

Anthropomorphism: Background, Criticism and Defining Categories

“IS GOD DEAD?” asked *Time* magazine in its April 8, 1960 issue. Yes, “God is dead,” responded three American scholars: Thomas Altizer of Emory University in Atlanta, William Hamilton of Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, and Paul Van Buren of Temple University. This bold response to a very extraordinary question proved to be the birth of what is known as “The Death of God” school, a movement marking one culmination of a centuries old study into the existence and nature of the “Transcendent God” of theism.

This chapter examines the claimed origins of religion and the rise of anthropomorphism: its ancient connotations, its historical development down the centuries, and what it has meant to followers of different faiths, as well as to philosophers, scholars and theologians. I am deeply indebted to Stewart Guthrie, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, Fordham University, New York, a world authority on anthropomorphism, whose work I draw heavily upon in this chapter. Also examined will be the various levels of criticism directed towards its application to God, where it collides with corporealism, incarnation and mystical interpretation, and where it has been considered appropriate to use in reference to ‘knowing’ God, strictly qualified of course and hemmed in by carefully defined parameters.

Confident sounding claims concerning the death of God are neither unusual nor are they new. For centuries, philosophers, intellectuals, and scientists have viewed the theistic conception of God as too confusing, complicated and indeed inconsequential, arguing that the idea of a transcendental God and his institutions have become irrelevant to man

and his surroundings. This postulation is implied in many philosophical and scientific writings. In the relatively modern age, to speak of “the death of God” is to invoke the name of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), famed German philosopher and nihilist, who stated these very words at the end of the nineteenth century. Writing on the various stages of development which ultimately led man – in Europe anyway – to the shared cultural belief that God was dead, Nietzsche first pointed to the many gods worshipped by ancient humanity. These in turn gave way to the jealous, biblical God of the Old Testament who declares, “There is but one God! Thou shalt have no other gods before me!” All the other gods, wrote Nietzsche, then laughed and shook upon their thrones, exclaiming an interesting secret: “Is it not just divinity that there are Gods, but no God?”¹ expiring from their laughter.

The multiple deities of ancient times, according to Nietzsche, connected usefully with human needs or natural forces. The one God who replaced them however, transcended human will and was too intrusive, disturbing, and involved in human affairs. This God, wrote Nietzsche “beheld everything I use, and also man: that God had to die! Man cannot endure that such a witness should live.”² Commenting on Nietzsche’s observations, religious ethics scholar Paul Ramsey explains that such a conception of God “was too much God with us, God in human, all-too-human form. He mixed too much in human affairs, even manifesting himself in this miserable flesh. In a sense, God’s fellow-humanity killed him.” Furthermore, “After the gods made in man’s image, the God who proposed to make and remake man in his own image, that God too had to die.”³

So, this “death of God” solution was necessary to liberate man from the unlimited restrictions, or so-called religious interpretations of man and the universe, imposed in the name of God upon the scientific and cultural products of men. This death, wrote German-Jewish philosopher Karl Löwith, “demands of the man who wills himself, to whom no God says what he must do, that he transcend man at the same time as he is freed from God.”⁴ This view considered men as autonomous and unlimited creators of their culture and destiny. Whereas in the past humanity would accomplish this task by projecting its fears and aspirations into the cosmos through the creation of gods, now it achieves this autonomy through science and philosophy. In other words, science

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and rationalism have effectively killed God removing the need for Him in the development of human culture and activity. So important is this line of thought that it is the belief of James C. Livingston, a scholar of modern religious thought, that the outcome of this development has been “the death of the ultimate ground and support of all traditional values. For over two thousand years men have derived their ‘thou shalt’ and ‘thou shalt not’ from God, but that is now coming to an end.”⁵

In poetic and prophetic terms, Nietzsche meant to represent the numerous critics of a theistic understanding of God, who for many centuries had asserted that the traditional, official, and transcendent God of theism had lost authority over the world and His usefulness to it. “In man the consciousness of an ultimate in the traditional sense has died.”⁶ Meaning that the God who once upon a time was worshipped as Creator of the universe, was no longer accepted as such and so regarded as neither the Creator of man nor his surroundings. Ironically, it was man who now created God, in his, that is man’s, own image.

Projection theories or claims concerning the human origins of notions relating to the divine are not recent. They can be traced back to the Greek philosopher-poet Xenophanes (570–470 BC), around six hundred years before Jesus Christ. Criticizing the anthropomorphism of Homer and Hesiod in their portrayal of gods, Xenophanes wrote:

if oxen (and horses) and lions...could draw with hands and create works of art like those made by men, horses would draw pictures of gods like horses, and oxen of gods like oxen...Aethiopians have gods with snub noses and black hair, Thracians have gods with gray eyes and red hair.⁷

It has long been claimed that the origins of religion and the worship of gods has stemmed from man’s inner desires as well as attempts to explain and control the natural environment around him, particularly its disturbing and puzzling phenomena. In the words of Cicero, “In this medley of conflicting opinions, one thing is certain. Though it is possible that they are all of them false, it is impossible that more than one of them is true.”⁸ The “Awe,” according to Cicero, evoked in man by terrifying natural phenomena and attempts to comprehend a greater power, was pivotal in helping to produce conflicting religious opinions and images of the divine.

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Writing in the fifteenth century, Francis Bacon (1561–1626), virtually substantiated Cicero’s observations by noting that human understanding relied upon causes that related “clearly to the nature of man rather than to the nature of the universe.” These significant observations were hallmarks of a new era: the era of science. Bacon, regarded by many as the leading philosopher of modern science and a prophet of empiricism, maintained that man anthropomorphizes. Under the now famous heading “idols and false notions”⁹ he classified anthropomorphism into four separate kinds: idols of the tribe, cave, marketplace, and theater. Bacon believed that tribal idols were based on the

false assumption that the sense of man is the measure of things. On [the] contrary, all perceptions as well of the sense as of the mind are according to the measure of the individual and not according to the measure of the universe. And human understanding is like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolors the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it.¹⁰

Bacon held that human perceptions depend on and are motivated by human feelings. He pinpointed to the human tendency to anthropomorphize as a fundamental weakness of the human thought process, and its major stumbling block.

In the sixteenth century, French writer Bernard Fontenelle (1657–1757), renewed the old Cicerian approach by proposing a universal evolutionary framework for the development of human thought and culture. Fontenelle believed that even the most ancient and crude centuries had had their philosophers. And these ancient philosophers had used the same anthropomorphic method as ours to explain the unseen and unknown by recourse to the seen and known, though they had used crude images and metaphors vastly different from our sophisticated technological symbols and images. Fontenelle stated that, “This philosophy of the first centuries revolved on a principle so natural that even today our philosophy has none other...we explain... unknown natural things by those which we have before our eyes, and that

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we carry over to natural science...those things furnished us by experience.”¹¹

Natural forces beyond human control lead people to imagine beings that are more powerful than themselves, able to significantly affect human lives and destinies. Furthermore, the very diversity of natural forces explains the multitude of primitive divinities worshipped, these gods the products of human thought and circumstances being thus anthropomorphic in nature. Therefore, the nature as well as qualities and attributes of these gods, change accordingly with changes in human thought pattern and culture. Primitive people ascribed rudimentary attributes to their gods i.e. physical bodies, corporeal attributes and crude anthropomorphic qualities. The more educated and sophisticated groups likewise described their gods in more developed forms and categories i.e. love, compassion, spiritual existence and transcendentalism. Hence, the conception of a god or gods in any given society reflected that society's culture and sophistication.

Seventeenth-century philosopher Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677) followed Bacon in criticizing the human tendency of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism. He regarded our perceptions of the world as extending from our views regarding ourselves. As we do things for certain ends, we perceive nature working for specific ends. Yet when humans “cannot learn such causes from external causes,” Spinoza wrote, “they are compelled to turn to considering themselves, and reflecting what end would have induced them personally to bring about the given event, and thus they necessarily judge other natures by their own.”¹² Therefore, gods and other transcendental beings are simply the mere creation of human imagination. They are seen to exist only in the imaginative world of man.

David Hume (1711–1776), Scottish philosopher and economist, pioneered this line of approach in the modern age. He provided a more detailed account of the anthropomorphic nature of the divine. According to his thinking, notions about the divine did not spring from reason but from the natural uncertainties of life and out of fear of the future. The resulting invented divine entity provided man with a framework of meaning boosting his confidence against uncertainty related anxieties and concerns for happiness. As a result, man was

allowed to feel an artificial sense of orderliness and security in a world full of disorderliness and insecurities. Viewing the idea of God in evolutionary terms, Hume rejected the theory of an original monotheism and considered the earliest form of religion to be idolatry or polytheism; the origin of the idea of God resulted as man personified his hopes and fears into the cosmos, then worshipped gods created in his own image.

After placing the world of ideas in the realm of human experience and impressions, Hume argued that even refined and abstract ideas of the divine or God sprang only from human senses and experiences. Man's worries about the uncertainties of the future included

the anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst for revenge, the appetite for food and other necessaries. Agitated by hopes and fears of this nature, especially the latter, men scrutinize, with trembling curiosity, the course of future causes, and examine the various and contrary events of human life.¹³

This sheer anxiety leads humanity to imagine and formulate ideas about powers governing them: "These unknown causes, then, become the constant object of our hope and fear; and while the passions are kept in perpetual alarm by an anxious expectation of the events, the imagination is equally employed in forming ideas of those powers, on which we have so entire a dependence."¹⁴

This anthropomorphic tendency of modeling all unknown powers after familiar human categories is the foundational source of man's belief in the divine. Neither is it limited to primitive man but is also the case for modern believers who like his ancestors, harbors the same tendencies. Ask any contemporary believer

why he believes in an omnipotent creator of the world; he will never mention the beauty of final causes, of which he is wholly ignorant: He will not hold out his hand, and bid you contemplate the suppleness and variety of joints in his fingers, their bending all one way...To these he has been long accustomed; and he beholds

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them with listlessness and unconcern. He will tell you of the sudden and unexpected death of such a one: The fall and bruise of such another: The excessive drought of this season: The cold and rains of another. This he ascribes to the immediate operation of providence: And such events, as, with good reasoners, are the chief difficulties in admitting a supreme intelligence, are with him the sole arguments for it.¹⁵

David Hume placed this anthropomorphic principle that originated with Xenophanes in a systematically coherent epistemological context. His analysis guides and serves as a point of reference for many modern scholars of religious philosophy and sociology who share his assumptions: Auguste Comte, Ludwig Feuerbach, Edward Tylor, Sigmund Freud, Thomas De Quincy, Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Brontë, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau Ponty, Albert Camus, A.J. Ayer, and E. D. Klemke, for example.

