“It is convenient that there be gods, and, as it is convenient, let us believe there are”

Ovid (Roman poet, 43 BCE – 17/18 CE)

1. INTRODUCTION

The authoritative argument (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969:307) from the so-called objective, literal/realist existence of god, is false. This is when it is maintained that something, or someone (usually) on the “other side” directs and controls people’s lives here on earth. Where is this “other side”, how can we access it, if it does exist? To pretend that you come from the mysterious “other side” with certainties naturally gives weight to your standing, but it also immediately destroys it because your point of departure is that of vague, mystic speculation. Ironically, Christianity knows this very well, and thus the Credo (Apostolicum) begins with “I believe in God the Father, the Almighty…” But believe (suspect, feel, speculate, hope) almost immediately crosses over to know as though convictions are tested scientifically; this is when problems arise. Whenever the church has found itself in conflict with science, the church has, sadly, lost.¹ The result has always been, more science², less god! All knowledge (also that from the natural sciences) originates subjectively within humans as speculation, or better, intuition, and subject to testing/control here on “this side”, while the so-called objective source of inspiration on the “other side”, remains either mystery, or nothing. And yet the god-arguments as revealed from “above” are still presented as proven facts – god willed women to know their place, that homosexuals are doomed to hell, that Aids was sent to punish them, et cetera. Karen Armstrong hits the nail on the head when she describes this so-called certainties as “…an uncanny resemblance to the preacher’s own prejudices”

¹ The church’s geocentric cosmology over and against Galileo’s (16/17th century) (and Copernicus’) heliocentric views are well known.
² Science can as “Scientism” be overrated as having all the answers possible.
Not too long ago we had the Apartheid-god\(^3\) whose will here in SA was clear and crisp from the “other side”, and where is this god now? Back into the “nothingness”, or perhaps never having existed, except in people’s minds? Theology needs a new definition of “god”, rather than the pretentious, “revealed” from a so-called (uncontrollable) objective “other side”. If we stubbornly cling to the last-mentioned, then theology is nothing but “garlic”-theology, the garlic-versus-ARM-viewpoint.\(^4\)

If the objective perspective of the existence of god is built on such shaky foundations, why then so much religion? Religion is alive all over the world, and people cannot seem to shake it; apparently they cannot live without it – in whatever divergent manner they express their religious intuitions. An association with religion (broadly defined) makes people live longer, be healthier, and have better social relationships – and this has been proved by research. Despite the shaky objectivist existence of god, scholars still write books with interesting titles: Hinde, PA 1999. *Why Gods persist: A Scientific Approach to Religion*. London: Routledge; Newberg, A, D’Aquili, E & Rause, V 2001. *Why God won’t go away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*. New York; Ballantine Books.

If religion doesn’t come from “above”, then where is it from? The insights of the cognitive sciences have, in the last few decades, exposed fascinating insights regarding the origin and functions of religion. Cognitive refers to the way in which the brain-mind creates or construes the reality/world in which we live (cf Johnson 1987:102). Part of this acquisition of a cohesive reality, is also the populating of it with god-concepts that are subjectively conceptualised. The advantage of the cognitive sciences is that they are empirical sciences. That is to say that their findings are constantly tested and controlled through thorough experimentation (Pyysslännen 2001:8; Boyer 2001:48). This presentation especially relies on insights regarding religion as exposed by Cognitive Psychology and Anthropology. These disciplines in turn rely on many others, including Neurophysiology, Evolutionary Biology, Paleo-Anthropology and Archaeology, to name a few. Where Psychology deals with the insights of humans’ evolutionary origin, it is

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\(^3\) The moral paralysis that Apartheid has caused makes people insensitive to detect the new race god that is currently emerging in SA.

\(^4\) Non-scientific “cures” like garlic, the Africa potato, etc, over and against scientifically proven anti-retroviral medicines unfortunately strengthen naïve solutions for Aids such as sex with children, shower after having had sex with an HIV-positive person and so on.
known as Evolutionary Psychology\textsuperscript{5} (Boyer 2001:117-118). Questions to be asked include: when and why did religion originate? Are there special tools and areas in the brain managing religion exclusively? Is there a difference between a general, good feeling and a specific pious/devout feeling? How does religion become part of the “fibre” of societies, how does it occupy their symbolic world? Is all religion necessarily good?

