

The Creative Universe and the Creating God

Chapter 2. Changing Images of God

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Challenges to the Traditional View of God

As I discussed in Chapter 1, the fact that good people often have to endure great tragedies while the wicked often prosper without being punished challenges the concept that the omnipotent and benevolent God closely supervises human affairs. However, an even more serious challenge comes from the historical evils unleashed in the twentieth century—the two world wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the civil wars in Cambodia, former Yugoslavia, Somalia, and Rwanda. After witnessing gruesome mass killings in Rwanda, one missionary said, “There are no devils left in the Hell. They are all in Rwanda.” We feel helpless at the realization that all the organizations and institutions in the world could not stop these killings in time. We wish God’s help in these events. The magnitude of the evils revealed in these historical events is so enormous that the notion that the omniscient and benevolent God closely presides over human history seems no longer persuasive.

Elie Wiesel, who was condemned to the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps, where his parents and his younger sister were killed, testifies vividly to his horrible experience in the best seller *Night*. Although the machinery for death—gas chambers and crematories—was in full operation every day in the Auschwitz concentration camp, the execution of a young boy left a strong impression on Wiesel.[1]

The three victims mounted together onto the chairs.

The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.

“Long live liberty!” cried the two adults.

But the child was silent.

“Where is God? Where is He?” someone behind me asked.

At the sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs were tipped over.

All the prisoners were forced to witness these horrible executions so that they would learn a lesson. By the time that the prisoners passed in front of the victims, the two adults were already dead. But the young boy, probably because of his light weight, was still alive, experiencing a slow agonizing death. Wiesel’s eyewitness account continues:[2]

Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

“Where is God now?”

And I heard the voice within me answer him:

“Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows . . .”

Wiesel then continues to describe his participation in a service on the Jewish New Year's Eve. The prisoners gathered there chanted "Blessed be the Name of the Eternal!" Hearing the chanting, the fifteen-year-old Wiesel thought:[3]

Yes, man is very strong, greater than God. When You were deceived by Adam and Eve, You drove them out of Paradise. When Noah's generation displeased You, You brought down the Flood. When Sodom no longer found favor in Your eyes, You made the sky rain down fire and sulfur. But these men here, whom You have betrayed, whom You have allowed to be tortured, butchered, gassed, burned, what do they do? They pray before You! They praise Your name!

Wiesel, who would receive a Nobel peace prize in 1986, had lived for God during his childhood, reading the Talmud daily. But when he accused God, he felt strong, not weak.[4]

On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone—terribly alone in a world without God and man. Without love or mercy.

These examples are human-made tragedies. Many natural disasters of enormous magnitude have also occurred throughout history. After the 1993 Mississippi flood, 18% of the people surveyed answered that it was God's punishment. Before accepting such a view, let us consider the most horrible natural disaster in history.

The Black Death ravaged Europe between 1347 and 1351, killing about twenty-five million people and reducing the European population by about one third. Many villages were wiped out, and many royal family members, noblemen, and high-ranking religious people were also among the victims. Such a devastating catastrophe was unprecedented. Later, the Second World War claimed a greater number of lives; but if we measure the severity of disaster in terms of the fraction of the total world population that was killed, no other natural or human-made disaster has exceeded it. During and after the Black Death, the church was unable to provide much spiritual guidance. First, the number of surviving clergy was not large enough to serve the population—their ranks had been decimated by the Black Death. Second, the clergy themselves were psychologically devastated by it and, hence, many of them did not have the proper mind set to provide constructive guidance. Third, seeing that God's servants were not spared, people did not have complete confidence in the church. After the Black Death, superstition and mysticism became even more popular in Europe.

Considering that the Black Death caused so many deaths and such great suffering to the survivors, and that it had negative impacts on Christianity, we might wish that God had prevented the catastrophe. But He did not. Why? We wish to cry out, as the psalmist did, "Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?" (Ps. 44:23–24)

In the midst of eloquent testimonies about the Holocaust and other tragic historical events, how are we to understand God’s providence? In the face of enormous natural and human-made disasters, how should we understand God’s omnipotence and benevolence? This is the first challenge to the traditional view of God.

