

Chapter Two

How has God worked for us throughout history?

God at least as a concept has been employed consistently since recorded history. The purpose of this chapter is to move along our inquiry into God by considering how this concept has influenced human history, in an effort to have more elements with which to judge its value and how this might affect its validity and the question of whether God exists or not. Without further ado, let us state from the outset our conclusion: a review of how the concept of God has worked throughout history, or of the role it has played in human culture and civilization, will not provide conclusive evidence one way or another as to God's existence or the usefulness or desirability of its use. Phenomenologically, the concept of God, though unique, has become part of human culture, and in this sense is a positive (empirical) element thereof, that is, a neutral fact, not good or evil in itself. How it is used in fact is another thing.

It is difficult to reconstruct how the earliest humans who thought up God and related to him (for convenience we will use the masculine personal pronoun for God, which is most common), but we can imagine they derived comfort and alleviation from fear, although the reification of an entity such as God is susceptible of projections of irascibility and demands which are punished if unmet, and thus can have created fear and anxiety too, from the beginning. Like all cultural constructs, there is a negative side to their usefulness. The same divine entity or entities which protect can also threaten to punish, which brings anxiety and discomfort, though almost always with a solution. A case in point is the story in the Book of Jonah, where there is a storm at sea and the religious "wisdom" on the ship is that there is an evildoer in their midst, which at first brings anxiety but can be quickly resolved by throwing the culprit overboard.

We know that soon after the concept of God as a cultural construct was developed there emerged individuals who claimed or were thought to have a special relationship to him. This is a common cultural phenomenon, the specialist, and in this case, hierarchy enters into the picture easily and quickly. The essence of divinity is superiority, and humans are quite given to pecking orders: it is a function of natural selection and anthropologically quite understandable. Leaders emerge, they serve a purpose, but as with all cultural and human developments, there is the potential for abuse of power. Religious leaders are no exception.

I hold to the idea, more or less in the form I learned it, which is based largely on the work of Gerardus van der Leeuw, that “religion” (in the broad sense of relation to the numinous) developed in three successive stages. The first is “taboo,” what a relationship basically of fear of the deity and a desire to assuage this fear is called. In this relationship, man fears unknown, mysterious powerful forces which are recognized or considered to be supernatural or divine and tries to placate these forces or beings by sacrifices or other acts of blandishment.

The second stage according to this view is called “magic,” and it develops when the principle that the deity can be placated and stopped from perpetrating or continuing its punishing acts can be applied not just to the prevention of harm, but to the procurement of benefits. That is, a bribable deity, so to speak, can be coaxed to not just abstain but to perform positively in favor of the humans who invoke and sacrifice to it. This is still a most common attitude to divinity; we want it on our side, and unconsciously or semi-consciously, we are in control: God is a concept we use for our purposes, even if we pretend at some level that God is above us and superior. Here the role of God’s authorized representatives or mediators is very important. Approach to God becomes ritualized, established, eventually laden with the prestige and untouchability of tradition, and thus doubts as to the propriety of the approach are removed. By this stage God is part of culture, and his benefits, or whatever is sought from him, is procured in set and familiar rituals, with the right individuals as go-betweens.

This kind of “religion,” which is what most non-believers and non-specialists usually think of when they think of religion, is clearly marked by narrow cultural interests and can thus often appear as evil and short-sighted. It is the kind of approach to God that religious reformers and others have often railed against. A classic example of this view of God is found in the Bible, where it seems that Yahweh, called a “man of war” in Exodus 15:3, is primarily Israel’s powerful defender, helping it win its wars, all of which at the time were “holy wars.” In this relatively early stage of Israelite religion, God is clearly quite bribable, at least as understood by the priestly class. God was a powerful being who had made a pact with Israel; he was on their side, and against Israel’s enemies, who were to be treated cruelly and without pity. The moral or ethical concern was quite secondary in a religion that related to divinity as a mysterious power which had to be handled with great care, like a radioactive element: its potential for good was immense, but so was its destructive power.

The deity had to be appeased with sacrifices; moral obligations were blurry at best. God's concern was only for the sanctuary, where he dwelt and from where he bestowed his blessings, but which was mysteriously contaminated by various impurities which resulted from certain activities, such as childbirth or sexual activity or emissions, or bloodshed. It seems these human activities in some way crossed the line between humanity and divinity; giving birth, or experiencing the life forces in semen and menstruation, seemed to occur in a middle area between the human and the divine, or had to do with life and death, events particularly within the purview of the divine. Thus certain rituals had to be observed in order to make right and put in order what had been disturbed by these special events, which crossed the line, so to speak, breaching forbidden boundaries. The priests were God's authorized spokesmen and intermediaries between him and the laity, performing these restorative rituals, although they themselves also needed purification and the benefits of ritual.

