

God and the Ego: A Theory of the Origins of Theism

Dios y el Ego: Una Teoría acerca de los Orígenes del Teísmo

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Abstract

This paper examines the question of why human beings have always had such a strong need to believe that gods are overlooking and protecting them. The characteristics of ‘indigenous spirituality’ and the historical origins of theism are discussed, and linked to the development of a stronger ‘ego structure’ amongst certain human groups. Monotheism (and theism itself) is seen as an inevitable consequence of the painful sense of separation and incompleteness which strongly egoic consciousness brings.

Keywords: gods, religion, indigenous peoples, ego, spirituality

Resumen

Este artículo examina por qué los seres humanos siempre han tenido una fuerte necesidad de creer que los dioses les vigilan y protegen. En él se discuten las características de un tipo de espiritualidad indígena y los orígenes históricos del teísmo, relacionándolo con el desarrollo de una estructura egoica cada vez más fuerte entre ciertos grupos humanos. De este modo el monoteísmo (y el teísmo en sí mismo), es visto como una consecuencia inevitable de la dolorosa sensación de separación y falta de unidad que produce el tipo de consciencia egoica.

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Until recent times, the existence of God, or gods, seems to have been taken for granted by the great majority of human beings. 'He' was – or they were, if we're speaking of polytheistic religions – a powerful psychological reality to most of the world's population. Wherever human beings have lived, gods seem to have naturally sprung from their psyche.

In my opinion, the amazing prevalence of this belief has never been explained satisfactorily. Many of the explanations for God and religion tend towards an 'intellectualist' or a 'consolationist' approach. The 'intellectualist' approach suggests that human beings invented gods and the religions associated with them in order to explain the world around them. On the one hand, religion explains strange natural phenomena. When the sun moves across the sky, when the thunder roars, when crops die, or when a person dies for no apparent reason – all of this can be explained in terms of the actions of gods or spirits. Religions can also explain how the world came into being (God created it) and why life is full of evil and suffering (it's because of the Devil, or else it's a test God has set us, and He will punish or reward us when we die) (Boyer, 2002).

Generally, the consolationist approach maintains that religion consoles human beings against our mortality and the sheer hardship and suffering which fills our lives (Boyer, 2002). Both Marx and Freud, for example, were proponents of the 'consolationist' view. To Marx religion was the 'universal ground for consolation' or, in his famous phrase, the 'opium of the people' (Hamilton, 1995) while for Freud belief in God was a neurotic regression to childhood, with God representing an omnipotent father figure. But at the same time for Freud, religion's task was 'to even out the defects and evils of civilisation, to attend to the sufferings which men inflict on one another in their life together' (in Hamilton, 1995, p. 58).

On the other hand, from the perspective of transpersonal psychology, we might take the Jungian view that God is not exactly a physically real being – as Christians or Muslims believe – but is nevertheless psychically real. For Jung (e.g. 1969) the collective world of archetypes is as real as the physical world, and God is one of the most powerful archetypes – hence the omnipresence of belief. Ken Wilber takes a slightly different approach, suggesting that the concept of the monotheistic God is an intuition of Spirit, conditioned and filtered through the archetypal realms. According to him (Wilber, 1981), monotheism is an evolutionary step forward from the 'magical' religion and

polytheism of 'primitive' cultures. Particularly when what he calls the 'incipient egoic-rational' phase began at around 500 BCE, more and more human beings began to access the subtle levels, and the development of monotheism was the result. Wilber's view suggests that the 'God concept' was so widespread simply because some human groups evolved to a point where the subtle levels – even if they were not their normal state of consciousness – became more accessible. At the subtle levels, and within the cultural context of the pre-scientific world, God was a reality.

Indigenous Spirituality

However, it is important to remember that not all human groups have concepts of gods. Indigenous tribal peoples like the Native Americans, the Australian aborigines and traditional pre-colonial Africans, were generally not, and are generally not (although the picture changed somewhat after they were exposed to monotheistic cultures), theistic.

