hypothesis cannot be supported by scientific investigation and testing, then it is rejected and other

hypotheses are proposed and tested. Scientific knowledge does not exist in isolation. A hypothesis may begin as a very specialized case, but it must withstand integration in the total body of knowledge. Inherent in this process is the evolutionary nature of scientific knowledge. The future state of knowledge about any subject is never the same as its present state.

Special revelation, on the other hand, is largely static. From its inception, special revelation is, by definition, direct revelation from God. Therefore, a special revelation must be eternally true. If the holy scripture records that a prophet said thus, then thus must be true. In general revelation, a prophet, such as Albert Einstein, may say thus, but it is understood by others that although what is said may be revolutionary, it will require correction, modification, and expansion in the future.

How are apparent conflicts between general and special revelation resolved?

Today, conflicts between general and special revelation are resolved by re-interpreting the special revelations. This is a tricky theological path. What God revealed must be true; therefore, it must be our understanding of the special revelation that must be in error. However, many special revelations recorded in Holy Scriptures appear to be very precise and clear. For example, the creation story in the book of Genesis in the Bible lays out a precise sequence and timing of the creation in six days. Early in the growth of scientific knowledge, such a story was clearly ludicrous. Theologians adapted and said that the term, “day” as used in the creation story did not have the same meaning as the human concept of a day being the time period between the risings of the sun. This adaptation was easy and simple. However, more and more conflicts between this special revelation and general revelation led to a broader re-interpretation of the creation story as a literary work, portraying the concept of creation by God in a poetic way.

Re-interpretation is an invalidation of the previous interpretation. It is a way of saying that God revealed the truth to mankind, but mankind did not understand his revelation. It is man’s fault, not God’s.

There are other explanations offered for resolving more limited, specific conflicts, such as the parting of the Red Sea, healing the sick, and raising the dead. But these explanations are spurious.

Mankind’s Special Relationship with God.

All major religions are built around the belief that mankind, above all other creations, has a special relationship with God. For example, the first chapter of the first book of the Bible set forth the claim that God created man in his image. What is meant by “image” is still debated today. There is little doubt that the initial meaning was a visual image; today more progressive interpretations focus upon non-physical characteristics, such as intellect. Transcending all the questions and stumbling blocks of literal and implied meanings, the principal purpose of the creation narrative is to establish that mankind is special with respect to God.

Without this special relationship, religion has no meaning or purpose. Only man is granted intellect, emotion, and free will. All other living creatures have no need or capacity for redemption.² This special relationship is entirely dependent upon acceptance of special revelation. General revelation has slowly constructed knowledge that refutes the presumption that mankind is distinct from other living creatures. Religious leaders immediately recognized that the Theory of Evolution represented an enormous threat to maintenance of the principle of mankind's special relationship with God. This threat explains why even today, with daunting amounts of supporting evidence for the correctness of evolution, many religious persons dogmatically deny its truth.

One argument proposed for the existence of a special relationship between the God of Creation and mankind is that humans alone possess higher motivations such as love and altruism. These higher motivations are argued to be the qualities by which man was created in the image of God. This belief is reflected in Christian special revelation of Jesus. In the New Testament, John 3:16 states, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Love and altruism are presented as Godly qualities. But does only mankind possess such Godly qualities?

Love is basically an attraction or devotion between persons. Most other creatures apparently have little love beyond sex. However, there are many creatures which form long-term, even lifetime, attachments to others of their kind. A squirrel will linger for awhile by its mate that has been killed by an auto. Some bird species mate for lifetimes. Mammals, birds, and some amphibians, reptiles and fish will care for their young. Even spiders will guard their egg sacks and protect newborns for a short time. Perhaps such love does not reach the extremes of human love, but surely it is love.

Humans are altruistic. They will behave in ways which help other humans even though such behavior may put them at risk. Other animals also exhibit altruistic behaviors. For example, a mother dove will fake a broken wing in order to distract a predator from its nest. A honeybee will sacrifice its life by stinging an intruder in order to protect its hive. A mother water buffalo will attack a lion that threatens its calf.

Love and altruism are most certainly not qualities restricted to humans. If humans have any superiority in the qualities over other creatures, it is purely quantitative. It is the height of arrogance for humans to believe that they are the epitome of God's creatures. At best we are only superior for our current time.

