

Tania Is Confused

Grappling with god
in the modern
universe

By Kanika G

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First Edition, August 2020.

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I want to thank my 8 year old daughter Pell G for sharing her insights, which helped improve the book. She has often been the inspiration behind Tania, but this time she helped hone the story and fine tune the way I dealt with various sensitive issues.

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The Assignment

It was a pleasant Saturday morning. Tania was working on an assignment from school, while Mama savored a cup of tea on her swing in the balcony.

"Mama, can you come to my room? I need you to look at this question I have for homework." Tania called out.

Mama was surprised. Tania rarely wanted assistance with homework. She preferred to struggle with it herself, except perhaps with Hindi. After a couple of bad grades, Tania had grudgingly acknowledged that she needed help.

"What's up Tania? What homework are you doing?" Mama asked, as she entered Tania's room.

"We are learning about places of worship in school. You know, like churches, mosques, temples, pagodas etc. The last question in the assignment asks what place of worship I usually go to, and what I pray for.

Mama nodded as she leaned against Tania's desk and read the question. She knew what the problem was, but she waited for Tania to articulate it.

"I don't go to any place of worship, Mama. And I don't pray. So what should I write?" Tania asked.

Mama had a distant look in her eyes as she gazed out of the window. Tania knew that Mama was thinking, and waited patiently.

A minute later, Mama turned to look at Tania. "Why don't you write just that?"

"Just what?" Tania was puzzled.

"What you just said. Write, *I don't go to any place of worship and I don't pray.*"

Tania stared at Mama. "What?" she asked, in disbelief.

"It's the truth." Mama pointed out, calmly.

"Is that even allowed? Won't the teacher think I'm being cheeky?" Tania hesitated. "They do make us pray in school every morning. I could write about that." Tania ventured. "I could say my place of worship is school, and I can write the school prayer." Tania cheered up.

Mama smiled. "Sure honey, if that's what you want." Mama noticed that Tania's momentary happiness had died out, and she looked pensive. "What's bothering you, sweetie?" Mama asked pushing a stray strand of hair behind Tania's left ear.

"It's not really what I want." Tania confessed. "But Mama, we were discussing this topic in school and ..." Tania bit her lip.

"And what Tania? Tell me." Mama urged.

"I said, I did not believe in god. Teacher told me that I had to. She said it didn't matter which god I believed in, but that I must believe in some god. She said I should be grateful to god for giving me such a good life." Tania blurted out, too upset to look at Mama.

Mama pulled Tania into a hug. "It's okay Tania. It's okay." She gently patted Tania on her back. "Tania why did you say you didn't believe in god? Is it true?" Mama led Tania to the bed, and sat down next to her.

"Teacher asked each of us which god we believed in. When it was my turn, I did not know what to say, so I said I did not believe in any god." Tania explained. Mama nodded.

"Mama, then Karishma said that she believed in god, and teacher told her that she is a good child and god loves her." Tania recounted, and was surprised to see Mama's eyes flash with anger.

"I'm so sorry, Honey. Did your friends say anything to you?" Mama probed.

Tania nodded. "Many of my friends said I was a bad person for not believing in god, and Tanisha said god would punish me for it and that's what I deserved. Is true Mama?" Tania's eyes were wide with fear.

"Tania, why didn't you tell me any of this before? When did this happen?" Mama asked, her voice full of concern.

"Yesterday. I didn't feel like talking about it. But then I saw this today." Tania gestured at her homework assignment. "Mama are we bad people for not praying to god? Why are people so mean about it?" Tears streamed down her cheeks, as she wondered how her best friend could say something so awful to her.

Mama sighed. "Tania god is a very sensitive subject. Different people follow different religions and believe in different gods. Usually, people of different religions peacefully co-exist, but

historically there has been some tension and distrust between them. So it's a precarious peace. Any incident that intensifies distrust between religious groups can trigger violence and bloodshed."

"Like what happened between Hindus and Muslims during partition of India, you mean?" Tania ventured. "Some of the people who had lived together in communities for generations, suddenly became suspicious of each other and even started killing each other." Tania frowned. "I read about it in a story."

"Yes. Several such bloody and gruesome conflicts between various religious groups splatter the pages of world history. Sometimes, even within a religion, there is tension between the different sects, for example Catholics and the Protestants fought each other for centuries in several religious wars in Europe."

"Even people who believe in the same god, fight over god? That doesn't make sense." Tania was perplexed and upset.