For peoples such as these, there are usually no deities who preside over certain localities or certain aspects of life. In fact to them the concept of 'God' or 'gods' has either no, or very limited, significance. It's true that some indigenous peoples have a concept of a creator God, but these are usually very remote and detached figures. They seem to have been developed purely as a way of explaining how the world came into being. After creating the world, this 'God' steps aside and has very little influence (Eliade, 1967). The Azande of Africa, for example, have a concept of a supreme being called Mbori. However, according to the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard (1967), there was only one rarely performed public ceremony associated with him, and individuals never prayed to him or even mentioned his name. Similarly, the Fang people of Cameroon believe the natural world was created by a god called Mebeghe, and that the 'cultural world' – of tools, houses, hunting, farming etc. – was created by another God called Nzame. However, as Pascal Boyer (2002) notes, 'these gods do not seem to matter that much. There are no cults or rituals specifically directed at Mebeghe or Nzame...they are in fact rarely mentioned (p.160).' According to Lenski & Nolan's statistics (1995), only 4% of hunter-gatherer societies and only 10% of simple horticultural societies have a concept of a 'creator god concerned with the moral conduct of humans' (p. 88).

There are two main elements of the spirituality of most indigenous peoples, neither of

which involve gods in the sense that we think of them. One of these is their awareness of an animating force which pervades the whole of the phenomenal world. Many indigenous peoples have a term for this 'spirit-force'. In America, the Hopi called it *maasauu*, the Lakota called it *wakan-tanka*, and the Pawnee called it *tirawa*, while the Ufaina (of the Amazon Rain Forest) call it *fufaka* (Heinberg, 1989; Eliade, 1967). The Ainu of Japan called it *ramut* (translated by the anthropologist Monro [1962] as 'spirit-energy'), while in parts of New Guinea it was called *imunu* (translated by early anthropologist J.H. Holmes as 'universal soul' [in Levy-Bruhl, 1965]). In Africa the Nuer call it *kwoth* and the Mbuti call it *pepo*. These concepts are strikingly similar to the universal spirit-force which spiritual and mystical traditions speak of – for example, the Vedantic concept of *brahman*.

The second common element of indigenous religions is belief in spirits (in the plural). The world teems with spirits – both the spirits of dead human beings and 'natural' spirits which have always existed incorporeally. As E.B. Idowu writes of traditional African religion, 'there is no area of the earth, no object or creature, which has not a spirit of its own or which cannot be inhabited by a spirit' (1975, p.174). Like the Great Spirit itself, individual spirits are not anthropomorphic beings with personalities, like gods. They are not beings at all. As Idowu writes, 'they are more often than not thought of as powers which are almost abstract, as shades or vapours' (pp. 173-4). And spirits are involved in the world in a way that gods are not. Unlike gods, they are never separate from it, but always moving through it, or living within its rocks, trees and rivers.

Early religious scholars tended to believe that animism was the result of a mistaken generalisation. According to Comte, since they themselves were conscious beings, our early ancestors simply assumed – in the absence of any other evidence – that all things had an inner, subjective life too (Hamilton, 1995). Freud believed that spirits and demons were the 'projection of primitive man's emotional impulses' (1938, p. 146), while more recently, Wilber (1995) has suggested that animism is the result of what he calls 'pre-personal fusion' with the world, the lack of a clear distinction between subject and object. However, these explanations contain the underlying ethnocentric assumption that spirits are an illusion, that they cannot genuinely exist. The idea that spirits may be a genuine objective reality may seem absurd in a

climate of post-modern rationality, but we should at least be open to the possibility. Buddhist philosophy accepts the existence of entities invisible to the human eye (such as the *petayoni*, *asurayoni* and *devas*), and suggests that we become sensitive to them as our consciousness becomes more refined through spiritual practice

However, if we decide that spirits are illusory, it is possible to interpret them in 'intellectualist' terms. It's not such a big step from sensing that all things are alive in a general way – because of the spirit-force which pervades them – to believing that all things are alive in the sense of being autonomous active forces. Spirit became individuated into spirits, and individual spirits were attributed with causative powers. When a wind suddenly arose, for example, this could be explained as the action of a wind-spirit, changes of seasons could be explained in terms of the actions of 'the spirits of the four winds' (as the Plains Indians believed), and illness and death could be explained as the influence of 'evil' spirits or sorcery (as most primal peoples believe). At any rate, whether they are objective realities or not, spirits do have this 'intellectualist' function to many indigenous peoples (Taylor, 2005).

