

A History of an Invisible God Seen Through Religion and Western Thought

By Siyaphiwa Mfundo Maphanga

Abstract

This paper serves to discuss religion and argues for the existence of the supernatural/transcendental. The argument stems from an overwhelming amount of evidence - in the form of religious practice and thought - from congeries of communities and cultures, across a vast span of time (arguably all of human history), the world over. Each community has grappled with the transcendental, something beyond this world hic et nunc.

I will begin by defining religion - the lens through which we shall perceive who or what we understand to be God, or the "spiritual". I will then explore various thoughts that have been espoused at certain junctures in human history both in religion and some of the philosophical thought that has commented on God and religion.

The Zulu *Mvelinqangi*; the Judeo-Christian God known by the ineffable tetragrammaton [YHWH]; the Muslim Allah; the deities of the Egyptians, Greco-Romans, Hindus and Babylonians to name a few. Karen Armstrong (1999:116) – in her *A History of God* – aptly points out that men have always speculated about an Absolute. They play language-games and not one of their explanations suffices; the study of religion, it can be argued, is as old as human thought (Jastrow 1901:1). In fact religious thought and practices have been present in almost every human culture (Murray & Rea 2008:x). Be it trees, animals, the sun or some transcendent being, humans have pondered about the supernatural for millennia. This then begs the question: “what is religion?”

A neat and compact denotation of the word religion is elusive; its object is vast and greatly disparate, so much so that any concise definition would inadvertently exclude a particular religion. To further compound this difficulty, specific religions (like the cultures in which they are situated) are in continual flux. This is to say that any definition proffered would possibly become obsolete at a later stage in human history. A simple example would be if you succinctly defined religion as a belief in a

Higher Power, a Supreme Being. As a Christian it would be easy for me to fall into what Clack & Cack (2008:1) call the “Parson Thwackum Error”, in defining religion by means of my particular religion or one dominant in my culture. I would be confronted with resistance from Buddhist scholars, a belief system that neither denies the existence of deities nor subscribes to or believes in them.

The difficulty experienced in denoting the word *religion* has led to a congeries of connotations cropping up, to the extent that Wilfred Cantwell Smith would rather discard the term altogether. In his *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Smith (1991:194) proposes this due to *religion*’s ambiguity and illegitimate traditional meanings [connotations]. His allegations can easily be illustrated by the societal reactions to the word *religion*: what comes to mind is the on-going crisis with ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), the 9/11 attacks or even the Colonisation of Africa narrated vividly in the late Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Closer to home, one may think of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa buttressing apartheid with religion. A malpractice of religion, however, cannot justify throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Let us explore the term *religion* and attempt to define it, with the cognisance of the transience of any definition put forth.

Morris Jastrow (1901:1) said that in a sense, the study of religion [*Religionswissenschaft*] is as old as human thought yet in another more apposite sense, is the youngest of the sciences. Peter Harrison (1990:14) states that *Religionswissenschaft* “defined its object and explicated it”; it was in accordance with the development of the science that religion emerged as a natural object and one that could be studied. Prior to that, religion was something people merely practised. Armstrong (1999:112) articulates that it was simply a matter of “cult and ritual” as opposed to ideas; it was not philosophical or theological. Religion was emotive and not cognitive, something practised not pondered.

Justin L. Barrett makes this distinction clear in his essay: *The Naturalness of Religion and the Unnaturalness of Theology*. As one can extrapolate from the title, Barrett argues for the naturalness of religion. He describes religion as “a shared body of ideas and practices related to the presumed existence of counterintuitive intentional agents” (Barrett 2012:4). Barrett (2012:11) likens religion to language, both being forms of cultural expression natural to human systems of cognition; he

cites the ease with which people engage in religious thought. People need little instruction and religious beliefs are generally acquired so early in life that most seldom remember not having them; archaeologically, evidence of ritual burial sites imply that religion has been in our midst for north of thirty thousand years (Barrett 2012:11-12). We can summate that religion is natural and something people have been engaged in for millennia, however, let us continue exploring the term in order to explicate it further.

When we consult the literature in this discourse, we find a dichotomy of approaches to the issue of defining religion: the substantive and the functional (Clack & Clack 2008:2; Thompson 2007:ix). The substantive definition defines religion according to the “objects of faith” or “(theistic) belief content”; Melford E. Spiro states that religion is “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings” (Clack & Clack 2008:2; Thompson 2007:ix). This definition is compatible with the three great monotheistic faiths but runs into trouble when confronted by Buddhism or certain sects of Jainism that do not believe in gods and powerful spirits or supernatural entities like angels and *jinn*; such a narrow definition would inadvertently exclude such belief systems (Clack & Clack 2008:2-3; Thompson 2007:ix).