However, before these questions can be answered, it is necessary to check whether a god “above” does exist, Christianity’s claim of the testimony of the Bible. What does the Bible really say about god?

\textbf{2. GOD(S) OF THE BIBLE}

Many years ago already, Carroll (1997:56) voiced his dissatisfaction with the contradictory god-concepts in the Bible. God loves and hates, builds up and destroys, rages and blesses, constantly changes his mind and is unpredictable in his actions. This brings the orthodox-postulated almighty, all-knowing, unchangeable, objective god who allegedly inspired the Bible into question. His solution is to rather see god as a literary character – different authors create different characters. A cognitive-scientist would reply that different people conceptualise different gods, and this explains the divergent voices in the Bible. Bibliologists also tried to address these discrepancies by rather speaking of theologies within the Old and New Testament instead of a (single) theology.

In a recent thesis, Gericke (cf summary articles 2004, 2005) builds on the idea of god as a literary character to expose the untenability of an objective god. An anti-realist viewpoint regarding god is more firmly rooted. He argues from a religious-philosophical point of view, and focuses on questions\textsuperscript{6} such as the nature of religion, the nature of religious language, the concept of revelation, the nature of god, the existence of god, the problem of evil, religious experience, the relationship between science, history, culture and

\textsuperscript{5} Developmental Psychology fascinatingly highlights some theories of evolution because “We know a lot more now about how minds work because we have found out a lot about how young minds grow” (Boyer 2001:106).

\textsuperscript{6} Philosophers of religion often focus only on the stereotyped Judeo-Christian god without acknowledging the multi-facetted god(s) of the Old Testament (Gericke 2004:34).
morality on the one hand, and religion on the other, life after death, and so on. He presents seven arguments that question the objective existence of god: confusing theological pluralism – Yahweh is the only god (2 Kings 5:15) and yet part of a pantheon (Gen 3:22); indefensible orthodox theology – Yahweh is omniscient, but does not know everything (Ps 14:2); polymorphic projection that makes the god Yahweh appear too much like a human – he makes incorrect predictions about the future, for example, the Davidic dynasty that would never end (2 Sam 7) yet with the exile was destroyed; mythology and syncretism – he looks remarkably similar to the Canaanite gods he opposes (El en Baal, Ps 29); faulty cosmography – Yahweh also believes in a three-layered cosmology (Ps 104); fictitious historiography – Joshua who “stops” history through praying that the sun would stand still (Josh 10:12); meta-textual history – pre-historical religion has been on the scene for a long time and Yahweh only appears towards the end of the second/beginning of the first millennium BCE, where was the “eternal” Yahweh before? The rationally uncovered shakiness of god’s objective existence in the Bible also applies to his so-called ipsissima verba (Gericke 2005).

The final redaction of the Hebrew Bible reminds us of the upgrading of a cell phone, except here the old models are also kept. The Canaanite El is transformed into the universal creator Elohim, and later harmonised with the nationalistic Yahweh (Vorster 2002:12 ff). Unfortunately, El’s daughter Ashera was abandoned (she could have meant so much to women), although she was reincarnated in Lady Wisdom (Prov 8). In the end, she was not a goddess in her own right, but merely a “clone” of the patriarchal Yahweh (Viviers 2005:884). Instead of the retribution god of traditional Wisdom, an opponent is created who does not function according to cause-effect, and yet still the final editors of Job kept both gods. It is understandable that, by the end, Job throws in the towel with the gods, and instead finds meaning in the earthly, his family and wider household (Clines 2005).

How can a truly almighty, omnipotent god allow all this conflicting, unclear and confusing ideas? There can be no other conclusion, than god merely existing in the world.

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7 These are only illustrative examples (cf Gericke 2004 for a detailed deliberation)
of the text and humans’ imagination – “…no more than a literary construct, a character in a story, and thus merely a figment of the religious ideological imagination” (Gericke 2005:79).