Theistic religions are particularly characteristic of the peoples of the Europe, the Middle East and Asia. It seems to be the case that, before colonial contact from the 16th century onwards, the indigenous peoples of Australia, the Americas and many other parts of the world did not have theistic religions. In Africa the situation is a little more complex, due to earlier European and Arabic influences, but even there theistic religions were a late development, and very rare until recent centuries.

The Birth of Gods

A controversial subject here is the 'Goddess religion' which, according to scholars such as Marija Gimbutas (1974) and Riane Eisler (1987, 1995) was spread throughout Europe and the Middle East during the Neolithic era, from 8000 BCE to around 3000 BCE (e.g. Gimbutas, 1974). However, there is actually very little hard evidence that, during the early part of this period at least, a Goddess was worshipped.

Prehistoric human beings seem to have revered the female form. Judging by the massive numbers of them which have been found, particularly throughout Europe and the Middle East, female figurines seem to have been their major art form. Along with the vagina-shaped shells (which were

placed on and around dead bodies), the large number of depictions of vulvae, and the practice of staining vulva-shaped cavities with red ochre (to represent menstrual blood), they attest to an awe of the female form and her reproductive processes. However, this does not necessarily imply that these groups worshipped a Goddess. As Morris Berman points out, 'The "goddess" in these images is surely in the eye of the beholder; it is not in the images per se' (2000, p. 130). During the latter part of this period, goddesses certainly were worshipped as anthropomorphic deities – for example, the Sumerian goddess Nammu, who gave birth to earth and heaven, the Egyptian goddess Nut, and Cretan goddess Ariadne. But we can see this later phase of obvious goddess worship as a transitional stage between primal spirit-religion and patriarchal theistic religion.

In fairness to these scholars, they do state that Goddess religion was not purely, or even mainly, anthropomorphic. The idea of an all-pervading 'spirit-force' was important too. In fact, some of these scholar's descriptions of Goddess religion make it sound very similar to (if not exactly the same as) the 'spirit-religion' of many indigenous peoples. According to Riane Eisler, for example, goddess religion, 'bespeaks of a view of the world in which everything is spiritual (inhabited by spirits) and the whole world is imbued with the sacred: plants, animals, the sun, the moon, our own human bodies' (1995, p. 57). Descriptions such as these make one wonder, however, whether the concept of a Goddess is actually necessary. A similarly questionable assumption often made is that these cultures - and other prehistoric and indigenous cultures - were 'matriarchal', because they didn't possess characteristics associated with patriarchal societies, such as male dominance, hierarchy and aggression. Although a few societies may have been genuinely matriarchal - in the sense that women held positions of power, and had higher status than men - in most cases it's more accurate to simply say that these societies were *egalitarian* rather than matriarchal, because neither gender dominated the other. Status differences didn't exist, and power was shared equally. It isn't a question of either patriarchy or matriarchy, just as it isn't a question of gods or goddesses. We are dealing with a different category which transcends those binary oppositions (Taylor, 2005).

The first indisputable archaeological evidence of theistic religion appears later, during the 4th millennium BCE, among certain peoples of the Middle East and Central Asia. Peoples like the Ancient Sumerians and Egyptians, the Indo-

Europeans and the Semites developed religions based around the worship of higher, metaphysical beings with anthropomorphic (and occasionally theriomorphic, in the case of the Egyptians) characteristics – i.e. gods. These gods were apart from the world of human beings, observing and controlling its events from a higher realm, presiding over different aspects of life such as war, love, travel, agriculture etc. As Cassirer (1970) writes of the Roman gods, for instance, 'They are, so to speak, administrative gods who have shared among themselves the different provinces of human life' (p. 97). The earliest of these gods that we know of are the gods of Sumer, where An was the supreme sky god, Utu was the god of the sun, Nannar of the moon, Nanshe was the goddess of fish and magic, Ninisina was the goddess of writing, and so on. The most familiar of them to us are the gods of ancient Greece, where Zeus was the king of the gods, Poseidon was the god of the sea, Ares was the god of war, Aphrodite the goddess of desire, and so on. Like many other peoples' gods, the Greek deities were almost laughably anthropomorphic figures, like comic book superheroes. They squabbled with each other, took each other to court, had headaches, and sometimes even had sex with humans (in which case, if they got pregnant, half divine 'heroes' like Hercules were born). And as well as pantheons of 'official' gods, there were a massive number of local gods, of individual towns, mountains and rivers, and even family gods. Like spirits, gods covered every part of the natural world, but in the sense of presiding over – not actually being present in – all natural things.