Science and Religion

The second challenge is how to integrate the modern scientific world view and Christian theology. The overall view of the universe portrayed by modern science is very different from the view of classical science. How does God interact with the universe, whose operation can be described by modern science?

The views of the relationships between science and religion can be categorized schematically as in Figure 2.1. According to the view of Figure 2.1a, there is no common ground between science and religion. Figure 2.1b represents the view that science is subordinate to religion or theology. When religious dogma was regarded as the ultimate source of knowledge, however, human reasoning was suppressed and, as a result, Europe entered the Dark Ages. Therefore, this view cannot be seriously considered. Even today, however, there are people who zealously promote so-called creation science, which is the subject of Chapter 11.

Figure 2.1c indicates scientism, which maintains that theology is subordinate to science. If someone says, “I will not believe in God until science proves His existence,” he is articulating the basic tenet of scientism. (Needless to say, a scientist is not a disciple of scientism but a person practicing science.) Scientists, in general, know the limitations of the scientific method and agree that to prove the existence of God is not the purview of science.

Figure 2.1d indicates the view that science and religion occupy some common ground, but there are two interpretations. One view is that science and religion are in conflict. Galileo’s trial and the clash between Darwinism and Christianity are often cited as examples of such conflicts. They are discussed in detail in Chapters 3 and 11, respectively. The other view is that science and religion are complementary.

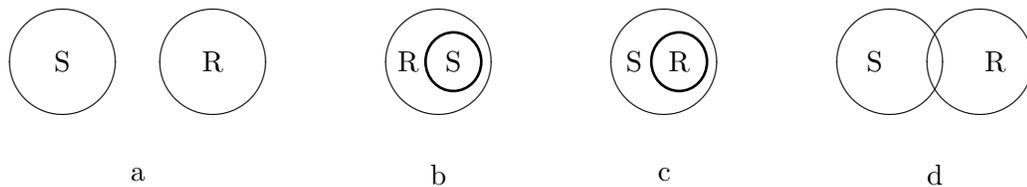


Fig. 2.1. Different views of relationship between science and religion. “S” represents science and “R” represents religion.

The following historical events will illustrate the interrelatedness of science and religion. The bell tower of St. Mark’s Cathedral (Fig. 2.2) in Venice was shattered by lightning in 1745. This was the second time the bell tower suffered lightning damage. In 1752 Benjamin Franklin (1706-

90), understanding the electrical nature of lightning, discovered that installing a conducting rod could prevent lightning damage. But the ecclesiastic authority of St. Mark's opposed installation of a lightning rod on the ground that it would interfere with God's providence. Such a belief was widespread at the time. For example, when an earthquake struck Boston in 1755, one preacher assured his congregation that it was a warning from God because so many in the city had defied the divine will by installing the works of the devil, lightning rods.[5] The St. Mark's bell tower was struck by lightning again in 1761 and 1762. Finally in 1766 a lightning rod was installed, which made the bell tower safe from lightning.[6] This sequence of events vividly exemplifies how scientific understanding of nature influences our view of God's attributes.

When people thought that lightning was a direct result of God's will, a person struck by a lightning bolt was regarded as having been punished by God. In this world view, the family members who lost their relatives due to lightning were guilt-ridden. Their neighbors were reluctant to visit to comfort them for fear of God's displeasure. However, because we now understand the electric nature of lightning, we are willing to comfort the grieving family of a lightning victim. Here we see how the scientific world view influences us, how we cope with human suffering, and how we treat our suffering neighbors.

