

God-consciousness in terms of a “new natural theology”

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Abstract

Can a “new natural theology”, based on the approach of “experiential realism”, accommodate a personal concept of God? Assuming that human knowledge is located in synaptic networks of the brain, the question is how it got there. According to developmental psychology, the experience of ‘mother’ during infancy as an ever available caregiver lies at the root of God-consciousness. The article questions the adequacy of this theory in three ways. First, God stands for the ‘source and destiny’ of the “whole” of reality. This is catered for by the prenatal experience of the womb, rather than the experience of “mother”. Second, the theory omits the infant experience of the “father”, which is critical for God-consciousness in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim tradition. Third, the image of the ever available “caregiver” is seriously deficient in terms of the biblical faith. This shows that the formal synaptic structure is filled with content at a higher level of emergence through the communication of a religious tradition.

Introduction

I admire and envy Cornel du Toit’s wide interdisciplinary horizons and his appetite for bold initiatives. Among other things, he has become a champion of a “new natural theology”. He has focused on “immanent transcendence”. He proposed a “post-reformation” theology that would replace the classical reformed “sin-redemption-gratitude schema” with a “desire-event-fulfilment schema”.¹ Each of these proposals – and many others – would merit extensive analysis, appreciation and critique.

In this article, I presuppose the need for a “new natural theology” based on “experiential realism” as commonly used in the positive sciences.² In this context I pursue the question on which grounds such a theology would come up with a personal concept of God that is congruent with that of the biblical tradition. I assume that a concept of God is grounded in God-consciousness which is located in the human mind. The question is how it got there.

I focus on the theory of developmental psychology that attributes God-consciousness to the experience of “mother” in early infancy. I ask whether the postnatal presence of “mother” indeed constitutes the most fundamental conditioning that catalyses God-consciousness among humans and whether it is capable of adequately accounting for the phenomenon found in the believing adult.

I engage in this exercise as a Christian theologian and believer. I take it that God, the transcendent “source and destiny” of reality, manifests “His” creative power in the reality that we experience and that the sciences explore, and “His” benevolent intentionality in the proclamation of the “Word of God”, as gleaned from the biblical tradition which emerged and evolved in Ancient Near Eastern history as part of the evolution of the cosmos as a whole.

While the transcendent God is beyond human observation, explanation and prediction, the intuition, notion or concept of God is part of immanent reality which can be described, analysed, critiqued, transformed or abandoned. The biblical faith is persuaded that transcendent God uses these immanent processes, however problematic and provisional they may be, as a “means” to disclose His creative power and His benevolent intentionality to humans. The task of theology is to find the most appropriate notion or concept of God as possible under any given set of circumstances.

Why should God be deemed a person?

Taking the openness of reality towards a transcendent source and destiny as point of departure,³ the question is why the assumed “where-from” and “where-to” of reality should be deemed a person. Can God not be thought

¹ Here I specifically refer to Du Toit 2010.

² For the concept of ‘experiential realism’ see Nürnberger 2013:33-35.

³ The faith assumption that immanent reality is open towards a transcendent Source and Destiny contradicts the assumption of naturalism that immanent reality is closed in upon itself. While ‘immanent transcendence’ (comprising aspects of immanent reality not immediately accessible to human experience) is self-evident, naturalism posits that there is nothing beyond immanent reality as such. (See Nürnberger 2010, or 2013:48-57.)

of as something other than a person – life force, blind fate, indescribable mystery, amorphous medium, impersonal mechanism, dharma, electro-magnetic field, causality, or the pervasive and persistent thermodynamic condition “far from equilibrium” that is the source of energy in the universe?

To explain what a “person” is would require a PhD thesis. For our purposes it is sufficient to say that a person is characterised by intentionality, agency and communicative competence, functioning within a network of relationships. According to biblical faith, God has power; God has a will; God acts; God speaks; God hears; God responds; at least for us humans God “exists” in a dynamic relationship with humans and reality as a whole. In terms of biblical tradition, it would be counterintuitive to dispense with the personal concept of God.

But this begs the question: how can believers be so sure of that? The biblical documents describe God’s manifestations, intentions and actions in starkly anthropomorphic terms. We have to concede that, when speaking of the transcendent, we have to speak in metaphors. This cannot be avoided since we have no language for something that might or might not “exist” beyond the range of our observation and comprehension.

However, why should these metaphors be taken from personal experiences and relationships, rather than from the impersonal aspects of reality – physical, biological, or mathematical? One could argue, and that has often been done, that the anthropomorphic metaphor is a relict from early childhood apperceptions of reality where impersonal objects and processes are readily personified. Developmental psychology argues that this is due to mental conditioning by the experience of “mother” in infancy and early childhood. How tenable is this thesis?⁴

Neurological aspects of God consciousness

According to modern neurology, all human knowledge is located in synaptic networks and processes in our brains.⁵ God consciousness cannot possibly be an exception. “Spirit” is structured and oriented individual and collective consciousness. Synaptic networks come about through the interplay of genetic predisposition, early life conditioning and the ongoing flow of information into the brain.

Incoming information – whether through sensual experiences or symbolic representations such as language, ritual or attitude – challenges the existing pattern of knowledge. It is scrutinised by the latter and either integrated as is, transformed to fit, or rejected as incongruent in terms of the existing pattern. Conversely, depending on its persuasive power, new information can lead to adaptations, transformations or replacement of the existing pattern.

The neurological mechanisms of the brain cannot distinguish between information derived from fantasy, conjecture or speculation, on the one hand, and information derived from sensual experience on the other. The criteria that are applied are derived, rather, from the existing pattern itself, as well as from the alternatives that challenge it.⁶ Whether in science or religion, “revelation” is the “aha-experience” that comes about when genetic predisposition, early life conditioning and ongoing experience fall into place and form an integrated, thus “plausible” whole.