At first traces of the old spirit-religions blended with the new god-religions. As I have suggested above, the early goddesses may have been a kind of intermediary stage between spirits and male gods, since the female psyche was more closely linked to the nature, and possessed the same nurturing and caring characteristics. As scholars like Gimbutas and Eisler tell us, the Goddess – and goddesses – was a symbol of the one-ness, the fecundity and the benevolence of nature. The idea of spirit-force was not completely forgotten by the early Egyptians either, who referred to Akh and Ba (the former referring to the universal soul, the latter the animating spirit which flows from Akh and pervades the whole of nature). Even in Greece, there was a pre-theistic stage of religion, *Eue theia*, when there existed, in Cassirer's words, 'a natural kinship, a consanguinity that connects man with plants and animals' (1970, p.91). It was only later, when this connection was broken, that gods came into being.

In time, however, these aspects of the old 'spirit religions' faded away. By around 2000 BCE, all prominent deities were male (Eisler, 1987; Baring & Cashford, 1991; DeMeo, 1998) and spirit-force only existed as an esoteric concept. And by this time the ancient sense of participation with nature had been replaced with a desire to dominate the natural world.

These peoples – particularly the Indo-Europeans and Semites – were war-like as well as theistic, and over the following millennia they conquered large parts of the world (see Gimbutas, 1974; Eisler, 1995; DeMeo, 1998). The Indo-Europeans eventually conquered the whole of Europe, parts of the Middle East and India, while the Semites conquered most of the Middle East. Over time they split into different groups. The Indo-Europeans sub-divided into peoples like the Celts, the Greeks, the Romans and the ancient Hindus, while the Semites sub-divided into peoples like the Hebrews, the Philistines, the Arabs and so on. And wherever they went, and whoever they became, their religions retained the same basic polytheistic character.

Monotheism came much later. The world's first ever monotheistic religion was founded by the Egyptian Pharaoh Ikhnaton in the 14th century BCE, who proclaimed that the only God was Aton, the sun God, and that all the old gods were obsolete. There is some evidence that Moses lived in Egypt at this time, where he was the son of a noble family (Moses actually is an Egyptian name), and that he assimilated this concept of one God and took it into the desert with him. This may be how the Jewish religion began, which eventually gave rise to Christianity, and – later still – to Islam.

The development of monotheism was probably not in itself such a significant event, however. The development of theism was the really momentous development, and monotheism can be seen as an extension of polytheism, possibly caused by an intensification of the original processes which produced theism (Taylor, 2005). In Frizzer's terminology, the important shift was from the magical to the religious stage, and the religious includes both polytheism and monotheism. And far from being evidence of an evolutionary advance towards the subtle realms (as Wilber believes) the fact that by the end of the first millennium CE most of Europe and large parts of the Near East and Africa worshipped One God is also largely attributable to accidental historical factors: the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine to Christianity, for example (which meant that Christianity was immediately the official religion

of the whole Roman Empire), and the missionary zeal and military power of early Muslims.

The questions we really need to answer, then, are: why did theistic religion emerge during the 4th millennium BCE? Why was the old spirit-religion replaced by a new religion of gods? And why is it, in the first place, that many indigenous peoples do not have concepts of gods?

The Intensified Sense of Ego

In order to answer these questions, we need to look at the fundamental psychological differences between 'modern' human beings and indigenous non-Eurasian peoples.

