

**Small Gods**  
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Stephen Hawking begins his book *A Brief History of Time*<sup>[1]</sup> with the story of a well-known scientist who gave a lecture on astronomy. At the end of the lecture, a woman at the back of the room stood up and admonished him:

“What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise.”

The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, “What is the tortoise standing on?”

“You’re very clever, young man, very clever,” said the woman. “But it’s turtles *all the way down*.”

The ancient Mayans left relics of a turtle god in what is now Honduras. They regarded this god, often called Mam, as somewhat elderly and able to emerge from his shell. I imagine Mam as a bit of a recluse, perhaps a bit cranky, only occasionally emerging to offer advice to a surprised fisherman and ducking back quickly into his carapace before there could be any backtalk.

The Mayans pictured four turtle gods as pillars that hold up the world, and the surface of the world as the back of a huge turtle.

This story is oddly like the creation myth of ancient India: the creator of the world took the form of a turtle in order to hold up the land. According to Hindu lore, the world is a sphere that rests on the backs of four elephants standing on the carapace of a giant turtle.<sup>[2]</sup>

I suppose that Terry Pratchett was influenced by these stories when he conceived of the “Discworld” as a flat plate supported on the backs of four elephants, which stand on the back of a turtle that swims through the universe.

(There was a fifth elephant, but it exploded, and the various fatty bits rained down and are now buried deep in the earth in the form of oil deposits.<sup>[1]</sup>)

In his novel *Small Gods*, Pratchett imagines a pantheon of gods, most with limited responsibility for a narrow sphere of human activity. My personal favorite is the one charged with making kitchen tools catch on the inside of a drawer so that it cannot be opened. Her name is “Annoia.”

One of Pratchett’s small gods is called Om, who is often depicted as a raging bull stomping the ground, steam rising from his nostrils. The great empire of Om numbers two million, with priests and rituals and an inquisition. Intending to materialize as he does from time to time to inspire his followers, Om inadvertently takes the shape of a small turtle and finds himself helpless to alter his form.

His lack of power is due entirely to the fact that in all the great empire, only one person is a true

believer. The novice monk Brutha has a simple goodness and innate ethical sense. He has memorized all the scriptures. When Om appears as a turtle he is surprised, but still believes, and gradually grows to understand the small god's dilemma. Om explains that most of the scripture Brutha treasures was written by the prophets, who were (of course) human.

Stranded in the desert, they are both desperate for water. Brutha quotes 1<sup>st</sup> Ossery 23, "He brought forth water from stones."

Om replies, "Artistic license."

"What," Brutha says, "You can't do it?"

"No," says Om, "Think of something else."

Pratchett's book is a fascinating exploration of the way that humans interpret and apply religious teachings, and sometimes simply invent them. Its premise—that "small gods" exist because people believe in them and give them power—allows the novelist to critique actions carried out in the name of God but without regard for the core belief of respect for every person. The good monk asks why Om requires his priests to torture unbelievers. "I didn't tell them to do that," Om responds. "That was their own idea."

In separate conversations this month, two people (who were *not* Jewish) have said to me that Islam is an "evil" religion. My response has been that it is not the religion that is evil, but the extreme interpretation of it, which promotes evil deeds.

As we gather here in the face of escalating war in Lebanon, it is worth remembering that the central teachings of Islam, like those of its sibling religions Judaism and Christianity, promote concern for every human being. All three faiths spring from the God of Abraham. It is Abraham whose many descendants are the people whose histories are linked in the lands of the middle East; whose descendants now struggle with issues of power and boundaries.

Abraham's story. Abraham is the man who thought God ordered him to sacrifice his 12 year old son, Isaac.

(One commentary to the Torah explains that the story takes place when Isaac was 12, because if he had been 13, it wouldn't have been a sacrifice. [\[2\]](#) OK, that was a joke, and I stole it from the comedians who performed here on Tuesday.)