The functionalist approach in contrast, does not focus on belief content but rather the role religion plays in a person’s life (Thompson 2007:ix). Clack & Clack (2008:3) posit that the word *religion* is derived from the Latin *religare* meaning “to bind”. The functionalist definition rings truer to the etymology of *religion* in that it investigates how religion binds together members of a community into a coherent whole, the values and morality that spring from it and how it contributes to their *Weltanschauungen* (Clack & Clack 2008:3; Thompson 2007:ix). I would argue that this is the sort of definition Karl Marx had in mind when he called religion the “opium of the people”.

With the aid of Clack & Clack’s (2008:6) definition, I will now conflate the various descriptions we have covered and proffer a denotation of religion as:

A cultural phenomenon, natural to humans, that is primarily practised by individuals within a community. It consists of a shared set of concepts and creeds. It normally presumes and lays claim to contact with supernatural entities or in the very least,

acknowledges transcendence. It provides a *Weltanschauung* to its adherents, and offers a meaning to life along with goals to be attained. It can have either substantive or functional qualities or both. It is generally but not prescriptively manifested in an institutional form with organised rituals, a priesthood and areas or structures dedicated to ceremonial activity.

Now that we have framed what religion is, we will use it as a lens through which we will focus and also capture what it portrays to us. We will first explore a few instances of religion. Through the ages, the idea of God has evolved and adapted to the needs of those practising religion. God was initially viewed as a majestic yet distant Sky God which begged the need for more relatable gods and spirits (Armstrong 1999:9); this is instantiated by the veneration of ancestors practised in African traditional religion, as well the anthropomorphic conceptions of Greek deities. Natural phenomena necessitated some measure of understanding and these forces were consequently personalised and made into gods as a means of explanation (Armstrong 1999:11). This is seen with Thor being the reason behind thunder, Zeus depicted as wielding lightning bolts, and the sun's traverse across the sky personified by a chariot driven by the Greek god Helios.

The sort of thought evinced here reminds me of *izinganekwane* [Zulu folklore] that my grandmothers used to tell to me. One that springs to mind features a dog and a cab driver. In short, the dog travelled with a cab driver and paid with a large denomination banknote, thereafter asking for his change upon arriving at the destination. The cab driver promptly sped off with the money and this story serves to explain why dogs chase after cars. This may be a ludicrous example but in light of these conceptions of God, we learn a lot more about ourselves and the thought we evince, as well as our needs in a given moment. Whether we seek an explanation for the world around us or the means to live in it – for instance, agrarian communities were inclined to worship a female fertility goddess whereas warrior groups tended towards a male god of war.

In antiquity, God was self-evident and pragmatic; people believed in Him because He worked for them. God was not a theological or philosophical abstraction; people did not sit in ivory towers cogitating proofs for His scientific and philosophical soundness (Armstrong 1999:25). The way in which we approach God today is the

heritage of the *Aufklärung* – one that has overtones of positivism and C.S. Lewis’ “chronological snobbery”. Friedrich Nietzsche (1874:83) speaks of an age which imagines that it “possesses the rarest of virtues, justice, to a greater degree than any other age”, an age that boastfully insinuates progress. Jean-Paul Sartre (1946:306) would be just as opposed to this – as Nietzsche was before him – stating that he, in a sense, does not believe in progress because it implies amelioration. It is chronological snobbery to assume that we are better off than any given society at any point in history, when the *Weltanschauungen* and *Zeitgeist* were different to that of ours. To look back from the imagined vantage point of a predominantly post-*Aufklärung*, Western mind-set and pass judgment on a different paradigm is irresponsible and inconclusive. Who are we to say we are better off and what exactly is the standard of measure? I would like to relate a story to stimulate thought on this point.

The story begins with a United States government official enquiring about a Native American chief’s observations of colonialists’ actions over a span of almost a century – the wars, technological advances, the “progress” and the damage. To this, the chief nodded in acknowledgment and the official continued to ask the chief’s opinion on where the colonialists had gone wrong. The chief’s response related all the positive aspects of their community – no taxes, no debt, an abundance of food, clean water, free medical service – and almost derisively, he states that only the colonialists were vacuous enough to presume they could improve such a system. Any system, however, has its drawbacks and although there is truth in the chief’s words, it is also true that there was a lot of infighting amongst the Native American tribes; it becomes difficult to gauge “progress”.