"They believe in the same god, but they disagree about what that god wants from them. Since god's messages are interpreted by religious authorities, sometimes there are disagreements that can lead to conflict." Mama explained.

"Oh, but people know better now, don't they Mama? Teacher said that god loves everyone, no matter which god they believe in."

Mama smiled. "As travel becomes cheaper and faster, the overlap between people of different religions increases. Some countries, like ours, recognize the dangers of religious conflict and encourage tolerance for all religions. But most people still believe in some god. That is why, although many people make an

effort to be tolerant of different religions, they are still very uncomfortable with the idea of no god at all."

"Oh, so that's why teacher said that it didn't matter which god I believed in, as long as I believed in some god." Tania's face was tear stained, but her eyes lit up as things started to make sense. "But that's why I do not want to write the truth. Because teacher will get angry." Tania looked worried again.

Mama pursed her lips. "If she does, I can talk to her. Don't worry. It's important to speak the truth and stand up for what you believe in."

"But Mama, I don't know what I believe. I haven't really thought about it. Is it bad to go to temples and believe in god?"

Mama was stunned. "Of course not! Is this something you want to explore?"

Who Is God?

"Umm. I don't know. Like why don't we go to some place of worship, or even pray at home for that matter? I mean most people do, so why not us?" Tania asked.

"Papa is an atheist, and I am not religious. So it's never come up for us." Mama shrugged.

"What's an atheist?"

"An atheist is someone who doesn't believe in god."

"Oh, so I am an atheist too." Tania nodded.

"Are you?" Mama raised her eyebrows and smiled.

Tania's face scrunched up in confusion. "You said Papa is an atheist, and you're not religious. So neither of you believe in god. I trust you both. So, I won't believe in god either."

"Tania, you're growing up. You need to learn about these things and then draw your own conclusions. While I am thrilled you trust us, I think this is something you need to figure out for yourself. Papa and I are happy to discuss this with you, answer questions, and help you understand anything that confuses you. Also, I never said that I don't believe in god. I said, I am not religious."

Tania blinked and shook her head. "What? What's the difference?"

Mama did not reply immediately. With her chin resting on her hands, a frown clouding her expression and an intense faraway look in her eyes, Tania could tell that Mama was organizing her thoughts. Finally, Mama spoke. "Okay, before we talk about believing in god, we need to figure out what we mean by god. So who or what do you think is god, Tania?"

"The one who created the universe?" Tania ventured.

"Okay, but is that all? I mean did god just create the universe and set it in motion to follow the rules of science, or does god run it whimsically and perform miracles?"

"I don't know." Tania shrugged. "How is god usually defined?"

"Typically, god is considered to be an immortal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent entity."

"What are all those *omnis*?" Tania blinked trying to take it all in.

"Omni means all and is usually used as a prefix. So omnipotent means all powerful, omniscient means all knowing, and omnipresent means present everywhere."

"Wow, that sounds like a tough job. Okay, let's go with that definition."

"This definition does not tie god down to any religion or religious practices. It does not clarify what behavior god rewards or punishes and how god interacts with humans. For that, one must turn to religion or at least philosophy." Mama looked at Tania to see if any of this was making sense to her.

"Oh, so Papa does not believe in god, and you believe an *omni-whatever* god exists, but you don't believe in any particular religion or follow any religious practices and rituals. Is that right?"

"Actually, I am not sure what I believe. Sometimes, I want to believe in an omnipotent, omniscient god I can confide in. Believing such a god is listening to me, automatically makes me feel better. I don't want to lose that. But at other times, I simply can't bring myself to believe in god. I guess I am agnostic."

"What's agnostic?" Tania was thrilled to be learning so many new words.

"An agnostic person is someone who believes that nothing is known or can be known about the nature of god."

"But why don't you believe in a god you can confide in? If this makes you happy, then what's the problem?"

Can Science and God Co-exist?

Mama took a deep breath. "The problem is that I love science too, and for most decisions I make, I follow scientific principles, and it bothers me that my belief in god is at odds with my love for the scientific method."

"But Mama, didn't a lot of great scientists believe in god? Like Einstein for example. My teacher told me so."

"Yes, a lot of scientists did, and still do believe in god, though some like Einstein believed god to be an abstract representation of nature itself. On the other hand, some scientists and mathematicians like Maxwell and Ramanujan were followers of a particular religion."

"But isn't that a contradiction? Can't science prove that god does not exist?"

"No it can't prove that. Science can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God."

"Why not?" Tania was taken aback. She had always had faith in the powers of science.