According to the early 20th century anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl, the essential characteristic of indigenous peoples was their less 'sharpened' sense of individuality. In his words, 'To the primitive's mind, the limits of the individuality are variable and ill-defined' (1965, p.68). He notes that, rather than existing as self-sufficient individual entities – as we experience ourselves – indigenous peoples' sense of identity is bound up with their community. He cites reports of primal peoples who use the word 'I' when speaking of their group. Similarly, George B. Silberbauer notes that, to the G/wi of the Kalahari, 'identity was more group-referenced than individual. That is, a person would identify herself or himself with reference to kin or some other group' (Silberbauer, 1994, p.131). In other words, such peoples do not just live *in* a group, as a collection of individuals, the community is part of their *being*, an extension of their self.

In the same way, they do not feel that they just live *on* land, but that their land is a part of their very identity, as much as part of their being as their own body. This is one of the reasons why being forcibly 'relocated' by governments is such a tragedy for them. Their attachment to their land is so powerful that they experience this as a kind of death. The Fijian anthropologist A. Ravuva, for example, notes that the Fijian's relationship to their *vanua* or land is 'an extension of the concept of self. To most Fijians the idea of parting with one's *vanua* or land is tantamount to parting with one's life' (1983, p.7).

In general, American-European peoples appear to have what Markus and Kitayama (1991) refer to as 'independent selves', whereas most indigenous peoples have 'interdependent selves'. The fundamental difference between European-Americans and indigenous non-Eurasian peoples

may therefore be that we have a stronger and sharper sense of individuality - or a stronger ego structure - than them.

The Ego Explosion

The stronger ego structure which characterises Eurasian peoples appears to have developed at a particular historical point (Taylor, 2003; 2005). Archaeological evidence for this includes new burial practices which became common from the 4th millennium BCE onwards. In Europe, prior to this, communal burial was the norm, and people were buried without markers and without possessions. People would be buried in shallow temporary graves and then, at a certain time of year, be reburied in a permanent communal site (Griffith, 2001). But during the 4th millennium BCE people were buried as individuals, with identity and property, as if their individuality mattered, and as if they thought it would continue after death. Chieftains were buried with their horses, weapons and wives, as if it was impossible to conceive of such powerful and important people ceasing to exist, and they were bound to return to life at some point. As the Swedish archaeologist Mats Malmer has written, these new burial practices (and the new emphasis on private property linked to them) are part of a 'surprising change [that] occurred in Europe, a new social system...giving greater freedom and rights of personal ownership to the individual.' Referring specifically to the beginning of the third millennium BCE, he calls these new European peoples 'the first individualists' (in Keck, 2000, pp.47-48).

Texts and inscriptions from the fourth millennium BCE also show a greater emphasis upon individuality and personality. For the first time, people's names are mentioned and their speech and their activities are recorded. We learn about who did what, why kings built temples and went into battle, how goddesses and gods fell in love and fought with one another. As Baring and Cashford (1991) write, 'We become aware not only of the personality of man and women but also the individuality of goddesses and gods, whose characters are defined and whose creative acts are named' (p. 154).

Similarly, the new myths which appeared throughout Europe and the Near East during the third millennium BC suggest a new strong sense of individuality. Whereas before myths had been based around the Goddess and nature (or symbols of them), now they became stories of individual heroes pitting their will and strength against fate.

According to Joseph Campbell, these show 'an unprecedented shift from the impersonal to the personal' (quoted in Baring and Cashford, 1991, p.154). In fact many of these heroes actually battle against symbolic representations of the Goddess of the Earth such as serpents, suggesting the new sense of separation and alienation from nature as the ego became more developed. In the Sumerian myth the Enuma Elish, for instance, the Earth goddess Tiamat – represented as a serpent – is killed by the sky god Marduk. Marduk takes her place as the creator of life, and now gods and goddesses – and by extension human beings – are 'outside' nature, detached from their creation rather than an organic part of it. Myths such as this symbolize what Owen Barfield (1957) calls 'a withdrawal of participation'. Whereas earlier human beings – and indigenous peoples – felt deeply interconnected with natural phenomena, now nature is something 'other' to be tamed and exploited.