It is easy to look back and label the civilisations observed as premodern, people who were uncritical of their beliefs. To them, God was pragmatic and met immediate needs, only later did man assume they could scrutinise Him under a microscope and conceive definitions for an infinite God using their finite minds. The finitude of the human mind led to a natural conclusion, that the idea of God contained in Western thought would meet its demise. Before we explore this idea, let us focus in on some instances of religion and the thought and practices thereof.

According to certain scholars and critics, the covenant made at Mount Sinai (circa 1200 BCE) between God and the Israelites only became important to them in the seventh century BCE (Armstrong 1999:32). The covenant, scholars argue, paints a picture of a polytheistic setting where Yahweh was preeminent; Israelites and much of the Middle East were not yet monotheistic (Armstrong 1999:32). The problem for me lies in the fact that the very *Tanach* that the scholars consult in making their claims calls “other gods” demons (see Dt 32:17); nothing more than evil spirits, *shedim* in Hebrew or *daimonia* in Greek. These beings are elevated to godhood through idolatry and the Bible states that they are created beings worshipped as gods that can do nothing (see Jr 10:3-5, 8-11; Rm 1:23; 1 Cor 8:4-5). The Israelites and their contemporaries may have held to a limited polytheistic view but one should question its validity.

Four centuries prior to the covenant at Mount Sinai, in the seventeenth century BCE, Aryans (a people from what is now Iran) invaded, subdued and imposed their religious ideas upon the natives of the Indus valley (Armstrong 1999:38). In the *Rig-Veda* (a collection of odes), we encounter a pantheon of gods that resemble those of the Middle East. There are also traces of human thought that all these gods were derived from one Absolute that transcended them all (Armstrong 1999:38). Unlike some faith practices in antiquity (e.g. Babylonian and Egyptian), the Vedic religion did not seek to explain the origins of life but consisted of a more existential approach.

In the subsequent centuries following the Aryan invasion, the religious ideas of the suppressed indigenous people resurfaced and an interest in *karma* resurged (Armstrong 1999:39). In light of that, since one’s destiny was a direct result of their actions, people were reluctant to blame gods for human behaviour and the consequences thereof (Armstrong 1999:39). Vedic religion was preoccupied with ritual sacrifice but the Indian practices of old renewed interest in yoga and the external focus of the Vedic religion felt empty as people sought inner meaning; the Indian practices were more internal and personal as opposed to the rigid Vedic liturgy and rituals (Armstrong 1999:39).

In the wake of Hinduism and Buddhism, the gods lost status in India. Hindus and Buddhists did not deny the existence of the gods but strove to conceive new means

to surpass and transcend them, to take charge of one's own destiny (Armstrong 1999:39). Buddhists do not attribute religious experience to contact with a supernatural being; they believe that it is natural to man (Armstrong 1999:9, 43). Conversely, in Vedic religion people experienced a holy power (*Brahman*) through sacrificial rituals. *Brahman* came to be understood as a power which sustains the universe; some saw it as personal whilst others viewed it as an impersonal force. *Brahman* is in fact neutral, permeates all life and cannot be addressed (Armstrong 1999:40).

Much like the people native to India had grown to be dissatisfied with the Vedic religion, so too did the Greeks grow tired of the myths of religion used to explain reality (Armstrong 1999:46). Richard Tarnas (1996:24) – in his *The Passion of the Western Mind* – states that the Hellenic mind had moved in a general direction away from “the supernatural and toward the natural”. The Greek civilisation is generally agreed upon (case in point being Armstrong and Tarnas) as the birthplace of Western philosophy with Plato (427-346 BCE) receiving primacy. In pagan antiquity, it was believed that an archetypal world existed that corresponded to our own, a notion that Plato translated into his conception of the world of the Forms or Ideas (Armstrong 1999:43; Tarnas 1996:6). Since it was believed that nothing in this world *hic et nunc* had any lasting significance and everything was in meaningless flux, then a stable, universal, timeless and perfect world was superior to and stood beyond the concrete world, forming it (Armstrong 1999:43; Tarnas 1996:6).