Auguste Marie Francois Comte (1798–1857), the father of modern sociology, rejected like Hume and other modern philosophers and idealists, transcendental metaphysics and theology. Emphasizing the intimate relationship that existed between ideas and society and the evolutionary nature of human thought, Comte applied his Law of the Three Stages (theological, metaphysical, and positive related to societal development) to human religious thought: the theological-military, the metaphysical-feudal, and the positive-industrial. Comte located the idea of the divine in the first and primitive stage (theological) of mankind. He further subdivided this age into three main periods, i.e.: fetichism, polytheism, and monotheism. The first stage “allowed free exercise to that tendency of our nature by which man conceives of all external bodies as animated by a life analogous to his own, with difference of mere intensity.”¹⁶ Its motive, as Hume already observed, was to try to apprehend and make some sense of unknown effects. After the idea originated in the anthropomorphic nature of mankind, it developed into polytheism, passing through the Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Judaic cultures, to reach the third stage to become modified into monotheism.¹⁷

Many scholars do not originate certain ideas, but expand upon already existing one, and as a result, are distinguished by their profound influence on the history of subsequent thought. They provide other

genius writers with the spark that, in the words of Isaiah Berlin, “sets on fire the long-accumulated fuel.”¹⁸ Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) German philosopher, anthropologist and atheist, was one such scholar. Feuerbach developed what he termed the true anthropological essence of religion and gods to its ultimate dimension, and provided philosophers like Marx and Engels with many crucial and seminal ideas. Engels proclaimed himself a Feuerbachian after reading Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity*: “One must himself have experienced the liberating effect of this book to get an idea of it,” he wrote.¹⁹ Richard Wagner saw in Feuerbach “the ideal exponent of the radical release of the individual.”²⁰ Karl Marx, perhaps rightly, marveled that Feuerbach’s work “consists in the dissolution of the religious world into its secular basis...[resolving] the religious essence into the human.”²¹

Feuerbach noted that “What distinguishes man from the brutes is the awareness of a distinctive human nature transcending individuality.” Man has reason, will, and affection, yet man cannot escape his nature: “Not even in our imagination can we transcend human nature; and to the ‘higher’ beings in which we believe we can attribute nothing better than human characteristics.” Therefore, the “religious object of adoration is nothing but the objectified nature of him who adores,”²² because

the object of a subject is nothing else than this subject’s own nature objectified. Such are a man’s thoughts and moral character, such is his God; so much worth as man has, so much and no more has his God. Man’s being conscious of God is man’s being conscious of himself, knowledge of God is man’s knowledge of himself. By their God you know men, and by knowing men you know their god; the two are identical. God is the manifested inward nature, the expressed self of man; religion is the solemn unveiling of man’s hidden treasures, the revelation of his most intimate thoughts, the open confession of what he secretly loves.²³

Feuerbach further argued that if divine predicates are merely anthropomorphic as is often observed, then the subject of them is also merely an anthropomorphism. Human attributes such as love, goodness, and personality are also attributed to the existing God. These

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attributions, as well as the very belief there is a God, are also anthropomorphisms. Furthermore, God is the highest concept humans could possibly attain.²⁴ In Feuerbach's doctrine, "*Theology is anthropology... the object of religion, which in Greek we call *theos* and in our language God, expresses nothing other than the deified essence of man, so that the history of religion... is nothing other than the history of man.*"²⁵

Feuerbach, like Hume and others, maintained that the idea of God originated in human needs, desires, wishes, and shortcomings in life: "The foundation of religion is a feeling of dependency; the first object of that feeling is nature; thus nature is the first object of religion." By projecting his feelings onto natural phenomena, man creates his own gods and then worships them. Therefore, "To live in projected dream-images is the essence of religion. Religion sacrifices reality to the projected dream: the 'Beyond' is merely the 'Here' reflected in the mirror of imagination."²⁶ Also like Hume, Feuerbach viewed religion as anthropomorphism but differed from him in that he located it in the inner self of man rather than in the external world around him. By promises of a better life in the hereafter, argued Feuerbach, religion provides people "an escape mechanism, which prevents men from going after a better life in a straight line. Religion is as bad as opium."²⁷ A phrase later echoed by Marx.

Feuerbach's anthropomorphic interpretations of religion render religious thought as mere wishful thinking, a means of human self-consciousness and childish error. In other words, religion stems from man's cognitive confusion and not from a supra-terrestrial transcendent being called God. Feuerbach concludes that man comes first and God ranks second. Therefore religions must recognize this historical and ethical reality. "*Homo homini Deus est*—man's God is Man. This is the highest law of ethics. THIS IS THE TURNING POINT OF WORLD HISTORY."²⁸

No doubt Feuerbach's interpretations of the divine and religion resulted in a turning point in subsequent influential philosophical thinking. Karl Marx followed Feuerbach's thesis but replaced Feuerbach's "man" with "society and state," declaring religion to be "the imaginative realization of the human essence, because that essence has no true reality...It is the opium of the people."²⁹

In the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin's newly developed theory of natural selection also touched upon religion, refuting the traditional theistic view of God as the Creator and Designer, and nature as the manifestation of purpose, design, and immutability. This, according to American botanist Asa Gray, was an "atheistical" step.³⁰ Adam Sedgwick, one of the founders of modern geology, a former teacher of Darwin, and a man of faith, whilst also stating that he roared with laughter at parts of Darwin's work, criticized Darwin, writing to him that, "It is the crown and glory of organic science that it does, through final cause, link material to moral... You have ignored this link... you have done your best...to break it. Were it possible (which, thank God, it is not) to break it, humanity, in my mind, would suffer a damage that might brutalize it, and sink the human race into a lower grade of degradation than any into which it has fallen since its written records tell us of its history."³¹

In the *Descent of Man*, Darwin theorized that "The Simiadae then branched off into two great stems, the New World and Old World monkeys; and from the latter, at a remote period, Man, the wonder and glory of the Universe, proceeded."³² He emphatically advocated an evolutionary theory of human and cosmic origins. Such an interpretation of man and his universe certainly countered orthodox metaphysics.³³

Biblical metaphysics is based on the concept of a loving God who created man in a unique fashion. The Christian worldview revolves around the concept of a fallen human nature, divine intervention through atoning sacrifice, and resultant redemption through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Darwin's worldview and interpretation of nature as autonomous, self-directing, and evolutionary undermined the traditional Christian worldview more than the scientific revolutions of Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton. Darwin's theories challenged and effectively shook the foundations of Christian metaphysics. With Darwin's evolutionism, every need for a God as the original source of creation and the sole maintainer of this universe ceased to exist. If creation was regarded as having evolved naturally from primitive origins and to be constantly evolving through the process of natural selection without any external divine intervention, then it

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stood to reason that God was not required for its existence, sustenance and continuity.

Evolutionary theory became extremely popular in almost all other disciplines aside from biology. It caused uproar in religious circles and not surprisingly, received a heated response from theologians. Despite opposition from religious establishments, evolutionary theory became the guiding principle in all leading disciplines of the nineteenth century. And in terms of God, the result was monumental, for empirical scientists, anthropologists, philologists, psychologists, sociologists, and naturalists of the time broke the moral theological link between this utilitarian sphere and a heavenly God. Instead they searched for God in this their own world: in nature, the human soul, the psyche, and human society. All of them, almost unanimously, were able to locate God in the human experience: i.e., in the mental process by which man acquires ideas and is influenced by his emotions. "We cannot take a step towards constructing an idea of God," argued H. Spencer, the famous nineteenth century anthropologist, "without the ascription of human attributes."³⁴

Edward Tylor (1823–1917), considered by many to be the founder of the science of social anthropology, advocated an evolutionary/developmental rather than a degradation theory of religion. Traditional theistic scholars have all along argued that the original stage in religious thinking had been that of monotheism; polytheism being the result of a degradation of human religious thought. Tylor argued that it was the other way around. Recognizing the survival of earlier cultural elements in new cultures, Tylor defined these elements as "processes, customs, opinions...carried on by force of habit into a new state of society...and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved." Tylor propounded a plausible theory of "animism," in which "the conception of the human soul is the very *fons et origo*' of the conception of the spirit and deity in general."³⁵ Animism, to Tylor, was the primary formation of religious beliefs that developed into modern higher forms of religion. He argued that such a belief stemmed from man's efforts to explain dream experiences and the phenomenon of death. Tylor believed that animism of the lower tribes could have easily continued had man not risen from

his savage conditions. Therefore, instead of a lofty divine origin, religious phenomenon had rather originated in the confused cognitive experiences of primitive savages only later developing into higher forms such as polytheism, henotheism, and monotheism.

French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) and Austrian father of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) agreed with Tylor that religion was no longer “true” in the literal sense of the statements it made about the world and gods. They also agreed that human beings anthropomorphize, and that religion results from this process. However they disagreed with Tylor that religion originated in mere speculation. Freud argued that men were not inspired to create their first system of the universe by pure speculative curiosity. The practical need for controlling the world around them must have played its part. Instead, “Animism came to primitive man naturally and as a matter of course... primitive man transposed the structural conditions of his own mind into the external world.”³⁶ It is our responsibility to “ask where the inner force of those doctrines lies and to what it is that they owe their efficacy, independent as it is of recognition by reason.”³⁷ Durkheim thought religion to be a sociological problem, while Freud took it as a psychological problem.