And the New Testament? Do we not find greater unanimity and the subsequent confirmation of god’s objective existence here? There is a greater extent of uniformity with the focus on Jesus, but when it comes to his divinity, we again have a divinity ascribed by people, people that create a god. Other than the god(s) of the Hebrew Bible that were invisible and unapproachable, the historical Jesus of Nazareth was really alive. The revolutionary Jesus Movement’s alternative lifestyle of caring (especially for the less fortunate), as providing meaning in the oppressive Roman rule, still inspires today. But was he god? The orthodox viewpoint would argue that his uniqueness made him god, because never before was there someone so special. But this is not true. In retrospect his followers deified him according to the typical Greco-Roman mythical heroic pattern – a god conceives a child with an earthly virgin, attempts are made to kill the child, salvation through travelling to a foreign land, his earthly life-journey becomes a search for meaning, he visits the underworld, rises from the dead, appears to people and then ascends to heaven. It becomes quite clear, Jesus is similar to Dionysys (Zeus’ son), the wise and good Appolonius of Tiana, Caesar Augustus himself and many more (Wolmarans 2002:207, 209, 212 ff). If Jesus is god, then so are they! What is also important to note is the concurrence of the mediator Jesus with the mediators of other religions, namely the ancestral spirits. His divinity comes into being through exactly the same psychological processes as theirs (cf below).

The Bible confirms the thesis of this presentation; people create god and not the other way around! The question is, where do gods and religion come from, and why did they come into being; why do people have the need for gods?

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8 The Jesus of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John for example immediately brings to the fore also the pluriformity of the New Testament which complicates the reconstruction of the historical Jesus.
3. ORIGIN AND FUNCTION OF RELIGION

For millions of years, the early ancestors of the modern human (Homo Sapiens), the hunter-gatherers, used a distinctive stone axe to dig up plant bulbs and cut meat. To have made this symmetrical axe through the process of “knapping” (careful chipping away of the stone flakes) requires a relatively sophisticated brain (Wynn 2000). Chimpanzees, our closest “family”, also use tools in this way, but don’t have a brain complex enough to manufacture such an instrument. But then something remarkable happened approximately 60 000 – 30 000 years ago. The different intelligences of the brain, that functioned independently for different survival tasks, started to work together, and all of a sudden humans acquired extraordinary new capabilities. The archaeological record clearly shows that tools become more abundant and more complex, funeral rituals became more comprehensive, ochre paint came into use for aesthetic reasons, and drawings and paintings were made against cave walls. Humans realised that lived experiences, could be recalled later in their imagination, they could see it “in their thoughts”. They did not need to see an eland physically to paint it, but could paint it at night in the cave, by firelight. Humans started to think in “decoupled mode” (Boyer 2001:131), they started to think in an abstract way and fantasize, and the fictitious or symbolic world was born. This development is known as the cultural revolution, or the symbolic “explosion” (Mithen 2000:211, 216; Boyer 2001:322). And religion is born! Earlier in the day, when the rock-painter watched the herd of eland on the horizon, he saw something like a shadow above the eland, its spirit, or perhaps it was just a chimera?

And here is human, with an exceptionally sophisticated brain that has extraordinary capabilities. To understand the workings of this complex organ, not just physically but also its psychological or mental functioning, neurophysiologists and cognitive psychologists have brought forth important findings the past few decades. The modular theory\(^9\) where the mental function of the brain is understood as cooperating modules, templates, “recipes”, intelligences or functions/capacities, currently enjoys great popularity. This model is known as the “Swiss army-knife model”. Although

\(^9\) Cf Carruthers and Chamberlain (2000:1-12) for other competing theories.
neuroscientists physically divide the brain into different areas, mental functions are abstract concepts that cannot be ascribed to certain physical areas. This then denies the popular view of a so-called “religious spot” in the brain: “There is ... no special religion centre in brain...” (Boyer 2001:329). The psychologist Justin Barrett (2004:3-6) differentiates between three types of mental tools with which we interpret our reality\(^{10}\), which has an evolutionary history (thus innate) and which highlights religious conceptualisation and representation. *Categorizers* (Object detection device, Agency detection device, Face detector, Animal identifier, Artefact identifier) that acquire information through the senses; *Describers* (Object describer, Living-thing describer, Theory of mind, Artefact describer) that add detail to the identified information; *Facilitators* (Social exchange regulator, Social status monitor, Intuitive morality) that regulate our social relationships. These tools all function unconsciously or intuitively and instantaneously, but inform our conscious/reflective thoughts and decisions. The more mental tools that are activated, the more believable the possibility of gods become. Subsequently they are viewed more closely, and specifically, how they accommodate religious concepts.