Aristotle (384-322 BCE) was heavily influenced by Plato but opposed his conception of transcendent, pre-existent and self-subsistent Forms, opting rather to describe them in a more immanent sense of being inherent in material objects (Armstrong 1999:49; Tarnas 1996:66). The only exception was Aristotle's supreme Form described as “an already existing actuality, absolute in its perfection, the only form existing entirely separate from matter” – the Unmoved Mover, the “first cause of the universe”, God (Armstrong 1999:50; Tarnas 1996:63). The ideas of Plato and Aristotle would later serve to buttress the monotheists' articulation of God although Jewish and Muslim admirers would have to concede that these concepts were “logical [necessities] rather than religious conviction[s]” and could have no impact on the lives of ordinary mortals (Armstrong 1999:51; Tarnas 1996:63). This illustrates a contrast between the Hellenic conception of wisdom and that of the Jews which

amounted to fearing God – according to the author of Ecclesiastes (or Wisdom of Solomon) (Armstrong 1999:84). The question is, “how did Yahweh become the God of Israel?”

Mark S. Smith states (1990:156) – in his *The Early History of God* – that although cultural similarities between the Israelites and their Canaanite past as well as their contemporaneous neighbours were identifiable, it is difficult to clarify the causes. With that said, it is difficult to trace the development of Israelite monotheism back to “the point of ancient Israel’s historical appearance [circa 1200 BCE]” (Smith 1990:156). The reasons may not be explicit but we can still follow the trend that shows ancient Israel moving away from a (limited) polytheism similar to that of its neighbours, to a religion that set them apart (Smith 1990:156). Armstrong (1999:68) paints a picture of a struggle, or rather a battle, for the primacy of Yahweh in the Middle East over against the pantheon of deities revered by a variety of nations. This process of “differentiation” resulted in the “displacement of Baal from Israel’s national cult” (Smith 1990:156). A notable example of the aforementioned process would be *Josiah’s reform* circa 623 BCE (Carr 2010:133). David M. Carr describes (2010:267) it as “a socio-religious reform that Josiah is said to have undertaken in the wake of the decline of Assyrian influence over the area (2 Kings 23; compare 2 Chronicles 34), eliminating sanctuaries outside Jerusalem and laying claim to some of the territories of the former northern kingdom”. This is one example of the move from many gods to the one Judeo-Christian God, Yahweh, who revealed Himself to man through Moses, the prophets and Jesus Christ.

This idea of revelation is expressed by Philo of Alexandria (25 BCE-50 CE), a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher. Philo states that God reveals Himself to and communicates with humanity using “powers” (Armstrong 1999:86). Two notable powers which God uses are Kingly (intelligible order of the universe) and Creative (blessing bestowed upon humanity) powers (Armstrong 1999:86). These powers are knowable and make God knowable to us; they emanate from His unknowable essential Being which Philo denotes as *ousia* (Armstrong 1999:86). According to Philo, we will never know God as He is in Himself, “He utterly transcends the mind”; we can only know God as He has chosen to reveal Himself to us (Armstrong 1999:85-86). Beyond revelation, we may find that we venture into the realm of what

Georg W.F. Hegel would term speculative [*Spekulativ*] philosophy (Inwood 1992:272).

My aim, then, is not to give a full account of God and all His characteristics. In actual fact, this is an insuperable task given the fact that such a comprehensive explanation is not even possible for our own terminable character. I daresay that we do not fully understand ourselves so as to give an exhaustive reflexive description; to assume our finitude can perceive the infinitude that is God, is folly. This, however, has not stopped man from speculating, even about an Absolute and the explanations thereof have never quite been adequate; there is a general consensus that human life consists of some essential transcendent element (Armstrong 1999:51, 116).

What we see with religion and other human thought, is an attempt to articulate this general and widespread human experience of an Absolute. The means of this expression is language and consequently, it would be asinine not to afford – the Swiss linguist and semiotician – Ferdinand de Saussure a seat at this round table.

De Saussure (1916:832) opposes the idea of language as merely a naming process – words simply corresponding to the things they are naming. He finds that this understanding presupposes that “ready-made ideas exist before words” and that the “linking of a name and a thing is a very simple process” (Saussure 1916:832). De Saussure (1916:832) then shows us that this approach can highlight something about the dual nature of the linguistic sign. The linguistic sign [*signe*] is an “intimately united” whole comprising of the signified [*signifié*] and the signifier [*signifiant*]; a *signe* carries the concept of something along with its sensory representation (as either sound or image which imply the concept as a whole) (Saussure 1916:833). The *signifiant* is therefore not empty; there exists a “natural bond” between it and the *signifié* (Saussure 1916:834). Humanity has articulated the transcendent and, in so doing, has produced a *signe*. The words and imagery (*signifiant*) humans have used and continue to use would be vacuous without a *signifié*. In fact, any discourse about a transcendent world would be meaningless without the referent.