"Because any scientific theory requires some assumptions, called *axioms*. They are the starting point from which logical conclusions are drawn in accordance with a theory. God is an assumption. No matter how well science succeeds in describing the universe, and even predicting results of experiments, a believer can always argue, that's how god designed it."

"You make it sound like god could be a scientist, and we could all be a part of some massive cosmic experiment. Processes seemingly obey rules, but the experimenter could change the rules."

"Yes, that's a possibility."

"But wouldn't we notice if the rules changed? I mean our records and observations would show inconsistencies."

"God could make us all forget the old rules, change the records, and make us think they never changed. God is omnipotent, remember?" Mama offered.

Tania was dismayed. "But what's the point of learning anything at all, if god can change anything in anyway, or if god can do things that make no sense at all?" She got up and paced, trying to make sense of it all.

Mama shrugged. "People say that believing in god helps them find meaning in their lives. But like you just pointed out, the idea of an omnipotent god, in my opinion, takes away all meaning from life."

Tania wasn't satisfied. She searched for a way to find meaning in it all. "Could god only change things slowly and make the rules more complicated, so we would always be struggling to learn more about the universe at each stage, but still have enough success to keep us interested." She proposed.

Mama smiled. "I see you want to picture god as a teacher. As I said, god is an assumption and you can choose your assumptions in any way that makes you happy."

Tania continued, "Do you think a god of this type would reward certain behavior and punish some behavior, like teachers do. Perhaps, religion tries to appease these gods and figure out the rules they want us to follow." Tania suggested.

"That's one way of looking at it. But personally, I don't want to believe that if such gods did exist, they would need appeasing. However, if they were indeed capable of observing every one of us all the time, it would comfort me to simply chat with them, even if it was a one way chat, so they knew what I thought and how I felt. You see, while you suggested that god could be a teacher, I like to think of god as a friend."

"But these gods would still have power over us and could use that power if they wanted to in any way. Isn't the thought that anyone can control our fate frightening? I mean, if we can't, no one should, right?" Tania looked defiant.

"So, you would rather leave it entirely to random chance? Because, random chance can be pretty cruel too, you know."

"Yes, I think I would rather leave it to random chance. Somehow, that seems fair on the whole, even though it's often not fair in individual cases." Tania nodded thoughtfully. After a pause she added. "But Mama, if science does not eliminate the possibility of god, then why did you say that your belief in god is at odds with the scientific method?" Tania asked, puzzled.

"Any scientific theory has a set of axioms. The theory uses logical rules to draw conclusions based on the assumptions. The conclusions can then be tested with experiments. The quality of a theory is gauged by both the number and type of assumptions, and the number of useful predictions. An elegant and effective

theory is one that minimizes assumptions and maximizes correct predictions." Mama explained.

"What has any of this got to do with god?" Tania asked, wondering if Mama was veering off topic.

"I'm coming to that." Mama assured her. "You see, an omnipotent god can do anything and everything and is effectively an infinite number of assumptions. As for conclusions, we can't draw any, as there are no rules. Everything becomes completely arbitrary. Even if experience tells us that god chooses to follow some rules, we cannot rely on it, because god can break those rules at any time in any way."

"But what if god never chooses to break the rules?"

"In that case god, even if one exists, does not affect our lives and observations in any way. So god serves no purpose that scientific theory cannot already account for, and is an unnecessary assumption."

"So, you're saying that while science allows for the possibility of god, it doesn't make for good theory."

"Yes, and that is why I hesitate to believe. Even though the idea comforts me in some ways, it irks me in other ways."

"But Mama, there is still one problem for which god can be the only answer."

"What is that, Honey?" It was Mama's turn to be puzzled.

Who Made the Universe?

"Who made the universe Mama? God is supposed to be the creator, but if god does not exist, then who made the universe?" Tania asked.

"I don't know. But why did someone have to make it?" Mama retorted.

"Is that a trick question? The universe can't just pop into existence, right?" Tania quipped.

"Why not?" Mama asked, without hesitation.

Tania stared at Mama, agog. "Because that's not how things work, especially if one believes in science." Tania was annoyed, because she thought Mama was being deliberately silly.

"But that's exactly what the Big Bang theory proposes." Mama objected.

"No, I mean who made the Big Bang happen? Where did all the stuff come from?" Tania was feeling frustrated.

"Again, I don't know, but saying that god made it is no solution at all." Mama asserted.