Under the *Categorisers* or identifiers, it is especially the Agency detection device that is important for god-conceptualisation. This “worker”\(^{11}\) is hypersensitive for intentional agency. That is to say, the immediate recognition of a human or animal busy with an intentional action. But if a statue for instance, suddenly “starts shedding tears”, it would pick it up immediately. It was vitally important that this antenna worked lightning quick in the pre-historic context of hunters and prey. By identifying prey in time, and thus capturing them, ensured food. If you notice the predator before s/he notices you, you can flee and survive. But this mental antenna is so fine-tuned that it can pick up even the traces of prey or predator.\(^{12}\) A rustling in the tree without you being able to see its source betrays the leopard hiding there, or perhaps it is merely the wind blowing through the leaves. It is better to be over-cautious and miscalculate, rather than be eaten. And so early

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\(^{10}\) These functions apply to normal, undamaged brains.
\(^{11}\) To have a grasp of these mental functions or capacities one can think of them as small people at work fulfilling specific functions.
\(^{12}\) A stroll in the veld when all is silent and all of a sudden you rush a rabbit from its hiding place under a bush makes your hair stand on end! It is this instrument at work.
humans began to “see” more than meets the eye. S/he starts seeing strange signs in the grass, or a phantom above the eland’s back, or faces in the clouds. And the existence of spirits and gods becomes possible, but not necessarily real.

Scholars use the concept “counter-intuitivity” for someone/something to qualify as a god, which actually implies the supernatural. A god must always be close to reality, but yet just a little bit more. This explains why gods and spirits are often so human-like, yet still superhuman. For a person, animal or artefact (most gods worldwide fill these categories) to be a god, it must be attention-grabbing, and have inferential potential; the god must have specific, strategic knowledge and abilities. Strategic knowledge is that which is required for survival and well-being, and has to do with food, safety, procreation and self-realization through art / the symbolic. If it is believed that the ancestral spirits provide good harvests, protection against harm and evil, fertile women and aid in contemplating your place in the world, then they will live on in the group’s collective memory. The following type of god does not survive: “There is only one God! He is omnipotent. But He exists only on Wednesdays” (Boyer 2001:56). This god may grab the attention because of his might, but by only being available on Wednesdays makes him useless. The most popular gods inhabiting people’s fictitious worlds or symbolic universa, are those that are in solidarity with humans here on earth, those that are “earthly”. This is why Jesus and the ancestral spirits are very popular, because they are concerned with the things that are strategically important to human beings. The creator god in Africa is far removed from the mundane, is far above somewhere, and few are concerned with him. This then confirms Boyer’s (2001:311) argument that religion is a practical, pragmatic, natural kind of thing with little interest in abstract philosophising.

The Mind-reader (“Theory of Mind”) in the Descriptor group, fills in the details of the intentional subjects/agents that were identified by the Agency detector. People are, by nature, mind-readers. With every interaction, we are constantly busy trying to sort out

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13 This also explains why people are far more interested in mundane matters than theoretical dogmas. When people register a god intuitively it is represented “earthly” or anthropomorphic; when reflecting on god their thinking becomes theologically “correct” and abstract (eg the tri-une god of Christianity), but they do not bother much about the latter (Boyer 2001:89).
what happens in the others’ thoughts (Carl knows that Sarah knows that John is having an affair with Susan, but neither John, Susan or Sarah knows that Carl knows, etc). This comes from pre-historical times. Not only did you read the “minds” of animals to see them as prey, but you also had to tread lightly when other hominids were around so as not to become their prey. It was important for survival to determine what others think, and therefore the mind-reading tool developed as an intuitive psychology (Boyer 2001:123). A human is also a social creature that cannot live without other people. In pre-historical times it was discovered that two heads are better than one, and that a group can achieve far more than a sole individual. Therefore, humans have become addicted to information (communication) and also cooperation (coalition) since the birth of humankind (Boyer 2001:120-121). Gossip is as old as humankind itself, especially to exchange strategic information and constantly position yourself, and for this reason it will never disappear. Gossip arouses contradictory feelings, because it satisfies the crave for information. On the other hand, if you gossip, perhaps you cannot be trusted, and if you – in turn – are gossiped about, then your position is weakened. Not all people have a “Theory of Mind”.14 Children who are autistic15 are not capable of determining what happens in others’ minds, as is the case with children under the age of three. For the latter, for example, it is not possible to visualise false representations in others’ minds, but older children can. Older people have stronger mind-reading capabilities than younger people, and women have stronger “theories of mind” than men (Barrett 2004:43).