In the tradition of natural philosophy, many theologians and scientists have studied nature in order to learn the attributes of God, and have cited the existence of design in nature as evidence of the existence of God. For example, Robert Boyle (1627–91) said, "There are two chief ways to arrive at the knowledge of God's attributes: the contemplation of His works and the study of His words." [7] The idea that we can learn the attributes of God by reading the "two books," the book of nature and the book of His words (the Bible), was quite influential for some time since Boyle. Many Jesuits studied science in this tradition. The design argument in the tradition of natural theology is a subject of Chapter 9.

However, it is too simplistic to portray the relationship between science and religion as either that of conflict or complement; there has not been *one* relationship between science and religion. Science and religion have been influencing each other in diverse ways throughout history. (Because modern science developed mainly in countries under the influence of Christianity, the relation between science and religion means the relation between science and Christianity.) According to John Brooke, the historical relationship between science and religion has been complex, diverse, and subtle.[8]

The principal aim of this book has been to reveal something of the complexity of the relationship between science and religion as they have interacted in the past. Popular generalizations about that relationship, whether couched in terms of war or peace, simply do not stand up to serious investigation. There is no such thing as *the* relationship between science and religion. It is what different individuals and communities have made of it in a plethora of different contexts. Not only has the problematic interface between them shifted over time, but there is also high degree of artificiality in abstracting the science and the religion of earlier centuries to see how they were

related.

What is science? It seems necessary to define science and religion before proceeding to discuss their relationship. However, rigorous definitions would need another book. To define science properly, we have to discuss the subject matter and the methodologies of science. Someone said that a definition is like a waist belt: the shorter it is, the more flexible it should be. Here I adopt a short and flexible definition by pointing out the main characteristics of science. Science is the human endeavor of trying to understand nature by observing natural phenomena and by experimenting. In determining the validity of scientific theories, only nature is the final arbitrator. In its empirical nature, science differs from the traditions of natural philosophy and theology. Science also means a body of knowledge discovered by scientific endeavor. The tradition of active analytical experiment started with Galileo Galilei (1564–1642). However, from time immemorial, humans observed nature and built world views based on their observations. Such an empirical approach to nature can be regarded as rudimentary science.

Prehistoric cave paintings are interpreted as religious expressions—prayers for power over the game animals. Therefore, it seems that even prehistoric people had some forms of religion. Because prehistoric people did not understand the principles behind terrestrial phenomena, nature seemed capricious. Therefore, they had polytheistic views in which earthly phenomena were governed by capricious gods. Nymphs ruled the rivers, Neptune ruled the seas, mountain gods ruled mountains, and the rain god made rain. Gradually, people realized that heavenly phenomena were orderly, unlike terrestrial phenomena. The positions of fixed stars made yearly rotations, and the seasonal changes were governed by the position of the sun. The regularity of the day-night cycle was caused by the motion of the sun. Therefore, they viewed the god in heaven as the most powerful god. We still use the phrase “heavenly God” in referring to God. From the discussion above, we can see that observations of nature (which are the basis of the scientific tradition) influenced our ancestors’ conception of gods.

It seems fair to say that organized religion started with the development of agriculture about 10,000 years ago. Settlements in agrarian lands made the emergence of large-scale societies possible. Farming made it necessary to have an accurate calendar. Religious ceremonies at certain fixed times of the year were reference points for deciding when to sow and when to harvest. Therefore, priests were calendar makers and sky watchers in ancient times. Science and religion indeed maintained a close relationship from early on.

Modern science started when Galileo performed active, analytical experiments to study nature instead of passively observing nature. In about 400 years since then, the scientific tradition has achieved spectacular success. Only recently (say, after the 1950s), we have become capable of grappling with many of the fundamental questions that had puzzled great thinkers throughout history. As a result, the world view offered by modern science is profoundly different from those of earlier centuries. No one would doubt that science has been the most successful way of discovering how nature operates. Nevertheless, it does not tell about the purpose and meaning of the universe

or the reason human beings exist. Religion and theology are concerned with these problems.