Freud argued that belief in God and religion was an illusion, a childhood experience of an exalted father figure, and a projection of desires, fears, and a sense of helplessness (echoing Hume and Feuerbach) into the cosmos. In other words, religion was not unreal or a lie, for it was a reality but of the unconscious experience of infancy that needed to be decoded by psychoanalysis. Freud differed with past philosophers, poets, and psychologists by giving a new interpretation to the unconscious experience. To Freud, the unconscious was the repressed conscious incapable of consciousness. The dynamic content of this unconscious was wishes, desires, and dreams. In his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud defined a wish as “a current in apparatus, issuing from pain [=accumulation of excitation] and striving for pleasure [=diminution of excitation through gratification], we call a wish.”³⁸ Every dream is a wish-fulfilment and a key to understanding neurosis. He further argued that the wish and not speculation or reason was the basis of all psychic activities: “Man’s judgments of value follow

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directly his wishes for happiness [and]...accordingly, they are an attempt to support his illusions with arguments.”³⁹ Freud believed man to be surrounded by relentless, unfriendly, and untamed forces of nature:

There are the elements, which seem to mock at all human control: the earth, which quakes and is torn apart and buries all human life and its works; water, which deluges and drowns everything in a turmoil; storms...diseases...and finally there is the painful riddle of death, against which no medicine has yet been found, nor probably will be. With these forces nature rises up against us, majestic, cruel and inexorable; she brings to our mind once more our weakness and helplessness, which we thought to escape through the work of civilization.⁴⁰

Chief among these strategies of civilization is religion. Freud declares: “I have tried to show that religious ideas have arisen from the same need as have all the other achievements of civilization.” Therefore religion serves as a palliative when life comes down hard on us, when we are hurt, disappointed, and dismayed. In reality, it does not solve our problems but offers simply a psychological mechanism of shunning problems and finding artificial solace in unseen powers and unconscious experiences. Freud believed that man’s childhood experience provided the clue, in that the helpless small child received protection from his parents. Similarly, wrote Freud, “a man makes the forces of nature not only into persons with whom he can associate as he would with his equals – that would not do justice to the overpowering impression which those forces make on him – but he gives them the character of a father.”⁴¹

Therefore, God, in reality, is nothing but the reappearance of childhood unconscious experience and the projection of a father figure into the cosmos because “the root of every form of religion,” to Freud, was “longing for the father.”⁴² In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud elaborated this point further. He argued that even though religious need originates in childhood helplessness, it does not stop there. It is “permanently sustained by fear of superior power of Fate...

The origin of religious attitude can be traced back in clear outlines as far as the feeling of infantile helplessness. There may be something further behind that, but for the present it is wrapped in obscurity.”⁴³

The decisive element of Freudian theory is the substitution of psychology for metaphysics, and as Stan Draenos, a York University social scientist, observes, “The transformation of metaphysics into metapsychology substitutes an immanent ‘within’ for a transcendent ‘beyond’ as the ground of self-understanding.”⁴⁴ With this brief statement Draenos puts the point of our discussion into a nutshell. The origins of transcendent divinity lie in the inner feelings and experiences of man and not in heavenly realms.

Freud, like Durkheim, connected his theory with “totemism” (an ancient system of belief in which humans are said to have kinship with a spirit-being symbolized in a totem) to give it a historical perspective. Scottish social anthropologist James G. Frazer and Durkheim explained that in “primitive” tribes this totem played two vital roles: a) providing tribesmen with protection, help, guidance, and warnings about troubles, and b) referring to an animal or plant species emblematic of a specific group, notably a clan. Clan members, respected, revered, and protected the totem animal by establishing a taboo around it and strictly observing two laws in connection with it: that of no killing of the totem animal and no sex to take place between clan members. Violations of these laws were punishable by death. Totemism, the primitive religious experience was based upon unconscious reasons, or as Freud put it, a “product of the conditions involved in the Oedipus complex.”⁴⁵

Freud explained this complex as a subconscious sexual desire on the part of the child for the parent of the opposite sex. This occurred as a process of transition with the helpless child entering society and becoming aware of the limits of the father’s abilities and powers as well as his own (the child’s) sexual desires. At which point the child’s attitude towards the father “takes on a hostile coloring and changes into a wish to get rid of the father in order to take his place with the mother.”⁴⁶ The pre-oedipal identification with the father helped repress these feelings.

The Totem, then, was simply a substitute for the father: what “is sacred was originally nothing but the perpetuated will of the primeval

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father.”⁴⁷ Thus, to discover the origins of religion Freud pointed to Totemism as the foundation of man’s primordial, simplistic and ancient religious thought. How he applied the concept to religion was to surmise that once upon a time primitive people lived a horde life where the father ruled over the younger males of the group, keeping all the females for himself, with other males’ wishes being repressed by sexual restrictions. One day the sons united and killed the father doing what would have been impossible on an individual level. And it was in this primeval murder that Freud looked for the clues to the origins of morality:

The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers, and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength. The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind’s earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and commemoration of so many things: of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion.⁴⁸

Freud advocated that religion was a powerful and durable reality because “the store of religious ideas includes not only wish-fulfillments but important historical recollections. This concurrent of past and present must give religion a truly incomparable wealth of power.”⁴⁹ Yet he still viewed religion as an illusion, and believed that people of the modern scientific era should abandon it. Freud contended that as a psychologist studies the development of man, he is forced to reach the conclusion that religion is comparable to childhood neurosis and that mankind will eventually surmount this neurotic phase just as many children grow out of theirs.

Commenting on Freud’s theory, Karen Armstrong observes that to Freud:

Religion belonged to the infancy of the human race; it had been a necessary stage in the transition from childhood to maturity. It had promoted ethical values which were essential to society. Now that humanity had come of age, however, it should be left behind.

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Science, the new logos, could take God's place. It could provide a new basis for morality and help us to face our fears. Freud was emphatic about his faith in science, which seemed almost religious in its intensity...⁵⁰

Sigmund Freud then made this "comfort theory"⁵¹ of anthropomorphism the clearest source of the divine, reducing religion to mere feelings of infantile helplessness and childish, unconscious, or subconscious experiences, worthy of elimination when humanity had come of age and 'grown up.' Hence religion was viewed as something infantile, to be discarded on reaching mental maturity. This perspective of religion and God revolutionized subsequent thought, anthropomorphizing God and bringing Him down from the realms of heaven to the world of man.

Another revolutionary perspective on religion came in the middle of the nineteenth century when the long historical battle between men of faith on the one hand, and philosophers, scientists, empiricists, social scientists, and general skeptics of religion on the other, reached a decisive point: the application of Darwin's theory of evolution by anthropologists and social scientists to the study of the developmental stages of religion. Supposing the idea of the divine to have originated in the world of man, many scholars applied extensive research to locating the exact origin of the idea of God and religion. Although some like Austrian linguist and anthropologist Father Wilhelm Schmidt used their research findings to prove that primitive religion everywhere had begun with an essentially monotheistic concept of god, they were nevertheless in the minority. The great majority of anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, and even some so-called theologians, contended that the origins of religion lay in the simple forms of primitive cultures, in animism, fetishism, and totemism, claiming that these had developed in turn into higher forms of religion such as polytheism, monolatry, monotheism, and finally into the ethical monotheism of modern religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam which comprise the bulk of belief today.

Despite their differences, they largely agreed on one point, that God does not have an objective reality of his own. He depends upon human needs, aspirations, and fears for His existence. The word "God" they

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asserted was merely a reification, personification, or projection of forces found in the external, internal, and social world of man. In other words discourse about God was basically a discourse about man, or in Feuerbach's words, and as discussed, "Theology is anthropology".⁵²

This essential understanding of the divine continued into the twentieth century. American anthropologist Franz Boas saw most religions as a "dogmatized development" of anthropomorphism.⁵³ Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that "religion consists in a humanization of natural laws" and an "anthropomorphization of nature."⁵⁴ In sum, anthropomorphism was thought to be, and still is, in the words of R. J. Zwi Werblowsky of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a "central problem" both in theology, the history of religions, and religious philosophy.⁵⁵ Nigerian scholar E. Bolaji Idowu observed that anthropomorphism has "always been a concomitant of religion, all religions, every faith. In the purest religion... there can be no way of avoiding anthropomorphism."⁵⁶ According to anthropologist Stewart Guthrie "religion is anthropomorphism."⁵⁷

In light of these observations, and when we examine the known faith traditions of the world, we see that anthropomorphism is embedded in the scriptures of almost all with varying degrees. Theologians of most of these traditions vainly try to eliminate anthropomorphism from their scriptures, but very often, scriptural text refuses such treatment. As it is impossible to discuss all the religious traditions within the limited scope of this work, we confine our observations to the three developed Semitic religions that claim their origin in the Abrahamic faith: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, God is shown to possess manifest human qualities, both mental and physical, as befits his proposal to make "man in our image." In the New Testament He is given a completely human form, in Jesus. Despite the many concerted efforts of some Jewish scholars and church fathers (as explored in later chapters) to stem this, the concept of a physically humanlike God has persisted in both the traditions. Most Muslims, like their Jewish and Christian counterparts, try to avoid anthropomorphisms, but the struggle is chronic, though not exactly as crude as in Judaism and Christianity. The cause, in the opinion of R. Strothmann in his article "Tashbih" in *The Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, is to be

found in the Qur'an, "which strongly emphasizes the absolute uniqueness of God and yet at the same time plainly describes him in the language of anthropomorphism, giving him a face, eyes, and hands and talking of his speaking and sitting."⁵⁸

Because of the pervasive nature of such anthropomorphism some theologians like W. J. Duggan have called it "indispensable."⁵⁹ The late philosopher F. B. Jevons argued that it "has characterized religion from the beginning [and] characterizes it to the end."⁶⁰ Other prominent scholars like Hugo Meynell, a Catholic philosopher,⁶¹ and Frederick Ferré, a professional theologian, have tried to defend anthropomorphism and resolve the paradox by analogy, faith, or any other possible means to save and advocate the validity of religion. For instance, Ferré, in his article "In Praise of Anthropomorphism," re-evaluated this "deep seated antagonism to anthropomorphism in discourse about God, and to offer reasons to praise rather than bury such a speech." He argued that anthropomorphism is "*not necessarily demeaning* religiously to the Most High [that is, we need not think Him mean or petty, for example] but also is *necessarily not avoidable* logically if the language of either the believer or the philosopher is not to be emptied of all content."⁶² On the other hand, Stewart Elliott Guthrie, a Fordham University anthropologist observes, "Ferré's praise, however, amounts to admitting once more that if we cannot say anything anthropomorphic about God, we cannot say anything at all...This, however, merely makes a virtue of necessity."⁶³