People also ascribe desires, convictions and thoughts of fear to the gods. Thus, gods are conceptualised anthropomorphically. They fear, desire, become jealous, angry and make mistakes just as people do. Some ancestor spirits in Africa that keep in the bush are simply stupid, and can be easily fooled. But in general, gods are cherished because it is believed that, due to their counter-intuitive abilities of omniscience and omnipotence, they have complete strategic knowledge at their command. If you appease the gods (by means of sacrifices and prayers, for example) they may allow you to share in this, but

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14 In this regard humans differ from animals, it is absent in animals. What seems to be mind-reading capabilities in animals are actually only highly developed instincts.

15 Some refer to this as a type of mind-“blindness.”
they can also punish you if your specific strategic information places the group in jeopardy.

The Mind-reader plays a key-role in the conceptualising of the dead into spirits. If a close (and beloved) relative dies, then the Living-thing describer registers that this person is lifeless, that s/he cannot move and do not need oxygen or food. In observing the deceased, the mental schema of predator-avoidance is also immediately activated. It awakens a (primitive) fear, to prevent you from also becoming “prey” (Boyer 2001:226), and therefore the dead often frighten the living. However, the Mind-reader refuses to accept the deceased as dead, and keeps them alive psychologically, and still ascribes thoughts (desires, etc) to them. This is why people still refer to the deceased in the present tense (“Peter doesn’t like this...”). The confusion of emotions that occurs when in contact with the dead, thus directly has to do with the conflicting functions of these two mental instruments. Ancestral spirits are still regarded as close to those remaining (and beloved as they were in life), and they therefore best know the strategic needs of the living. This is also why they are the most widespread category of gods globally (Boyer 2001:227). In a similar way, the crucified Jesus of Christianity is made into a god by his followers through the same psychological process. His love and knowledge of their “earthly” needs, makes him exceptionally special, and they let him live on in a supernatural way.

The Facilitators regulate people’s social interactions, establish and maintain morality and confirm our group ties. Over hundreds of thousands of years, group-life adopted a structure of give and take, and therefore the Social exchange regulator developed that confirms people’s natural feeling of reciprocity (who owes what to whom, or: do unto others as you would like done unto you). The Social status monitor, unconsciously signals who the most influential person would be to associate with, and our Intuitive moraliser gives us a “gut feeling” of right or wrong. Small groups of early humans could control each others’ doings quite easily. As groups became increasingly bigger and bigger, it became more difficult to expose “freeriders” and “cheaters” that undermine the group and endanger its survival. There have always been opportunists that did not want to
work, but were always ready to enjoy the profits. In this context, it makes sense to invent a god whose omnipotence and omniscience allowed it to observe man’s covert behaviour, and act as the perfect moral arbitrator (Barrett 2004:51), to punish and reward, as needed. It provides the group the freedom to concern themselves with the important issues of gathering food, hunting for survival, and sex for procreation. It is important to note that the moral tools were already there before gods were thought up and connected to it. Thus gods do not create morality, but morality creates gods, and makes their existence possible. As soon as gods are formed, they merely endorse and strengthen the moral rules that already exist. Boyer (2001:191, 202) verbalizes this succinctly, when he says, “... religious concepts are parasitic upon moral intuitions ... The (god) concepts are parasitic in the sense that their successful transmission is greatly enhanced by mental capacities that would be there, gods or no gods”. This explains the long-standing, general phenomenon of non-religious people also being “good” people, although almost all religions pretend that if it were not for them, the world would morally disintegrate. Religions tend to overestimate their importance.