"Why not? It's the argument I find hardest to counter." Tania was puzzled. Mama had been hesitant and uncertain, until now. But when it came to the creation of the universe, Mama seemed so sure, as if this was the one argument that did not sway her. Yet, this was the hurdle that had tripped Tania. "Sonali asked me

who I thought made the universe if I did not believe in god, and I did not have an answer." Tania sighed defeated.

"Tania saying god made the universe just leads to the question, who made god?" Mama clarified.

"What?" Tania was stunned. "What does that mean?"

"I mean if you can't allow for the possibility of the universe just popping into existence, then how can you allow for the possibility of its maker, who is presumably even more complex than the universe itself, just popping into existence?"

"But if you assume that the universe just popped into existence, then isn't that way too many assumptions ruining an elegant scientific theory?"

"Not at all. The universe popping into existence is just the set of initial conditions for the theory. It states the existing conditions when the theory is first applied. From there on, the universe evolves in time following the consistent rules of science, which are either known or can be known."

"Okay, but what if god is not omnipotent, but just the creator of our universe?" Tania proposed.

"Go on." Mama encouraged.

God or Godlike?

"So god could be an inhabitant of a larger civilization that contains our universe, and god could have made the universe, right?"

"Yes, but it leads to the question that does the larger universe then have their own god, and where does this stop?"

"Sure, but getting back to our own universe for the moment, this god would seem so powerful to us, that we may consider it omnipotent. God could be an extra-universal alien, right?"

"Hmm. That actually brings up several interesting points. The TV show *Stargate* proposed the possibility of Egyptian and Norse gods being aliens from another planet, who seemed all powerful because their civilizations were far advanced compared to our own, at that time."

"There you go." Tania nodded. "Such a god doesn't have to be omnipotent, but may only appear to be so, and therefore would not be at odds with science."

"True, or we could be have been created by a superior form of intelligence outside our universe, just like we create robots and computers." Mama proposed.

"So just in case that's how it is, shouldn't we pray to these gods to keep them happy? I mean we have nothing to lose. If they don't exist, our prayers are useless, but if they do, then our prayers may help improve our lives." Tania felt like she was on to something.

"Even if that were true, how would you know what these gods would want? How would you know they wouldn't be offended by the calculated nature of your faith? What if they despise being prayed to? We don't expect our robots or computers to pray to us. We don't even believe they feel the way we do."

"But don't scientists reward monkeys for certain types of behavior in some conditioning experiments?"

"Yes they do. We too learn from the feedback the universe gives us when we interact with it. Are these a part of some experiment designed by extra-universal gods? No idea. The thing is, gods if one or more exist, have not tried to communicate their desires to us directly, and we can't guess with any certainty. So we must go on living as best we can, with the feedback we receive from our surroundings and conscience, to improve ourselves and our world."

"I suppose we imagine god thinks the same way we do. We like praise, so we assume god does too. But that doesn't have to be true, does it?" Tania thought out loud.

"Exactly Tania. And that brings me to another important issue. Remember, I said you had made several good points."

"Yes, what else did you mean?"

Anthropomorphism and Ethics

"Well, I liked how you used the pronoun it for god, instead of he or she."

"Because there is no particular reason to assume that god is either male or female, you mean? Most religions that have only one god consider their god male, and even in religions that have multiple gods, the most powerful gods are usually male and referred to as *He*."

"Yes, but there is more. Almost all gods are human gods. Even the ones that don't look human, think like humans. It's because we tend to anthropomorphize."

"Anthro... What?" Tania frowned.

"Anthropomorphize. It means, to assign human attributes to non humans. Like in some cartoons, many animals are shown to talk and think like humans. Some are even shown to live like humans, *Peppa Pig*, or *Top Cat* for example. Sophisticated books like *Animal Farm* and *Alice In Wonderland* also anthropomorphize animals.

"So we imagine gods to have human personalities and often even human appearance, but with magical abilities and or exaggerated physical features like giving them ten hands instead of two, sort of like superheroes." Tania concluded.

"Hmm.. I hadn't thought of that, but traditionally superheroes save humanity from evil and have superhuman powers, a lot like we imagine god. Interesting observation Tania."

"But god is immortal, omnipotent and omniscient, and can be nothing like us humans, right? I mean our insecurities and mortality motivate our actions and behavior. So why do we anthropomorphize?"

Mama smiled. "Yes, that is an irony indeed. On one hand we want to believe in a superior power and consider ourselves humble for doing so. Yet, we attribute human qualities to this superior power. Gods of most religions have the similar strengths and weaknesses of character as regular mortals. Some religions say that god made us in his image, but to me it seems more likely, we made god in our image."