With the pronouncement of the death of God by Nietzsche, however, we see an anti-foundationalist removal of the *signifié* from thought, resulting in meaning being simply perspectival. This is one aspect of a secular postmodern society, a secularism that Armstrong (1999:4) describes as uncharted territory in Western

history. Some may perceive this as a positive pioneering endeavour and that resorting to a transcendent *signifié* is a step backwards, however one cannot escape reality; a reality that has been experienced by humanity for millennia. Consequently, we see a return to spirituality in response to what Armstrong (1999:10) would call a “God-shaped hole”.

Jeffery W. Robbins (ed. 2007:13, 15) speaks of a “transition from the death of God to postmodern faith”; “from secularism to postsecularism”, and quoting John D. Caputo, a move towards “religion without religion”. Celia Kourie (2006:75) illustrates this with a prevalent interest in spirituality in society whether it is “the concept and practice [of] *Ubuntu*”, utilisation of eastern meditation techniques and yoga. This can extend to and be seen with regards to *feng shui* architecture and interior design, employing acupuncture in medical practice and New Age spirituality espoused in popular culture such as Rhonda Byrne’s *The Secret*.

My argument then, is to state that there exists a transcendence; one that I would describe as God. I do not hold to the notion that all religions lead to God in the sense of all roads leading to Rome. Alvin Plantinga’s use of the analogy of blind people each touching a certain part of an elephant (be it the tail, trunk, tusks, etc.) better describes my stance. No one person can claim a complete perception of the elephant but each describes what they experience in an attempt to understand more fully. The bottom line is that we are all experiencing the elephant, or rather, the Absolute that it represents.

Bibliography

- Armstrong, K., 1999, *A history of God from Abraham to the present: The 4000-year quest for God*, Vintage, London.
- Barrett, J.L., 2012, 'The naturalness of religion and the unnaturalness of theology' in D. Evers, M. Fuller, A. Jackelén & T.A. Smedes (eds.), *Is religion natural?*, pp. 3-23, T&T Clark International, London.
- Carr, D.M., 2010, *An introduction to the Old Testament: Sacred texts and imperial contexts of the Hebrew Bible*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester.
- Caputo, J.D. & Vattimo, G., Robinson, J.W. (ed.), 2007, *After the death of God*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Clack, B. & Clack, B.R., 2008, *The philosophy of religion: A critical introduction*, 2nd edn., Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Harrison, P., *'Religion' and the religions in the English Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Inwood, M.J., 1992, *A Hegel dictionary*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.
- Jastrow, M., 1901, *The study of religion*, Walter Scott, Ltd. (Paternoster Square), London.
- Kourie, C., 2006, 'Postmodern Spirituality in a Secular Society' in C.W. du Toit & C.P. Mayson (eds.), *Secular spirituality as a contextual critique of religion*, pp. 75-94, University of South Africa, Pretoria.
- Murray, M.J. & Rea, M.C., 2008, *An introduction to the philosophy of religion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Nietzsche, F.W., 1874, 'On the uses and disadvantages of history for life', transl. R.J. Hollingdale, in D. Breazeale (ed.), 1997, *Untimely meditations*, pp. 57-123, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Sartre, J., 1946, 'Existentialism is a Humanism', transl. P. Mairet, in W. Kaufman (ed.), 1956, *Existentialism: From Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, pp. 222-311, World Publishing Company, Cleveland.
- Saussure, F. de, 1916, 'Nature of the linguistic sign', transl. W. Baskin, in D.H. Richter (ed.), 1998, *The critical tradition: Classic texts and contemporary trends*, pp. 832-835, Bedford/St. Martin's Press, Boston.
- Smith, M.S., 1990, *The early history of God: Yahweh and the other deities in ancient Israel*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York.

- Smith, W.C., 1991, *The meaning and end of religion*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis.
- Tarnas, R., 1996, *The passion of the Western mind: Understanding the ideas that have shaped our world view*, Pimlico, London.
- Thompson, M., 2007, *Philosophy of religion*, McGraw-Hill Publishers, Blacklick.