Despite the pervasiveness and defense of a few scholars, anthropomorphism continues to be an "anathema,"⁶⁵ American philosopher Humphrey Palmer observed, stuck to religion. For German theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich (1868–1965) traditional Christian names for God, such as Father and Lord were all too anthropomorphic. Names such as these made of the divinity a perfect heavenly person living somewhere above the world.⁶⁵ Tillich viewed the word 'religion' to be derogatory,⁶⁶ and found even the name 'God' objectionable because it made the deity an object among other worldly objects:

The concept of a "Personal God" interfering with natural events, or being "an independent cause of natural events," makes God a

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natural object beside others, an object among others, a being among beings (maybe the highest) but nevertheless a being. This indeed is not only the destruction of the physical system but even more the destruction of any meaningful idea of God.⁶⁷

In an effort to avoid anthropomorphism, Tillich created new names for the deity: “Being-itself,” “Ground of Being,” “the Unconditional,” and others as preferable to the term God. Karen Armstrong observes that a century earlier, “Feuerbach had made a similar claim when he had said that God was inseparable from normal human psychology, and that now this atheism had been transformed into a new theism.”⁶⁸ In short, religion, according to Tillich, is “directedness of the spirit toward the unconditional meaning.”⁶⁹ The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of “all being is God. That depth is what the word god means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation.”⁷⁰

Few scholars or theologians accept Tillich’s definition of God. Rene Williamson, a modern American political scientist, argues that the “Christian God is a person, a living person,” whereas Tillich’s is “devoid of color and power...bloodless”, He fails to impress or convince the ordinary believer.⁷¹ Guthrie observed that in, “Trying to eliminate the disease, however, he kills the patient.” Guthrie also argued that, “Like birdshot fired at a flock in general, it hits nothing at all. The less anthropomorphic Tillich makes God, the more God becomes incomprehensible.”⁷²

Many scholars it would seem prefer a somewhat anthropomorphic notion of God to an obscure, unintelligible, and non-personal God. Swinburne, for instance, begins his book with the observation “By a theist I understand a man who believes that there is a God. By a ‘God’ he understands something like a person.”⁷³ Comparative religion scholars and philosophers such as S. G. F. Brandon,⁷⁴ Kai Nielsen,⁷⁵ and A. Gallus agree with German philosopher Karl Jaspers that “if religion is demythologized, it is no longer religion.”⁷⁶ Moshe Greenburg, a Hebrew University biblical scholar, well summarized the situation

when he noted “Contemplative thinkers among Jews, Christians, and Moslems have always recognized the predominance of anthropomorphism as the mode of religious perception and discourse and have declared it an obstacle to true knowledge of God.”⁷⁷ Finally, Guthrie observes that “Most theologians admit that to eliminate anthropomorphism is to eliminate religion. The religion cannot be extricated from anthropomorphism suggests that anthropomorphism is even more than its matrix. Rather, religion looks like anthropomorphism, part and parcel.”⁷⁸

On the other hand religion which retains an anthropomorphic understanding of God has been criticized and refuted by many scholars, philosophers, and scientists of modern times. In addition to scientific developments or scientific metaphysics, and a mechanical interpretation of nature, such apathy towards religion can partly be attributed to the over-anthropomorphic nature of theistic notions of God. English novelist W. M. Thackeray, commenting on nineteenth century English cultural critics and poets such as Thomas De Quincy, Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Emily Brontë, once remarked that they were “a set of people living without God in the world.”⁷⁹ French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) rejected God. French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau Ponty (1908–1961), French Nobel Prize winner philosopher and journalist Albert Camus (1913–1960), and Logical Positivists like A. J. Ayer (1910–1991), advocated heroic atheism.

Physicist Steven Weinberg,⁸⁰ astronomer Sandra Faber,⁸¹ biologist S. E. Luria,⁸² paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould,⁸³ and philosophers like E. D. Klemke⁸⁴ etc., have all accepted a world without God. Celebrated astronomer and philosopher Sandra Faber, for instance, winner of the Heineman Prize and the Harvard Centennial Medal has asserted that

the universe was created out of some natural process, and our appearance in it was totally a natural result of physical laws in our particular portion of it... or what we call our universe. Implicit in the question...is that there is some motive power that has a purpose beyond human existence. I do not believe in that...[and]... ultimately I agree with Weinberg that it is completely pointless from [a] human perspective.⁸⁵

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Cornell professor of natural history, William Provine, encapsulates the position of almost all biologists and indeed most scientists of our time when he remarks:

Everything proceeds purely by materialistic and mechanistic process...modern science directly implies that the world is organized strictly in accordance with mechanistic principles. There are no purposive principles whatever in nature. There are no gods and no designing forces that are rationally detectable. The frequently made assertion that modern biology and the assumptions of Judeo-Christian tradition are fully compatible is false.⁸⁶

The idea of God as an external agency governing the universe leaves American philosopher E. D. Klemke “cold. It would not be mine...I, for one, am glad that the universe has no meaning, for there is man all the more glorious.”⁸⁷ What Feuerbach envisioned a century ago is today fully accomplished. Finally, theologian Thomas Altizer (b.1927) following Nietzsche proclaims the apparent “good news” of God’s death, arguing that “Only by accepting and even willing the death of God in our experience can we be liberated from a transcendent beyond, an alien beyond which has been emptied and darkened by God’s self alienation in Christ.”⁸⁸ Altizer is fairly mystical here. However, William Hamilton of Colgate-Rochester Divinity School is not so. His is a forthright clinical analysis bluntly stating that secular man does not need God for anything and wants to find his own solutions in the world.

Literary critic Joseph Hillis Miller (b.1928) has accurately characterized the current situation with regard to God and religion:

The lines of connection between us and God have broken down, or God himself has slipped away from the places where he used to be. He no longer inheres in the world as the force binding together all men and all things. As a result the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seem to many writers a time when God is no more present and not yet again present, and can only be experienced negatively, as a terrifying absence.⁸⁹

Furthermore, Miller considered cities to be a “literal representation of the progressive humanization of the world.” He saw no room for God in the city, and wondered if man excluded God by building great cities, or whether cities were built because God had disappeared. In any case, he wrote, life in the city is the most common way that men have experienced most directly what it means to live without God in the world.⁹⁰

Despite the brave front, there exists a strong sense of alienation, isolation, subjectivism, relativism and nihilism in modern man. In the words of Dostoyevsky, “If there is no God, then everything is permitted.”⁹¹ Religious values do not currently bind, in general. Moral values are not ultimate but fairly relative, disappearing, at least in the United States and Europe, with unprecedented speed, while family values are diminishing in most parts of the developed world.

A new cultural-values survey of 2,000 American adults undertaken in March of 2007 by the polling firm Fabrizio, McLaughlin & Associates for the Culture and Media Institute revealed that a strong majority, 74 percent, believed moral values in America to be weaker than they were 20 years ago. Almost half, 48 percent, agreed that values were much weaker than they were 20 years ago.⁹² Most Americans blamed entertainment media for the sharp decline in moral values. The agreement was quite remarkable across political and religious groups. This sentiment was shared by Republicans (86 percent) and Democrats (68 percent); conservatives (80 percent) and liberals (64 percent); even religious types identified as orthodox (82 percent) and mostly secular progressives (62 percent).

A detailed survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life conducted from May 8 to August 13, 2007 showed that:

More than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion – or no religion at all. If change in affiliation from one type of Protestantism to another is included, 44% of adults have either switched religious affiliation, moved from being unaffiliated with any religion to being affiliated with a particular faith, or dropped any connection to a specific religious tradition altogether.⁹³

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On March 9, 2009 a CNN survey revealed that America was “becoming less Christian.”⁹⁴ The findings pointed out that the US had become a less Christian nation in 2009 than it had been 20 years ago. Christianity had not been losing to other faith traditions but to rejection of religion altogether. In 2009 seventy five percent of Americans identified themselves as Christians according to the American Religious Identification Survey from Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut. In 1990, the figure was 86 percent. The survey also showed that one in five Americans denied having any religious identity while one in four explicitly stated that they intended not to have any religious funeral. Erosion of religion it would appear is a nationwide trend.

Whilst it could be argued that the number of evangelical churches and their attendance has increased in the past decades, this is deceptive, for the increase is disproportionate to the loss of church members in the mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches. Additionally being religious and moral in contemporary America or Europe is substantially different from the practice some twenty years ago. Many Christian dogmas such as the Trinity, Incarnation, and Original Sin as well as moral values such as sexual decency, protection of life, and family dignity are frequently compromised, or interpreted in such a fashion as to become a different animal. The modern idea of God is not as awe inspiring as it was in past centuries, and modern man has distanced himself from the transcendent God of theism. Consequently, and as Miller states, “We are alienated from God; we have alienated ourselves from nature; we are alienated from our fellow men; and finally, we are alienated from ourselves, the buried life we never seem able to reach. The result is a radical sense of inner nothingness.”⁹⁵ God-conscious people do of course exist in the world, but the vast majority present the exact picture mentioned in the Qur’an when it says: “And be ye not like those who forgot God, and He made them forget themselves” (59:19).

Hence what has been discussed alludes to two distinct charges levelled against a theistic understanding of God. The first is that of anthropomorphism. Advocates of this charge against religion (whilst not denying God’s existence) contend that any material description of God is conditioned by and derived from man’s understanding of his own nature. Those who, since Xenophanes, have pressed this charge

have maintained that God transcends this material world and is solely different from human beings; therefore, any description of Him in terms of human nature, no matter how greatly qualified, will distort His perfection and will be worse than no description of Him at all.

The other charge is that of 'invention'. The supporters of this charge contend that God is fictional with no real existence. He depends ontologically on human beings for they invent him by a cosmic projection of their nature, characteristics, and qualities. Guthrie noted that people who say religion anthropomorphizes usually mean that it attributes human characteristics to gods, or that, in claiming gods exist, it attributes human characteristics to nature. In the former meaning, religion makes gods humanlike in crediting them with the capacity for symbolic action. In the latter religion makes nature humanlike by seeing gods there.⁹⁶

To understand the depth and reality of the charge we need to define the related terms of anthropomorphism and transcendence.