"But whatever god may look like, at least believing in god makes people good." Tania noted. "I mean if you don't believe in god, then you don't worry about being punished for doing bad things as long as you don't get caught."

"Tania how do you feel when you do something you think is wrong? Like remember the time you copied Tanisha's homework? Were you scared of getting caught?"

"A little, but more than that I was ashamed. I couldn't even look at Miss Gupta, because she always said such good things about me, and I knew I did not deserve her praise any more."

"And how did you feel when Miss Gupta asked Tanisha and you about it?"

"I was relieved once I confessed. I felt much happier getting it off my chest. I guess, if Miss Gupta hadn't smelled a rat, I would have told her anyway to get it off my chest."

"What about the time you troubled Mrs. Wadia by ringing her doorbell and running away? That was a fun trick, until you got caught, right?" Mama recalled.

"Yeah Mama, but that's only because I thought she deserved it. Once you told me about her injured leg, I felt terrible that I had made her walk up to the door for no reason, so many times. It was even worse than being scolded by her."

"What about the time I got that writing job. Your plan to make me quit almost worked." Mama winked.

"Oh Mama. You are cruel. You know how bad I felt about it, when I realized how much you wanted the job." Tania complained. "Anyway why are we talking about all the bad things I ever did?"

"Because I wanted you to think about what prevents you from doing bad things most of the time. Is it fear of being caught?"

Tania thought about it for a moment. "Well, I wouldn't worry about breaking rules I did not agree with, unless I was worried about getting caught. But I would feel terrible about doing something I thought was bad, or if I hurt someone. It would bother me until I fixed it."

"So then do you think you would do bad or hurtful things, just because god wasn't watching?"

"No. I don't think so." Tania shook her head.

"Tania if one only does the right thing because one is afraid of being caught, then they will always try to find a way around it. Fear as a motivator goes only so far. The urge and need to do the

right thing must come from within. Being responsible for our actions, we can only be happy, if we believe we are doing the right things. Being at peace with ourselves, and not just fear of god, must be the motivator to do the right thing."

"But how do we know what the right thing is Mama? Couldn't we be wrong about it?" Tania asked.

"You know Tania, when you are a kid, you have lots of grown ups to help you figure out right from wrong. You rely upon your parents, grandparents and teachers to help you see what is right, until you gather enough experience and knowledge to be able to figure it out for yourself."

"Oh, but then how do you know when you are ready to decide for yourself?"

"It's a gradual process. During your adolescent years you slowly start taking control of more and more aspects of your life. You are bound to make plenty of mistakes, but you learn from them. The point I'm trying to make is that people are used to being watched over by their teachers and parents. It makes them feel safe. So, what happens when one no longer has teachers and parents to lean on? What do we do then?"

"Don't we just figure stuff out ourselves?"

"Yes we do. But at that point, it feels comforting to believe that god is watching over us. It's a familiar feeling that takes us back to the warmth and safety of our childhood. When we have to make difficult choices, it helps to think that god approves of a particular choice, and therefore it is the right one."

"You said Papa is an atheist. So how does he make difficult decisions?"

"He takes full responsibility for them, and that's not easy. But he puts a lot of thought and research into every difficult decision he makes, and he realizes that the decisions he makes, are only good to the best of his knowledge. He knows that in time, events may develop in ways that prove him wrong. It's a difficult and lonely road, and not everyone can walk it."

"So should I be an atheist like him?"

"That's not what I am saying. It's important to make thoughtful, well researched and compassionate decisions that you can be proud of. When you make decisions, you need to do your best to make sure they won't haunt you. If believing in a god helps you do that, then that's what you should do. If not believing in god smooths out the process for you, then that's what you should do. Believing in god and religion is a choice, and *you need to make the choice that helps you be the best version of yourself.*"

"Okay, I'll think about it, but can I change my mind with time?" Tania inquired.

"Yes, of course. Life is a series of learning experiences, and every time we learn something new, we adapt our beliefs and actions to make the most of our new knowledge. So yes, it is fine to change your mind about believing in god, and for that matter, anything else."

"Okay, I'll think about it. And I'll write the truth in my assignment. I hope teacher does not get angry, but if she does, I'll tell her that I just wrote the truth, and while I am still trying to fig-

ure out if I believe in god, I already know that I believe in telling the truth."

"I think that's a pretty good response Tania." Mama smiled.
"How about some cookies? All that thinking made me really hungry."