Science relies mainly on reason while religion relies mainly on belief. However, religion also requires reason and science also requires belief. Scientists uphold three basic beliefs. First, the operation of nature is regular and describable by natural laws. Second, some human beings are capable of discovering and understanding such natural laws when they devote enough effort to the endeavor. Third, scientific research is worth pursuing as a career. These beliefs were not obvious before Galileo; otherwise, the scientific tradition would have started much earlier. Nor can they be scientifically proven, although, after several centuries of the scientific tradition, they have become very convincing.

Accepting the validity of the first two beliefs, we may ask why they are valid. We can answer metaphysically or theologically. If we say that it is because a rational God created both the universe and human beings, we are giving a theological explanation. If we say that we do not have to explain but accept them simply because they work, we are giving a non-theistic explanation. Since the basic beliefs that made the scientific tradition possible cannot be scientifically proven, science is not a self-contained system. Its very foundation begs metaphysical and theological questions. The third belief represents a personal commitment. Without it, one cannot be a scientist with a deep appreciation of scientific knowledge. Similarly, without a religious commitment one cannot attain religious understanding.

A. R. Peacocke, a theologian with a Ph.D. degree in chemistry, has developed the view that the relationship between science and theology should be a hierarchical relationship.[9] According to him, there are hierarchies in the subject matters of various disciplines, but not in their status. A hierarchical relationship among different branches of biology is as follows:

Molecular biology → Cell biology → Study of organs → Study of individual organisms → Ecology

Similarly, we can make the following relationship:

Psychology → Sociology → Political science → International relations

According to Peacocke, a branch of science in a higher position of the hierarchy should incorporate discoveries made by a branch of science in a lower position. Physiology is higher in the hierarchy than the biology of microorganisms such as viruses and bacteria. When the existence of bacteria was accepted by physiologists, it tremendously enhanced the health of human beings. Because theology is the highest in the hierarchy of disciplines, theology should accept and interpret the discoveries made by natural science and other branches of science instead of resisting them.

God created the universe, and human beings were created within the universe. Now these human beings ponder upon the mysteries of God and the universe. In this way, God, the universe, and human beings form a triangular relation as shown in Figure 2.3. In this model, interactions between them are indicated by arrows accompanied by numbers. The direction of each arrow indicates the direction of influence. Natural science is mainly concerned with interactions within

the universe (7) and the interactions between human beings and the universe (3, 4). Religion is more concerned with other interactions (1, 2, 5, 6, 8). However, there is no clean separation. For example, humankind's influence on nature (4) is a concern of science from the engineering point of view, but pollution of nature by human activity is also a concern of religion. Furthermore, our world view on how the universe operates (7) directly influences our view of the relation between God and the universe. Conversely, our view on how God interacts with the universe influences our view on how the universe operates. This point will become clear as we proceed.

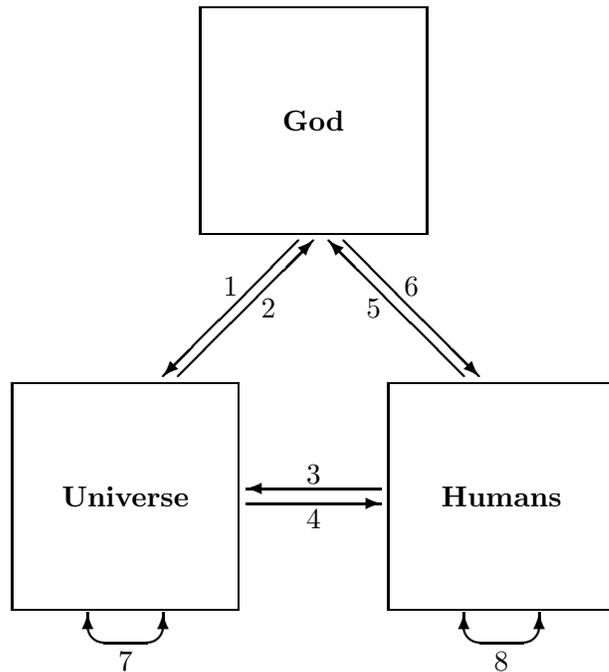


Fig. 2.3. The triangular relation between God, the universe, and humans. By this diagram, I do not mean that the universe is independent or separate from God. Nor do I mean that humans are independent or separate from the universe and God.