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Anthropomorphism derives from the Greek *anthropos* (human being) and *morphe* (form). As a term it is relatively modern being developed in the eighteenth century. A general definition of anthropomorphism could be: an inveterate tendency to project human qualities into natural phenomena, consciously or not,⁹⁷ or, the description of non-material, 'spiritual' entities in physical, and specifically human, form.⁹⁸

Used in its religious sense, the term denotes a universal human tendency to experience, express, and appeal to the divine in human shapes or categories. Anthropomorphism can denote the ascription to God of a human form or member.⁹⁹ In its wider sense, the term has been used to include attribution of any kind of human characteristics, activities, emotions, or feelings to God. It is sometimes broadly defined as forming religious concepts and ideas in human terms, according to shapes and metaphors of this world and human experience of it.¹⁰⁰ Essential to anthropomorphism is the description of God and formulation of the concepts pertaining to Him in human forms and categories.

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There are two major forms of anthropomorphism. The first, in which appeal is made to physical or corporeal traits of the deity, is termed “physical anthropomorphism.” The second refers to ascription of human emotions like love, hate, desire, anger, and repentance to God and has been termed “mental, psychical, or psychological anthropomorphism.” Social thinker and author John Ruskin (1819–1900) called it “anthropopathism,” from the Greek *anthropos* (man) and *pathein* (suffering). Both forms allude to the same notion that divine functions, qualities, attributes, and characters derive from human life and experience. The theistic notion of a personal God with personal qualities and attributes is thought to be the ultimate source of anthropomorphism. In contrast to this mood of imagination is “theriomorphism,” a tendency to describe and embody the divine being in forms and categories borrowed wholly or partly from the animal world.

Various scholars have given two standard explanations for anthropomorphism: the “theory of comfort” and the “theory of familiarity”. The “comfort theory” postulates that human beings feel comfortable when seeing human faces in a non-human world, and fear of the unknown causes this wish fulfillment and cognitive confusion. The “familiarity theory” holds that the human self is man’s mirror to the external world. The knowledge of oneself is the most authentic and the easiest of all sources of human knowledge. This would explain projecting human faces, qualities, and characters in the realms of heaven because humanity is naturally acquainted with these anthropomorphic traits.

Each of the theories has several versions. The “theory of familiarity” has two chief versions which Guthrie terms “confusion” and “analogy.” He further observes that these versions

are on a continuum. They share the notion that anthropomorphism consists in extending models of what we know to what we do not know. They differ in that the confusion version assumes this extension is involuntary, unconscious, and indiscriminate, while [the] analogy version assumes it is voluntary, conscious, and discriminating.¹⁰¹

We have already seen examples of confusion theory in the discussions on Feuerbach, Freud, Spinoza, and Comte, and analogy theory, to some extent, in discussions of Hume and Fontenelle.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) successfully advocated the religious version of analogy theory. However, the “comfort theory” is also widespread, and closely relates to the wishful thinking theory of religion, as seen in Feuerbach and Freud. Freud argued that human beings humanize nature so that they “can breath freely, can feel at home...”¹⁰² Anthropologist Leslie White (1900–1975) argued that the anthropomorphic philosophy is that of “wish and will projected from the human mind.”¹⁰³ It has sustained man with illusions and provided him with courage, comfort, consolation, and confidence. Each of these theories, Guthrie observes, “has a little truth but neither is sufficient.”¹⁰⁴ Indeed, both are problematic, and neither of them a good reflection upon religious phenomenon when analyzed in detail.

The charge of anthropomorphism directed at religion, as in its original form first levelled by Xenophanes of Colophon, only denotes ascription to the deity of a bodily figure. Not much consideration was given by Xenophanes or his successors to the attribution of intellectual as well as moral attributes and qualities to God that might be akin to those of human beings. Consequently, Christian apologists like Justin Martyr, who although believing in the theistic conception of a personal God and the Christian concept of divine incarnation in the figure of a historical man, yet nevertheless levelled this charge against pagan religions and the polytheism of the time. K. Latourette, a modern church historian, observed that church fathers, “excoriated the immoralities ascribed to gods by the current myths, pilloried the follies and inconsistencies in polytheistic worship, and poured scorn on the anthropomorphic conceptions and images of the gods.”¹⁰⁵ In the fourth century, the charge of anthropomorphism was directed by orthodox fathers toward a group of African Christians who maintained that God Himself had suffered a painful death on the cross. In consequent history the charge was repeatedly made to repudiate various religious traditions who viewed God in corporeal terms.

Medieval philosophers and theologians like al-Farabi (870–950) and Rabbi Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) further developed God’s non-corporeality to cover various aspects of God’s intellectual and moral

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attributes. Interestingly, anthropomorphism never became a serious weapon against God, or even religion as a whole, except after the Enlightenment, because it was the intellectual movement of this 'age of reason', as it is often called, which negatively effected man's attitude towards God. Although, the change of direction, perspective, and emphasis is too complex to be traced here, three inherent factors of the pre-Enlightenment period can be identified as having laid the foundations for this decline. Firstly, the power struggle which developed between the Church and the educated elite; secondly, issues with Christian incarnation theology, especially its popular version; and thirdly the use of personal images of God in popular piety.

Empirical scientists and scholars, in an effort to restrict the compass of God and religion, and thereby the Church's influence and interpretations of man and his surroundings, promoted the charge of excessive visual imagery or physical anthropomorphism against religion, extending it to cover all aspects of God deemed comparable to that of human beings. Accusations of anthropomorphism were pressed so hard that the exercise became a virtual witch-hunt with any divine quality or attribute, no matter how moral or spiritual, if linked to the human realm, being dubbed as sheer anthropomorphism. Pushed beyond its limits the accusation ultimately lost all credible meaning stripped of its real context to become merely a term of reproach or vehicle for the expression of dislike. Things deteriorated to such a state that English theist James Martineau (1805–1900) was forced to declare, "you can scarcely recognize any quality, however spiritual, as common to the Divine and the human nature, without incurring the imputation of 'anthropomorphism'." A term which "when fastened upon a belief, is apparently supposed to make an end of it for every one above a 'philistine'."¹⁰⁶ Little has changed. Despite several modern efforts to prevent this hysterical imputation, as seen above, the situation today is no different to that observed by Martineau.

INCARNATION

Incarnation is a species of anthropomorphism. Whereas anthropomorphism allows description of God in human categories, with human

characteristics, without His emerging in human form, the term “incarnation” specifically alludes to the representation of a human being as the true image of God. Jewish studies scholar Jacob Neusner defines incarnation as: “The representation of God in the flesh, as corporeal, consubstantial in emotion and virtue with human beings, and sharing in the modes and means of actions carried out by mortals,”¹⁰⁷ This is more perhaps a definition of the popular Christian concept of incarnation, but Christianity is not an isolated case. The idea that God or gods have incarnated in this sense is quite widespread in the history of religions. Philosophical theologian Brian Hebblethwaite writes:

...it constitutes a third, incarnational, strand alongside the numinous and the mystical strands in the religious experience of mankind. The Christian doctrine of Incarnation represents this strand in its most highly developed form. The central Christian doctrine states that God, in one of the modes of his triune being and without in any way ceasing to be God, has revealed himself to mankind for their salvation by coming amongst them as man. The man Jesus is held to be the incarnate Word or Son of God. Taken into God’s eternity and glorified at the resurrection, the incarnate one remains for ever the ultimate focus of God-man encounter; for he not only, as God incarnate, mediates God to man, but also, in his perfect humanity, represents man to God.¹⁰⁸

This definition differs slightly to the popularly understood Christian interpretation of the incarnation of God in Christ. Meaning that it represents a more intellectual than popular trend in Christianity, where literal rather than metaphorical interpretations are more common. In popular Christianity, God is represented as human flesh, in the person of the historical Jesus Christ, and moreover is presented in corporeal forms said to have suffered a physical and agonizing death as atonement for man’s sins under the doctrine of salvation. The Christian theological doctrine of Jesus as simultaneously a complete God and a complete man represents corporealism and anthropomorphism in perhaps its purest form, although many Christian theologians claim otherwise. Yet this is

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a pivotal aspect of Christian theology, for if God is believed to have become fully incarnate in human flesh (that is, in the historical person of Christ) and is believed to have experienced human limitations to the extreme point of having experienced pain and an agonizing death, then surely we have in front of us nothing less than the strongest case of corporealism.

This notion of God as having suffered death has seemingly contributed to the 'death of God' theology mentioned in the opening of this chapter, and underscored His irrelevance to modern culture and society. The reasoning is clear. A God that forsakes Jesus on the cross is a God that modern man no longer trusts. What guarantee does man have that this same God will not forsake him when man needs Him most? A God that is unable to forgive a simple mistake, the transgression of Adam having eaten of the forbidden apple, requiring that atonement be made through the violent bloodshed of an innocent righteous man, is a God that modern man has serious doubts about especially with regards to His justice, loving nature, and validity. A God that is unable to eliminate or even subdue sin despite this blood atonement, is a God that becomes irrelevant to the modern culture of relativism and logical positivism. Such a God makes no sense and is too mysterious, paradoxical, and anthropomorphic to be taken seriously. Ironically, and in a sense, the death of God in the human conscious was already set in motion, and is in fact the inevitable outcome of, his physical (in the form of Jesus Christ incarnate) death at the hands of the Romans. In short, the humanization of the divine has ironically resulted in the divinization of the human.

Having discarded what he dismissively perceives to be outmoded and unwarranted notions of the Divine, man is left seeking his own solutions to life's varying problems, using the tools of his knowledge and institutions, and without looking to the transcendental realms for assistance or guidance. The old cognitive confusion of imploring God during times of need have now been cast aside in favor of solutions provided by science and technology.

The subject of incarnation will be examined in more detail in Chapter 3. For now suffice it to say that whenever God is portrayed in corporeal terms and categories, or shown engaged in activities practiced

in the manner and style and emotion of human beings then we have in front of us a clear case of incarnation.