Love and altruism are evolved behaviors with a long evolutionary history. Love and altruism are not gifts from God bestowed uniquely upon humans. The development of love and altruism are functions of evolutionary paths of creatures. A blackberry bush does not produce fruit which is eaten by birds and mammals because it loves these animals. It encases its seed in fruit so that the seeds will be remotely scattered, thereby extending the domain of blackberries. The dove risks its life to protect its young because this behavior increases the survival potential of its offspring. However, the dove only exposes itself to a minor amount of risk. The probability of the adult dove being captured by the predator is low. The amount of altruism exhibited by the dove is not limited by the amount of love it has for its offspring but by the consequences of its being killed. If the adult dove is killed, its offspring will die also.

² There are a few exceptions in the Bible, such as the serpent seducing Eve and Jesus cursing the fig tree for not providing food for him.

Love and altruism are predominantly associated with the amount of sociability that has evolved in the creature. Wolves and lions, animals which live in packs, can take more risks and thereby act more altruistically than foxes and tigers which live solitary lives. Humans can exhibit great amounts of love and altruism because we are highly social creatures. We have evolved from a path of living in groups, clans, nations, and empires. When a parent dies, others will assume the duties of protecting and rearing its offspring.

The Thorn in the Side of Theology.

The dichotomy between special and general revelation is the most intractable problem for theology today. For religion to have meaning and purpose, the concept that mankind has a special relationship with the one god must be maintained. The method used to establish and maintain the “truth” of this principle is special revelation. As general revelation increases, the literal correctness of special revelation is corroded. One by one, dogmas based upon special revelation must be modified and rationalized. Unless a major theological revolution occurs, the future of religion appears to be atheism or secular humanism.

Special revelation also presents another paradox for today’s theologians. There exists a desire by many theologians to expand the goodness of their religion to include other people’s religions. That is, to argue that all religions have a common purpose and the ability to add constructively to the understanding of transcendent goodness. Thus, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists can learn by listening to one another. It is each religion’s special revelations which separate them from the others. Through general revelation, they can be united.

Is Religion Theistic or Humanistic?

Contrary to definition and common belief, religion is not theistic. Religion abandons “godly” conceptions of God, such as transcendence, immanence, omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience, and assigns God the human concepts such as love, suffering, jealousy, justice, and forgiveness. In doing so, religion cannot be theistic. Religion is humanistic.

From the beginning, religion has proclaimed itself to be theistic as a means of establishing its authority and power. Special revelation, defined to be direct revelation from God, was a powerful and convenient method to assert authority. Who can dispute the word of God?

The knowledge and wisdom contained in religion is humanistic. Although religion has occasionally been used for personal gain and justification, religion is at heart an attempt to help humans co-exist in society and direct them toward lofty actions.

With the growth of general revelation, traditional religion would have disappeared long ago had not theologians incorporated a hypothetical solution to mankind’s greatest fear. Surely, early in the development of consciousness in human thought, the question of what happens to us when we die formed. Our egos rejected cessation. Theologians created the answer that a creator God would provide us another life after death if we lived and thought as God wanted us to. This brilliant answer was presented as a special revelation. As special revelation, it must be accepted in faith and cannot be proven.

The special revelation of life after death was modified in Christianity to apply first and foremost to the meek and humble. As a tool for aiding humanity in accepting the harsh realities of life, this modification was very powerful and probably was the most dominant force behind the growth of Christianity into the largest religion in the world today.

Knowledge is a dynamic, growing human characteristic. The traditional concepts of life and death have now been shaken and blurred. Unless theology adapts again, religion may become a minor force in future human behavior.

Who is God?

All theological and religious knowledge is human knowledge. There have been no special revelations from the one God to mankind. Special revelations were tools used by theologians to authorize and codify their ideas for human direction and interaction. The growth of general revelation through logic, science, and philosophy has resulted in modifications to the special revelations. With a more educated populace, the use of special revelation will become more problematic and will drive people from religious belief. We see this happening today in North America and Europe. Religion is shifting to an artifact of the poor and less educated.

So who is God? Paraphrasing a famous quote from the **Pogo** cartoon strip by Walt Kelly, “We have met God, and He is Us.” The god of religion does not exist apart from humanity. God needs to be redefined in humanistic terms. God could be defined as the collective conscience³ of mankind. As “I” is the metaphor for the individual and “we” is the metaphor for a particular group of people, “God” is the metaphor for all humanity.

Theologians can continue to discuss and attempt to describe the God of Creation, the one true god. Defining the God of Religion to be the collective conscience of mankind does not preclude the existence of the God of Creation. Paradoxically, redefining the God of Religion to be not inclusive of the God of Creation, allows for the reasonable existence of the God of Creation by removing the logical inconsistencies between God the Absolute and God the Redeemer of Mankind. Sin becomes not disobedience of God the Creator, but actions of individual humans that are judged to be bad or less good by the collective conscience of mankind.