When young Confucius (551–478 BC) met aging Lao-tzu,[10] Lao-tzu said to him:[11]

If you indeed want the men of the world not to lose the qualities that are natural to them, you have to best study how it is that Heaven and Earth maintain their eternal course, that the sun and moon maintain their light, the stars their serried ranks, the birds and beasts their flocks, the trees and shrubs their station. Thus you shall learn to guide your steps by Inward Power to follow the course that the Way of Nature sets.

Had Confucius followed Lao-tzu's advice to study how the sun and moon shine their light, the

history of the world would have changed profoundly. But it was a tall order to follow at the time. Now that our understanding of nature has developed during the intervening twenty-five centuries, we can and must incorporate scientific knowledge into our discussions of humankind's relation to the universe and God. As a modern scholar, Peacocke expressed this view eloquently:[12]

Any theological account of God's relation to the world is operating in an intellectual vacuum, not to say cultural ghetto, if it fails to relate its affirmations to the answers to these questions the natural sciences have been able to develop. It is true that theology, the intellectual ordering of religious experience, is concerned with wider and deeper questions of overall intelligibility and personal and social meaning than the natural sciences as such. But these fundamental questions, with the daunting implications of their possible answers, cannot be asked at all without directing them to the world as we best know and understand it, that is, through the sciences.

Following this spirit, we start from empirical knowledge in our quest for the understanding of God's attributes.[13] Empirical knowledge is not sufficient for uniquely specifying them, but it should provide rational constraints to our deduction of God's attributes. Just as a theology based on the geocentric cosmology would look ludicrous today, a theology based on a world view that is scientifically incorrect would not be convincing. Generally speaking, our empirical approach follows the tradition of natural theology.

Paradigm Shifts within the Bible

The traditional paradigm about God changed whenever the historical reality seriously challenged it. We can find such paradigm shifts in the Bible. Considering that the Bible is made of sixty-six books written at different epochs by many authors, in making a brief summary, we run the risk of oversimplification. However, a careful reader can discern four major paradigms about God in the Bible: Abraham's God, Moses' God, the God of the prophets, and the God in the New Testament.

The God who appeared to Abraham was very much like a person. According to Chapter 18 of Genesis, one day Abraham saw three men resting under an oak tree in front of his tent. Without knowing their exact identities, he gave them water for washing their feet, bread made of fine flour, and tender meat from a freshly slaughtered calf. After a good meal, one of them predicted that Sarah would have given a birth to a son by the same time in the following year. Then, Abraham realized that he was the Lord. Abraham's God was a man-like, friendly being who blessed Abraham and his descendants.

The lives of patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph—were blessed; therefore, they had no problem in perceiving God as the God of blessing. However, the lives of their descendants in Egypt were far from being blessed. They were subjected to slavery and their male children were ordered to be killed at birth. Abraham's God of blessing was not in accordance with the harsh reality. Hence, they were willing to accept a new image of God introduced by Moses, a God of war

who would save them from their bondage.[14] He was fearsome and terrible, instead of friendly. He appeared in storm clouds, and only Moses—not his people—could see Him even vaguely through clouds or mists in the mountains. It was said that anyone who saw God’s face directly would die. The God of Moses revealed that His name was YHWH (now spelled either Yahweh or Jehovah). Moses did not perceive Him as the Creator nor as the God of all peoples but as a tribal God very partial toward his own people. In the Ten Commandments, Yahweh commanded people not to murder, but He ordered the slaughter of all the members of enemy tribes, including children. The fact that Moses’ God had a name and that Israelites made a covenant with Him indicates that they perceived Yahweh as one of many gods.