An effective way to demonstrate your reliability as a moral being, is through religious rituals.16 Here social communication occurs, a signalling of messages to one another regarding shared ideologies and values, and the recognition of the deep emotional bond existing between participants. Participants, among them the gods or spirits, and outsiders, can all be visually convinced of a person’s bona fides. Thus today, the connection is still made between a “good” person and their demonstrated devotion. Rituals are often characterised by irrationality, because people cannot provide rational explanations of what really happens during the ritual, and surely experience a loss if it does not occur. The roots of ritual acts probably lie in the evolutionary fear of contamination (Boyer 2001:214-215, 240-241, 245; Whitehouse 2004:191). Early humans quickly realised the dangers of pathogens, contamination and subsequent death, if they came into contact with

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16 Rituals are usually characterized by two modes of religiosity, namely an “imagistic mode” (very emotional, singular, very personal within the in-group, decentralized, etc) and a “doctrinal mode” (less emotional, repetitive, widely spread, centralized control, etc). The latter can lose its impact through the “tedium”-effect (Whitehouse 2002:298).
dead bodies, animal carcasses and bodily excrement. “Impurity” could also be invisible somewhere in the air, and thus followed the establishment of various acts to neutralise it. In this way, humans also developed a “contagion system” that religion links up with. Religious rituals are often coupled with “purification”, for example, the Christian baptism. Participation in religious rituals are very costly in terms of time, dedication and the giving of material goods (e.g. offerings, tithes) to maintain the functioning of the system. The compensation for this is the experience of intense emotions. Deep-seated somatically marked emotions become the driving force, and the reward (Newberg et al 2001:52-53; Boyer 2001:184, 250; Pyysiäinen 2004:76) for all the sacrifices made. Because emotions can become so overwhelming, it explains the fanatical extremes to which the pious will go to for the realization of their cause.

Religion makes use of the same natural instruments of thought that we use to construct our everyday reality. The categorisers, describers and facilitators create a meaningful world in which we can co-exist with other subjects, understand their fears and desires, and relate to them in a socially skilled and well-adapted way. The same tools make the inventing of gods possible. We do not have special antennas to “receive” god-signals, but god-concepts come into being through mental templates that developed naturally throughout thousands of years. By focussing, for a moment, only on the physical brain, we see how religion follows the same neurological paths as the satisfaction of our normal, earthly needs. In the brain, there is an area known as the “Orientation Association Area”. This area, that receives sensory input from other parts of the brain, helps us to determine the boundaries of our bodies, and to determine our “ego”. During sex, the autonomic nervous system, both the sympathetic (“arousal”) and parasympathetic (“quiescent”) systems, are stimulated to a climax, and to prevent the “overload” of the brain, sensory input to the orientation area is placed on hold. The result – the intense feeling of becoming one, or merging, with another. Exactly the same thing happens with religious meditation. Certain rituals stimulate the same arousal and quiescent systems of

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17 “Put your foot in it” and notice your reaction!
18 What happens is the coupling of a religious idea with a specific physiological response. A religious experience can either lead to deep physical relaxation or intense physical arousal and also explains why people become addicted to religion.
the brain, and eventually results in a cut-off of sensory input to the orientation area. The body’s borders can no longer be drawn, and then the *unio mystica* with the deity follows, or if there is not a personal god involved, the unification with everything during the movement into *nirvana* (Newberg *et al* 2001:19-20, 38, 42, 87, 114-115, 124-127). Religion and sex (and the other everyday aspects) are closely related.19

As seen above, it appears that religion is parasitic on our natural abilities – these mental capacities that developed without gods, and would still function without gods. Gods only appeared on the scene later, as a by-product (Boyer 2001:311). Originally, birds acquired feathers for thermal regulation and later, through evolution, they discovered they could also fly with these (Atran 2002:44). Music developed as a by-product of language. What we hear in music as wonderful, beautiful sounds, are supervowels, and the rhythm, are the pure consonants (Boyer 2001:132). In the same way, religion arose as a by-product to something that was already there. Newberg *et al* (2001:126) makes the following, surprising observation: “An evolutionary perspective suggests that the neurobiology of mystical experience arose, at least in part, from the mechanism of the sexual response ... an accidental by-product”. Religion is a by-product of sex! But these by-products are here for good. This is why gods do not disappear, because our brains, through evolution, have become “hardwired” so that we intuitively, spontaneously conceptualise the supernatural, even if it is invisible, untouchable and unprovable. Even a small child can visualise a god, even without an anthropomorphic representation (Barrett 2004:77-78).