In the Bible, the books of the prophets Amos and Hosea, who lived in the eighth century B.C.E., demonstrate a strong reaction towards this kind of religion, which countenanced and even promoted an ethicless but flamboyant cult alongside great social injustice and the misery and exploitation of the poor. Here begins, at least in Israel, what the classification alluded to above, based on van der Leeuw, calls true "religion;" the deity is conceived not as being at our command, but as wholly independent and making demands on us which we may consider to be against our self-interest. These prophets, and others, rail against the ethicless cult and declare that God is not pleased with the sacrifices of animals, but protects the poor and defenseless. It should be noted that most prophets, in fact, were little more than poetically-talented cheerleaders for the powers that be who paid them; the "true" prophets were persecuted for their stance and words, which contravened societal expectations and the interests of the powerful. Many would agree that this is religion at its best, at its most honest and useful, even though it is a form of religion inherently disruptive, and in this sense, unstable. Religion, the biblical one being no exception, eventually domesticates prophecy, making it part of the institution as something of the past no longer active or acceptable, but venerable and to be correctly interpreted (by the authorities).

Human culture and society place a great stake on stability; the Chinese curse says "may you live in interesting times." But positive change comes about with disruption, and thus there is a good role for protest and urging of change, and progress results therefrom. This is what the

prophets accomplished in eighth-century Israel: they influenced the priestly class to reform (or at least some branches of it), and to extend their area of concern (and thus, of God) beyond the sanctuary to the whole land of Israel itself, and God, like the king, became first and foremost the protector of the weak. Certainly this signifies a change in the balance, or better, imbalance, of power in society, and corrects (or tends to correct) grievances which themselves may be disruptive. Here we have a positive development in the role of religion in human culture, promoting the idea of a powerful being, God, who is utterly moral (according to the most enlightened human understanding of morality at the time) and demands adhesion to his high ethical code. Here we also have what thinkers such as Gordon D. Kaufman (my professor at Harvard) consider the usefulness of the concept of God, which humans construct (and should so do consciously and deliberately) in order to better order our life in society. God is a concept, even a “being” to whom we can relate, who is unlike us and not us and judges us from an absolute point of view and standard that we cannot, or at least should not, confuse with our own necessarily narrower, more selfish and short-sighted interests.

Kaufman’s call, at least as I recall it from many years ago, was that we should build the concept of God in a way that fosters our best ethical aspirations and beliefs. In this view (I am not saying Kaufman adheres to these specific applications of his view), God, for example, doesn’t prohibit homosexuality or homosexual behavior. These prohibitions come from –at least in the Bible– from ancient priestly taboos against unusual, irregular things, which violate a certain order in creation and thus court chaos, which is to be avoided at all costs. It is part of a highly regulated, disciplined life which brings many benefits; the success of the Jews in so many endeavors is proof thereof. In this ancient view, not all animals should be eaten: one weeds out most of them as impure and improper. One is the bat, a strange, call it improper, bird, which has fur, or shrimp, a fish without fins. One does not boil a kid in its mother’s milk: the milk is meant for life, not death, much less to serve as a delicacy cruelly obtained. In this way, ideas which seem to be and which began as superstitions about impurity and mysterious contaminating forces are blended with “higher” human ideals, such as discipline in eating and gentleness in how and what we eat; the kosher diet includes no predators, and avoids the pig, not just because it was a classic animal used by idolaters, but also because it was too delicious and could excite the passions (thus says Philo of Alexandria). And it turns out, serendipitously, that eating pig can be harmful and carry the risk of trichinosis, which was not known until the nineteenth century.

Homosexuality is one of those aberrations, in this view, to be avoided as violative of the natural order. The Jewish priest was highly invested in this order; the very first chapter of Genesis, when describing creation, speaks of it as overcoming chaos and *separating* things, light and dark, wet and dry, the different species. This served a most useful lesson for Israel: its unusual identity had to be maintained at all costs, and mixing with the heathens was a great danger. The great explanation for the disaster of exile and destruction was Israel's failure to keep its obligations toward God, and these obligations were jeopardized when Israel forgot its identity and behaved like what was not Israel. One sees here both the ethnic self-interest element (Israel wants to promote itself) and how "religious thought" has reified a situation such as to make it primarily ethically demanding. Discipline and adherence to an increasingly enlightened or reformed ethical code are useful and valuable human constructs, and in this sense religion, inescapable at that time (and seemingly, still), is refined into a more clearly recognizable human cultural value.