The incarnation of God is manifested in two primary ways: (a) in the form of individuals such as kings, emperors, imams, or other human personalities etc., a common phenomenon in various religious traditions including Hinduism, certain Greek religions, certain traditions of Judaism, as well as some extreme Shiite sects, as will be seen in Chapters 2 and 4. (b) As the second person of the Trinity *logos*, thought to personally adopt a human mortal personality and live on earth for a specific period of time in history. It is an understanding of incarnation unique to Christianity among the Semitic religions and is derived from the Christian conviction that the union of the divine with humanity was realized in the person of Jesus Christ, a notion quite controversial even among Christians, as will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Having introduced, defined, and given a brief background of the term anthropomorphism, I will now examine the essentials of the charge that religion by nature is anthropomorphic, and that being anthropomorphic, God has no reality of His own outside the world of man. Before looking more deeply into the main theme and crux of this work (the study of anthropomorphism and transcendence in the Bible and the Qur'an), we need to first establish the boundaries or parameters of the charge of anthropomorphism levelled at religion, and estimate the grounds of its sheer dislike by many modern scholars.

The nature of the problem can be located in the assertion that any attribute, quality, or category present in the human sphere is to be disqualified from being referred to God. This qualification goes too far. An extreme application of this perspective would strip God of all meaning and relevance in terms of our human faculties and the sensory world around us. In almost all theistic traditions God, seen as Great and Almighty, is accepted as the source of all creation, and as such, it is religion that has tackled historically and to the present, issues of humanity's origins, destiny, and longing for immortality. Science and technology although resolving many of the problems of our physical realm are unable to provide satisfactory answers to the most basic, and at the same time most ultimate, questions facing humanity: who are we?, where do we come from?, what is our purpose?, what happens

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after death? etc. Furthermore, science and technology are not a panacea for all ills and are unable to provide solutions to many of the problems and conditions humanity faces. In contrast, human beings depend upon God for their origin, existence, being, and continuity. There is worldly outward knowledge and then there is knowledge of the soul, the inner world of man. Naturally (and it is a universal fact) human beings long to know their source of existence and being. Nothing is so important to man as man himself, his existence, his being, his consciousness and his outward and inner experiences. Therefore, it is natural and appropriate for humanity to reflect and think about the unknown God through whatever is certain, familiar and known to it, to establish a viable relationship with the Creator. We try to project on our Creator the best that is in ourselves, for we give this great value, and this approach results from our inadequacies and not from divine necessities or shortcomings.

When we project upon God what we consider to be the highest qualities and characteristics of man, this in no way means that we are degrading our idea of God or ascribing personality to Him. For mankind also understands that God is the definite perfect Being, absolutely other than man by His very nature, and that these qualities that we ascribe to Him are imperfectly held within us but perfectly and in their most complete way held by Him. If we show mercy He is the Most Merciful, and so on and so forth. It is in this vein that we use personality as the gateway of our knowledge of the Divine. Human beings, observed John Calvin (1509–1564),

must therefore borrow comparisons from known objects, in order to enable us to understand those which are unknown to us; for God loves very differently from men, that is, more fully and perfectly, and although he surpasses all human affections, yet nothing that is disorderly belongs to him.¹⁰⁹

Philosophical theist Ian Thomas Ramsey (1915–1972), Ferré, theologian John Macquarrie (1919–2007),¹¹⁰ and many others have developed this thought further to show that these known comparisons or religious images serve as conceptual models albeit with some definite qualifiers.

Ramsey viewed religious language in terms of “models and qualifiers” that function in “logically odd” ways to stimulate “discernment situations” noting that for the religious man “God” is

a key word, an irreducible posit, an ultimate of explanation expressive of the kind of commitment he professes. It is to be talked about in terms of the object-language over which it presides, but only when this object-language is qualified; in which case this qualified object-language becomes also currency for the odd discernment with which religious commitment, when it is not bigotry or fanaticism, will necessarily be associated.¹¹¹

Ramsey argued that, “We should expect religious language... to be constructed from object language which has been given appropriately strange qualifications...” This odd object-language has “a distinctive significance, and we might even conclude in the end that the odder the language the more it matters to us.”¹¹² Furthermore, a religious assertion such as ‘God is loving’ claims that we can model God in terms of “loving” situations. He also wrote that the assertion is logically incomplete and should be qualified with “infinitely” or “all,” as in “God is infinitely loving,” or “God is all-loving.” He concluded that,

special positioning can nevertheless be reached from ordinary language, to which words like “love” belong, once this ordinary language has been appropriately qualified, as by the word “infinite.” Here then is a method by which not only are problems overcome, but where at every point we plot and map our theological phrases with reference to a characteristically religious situation: one of worship, wonder, awe.¹¹³

Ferré argued for the use of conceptual models in considering theistic images in their speculative function:

In all logical respects... anthropomorphic theistic imagery can function on its speculative side as a vivid metaphysical model. It can give conceptual definiteness to the ultimate nature of things

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by picturing all of reality as constituting either creature or Creator, each with specific characteristics; it can suggest patterns and unity in the totality of things in terms of its representation of the various relations between the entities so pictured; and it can give a sense of intelligibility, an aura of meaning and familiarity, by virtue of the appeal to personal purpose, volitional power, and moral principle as the ultimate explanatory categories.¹¹⁴

Ferré concluded that the theistic model as religious imagery is a kind of symbolism that may, for those who adopt it, “overcome the threat of the arbitrary on its valuational side as well as to meet the cognitive challenge of strangeness and disconnection on its theoretical side.” The model portrays the best as also most relevant, and shows “‘brute fact’ not to be just ‘brutal’ but, rather, to display the propriety that is its final vindication. And so theoretical and practical reason rejoin one another once more, at the upper reaches of the search for understanding.” Therefore to Ferré, “anthropomorphic theistic imagery has a reasonable claim on any who judge the success of ultimate imagery, in part at least, in terms of its capacity to stimulate and sustain valuational fullness in the lives of those who adopt it.”¹¹⁵

Moreover, historically and ontologically, God existed from eternity, long before human beings could speculate about Him. The personality of God should have been the origin of human understandings of their own personalities. St. Thomas Aquinas observed that the word ‘God’ was primarily used for the Creator and derivatively of creatures. The word symbolizes perfection and absoluteness which flows from God to His creatures. He noted that we apply it first “to creatures because we know them first. That...is why it has a way of signifying that is appropriate to creatures.”¹¹⁶ Furthermore:

All words used metaphorically of God apply primarily to creatures and secondarily to God. When used of God they signify merely a certain parallelism between God and creature. When we speak metaphorically of a meadow as ‘smiling’ we only mean that it shows its best when it flowers, just as a man shows at his best when he smiles: there is a parallel between them. In the same way,

if we speak of God as a 'lion' we only mean that, like a lion, he is mighty in his deeds. It is obvious that the meaning of such a word as applied to God depends on and is secondary to the meaning it has when used of creatures.¹¹⁷

Notre Dame University professor of philosophy Ralph M. McInerny explained St. Thomas's position by observing that:

The names common to God and creatures, like "being" said of what falls into the various genera, happens to be such that the perfection from which the name is imposed to signify is in each of the things, but according to a scale of greater and lesser perfection, a magis et minus which will be revealed in the various rationes of the common name. Thus there will be participation per prius et posterius or, in the case of the divine names, God will have the perfection essentialiter, be one in substance with truth, for example, and creatures will be true per participationem.¹¹⁸

Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) observed that "All virtues primarily are in God, and only then in his creature. He possesses them *per essentiam*, those only *per participationem*. The metaphors we are using to describe the divine are true in so far as they rest on the truth of God himself."¹¹⁹ He believed that God made humans theomorphic, (referring to the bestowal of divine attributes on humanity) which justified our speaking of Him anthropomorphically.¹²⁰ The observations of both Bavinck and Aquinas should be qualified with the stipulation that God created the theomorphus in a spiritual and moral sense and not in a corporeal sense; therefore, although our only choice is to find some common ground and language to have a useful relationship with and experience of the divine, this experience should only be expressed in spiritual imagery terms and not in concrete material or gross corporeal imagery. By this is meant that only those metaphors or anthropomorphic expressions should be used of God that do not violate His transcendence, His great uniqueness, His utter difference from His creatures. Further, only those phrases of the commonly used object-language should be allowed of Him that do not

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make Him fully resemble His creatures and are appropriate to His exalted majesty. Bearing in mind of course that even these can only ever be superficial as compared to His perfection. In addition and needless to say this metaphorical commonality must only ever be seen as a vehicle to facilitate communication and in no way, shape or form to denote absolute resemblance. Only in God's case are these images, attributes, and names in absolute form, while in the human sphere they are just relative.

Once this is understood and the development of the reasoning process with regards to expressing God in appropriate human categories and terms for communication purposes, is appreciated, the allegation of anthropomorphism in its negative sense, as found in some developed theistic understandings of God, would lose its foundation. J. R. Illingworth, the famous nineteenth century English theologian, observed that human belief "in a personal God, from whatever source it is derived, must obviously be interpreted through his consciousness of his own personality."¹²¹ As man's idea of personality in most cases derives from and is interpreted in terms of man's consciousness of his own personality, all personal, theistic notions of God in a sense would have to be somewhat anthropomorphic and should not be regarded, as religious reformer Theodore Parker (1810–1860) did, "a phantom of the brain that has no existence independent of ourselves."¹²² Some scholars would disagree with Parker. In fact, religion by its very nature is somewhat anthropomorphic and even "in its highest and most transcendental effort...can never escape from anthropomorphism."¹²³ This anthropomorphic tendency is intrinsic to and connected with human limitations, and not with the divine sphere or Being.