And I am not, of course, the first person to suggest that these myths contain elements of historical truth. Scholars such as Ernst Cassirer (1953, 1970), L.L. Whyte (1950), Jean Gebser (1985), Julian Jaynes (1976), Joseph Campbell (1964) and Wilber (1981) have all suggested that our strong sense of individuality was not shared by earlier peoples, and emerged at a particular historical time. According to Whyte (1950), this is when the conflict between rational and instinctive behaviour which typifies modern man originated; according to Jaynes, this was when human beings ceased to obey the voices of the gods and started to think and act as individuals; while Campbell shows that at this point the myth of the individual hero pitting his will and strength against fate begins to take precedence over myths based upon the goddess and natural phenomena. According to Cassirer (1953, 1970), early human beings lived in a state of 'cosmic continuity', in which there was no sharp distinction between the individual and the environment. But later human beings developed a subjectivity, and the duality of subjective-objective and outer-inner.

These authors agree that the transition to a stronger sense of individuality specifically involved the human groups I have mentioned above: the Sumerians, Egyptians, the Indo-Europeans and the Semites (amongst others). However, perhaps due to the lack of archaeological evidence available to them, the dates they suggest for the transition are contradictory. Campbell suggests during the 3rd millennium BCE, while Whyte and Jaynes suggest during the 2nd millennium BCE. The researches of James DeMeo (1998), however, sug-

gest that the Ego Explosion – as it might be termed – occurred much earlier, at around 4000 BCE.

Why did this intensification of the ego occur? Perhaps, as Wilber (1981) suggests, it was an evolutionary development, an advance in terms of the development of consciousness but one which had a disastrous ‘shadow side’. Or perhaps, as DeMeo suggests, an environmental catastrophe was the main factor. DeMeo’s *Saharasia* uncovers evidence of a massive environmental transformation which began at around 4000 BCE: the desertification of the large region of the earth which he calls ‘Saharasia’, which until that time had been fertile and widely populated with humans and animals. Parts of Saharasia – particularly central Asia and the Middle East – were the homelands of these groups, and this environmental change affected them massively. On the one hand, they were forced to leave their homelands (which explains the mass migrations of the Indo-Europeans and Semites over the following centuries), and on the other hand, the new living conditions they were forced to endure apparently transformed their psyche. DeMeo’s research strongly suggests that this was the historical point where war became rife, when societies became socially stratified, when patriarchy began, and when human beings began to experience guilt and shame towards bodily processes and sex.

This environmental disaster could also be seen as the ‘trigger’ of a sudden intensification of the ego. Perhaps the sheer hardship of these human groups’ lives when their environment began to change – when their crops began to fail, when the animals they hunted began to die, when their water supplies began to fail and so on – encouraged a spirit of selfishness. At the same time perhaps the new difficulties the groups faced as their environment changed brought a need for a new kind of intelligence, a practical and inventive problem-solving capacity. They were forced to develop powers of self-reflection, to begin to reason and ‘talk’ to themselves inside their heads. In other words, this is perhaps how what Barfield (1957) calls ‘Alpha thinking’ developed. And as he notes, this type of thinking inevitably results in a sense of separation from the environment, and an ‘individual, sharpened, spatially determined consciousness’ (in Wilber, 1981, p.28).

The Origins of Theism

Although its causes are obscure, this ‘Ego Explosion’ appears to be linked to the onset of theism (and with the onset of intensive warfare,

patriarchy and social stratification) (Taylor, 2005; 2012). There is a clear historical link: the groups who exhibit signs of increased individuality – such as the Indo-Europeans and Semitic peoples – were the very same groups who developed theistic religions (and who also became war-like, patriarchal and socially stratified). In James DeMeo’s (1998) terminology, for these peoples, matrilineal ‘natural religions’ (centred around an awareness of animating and spiritual forces) gave way to patrilineal ‘high God religions’, characterized by dominating male gods separated from nature, who demand obedience and certain forms of moral behaviour.

The question we need to answer is: how did the new strong ego structure apparently bring an end to indigenous spirit-religion, and give rise to theism?