In the conscious elaboration of the concept of God and what he, she or it may demand, those of the Kaufman school and others may then refine the views on homosexuality to divest them of their primitive taboo setting and make them into inclusive, celebrative views of this minority sexual preference. Here reference can be made to other cultures besides the biblical one, like the Cheyennes or Hindu or native Mexican cultures, where unusual people, and especially men who dress or act like women, are given a special, celebrated place. The teaching here is the acceptance of the varieties of human life which exist on the planet, each with something to contribute, as in a symphony. And of course the view of war and religious intolerance are left far behind in this view, which promotes intercultural and international good will and cooperation over ethnic or national identity when these interfere with the common good understood in the broadest terms. Obviously careful thinking is required to balance legitimate ethnic or personal interests with acceptance of the *other*, of the one who is different; maturity is required for this, and enlightenment, and so far most of humanity is far from this.

Thus even after Jesus Christ came preaching love of enemies –most unusual– and teaching by most graphic example, and after he was "made" into God, an all-powerful and severe *Pantocrator* sitting in judgment, his followers the Christians waged merciless wars and persecutions of their enemies real or imagined, and all this in the name of their God. Jesus himself had predicted that his real followers would be killed by those who thought that by doing

so they were worshipping God (John 16:2). This is the “magical” view of religion (we have God on our side, he is pleased with us because of our sacrifices or bribes or status as baptized or allegiance in the Church), still triumphant over a more objective, altruistic, ethically demanding, genuinely “religious” view.

So with this cursory view of how God has “worked” for us throughout history, we see that God still seems to occupy that strange place which is both in ourselves and outside. That is, God seems to be a projection of the human mind which reifies or creates into an entity fears and desires and images it has, and then relates to it as another being, very powerful, but usable for human needs and purposes, under the right religious leadership. This is God wholly of our creation and invention.

But the concept itself lends itself to another kind of reification, to being made into a “thing” (that is what reification means) which serves a unique cultural purpose: to put into question all our tendencies and desires, to see them from an absolute point of view outside of ourselves, or at least outside of the interests of those who have preponderant power in society and tend to abuse it. This is related to the human search for salvation and wisdom, for happiness sought philosophically, beyond what is “common sense.” Here the human mind, so active and overactive beyond what is needed for physical survival, deals with itself, and tries to calm itself by thinking and discovering enlightened paths which lead to peace and well-being. The common philosophical view, shared by philosophers in many regions of the world, stresses the need to rise above the merely physical, to limit what the body would demand, to feed the mind, where “it all takes place.” God was seen in Greek philosophy as the one who contemplated, and philosophers imitate him. This is a calm, non-violent, principled life, which seeks the common good, usually, and both its religious and non-religious forms are quite similar. Religion, however, provides a focus and a fulcrum: one focuses on God, and usually has an established way of approaching him, as in Hinduism or Buddhism (in its theistic versions), or Judaism and Christianity. All these religions have mystical schools, and they share many things in common among themselves and with the philosophers.

Clearly this is an “enlightened” view of religion, far removed from what the “masses” with their selfish or unenlightened leaders follow. There religion is part of a culture *tout court*, and serves cultural and nationalistic or party purposes. This is what enemies of religion *tout court* want to eliminate. And it is worthwhile to unmask what an insidious cultural element this

kind of religion is: masquerading as divine, it is diabolic, or, in other terms, pretending to be what is best in us it masks what is worst.

So how God has worked in our history can be seen either as how one important cultural element has served to promote common human endeavors which tend to be selfish and narrow and shortsighted, or as how a unique cultural “invention” has provided a fulcrum (a means of enabling) for higher ethics, especially when a counterweight to power is necessary, which is often. In other words, this form of religion turns things on its head: instead of religion being about a powerful God who is closest to the powerful on earth, who are most like him, God is thought to be the defender of the defenseless, the outsider, the questioner of human thoughts. And this use of God works in both a believing mode and in another mode which stresses not so much belief as our need to use the concept for the unique purpose it can serve, to relativize human thought and action and desire, as no other concept can, by reference to something absolute which is outside of our own schemes (at least in Kaufman’s view).

In conclusion, throughout history “God” has worked as other ideas have: ‘we are the chosen people, our ideals are best, we are the master race’, etc. But it has also worked in uplifting ways, closely associated (and for a long time only associated) with human striving to lift themselves above evolutionary atavisms (we must accumulate, wage war, oppress others to get our way, etc.) into a more “divine-like” existence (as it is thought to be), of peace, contemplation, discipline in meeting bodily needs, promoting the welfare of others, maintaining or creating a balance between sectors of society etc. There can be no absolutely condemnatory verdict for “God” as used throughout human history. It remains an interesting, unique development of human thinking and culture, serving unique functions. This is not proof God exists, but is used by believers to buttress their position that the hidden God is actually at work, but only accessible through faith and not proof, faith in itself not being considered an inferior form of knowledge or a bad substitute thereof, but the unique human act that matches the unique hiddenness of God. We will say more about the faith option later.