When the Hebrews had to free themselves from the bondage of Egyptian slavery, and when they had to fight with the Philistines or other enemies to conquer the land of milk and honey, they perceived Yahweh as a god of war. In times of peace, they worshipped Baal to wish good harvests, because they did not perceive farming as Yahweh’s domain. Then, in times of war, they repented and relied on His help. Much later in Israel’s history, the prophet Elijah showed Israelites that Yahweh was more powerful than Baal even in rainmaking,[15] which was regarded as Baal’s own specialty, implying that Yahweh was the universal god.

The image of Yahweh as a war god no longer worked, after the Israelites and Jews were defeated by the Assyrians and the Babylonians and their temples were ruined by the pagans. The transformation of Yahweh from a tribal god of war to the universal god was made by prophets. They proclaimed that Yahweh preferred justice in human society to burnt offerings or animal sacrifices. They proclaimed that the Assyrians and Babylonians were God’s tools for punishing unfaithful Israelites.

In the New Testament, the image of God makes a radical change—from the God who was special to Jews to the God for all peoples. But He is not depicted as absolute. The God who incarnated as a fragile baby in a manger and was later crucified was far from being absolute.

The Need for A New Paradigm

According to Karl Jasper (1883–1969), the foundations of all major philosophical systems and all major religions were laid in the period from the eighth century BC to the second century BC. In China, great thinkers like Lao-tzu, Chang-tzu, Confucius, Mencius, Mo-tzu, and others laid the foundations of Oriental philosophies during this period. Buddha and Jain in India, Zoroaster in Persia, Socrates, Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle in Greece, and Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea in Israel were all active during this period. In these independent cultures, great transformations from tribal perspective to universal perspective were made in the same period. This is why Karl Jaspers called this period the “axial period.”

In *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong[16] says that the image of God changes according to historical needs. We have seen examples in the Bible. While the mode of explaining the natural world was based on myths before the Axial Period, it was chiefly based on Aristotelian philosophy for scholars until the Middle Ages. Thomas Aquinas synthesized the classical view of God, Thomism,

by integrating the Aristotelian world view and the biblical view of God. The classical view of God is still widely accepted, even though our view of the universe has gone through two revolutions since the formulation of Thomism—from the Aristotelian world view to the Newtonian world view and then to the modern-scientific world view. Here lies the need for a change of our view of God.

To meet today’s challenges to the classical paradigm about God, therefore, we have to develop a new paradigm that is consonant with the modern-scientific view of the natural world as well as with the historical events of the twentieth century. When such a paradigm is accepted by people, the coming age will perhaps be called the New Axial Period.

Notes and References

1. Wiesel, E. *Night*. New York: Bantam Books, 1980, p. 61.
2. Ibid. p. 62.
3. Ibid. pp. 64–65.
4. Ibid. p. 65.
5. Fleming, T. *The Man Who Dared the Lightning*. New York: William Morrow, 1971, p. 10.
6. Brooke, J. H. *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 2.
7. Boyle, R. *The High Veneration Due to God*. 1685. Quoted in Peacocke, A. R. *Creation and the World of Science*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 4.
8. Brooke, p. 321.
9. Peacocke, Chap. 4.
10. Lao-tzu was the founding father of Taoism, and his book *Tao Te Ching* is one of the most profound and cryptic books.
11. The English translation is from Arthur Waley, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982.
12. Peacocke, p. 47.
13. We can find support for an empirical approach in the Bible verse, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, and evidence of things not seen.” (Heb. 11:1) Reversing the logic that faith is evidence of things not seen, we can say that evidence of things seen should be found from observations.
14. Chapter 15 of *Exodus* explicitly describes Yahweh as a warrior.

15. 1 Kings 16:29–19:18.
16. Armstrong, K., *A History of God*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.