Discourse about God in appropriate personal terms is particularly symbolic and metaphorical in nature. Without tracing the historical roots of this approach, it is enough to quote Aquinas's classical position. He asserted that God provides for all things in accordance with their nature and abilities. Human beings use senses to access the world of intelligence. Consequently, the Scriptures imply metaphors taken from bodily things to communicate spiritual truths. In addition, "no word can be used literally of God... every word used of God is taken from our speech about creatures...but...are used metaphorically of God, as

when we call him a ‘rock’ or a ‘lion’.”¹²⁴ Aquinas elaborated on establishing content by analogy:

Some words that signify what has come forth from God to creatures do so in such a way in which that part of the meaning of the word is the imperfect way in which the creatures share in the divine perfection. Thus it is part of the meaning of ‘rock’ that it has its being in a merely material way. Such words can be used of God only metaphorically. There are other words, however, that simply mean certain perfections without any indication of how these perfections are possessed – words, for example, like ‘being’, ‘good’, ‘living’ and so on. These words can be used literally of God.¹²⁵

Muslim Aristotelian Averroes (1126–1198) preceded Aquinas, and distinguished between univocal, equivocal, and analogous predication.¹²⁶ The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) rejected the former two kinds whilst accepting the third, the analogous concept, which became a fundamental in Christian circles.¹²⁷ Martin Luther (1483–1546) disagreed with Aquinas’s interpretation of metaphor, and argued that when Christ is called a ‘rock’ the old word ‘rock’ acquires a completely new sense. Although Luther defended the correlation between God-talk and human experience, between *cognitio dei et hominis*, he did not deny that God-talk is somewhat symbolic. The example that “Christ is a flower,” meant to Luther “that Christ is a flower but not ‘a natural one.’”¹²⁸

John Calvin (1509–1564) worked tirelessly to establish the metaphorical nature of the biblical language and tried extensively to explain these metaphors in his commentaries. Bavinck,¹²⁹ Ramsey,¹³⁰ Harry Kuitert, Just van Es,¹³¹ Janet Soskice,¹³² and many others agree that God-talk is symbolic and metaphorical in nature. These “symbolic elements,” argued the Scottish theologian John Macquarrie, “in theological language preserve the mystery and transcendence of God, and acknowledge that he is characterized by an ‘otherness’ that goes beyond the grasp of rational thought. Such symbols are evocative rather than straightforwardly descriptive.”¹³³ Janet Soskice, the Cambridge

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philosophical theologian, argued that in religious and in all language the distinction between literal and metaphorical is determined by the context and use alone. She observed that “what we call ‘literal’ usage is accustomed usage and that metaphorical usages which begin their careers outside the standard lexicon may gradually become lexicalized.”¹³⁴

In caution it should be said that religious language or God-talk is metaphorical in nature but should not allow anybody to violate the basic rules of language or spirit of the text itself to invent something not present in the text. The spirit of the text must be maintained. Metaphors should be based upon standard language usages and not upon mere excuses of subjective agency or unverifiable suppositions. They should be found from within the textual context and not arbitrarily invented to substantiate certain preconceived thoughts or claims, or to add something to the scripture.

We conclude this part of the discussion with Guthrie, who observed:

There is no religion without relationship, no relationship without significant communication, no significant communication without language, and no language without likeness. For the most rudimentary communication, humans may gesture; but even gesture depends on human likeness such as smiling, frowning, eating, and breathing. In any case, communication requires some commonality in context, in communicative system, and in content. Fully human relationships require language in some form. Any god worth talking about – that is, any god we can talk with – must be at least so like us as to share our language and its context. A shared language already is more than all humans have in common.¹³⁵

Religion, by its very nature, is communicative as Clifford James Geertz, the American anthropologist¹³⁶ Robert Neelly Bellah, the American sociologist,¹³⁷ and many others point out.¹³⁸ Austrian born Jewish philosopher, M. Buber, describes God as one who speaks and communicates, “whom men trust because he addresses them by word and calls them.”¹³⁹ To Buber, “God is the Being that is directly, most nearly, and lastingly, over against us, that may properly only be

addressed, not expressed.”¹⁴⁰ The Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne’s God is a person and language is fundamental to persons for communication.¹⁴¹ Barbara Krasner, a contemporary psychiatrist, also pinpoints living and ongoing communication.¹⁴² Even to Feuerbach, “the essential act of religion...is prayer.”¹⁴³ Guthrie gave a detailed account of such a communicative process.¹⁴⁴ Therefore, there is no choice for religious believers as well as the scriptures but to communicate. For the communication to be meaningful and appropriate to the profundity of religious experience, it has to be personal and hence somewhat anthropomorphic.

Although scientists starting with Bacon¹⁴⁵ have always disliked anthropomorphisms and have tried to minimize if not possibly eliminate them, anthropomorphism in this minor sense is intrinsic to all human achievements and endeavors including science and philosophy.¹⁴⁶ Philosophers of science like Robert McCauley,¹⁴⁷ scholars of religion like E. Thomas Lawson, and sociologists of science like Barry Barnes all argue that science is the “most elaborated and systematized of all forms of knowledge, and the least anthropomorphic.”¹⁴⁸ On the other hand, primatologist Linda Fedigan believes that although the fundamental achievement of science is the “realization that we are not the center of, nor the prototype for, all else in the universe, [that] while anthropo-morphism is to be avoided or minimized, it will not be eliminated.”¹⁴⁹ Philosophers like Percy Nunn argue that the very notion of matter in physics is anthropomorphic. Anthropomorphism, to London professor of education T. P. Nunn, is

too deeply rooted in human nature to be easily suppressed. The average student of physics today is probably still at heart an anthropomorphist. He takes his science to be a hunt after causes [that] convey into the transactions between material bodies features of the traffic between man’s mind and his environment.¹⁵⁰

Brightman observes that “all knowledge, scientific, philosophical, or religious, must be based on human experience and reason; hence, anthropomorphism is unavoidable. The question should be: what kind of anthropomorphism, critical or uncritical?”¹⁵¹

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Guthrie conducted a comprehensive survey of various branches of science to conclude that anthropomorphism occurs even in the most systematically self-critical and technical domains of thought. His survey seemed to support Nietzsche's claim "that it does so fundamentally, intrinsically, and inevitably." However, Guthrie, along with other philosophers and scientists, including Bacon, agree that "at least egregious anthropomorphism can in principle largely be eliminated and that doing so improves our understanding of the world." Guthrie noted that although philosophers and scientists are wary of anthropomorphism, and "most now regard it as unalloyed error, they are as prone to it as the rest of us." And, "while modern reflection tends to diminish it, some forms, generally judged inoffensive, survive. Anthropomorphism, then, though fundamental neither to philosophy nor to science, criticized by both and evidently antithetical at least to science, continues to appear in them."¹⁵²

Now, if scientists and empiricists render the religious conception of God anthropomorphic merely because it is limited by the conditions of human personality or controlled by the experience and thoughts provided by human personality, then the world, as the English philosopher and politician A. Balfour puts it, "presented to us by science can no more be perceived or imagined than the Deity as represented to us by Theology."¹⁵³ Balfour maintained that the epistemological foundations of science were just as open to doubt as were the foundations of theology. In the words of Martineau:

In every doctrine, therefore, it is still from our microcosm that we have to interpret macrocosm: and from the type of our humanity, as presented in self-knowledge, there is no more escape for the pantheist or materialist, than for the theist. Modify them as you may, all casual conceptions are born from within, as reflections or reductions of our personal, animal, or physical activity: and the severest science is, in this sense, just as anthropomorphic as the most ideal theology.¹⁵⁴

Man is at a loss to perceive the deity but in three possible forms: personal, animal, and physical, or as mind, life, and matter; the only

question arising being as to which one of these forms he would choose. He can construe the deity in terms of His highest attributes and, thus, allow for extremely strong feelings of reverence and dependence upon Him, or by the middling qualities man shares with some other organisms; or by the lowest characteristics man shares with every physical thing. The first choice will be classed as *anthropomorphism*; the second as *biomorphism* (describing God in organic, biological and natural life categories) or *zoomorphism* (in animal form or imagery); and the third as *hylomorphism* (as matter or substance).¹⁵⁵ And 'anthropomorphism', perhaps, will be a better choice than the empiricists' choice of *hylomorphism*. Therefore, it would not be objectionable to describe religion as anthropomorphic; but we may condemn any particular form of anthropomorphism as narrow, trite, or degrading.¹⁵⁶ The degrading anthropomorphisms will be those expressions used without proper qualifiers and precautions, so as to make God look like a human being or assign to God any attribute or quality inappropriate or incompatible with His Infinitude, Majesty, Absoluteness, Perfection, or in other words His 'Otherness and Transcendence.'

Due limits must be maintained between what is human and what is Divine. Blurring the demarcation lines between humanity and divinity will confuse the nature, significance, and essence of the divine thereby degrading the Deity and, in reality, the very essence of the religious experience. Metaphorical or seemingly anthropomorphic expressions should be used to provide human imagination with a kind of modality, but the imagination should be alerted not to go too far or overstep its bounds because God transcends all human modalities and conceptions and cannot be fully grasped or conceptualized by any material model or figure. He cannot be and must not be reduced to the categories of human thinking and must not be modeled on a blown-up anthropocentrism or physical anthropomorphism. He is by His very nature unknown to us in His essence. Therefore none of the above categories of minor or seemingly anthropomorphic expressions, as Macquarrie argued, "can be taken literally. This means that they have to be both affirmed and denied, so that theological language has a paradoxical character."¹⁵⁷ A healthy tension should be maintained between the

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affirmation and the denial process of even such minor anthropomorphic expressions. Intelligible concepts and models should be developed to articulate and bring home the idea of the creator God, but this must be done with the greatest care so as to not fall into the trap of sheer abstraction or sheer anthropomorphism or corporealism. Both extremes would infringe upon the transcendence and mystery of God. Such extreme notions would fail to reach the depths of human beings and they would be at a loss to create a proper response. A sense of mystery and ineffability is absolutely essential for the proper man-God relationship.

TRANSCENDENCE

Transcendence, on the other hand, is the term most commonly used to signify God's continuous providential guidance to, and independence of, this material world by emphasizing His separation from and elevation above this world. Transcendence is the most significant attribute of all the divine attributes, for the other-worldliness of divinity and supernaturalism rests upon it. God is beyond this utilitarian sphere of time and space since He is the creator of this spatio-temporal cosmos. Moreover, the term transcendence denotes that God Himself and notions about His existence, Absoluteness, Power, and Authority are not humanly created conceptions, so cannot be dispensed with as meaningless and empty terms, as contended by empiricists. In contrast, God and His revelation are the fundamental sources and ground of meaningfulness in this world.

The etymology of the word 'transcendence' has its origin in the Latin root *scando* which means 'I climb'; when to this root, prepositions like *ad*, *de*, and *trans* are added, we get the words i.e., 'ascend', 'descend' and 'transcend'. Thus, the word 'transcend' will literally mean "something has climbed out of something,"¹⁵⁸ or something has "risen above" and "went beyond" something. This definition presupposes two things: a difference between the one which transcends and that which is transcended. It also presupposes a relationship or relevance between them. As a metaphor, the term transcendence has been used to convey

a number of varied though related meanings;¹⁵⁹ therefore, the precise significance of the term in any particular work would be determined from the context in which it is used. In this enterprise, the term will be used for God, His uniqueness and otherness, and to denote His unique mode of relationship to the world with the exclusion of corporealism.