Religion is for mankind. Religion does not include other living creatures or inanimate things. Religion does not attempt to redeem other living creatures. Why should it? Under existing theologies, all other creatures are different from humans in that they do not have conscience or souls. With the refined God of Religion as the collective conscience of mankind, religion still would not include redemption of other living creatures. The exclusion of other creatures is not based upon special revelation that mankind has a special relationship with the God of Creation. Rather,

³ The word “conscience” is derived from Latin by the combination of the prefix: com- (with) + plus the verb: scire (to know). Thus conscience in its root form mean “with knowing.” Today, conscience is the sense or consciousness of the moral goodness or blameworthiness of one's own conduct, intentions, or character together with a feeling of obligation to do right or be good (from Merriam-Webster).

exclusion is based upon the general revelation that other creatures are not part of the conscience of mankind.

The Existence of Free Will.

Free will is generally defined to be the ability to make voluntary choices or decisions, not determined by prior causes or by divine intervention. Under a theology of the God of Creation, there can be no free will. However, free will is not prohibited under a theology of God of Religion. How can this be?

First, mankind is not the God of Creation; therefore no human can consciously know precisely what his future choice will be. Hence, humans have the perception that they have free will. Whether a person's choice is the result of "voluntary" choice based upon the person's individual character, history, etc., or the predetermined result of prior causes or divine intervention, the person cannot distinguish. The experience is the same.

Second, humans are social creatures. We must learn to interact socially with other humans. This imperative increases with our growing world population. The customs, rules, laws, and moralities of human society are the forces which direct human social interaction. Many different societal structures have existed in the human populace. Some have been loose or rigid, totalitarian or democratic, brutal or kind. Religion seeks to teach humans how to interact socially in a manner that transcends specific social forms. Religion urges us to act within a concept of transcendent goodness. We are encouraged to act in concert with a perceived idea of what is good for mankind, not just for ourselves. Religion urges us not to "sin" against the God of Religion.

Intellect and adaptability are two powerful characteristics which humans have used to become the dominant life form in the known universe. The concept of free will is also one of our most potent attributes. Many persons, when considering whether the world is predetermined, dismiss further analysis by saying, "If everything is predetermined, I might just as well not do anything." This conclusion, however, is the antithesis of determination. Because the world is determined, then one can reason what the potential outcomes of action will be and seek to make a better decision. The fact that the person "voluntarily" acted upon reasoned choices based upon foreseen consequences has greater potential for a good outcome than inaction. Whether a person acts as if he has free will because he "really" has free will or because he is predetermined to act in such a manner is not distinguishable. The characteristic of free will greatly benefits humanity. The God of Creation predetermines how the person acts, but the God of Religion directs his actions.

Life Eternal.

What does separation between the God of Creation and the God of Religion mean for the promise of life-after-death? Religion has claimed the gift of eternal life through special revelation. Can the God of Religion promise life-after-death?

With respect to the God of Creation, human eternal life may or may not exist. The God of Creation does not seek human compliance with his wishes, nor does he make promises to mankind to entice compliance. Since there is no special relationship between mankind and the God of Creation, life-

after-death may be bestowed upon humans, or any other life form, only by the grace of the God of Creation. Mankind can do nothing to deserve it or earn it.

The God of Religion cannot promise life eternal. Life-after-death can only exist in general revelation once it has been added to the knowledge base of mankind. In this respect, eternal life is the same as any other human objective. For example, mankind could dream of flight only after the concept of flight was created in the mind of mankind. Mankind then achieved the power of flight through many years of trial and study. Until flight was achieved, it could not be promised. Therefore, religion cannot yet promise eternal life. A method for achieving life-after-death must first be created through general revelation. What religion can promise is that if mankind works together, human dreams have the potential to become real. What we first envisioned as flight was not be the same as the kind of flight actually achieved. Similarly, what we now envision as eternal life may not be the same as what may be achieved.

Future of Religion.

Approximately 75 percent (4.8 billion) of today's human population are associated with the three great religions: Christian, Muslim, and Hindu. If these religions continue to rely upon special revelation as the base of their beliefs, one cannot avoid being pessimistic about the triumph of love and peace. Try as they might, theologians cannot dismiss the conflicts between the special revelations of their faiths with those of the other faiths. However, there are abundant instances in which theologians find common ground in the intentions of their faiths.