This transition may have entailed a loss of awareness of the presence of spirit force pervading the world (as appears to have been common amongst indigenous peoples), which can be explained in terms of a redistribution of psychic or mental energy, which began with the Ego Explosion. These individuals’ more powerful egos required more energy in order to function, and this was only possible by sacrificing energy which had previously been used by other functions. And in this case energy which had been devoted to ‘present-centred awareness’ was sacrificed. That energy was diverted to the ego; as a result there was less psychic energy to use perceptually, and the individual no longer perceived the phenomenal world with the same intense, vivid vision. As a result their attention became ‘switched off’ to the presence of spirit-force. And if we accept that spirits are objective realities, this was obviously the point when we ‘switched off’ to their presence around us too (Taylor, 2003; 2005).

This loss of the awareness of Spirit was perhaps part of the reason why gods became necessary. Many indigenous peoples appear to perceive the world as a meaningful and benevolent place, presumably because of their awareness of spirit-force, and their sense of connection to the cosmos. Through losing their awareness of spirit-force, Eurasian peoples seem to have lost this sense of harmony and meaning. Rather than being animate, natural phenomena became soulless objects, and the world became a cold, mechanistic place. In other words, these new strongly ‘egoic’ human beings lost the sense of being ‘at home’ in the world. What Campbell (1964) calls ‘the Great Reversal’ occurred, when the sense of the sacred faded away, the human psyche became riddled

with guilt, and the body became associated with sin.

At the same time, perhaps even more importantly, these peoples began to experience a painful new sense of separateness to the world, and lost the sense of kinship to nature and to other living beings which primal peoples seem to experience (Taylor, 2012). The psychological effects of this were momentous, and partly explain the 'Great Reversal' Campbell describes. This is the terrible 'human condition' which existentialist philosophers and psychologists often describe so dramatically - for example, when Fromm (1995) writes that '[Man's] awareness of his aloneness and separateness...makes his separate, disunited existence an unbearable prison' (p. 7). This sense of aloneness also brings a sense of incompleteness. Individuals become isolated fragments, broken away from the whole, and as a result have a fundamental sense of unfulfilment (in the literal sense), of not being sufficient as they are, a sense of lack.

In my view, theism was a psychological strategy these human beings used to deal with this new state of being. The belief that gods were always present, watching over them, acted as a defence mechanism against their sense of isolation, and also an attempt to assuage the sense of coldness and indifference they experienced from the world. If the gods were there, they were never alone. If gods were controlling events and protecting them, the world was a more benign place.

Another important 'compensatory' factor of theistic religions are their concepts of an afterlife. Many indigenous peoples had (and still have in some cases) fairly mundane conceptions of life after death. The Cheyenne Indians, for example, believe that after death they carry on living in the same way, but as insubstantial spirits, like shadows (Service, 1978). Members of the Lengua tribe of South America told the missionary W.B. Grubb that, 'The aphantak or departed souls of men in the shade world... merely continue their present life, only of course in a disembodied state' (in Levy-Bruhl, 1965, p.314). And for some groups, life after death didn't necessarily mean immortality. As Levy-Bruhl pointed out, 'Everywhere primitives believe in survival, but nowhere do they regard it as unending' (p. 313).

But after the Ego Explosion the afterlife became important as a consolation for the sufferings of life; the psychological suffering which the sharpened sense of ego brings, and the 'social' suffering of war, oppression and poverty (much of which can also be seen as a consequence of the

Ego Explosion). We can assume that the intensified sense of individuality which came with the Ego Explosion brought an intensified fear of death too. After all, if you define your identity purely in terms of your own being, rather than as a part of your community or as a part of the cosmos itself, then the dissolution of your own being is a terrifying prospect. We can therefore see the concept of immortality as a response to this terror of death (Taylor, 2005; 2012).

Perhaps Gods – and God – had a secondary 'intellectualist' function too. Without an awareness of Spirit, these Eurasian groups could not explain the world in terms of the actions of individual spirits. But, of course, anthropomorphic gods took over this role, and became the explanation behind natural events. When the wind rose up, for example, this was not because of the action of 'wind spirits' anymore, but because the god of wind was angry; and when a person died of illness this wasn't because of evil spirits, but because of 'the will of God'.