God transcends the world not in the sense that He is out of the world, but in the sense that “He stands over against all finite beings” and is “not identical with or His power not exhausted by the realm of finite being.”¹⁶⁰ He is never non-being like finite beings. God “transcends structure,” the unbreakable necessities, both spatially and temporally, and is free in relation to all of them. To Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr, American Protestant theologian, this freedom of God means that He neither resembles any created structures nor is a product of any such structure. He cannot be explained or comprehended fully by these structures or, in the words of Tillich, by “the world of polarities and finitude.”¹⁶¹ These finite structures are neither self-sufficient nor self-explaining, while God is self-sufficient as well as self-explaining. He is self-explaining through acts of creation and revelation. Moreover, He is the source of explanation and meaning for the finitude and hence, as the transcendent and unique reference, solves their problem of meaning. Without such a transcendental reference human life will be nothing but “meaninglessness and absurdity, a pointless and empty burden silly to be endured.”¹⁶²

In short, God’s transcendence, to quote Karl Heim, the German professor of dogmatics, “means that he is not a member of the series, nor is he the series itself, but rather its Lord.”¹⁶³ He is the creator “who makes finite and relative existence possible...and is the source of all reality.”¹⁶⁴ He is the Absolute, the Perfect, the Almighty, the Omniscient, the Omnipresent, the Holy, the Eternal and the highly impressive transcendental other. The “Other” who differs from all that is usual and familiar to this world of senses. As Illingworth observes, He “sustains all finite beings in existence, or in other words imparts to them all the reality that they possess, while transcending them as immeasurably as the creator ever must transcend the creature. He is our infinite and absolute Other. He is all that what we are not.”¹⁶⁵ Consequently, God’s existence or authority does not depend on our

feelings or emotions. He exists independent of the whole material world and is not subject to the limitations of whatsoever is other than Him.

TRANSCENDENCE:
A PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION

It needs to be made clear that the religious/theological concept of 'transcendence' as discussed above is different to the interpretation given to it by philosophers. Their notion of transcendence contrasts sharply with their concept of divine immanence. In their efforts to press Gods' unity and oneness, and to purify His being from all human attributes or characteristics, philosophers go so far as even to cut His entire relationship with, and in some cases direct authority over, this world of perception. This extreme notion of transcendence, which started life with the Pythagoreans and Platonists, permeating through Philo and Neo-Platonists to a great number of philosophers and theologians from all three traditions, identifies God with that source of divine reality from whom all other realities emanate wittingly or unwittingly as the light emanates from the sun.

To Plato this world and all it contains was nothing but a copy of the "Ideas" existing in a higher realm. Behind these 'Ideas' of the higher realm was the "Ultimate Idea": the Idea of Good. Speusippus, the successor of Plato as the head of the Old Academy, developed Plato's philosophy of Ideas into the notion of the absolute transcendence of the supreme First Principle.¹⁶⁶ Philo, a Jewish theologian and philosopher of Alexandria, incorporated this emphatic doctrine of divine transcendence into religious theology to avoid the anthropomorphic notion of deity presented by the scriptures, and to insist instead upon man's total inability to perceive God's essence. The scope of this work does not allow further discussion on this.

IMMANENCE

The term 'immanence' denotes God's presence in this world and is thought to directly oppose the term 'transcendence.' 'Immanence'

derives from the Latin base *manere*, meaning to stay or to remain. The addition of the preposition 'in' renders the meaning of 'staying in' or 'remaining within.' It is worth noticing that what stays in something or remains within something is distinguishable and distinct from that which it stays in; otherwise, one will merely be a part of the other. Keeping this fact in mind, it can be argued that the term 'immanence' is not a polar opposite of the term 'transcendence.' In a sense the transcendence of God presupposes a relationship of God with the world. He transcends, while necessitating His "otherness" from it. God, as Niebuhr observed, "is certainly in the structures and temporal processes just as the human person is 'in' its organism. But both the human and the divine person possess a freedom over and above the processes and structures."¹⁶⁷ (Freedom to Niebuhr means neither being identifiable nor created by any created structure). Therefore, the transcendent God is related to this world of senses as the original and only source of its creation and existence, as the Creator and the Sustainer. He stays within the world of the material and is immanent in every aspect of its existence by means of His eternal power, knowledge, authority, protection, love, and many other infinite and absolute attributes and qualities, but ontologically is wholly 'other' than the world. Therefore, when contrasting transcendence, or surpassing nature, with immanence or the indwelling presence of God, we only describe in inadequate human language two aspects of one and the self-same Being which differ from each other.¹⁶⁸ This is probably why J. R. Illingworth maintained that both transcendence and immanence are "not alternatives but correlatives."¹⁶⁹ Both supplement each other as each contains some elements of the other.

Such a theistic understanding of 'transcendence' is central to the Semitic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). The belief in such a transcendent God sinks deep into the personalities of those who believe in Him and shapes their whole life. This belief is not something they can keep to themselves; there is a kind of compulsion and urgency behind it. All activities of true believers seem to be molded into and dictated by the particular kind of belief they possess regarding the 'Transcendent', because to them He is the sole source of their very existence, the One Unified, Perfect being that, though distinct from the

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cosmos, is the source of it, and continues to sustain and providentially guide it.

The approaches adopted by followers of these Semitic traditions with regards to anthropomorphic and corporeal depictions of this “transcendent” God are different to certain degrees. Jewish Scripture (the Hebrew Bible, Old Testament) is inundated with anthropomorphic expressions and depictions of God, though medieval Jewish theologians and philosophers like Saadia ibn Joseph (Saadia Gaon) (882–942), Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), and many modern scholars of our times have tried to eliminate or at least minimize these scriptural anthropomorphisms by various methods of interpretation. On the other hand, the pervasiveness of anthropomorphism in the Hebrew Bible makes such intellectual attempts superficial. Christianity’s dogma of the person of Christ and “Incarnation” is also anthropomorphic. In spite of ample emphasis in the Christian tradition upon the transcendence of God and His uniqueness, the presence of dogmas like “Incarnation” and the frequent usage of expressions like the Father, the Son, God in human form, God on earth, Mother of God, and the face and hands of God etc. leave tinges of corporealism in the human mind. Islam emphasizes God’s transcendence and its scripture keenly protects the transcendent God from any shade of corporealism and physical anthropomorphism being ascribed to Him, for “... there is none like unto Him” (112:4).

I conclude this chapter by reference to its opening statement “Is God Dead?”

The form of the questions that often arise concerning the nature of Divinity is revealing in this connection. It is usually something like “is there a God?” or “does God exist?” or “is God a reality?” or “what is God like?”; in any such form they are really “leading questions”, since they imply that God can properly be considered as one factor in our situation among others; that God “as He is in Himself” – to use an admittedly but inevitably equivocal phrase – can be objectivised distinctively, like the objects of our perceptions and imaginations; that He is not even as real as those objects unless He can be brought into comparison with them; in short, that God is a relativity like everything else we can perceive or know.¹⁷⁰

The next chapter explores in detail transcendental and anthropomorphic tendencies and expressions contained in the Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments.

NOTES

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1954), part III, ch.52, p.190.

² Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," part IV, ch.67, pp.264-67.

³ Paul Ramsey, in his preface to Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God* (New York: George Braziller, 1961), p.XIX.

⁴ Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p.322.

⁵ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), p.196.

⁶ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought, from its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p.497.

⁷ This is an oft-repeated statement quoted in the majority of works on Greek thought. For instance see John M. Robinson, *Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p.52.

⁸ Marcus T. Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, H. C. P. McGregor, trans. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p.71.

⁹ Francis Bacon, *The New Organon and Related Writings*, Fulton H. Anderson, ed. (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1960), p.52.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.48.

¹¹ J. Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion* (London: Yale University Press, 1987), pp.43-44.

¹² Benedict de Spinoza, *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza: On the Improvement of the Understanding; The Ethics; Correspondence*, R. H. M. Elwes, trans. (New York: Dover, 1955), p.75.

¹³ David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, H. E. Root, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), vol. II, p.28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. III, p.29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.50.

¹⁶ August Comte, *The Positive Philosophy* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1854) vol. II, p.186.

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- ¹⁷ Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy*, with a new Introduction by Abraham S. Blumberg (New York: AMS Press, 1974), p.545, 559.
- ¹⁸ Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.76.
- ¹⁹ Friedrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1941), p.18.
- ²⁰ Richard Wagner, *My Life* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1911), vol.1, p.522.
- ²¹ Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, Friedrich Engels (New York: International Publishers, 1941), p.83.
- ²² Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, E. G. Waring, F. W. Strothmann, eds. (New York: Frederick Unger, 1957), p.7, 9, 11.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, pp.10–11.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.1–2, 14.
- ²⁵ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Lectures On the Essence of Religion*, Ralph Manheim, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p.17.
- ²⁶ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, p.49.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.47.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.65.
- ²⁹ Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Criticism of Hegel's Philosophy," quoted in Henri De Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, M. Riley, trans. and ed. (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1950), pp.15–16.
- ³⁰ Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, p.230.
- ³¹ Tess Cosslett, *Science and Religion in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.87; Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, p.230.
- ³² Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (New York: Appleton & Co., 1962), p.528.
- ³³ Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, p.228.
- ³⁴ Herbert Spencer, *Illustrations of Universal Progress* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1870), p.442.
- ³⁵ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Cultures* (New York: Holt & Co., 1883), vol.1, pp.26–27, vol.2, p.247.
- ³⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, J. Starckey, trans. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1955), p.91.

- ³⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), p.29.
- ³⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, A. A. Brill, trans. (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p.450.
- ³⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, James Starckey, trans. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), p.92.
- ⁴⁰ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, pp.15–16.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.17.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p.30.
- ⁴³ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p.19; and see also Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, pp.23–24.
- ⁴⁴ Stan Draenos, *Freud's Odyssey: Psychoanalysis and the End of Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p.80.
- ⁴⁵ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p.132.
- ⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the ID*, John Riviere, trans. (London: Hogarth, 1927), pp.40–41.
- ⁴⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, Katherine Jones, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1967), p.156.
- ⁴⁸ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, pp.141–142.
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