Even though the gods appear so naturally from our creative thoughts, we must remember that they appear as credible possibilities, and not ontological, objective realities, and they are our creations. If we switch off, or “short-circuit” the templates that generate them, they simply stop existing, and this normally only happens in an urban, intellectual milieu, where people offer scientific-rational explanations for events, instead of an intuitive

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19 Bynum (1991:190-191) pointed out the interesting erotic relationships nuns in the Middle Ages had with Jesus. History repeated itself when Afrikaner women during the Anglo-Boer War did the same to alleviate the hardships of the war. Landman (1994:118) captures this succinctly: “Also playing an important role in these guilt fantasies was Jesus, seen as the lover of the Song of Songs. The Dutch-Afrikaners women of the eighteenth and nineteenth century who have been discussed were all kissed and loved by Jesus. In more decent dreams they eventually married him.”
explanation of a supernatural, personal agent involved (usually in a rural milieu; Barrett 2004:107-118). Whether an objective god does in fact exist somewhere, is not verifiable or falsifiable. This remains unknowable. The only god(s) that we can truly know, are those that we create ourselves, processed by our everyday mental tools, and who – importantly – serve us, not the other way around. Because they are our individual or group creations, they are never neutral, but always idiosyncratically and ethnocentrically in service of our ideologies, values and sentiments.

4. GOD AS A SOCIAL MECHANISM OF POWER

Cognitive psychologists and anthropologists, who specialise in religion, accuse early pioneers of religion of anti-psychologism. For example, Durkheim (collective consciousness) and Geertz (system of symbols) are criticised that their concepts, such as worldview, values and symbols are seen as the foundations of religion, without indicating where the foundations come from. These concepts appear to have an (mind-) independent existence of their own; they are merely downloaded by the individuals like a computer program, and they then inform how to behave in a religious appropriate way. What is absent, is the subjective individual who – through cognitive processes – creates religion. Pyysiäinen (2004:221) solves the problem by indicating that culture is selective abstractions from individual ideas that coerce, because people are, by nature, good communicators. A symbol, for instance, does not just fall from the sky, but is the result of an individual, and also a collective creative and input-process. The symbol also attains – to a certain extent – a life of its own, and in turn also formatively affects and shapes those that created it. Individual templates create concepts that grow into communal symbols, and so become part of the cultural context.

What do religious symbols do in culture? Many answers have been given in this regard, but Vorster (2003:4) grasps the core function of god and religion as a social mechanism of power. It empowers the inner-group, so that each one can take up their place in society. It also disciplines the group (often mercilessly) to go and live the given culture, and ostracises and dooms all outsiders. Religion has to do with humans’ “ultimacies”
(Vorster 2003:9), with their deepest values and convictions (cf emotional activation through religion, above). That which lies closest to the heart, is projected and personified so as to lend stability to it (Vorster 2003:14). God does not have to be merely a person, but can represent anything which we can describe as something like “The Cause”. Karen Armstrong (in Newberg et al 2001:162-163) indicates how monotheism, despite severe criticism of exclusion, still succeeded in establishing a strong consciousness of individual rights. The personal Judeo-Christian god of the West, convinced society, as a symbol, that the Western individual does, in fact, matter. But this god is a man, and meant little to women. And to change the Western monosexual, patriarchal, symbolic order – therefore the plea of Du Toit and others (2005:204 ev) for the creation of a new symbol, for the founding of an own horizon to which women can strive and live. This can happen through the establishment of a goddess in order to develop female/women’s subjectivity. The argument that god is actually sexless/genderless, is not valid in a society where power is unequally distributed, because here even the so-called universal, genderless god, is masculine (Du Toit 2005:208). A decade ago, Clack (1996:156) also pleaded for the resurrection of the goddess in modernity: “Language concerning the Goddess is not used referentially, but as a symbolic way of exploring the nature of womanhood”. Her apologetic tone regarding the goddess as anti-realist and non-referential, however, creates the impression that the masculine/male god truly is objective/realistic, and we have seen that this is not valid for any god. The ancient Greeks had great wisdom in the regulation of their society, by creating different gods for the different interest groups. Except for the masculine/male gods, there were numerous goddesses, and also gods for minority groups – Hephaistos for people with bodily disabilities, and Hermaphroditos for people with sexual orientations different to the main stream. Although their pantheon was hierarchised, similar to the earthly society (Garland 1995:61-63), they at least grasped the value of a richer symbolic order.