There is some evidence that, during later millennia, the strong ego structure which these groups developed intensified even further, leading to an intensification of war, patriarchy and antipathy to sex and the body (DeMeo, 1998). And this may have been partly responsible – together with the historical factors I mentioned above – for the transition from polytheism to monotheism. A stronger ego structure brings a more painful sense of separation, and the monotheistic god became necessary to assuage this, since He, we can presume, offers an even greater sense of protection and a greater sense of thereness than assorted polytheistic deities.

The transition from spirit religion to theism was also signalled by a new division between the sacred and the profane. As Service (1978) notes, in 'primitive society generally, conceptions of the sacred, or supernatural, so permeate activities that is difficult to separate religious activity from such activities as music and dance or even from play' (p. 64). Indigenous cultures generally did/do not have special 'places of worship' such as churches or temples, special 'holy days' or 'religious specialists' like priests. The key to this, of course, is the individual's awareness of spirit-force. There cannot be a division between the sacred and the profane because the omnipresence of spirit-force – or spirits – makes everything sacred. Every place is potentially 'holy' and every individual has access to the divine. But now that awareness of spirit-force was lost, a compartmentalisation of religion took place. The divine became contained

within particular places, such as churches and temples, and religious specialists began to act as intermediaries between human beings and gods.

Conclusion

Of course, not everyone conceives of God as a personal being who overlooks the world and controls and intervenes in its events. Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Jakob Boehme used the term 'God' to describe a spiritual force, or the Ground of all Reality, and encountered a great deal of hostility from the church authorities precisely because this was not the same personal 'God' which conventional Christians worshipped. At the same time there are many concepts of God as both personal and spiritual at the same time – i.e. 'God' exists as a spirit-force which pervades the universe, but at the same time can manifest himself as a personal being, or at least have powers of agency and influence. The concept of God of the Bhagavad-Gita, for example, is similar to this. Similarly, Keith Ward (2002) suggests that concepts of God or gods arise when human beings try to grasp ultimate reality. We cannot directly perceive the pure spiritual essence of the universe, and so have to 'image' forms which represent it. These concepts makes sense when we consider that there is a large grey area between complete ego-separateness and oneness with the cosmos. At any point along this continuum, there will still a degree of existential trauma and therefore a need for consolation, and a consequent need for a personal god – even whilst there is an awareness of Spirit.

The point I am trying to make, then, is that the concept of God is a psychological strategy which only became necessary when certain human groups developed a strong ego structure. The development of theism was not the result (and the indication) of an evolutionary movement advance towards spirit – as Wilber (1981, 1995) believes – but more probably the result of an accidental historical event which caused a movement away from it.

In a sense the born-again Christians who tell us that there is a 'god-shaped hole' inside us are correct. The 'hole' is our fundamental sense of lack and incompleteness, caused by our strong sense of separateness from the cosmos. This is why religious beliefs are so persistent, even with so many apparently rational arguments against them. It's true, however, that particularly in secular western Europe, the 'opium' of religion has become less readily available. Science has taken over religion's

secondary function of explaining the world, and in the process negated its primary function. As a result many people are forced to find other ways of filling the 'god-shaped hole', which might include materialism, power, success, drugs, hedonism, and even supporting soccer clubs.

However, perhaps the best way of dealing with this sense of lack, and the only way which can be truly successful, is not to try to fill it, but to try to remove it – or perhaps more accurately, to transcend it. This is what spiritual traditions such as Vedanta or Buddhism offer us: methods of weakening our ego structure, overcoming our sense of separation and incompleteness, and reconnecting with the cosmos. In a sense they offer us techniques of undoing the negative effects of the Ego Explosion and returning us to the holistic and harmonious experience of the world of many indigenous peoples.

In other words, spiritual or transpersonal development does not help us by giving us a consolation for our 'terrible' human condition, but by enabling us to change the state of being – or psyche – which is responsible for our suffering. When we reach a certain level of transpersonal development, the need for consolations such as religion, drugs or materialism naturally falls away, simply because we have transcended the state of ego-isolation which created that need. We discover that our existence is not an 'unbearable prison' of separateness and aloneness after all, because the whole universe and everything in it, including our own being, is pervaded with the Spirit.

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