Abraham's story. Abraham took his son to the altar on the mountaintop. At the last minute, Abraham heard the voice of God ordering him to sacrifice a ram instead. This story is important *not* because, as is so often suggested, Abraham stood ready to do whatever horrific deed he thought God had ordered.

Abraham's story is important because it marks a turning point in 5,000 years of religious history. It marks the time when the God of the Old Testament—the God of today's Christians, Muslims, and Jews—announced an end to human sacrifice. It marks the beginning of the *religious* idea that killing in the name of God is not God's will.

Abraham's story marks the beginning of the religious idea of respect for human life. It marks the beginning of a *new conception of God*.

But Abraham's story was *only* the beginning. As human history proves—as current events demonstrate daily—human beings continue to attribute to God commands and ideas that spring from their own desires, their fears, their short-sightedness, their unwillingness to explore alternatives.

Whatever our idea of God or Right or Good, Pratchett's novel offers a useful metaphor. "Small gods" have power only as long as people believe in them. What small gods do humans believe in? Give power to?

In China, in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese Christian Hong Xiuquan [Zoo-Kwan] led the Taiping Rebellion and named himself the Heavenly King. Hong had a dream about a robed and hooded figure. He awoke believing that he had heard God speak; that he was the son of God, the younger brother of Jesus. He believed God had chosen him to lead the world to a new kingdom of "Perfect Peace."

The poem he wrote to express his mission was entitled, "Executing the Vicious and Preserving the Righteous." His followers, who called themselves the "God Worshipers," took as their earthly task the destruction of religious artifacts and writings of Confucians and Buddhists—and many of the Confucians and Buddhists as well.

Small gods. They are everywhere, self-anointed, wanting power, waiting for someone to believe.

Emerson said that "a person will worship something." What does it mean to "worship" a small god?

Emerson believed that we "worship" whatever it is that "dominates our imaginations and our thoughts," and what we worship "will determine our lives, and character."

What small gods do we worship? To what do we give unthinking belief, unshakable loyalty? Are there political, social, religious ideas that have shaped our views for years without examination?

And perhaps we give power to gods of an even smaller scale: the voices that carp and complain, exhort and command from the depths of our memories? The household and workplace gods who place unrelenting demands upon us? The god of self-image who constantly critiques each detail of appearance and presentation?

Where, in this cacophony of small gods each calling for belief and authority, is the god of love, of life, of peace, of personhood? Do we lose the real God—the Right, the Good—among the many small gods that clamor for our faith?

There is no need to give power to small gods.

*It is possible* to retain for ourselves the power, the authority, to decide what moral course follows the Good and Right. *It is necessary* to begin with ourselves; to set our boundaries firmly; to claim our own power and not give it away to small gods.

**And then let us fill our hearts with love for a Large God: to center our thoughts and actions in respect for other human beings, in solidarity with their needs, in celebration of their diversity.**

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[1] Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (1988) (an updated 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition is available).

[2] [http://dutch.phys.strath.ac.uk/CommPhys2004Exam/Sonia\\_Mitchell/overview.html](http://dutch.phys.strath.ac.uk/CommPhys2004Exam/Sonia_Mitchell/overview.html) Mitchell also reports: “In the Western hemisphere, too, creation stories of several Indian tribes maintain that the world was created on the back of a turtle. From the Seri Indians of the Gulf of California: ‘in the beginning there was only darkness and deep sea. From tidal waves and turbulence, one day, a giant leatherback turtle arose from the bottom of the ocean. On her back grew plants, then animals, then finally the first Seri people.’ (Rudloe 1979).”

[3] The consequences to the Discworld of this event were far-reaching, and are related in Terry Pratchett’s novel *The Fifth Elephant*.

[4] This joke belongs to Rabbi Bob Alper, a real rabbi and a professional comedian, who performed at our church on July 18, 2006 in the company of the Arab-American comedian Nazareth—“building bridges with laughter in troubled times.” These two have performed in a fundraiser for Seeds of Peace, the excellent organization that brings Palestinian and Israeli teens together to a camp in Maine to learn how to promote peace between their peoples.