The power of the religious symbol very blatantly manifests in fundamentalist groups. Religious guilds (church, religious organisations, pressure groups, etc) readily maintain the form of fundamentalist intolerance, where religion is used as merciless power to discipline members to group loyalty. This demonstrated power-play is usually public,
observable and primarily aimed at the inner-group – they must get the message that mutiny\textsuperscript{20} (defection) is unforgivable, and therefore too costly to consider. The punishment which extreme forms may take on, such as public beatings or even beheadings, is an intense form of “social messaging”. The evolutionary roots of this, are clear. It can be traced back to pre-historic coalition behaviour. Coalitions are formed for the sake of survival, and those who betray the group, threaten the survival of the rest. Religion, as newcomer to the scene, symbolically reinscribed and strengthened the bonds of the coalition, that which was already there, before religion. Boyer (2001:296) concludes appropriately: “…fundamentalism is neither religion in excess nor politics in disguise. It is an attempt to preserve a particular kind of hierarchy based on coalition, when this is threatened by the perception of cheap and therefore likely defection”.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Religion has interestingly enough not always been around, but has become part and parcel of humans’ evolutionary development. Early humans managed well without it and later on discovered it as a handy by-product, just as birds discovered that they could use their feathers also to fly and not only for thermal regulation. It became so part of humans’ general brain-mind functions that it is unnatural no to have some kind of religious reaction or experience, even though the belief in some or other counter-intuitive being becomes faded. It requires a deliberate reflective (rational) “short-circuiting” of mental templates and a convincing of them of a better explanation, that the lightning bolt that struck the house is not due to punishment by “someone” but the outcome of impersonal, natural, climatological forces. Intuition is a wonderful thing that enabled humans to survive for millions of years, but as children of our time we cannot other than be informed by science (a late, latecomer in the existence of humankind). If I drive through the Kalahari for eight hours non-stop, each bit of intuition inside me will scream that the earth is actually flat. I have to, however, also double-check this feeling with modern Astronomy that provides a controllable answer that the earth is in fact round. Ancient and modern societies also discovered that god becomes a handy societal power mechanism to

\textsuperscript{20} Boyer’s (2001:294) analogy with a military fighting unit is fitting where mutiny is unforgivable.
control their adherents, to both empower some and disempower others. It is our task to critically evaluate which gods allow life to flourish and which destroy life.

The following few points need our attention for serious deliberation and further contemplation:

- People create gods and not the other way around. Pre-historic humans initiated this process, the Bible does not differ in this regard and our own recent political change led to the discarding of previous gods and the creation of new ones.
- Gods are not forever and unchangeable givens, because we create them. If this is advocated it is usually a desperate ensuring of group interests and power, for example a patriarchal society (with its male god) not allowing a goddess for women.
- Some gods and religions are dangerous and destructive, namely those of fundamentalistic groups within all religions. We have to separate the wheat from the chaff, the symphony from the cacophony, and expose and combat that which is bad. This also applies to those that camouflage their god(s) as the “Ultimate Cause.”
- Religion, broadly defined, is here to stay (unless we all of a sudden develop other kinds of brains); it has through evolution become innate. To disacknowledge it would be the same as to expect birds to stop flying, or to prohibit music or sex.
- In the urbanized, intellectual milieu that we live in nowadays god as the personalized causality of all happenings is fading, especially in the light of s/he/it being our own creations. But without nirvana, with no personal agents around, nobody seems to be able to cope. Different people concretize the “peace that exceeds all” in very diverse ways, and in this regard we can enrich each other immensely.

The Roman poet Ovid said if gods are convenient and useful we should have them. If not, we should create new ones. We have been doing this all along.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