This again shows that whatever is experienced as “truth” cannot be invented or constructed. It imposes its validity on our consciousness. An arbitrarily constructed “truth” may bowl us over when presented with rhetorical cunning or rational argument, but it will not convince us in the longer term. It is only through the scrutiny of inflowing information that an existing “truth” can be modified or replaced.

Developmental roots of the personal concept of God

If God consciousness is located in the synaptic networks of the human brain, the question is how it got there. In view of the great variety of convictions, it seems clear that God consciousness is not produced by our genetic endowment, but by the inflow of “cultural” information. The biblical faith agrees that faith in God is the creation of the proclaimed “Word of God” (Romans 10:14-17). However, the human species has a need for some kind of “beyond”, because we experience ourselves as derived, dependent, vulnerable, mortal and accountable beings. The information that responds to this need will define the content of our consciousness of the transcendent.

The view that “infants are born atheists” and come to believe in God only through postnatal indoctrination, frequently expressed in circles dismissive of faith in God, is not entirely wrong, but too

⁴ In what follows I resume my critical dialogue with Faber 2004 (Nürmberger 2013, chapter 6).

⁵ To find God or oneness with God “is not different than finding anything else there: everything we experience is mediated by the brain” (Faber 2004:218).

⁶ That is why a scientifically conditioned mind cannot accept the traditionalist assumption that HIV is caused by sorcery, while a traditionalist may find it difficult to accept a purely ‘natural’ explanation when lightning strikes a homestead.

simplistic.⁷ According to developmental psychology, there is indeed an experiential base of God-consciousness, namely the postnatal encounter of the infant with that mysterious entity called “mother”.⁸

In my view, however, subconscious experience begins in the womb, rather than natal infancy.⁹ For a simple reason this experience is also more fundamental for the development of God-consciousness than that of “mother”. Although the physical health, social situation and psychological disposition of a pregnant woman may cause some considerable stress for the foetus under adverse circumstances, the womb is in general an all-inclusive and near perfect environment.

For the foetus the womb represents the universe. Moreover, it is a universe in which all needs are fulfilled and all dangers are kept at bay. At that stage in the development of the human being, therefore, the foetus experiences “heaven”, or “paradise”.¹⁰ The normalcy of being safely embedded in an all-encompassing and essentially “benevolent” whole must constitute one of the most fundamental ingredients of the evolving hardwiring of the brain – the foundation for a sense of security and the concomitant attitude of trust.

Birth may be the most shattering experience to which we humans have ever, and will ever, be exposed. The passage into the outside world is unbearably tight and oppressive. At the end of it, the paradise of the womb is gone. We are exposed to a cold, bright and irritatingly unfamiliar world. We seem to suffocate unless we breathe. We are slapped to trigger our lung action. We seem to starve unless we suck. We no longer float effortlessly in the womb; we are wrapped up in cloths that are too hot or too cold, too tight or too loose, imposed on us by coarse and perhaps less than empathetic hands.

Initially the infant may not be conscious of this unpleasant experience, but it surely leaves its mark on the structures of our subconscious. The submerged memory of an ideal state (what reality “ought” to be) is superseded by the experience of what reality ought “not” to be. Subconsciously, the experience of being exposed to needs one cannot fulfil on one’s own, and the concomitant sense of dependence on some powerful outside agent gradually becomes part of the entrenched hardwiring of the brain.

Assuming that God is the name for the sense of the presence of an omnipotent and benevolent “provider”, developmental psychologists believe this to be the root of our God consciousness. How valid is this assumption? Several aspects still seem to be missing in the mosaic. The first is, again, the origin of the perception of God as a person.

Mother as a person

For the first time in its post-foetal life, the infant experiences need – hunger, thirst, cold, discomfort – and responds by crying. The warm body, the breasts and the hands of “mother” (the dimly sensed presence of something other than the needs themselves) offer a much needed relief. Screaming triggers comfort and care.

The cry-response pattern repeats itself again and again, forming a synaptic structure that suggests something like a causal mechanism – crying delivers the goods. But this impersonal sequence of events is soon superseded by the experience of “mother” as a person. It is often believed that this is the root of the synaptic infrastructure for what may later manifest itself as prayer.

In time the eyes of “mother” meet the eyes of the infant. Through repeated and prolonged eye contact accompanied by rudimentary verbal exchanges, the infant begins to penetrate the “other”. It turns out to be the utterly mysterious entity we call a “person”. A symbiosis begins to develop between the facial expression of the child and the facial responses of “mother”.¹¹ Communication – the exchange of messages – begins to take place. If the infant smiles, she smiles; if it frowns, she frowns, though in a benign kind of way.

The face and the utterances of the mother, thus, act as the mirror through which the self-identity, self-consciousness and self-expression of the child begin to develop. This is highly significant for the emerging God concept.¹² It can be argued that there is an intimate connection between self-awareness and God-consciousness, with God-consciousness correlated negatively with the empirical self and positively with the authentic self.

⁷ See the blog “Does the emerging consciousness of an infant know God or are we all born to be atheists?” where the overwhelming number of entries agreed with this claim. <<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080130104444AAW3EZT>>

⁸ This psychological theory is, of course, much older. It has also been widely researched and discussed. Utilising developmental insight, theologians W. Pannenberg and H. Küng assumed that the infantile Mother-experience leads to the ‘eccentricity’ of the human ego, a ‘symbiotic relationship’ between ego, body and environment and ‘primal trust’, located first in the Mother, then in the experienced world as such, which can then be translated into trust in God. Pannenberg 1983:213-228.

⁹ “Only during the course of the early period, when the caregiver and the child form the primary symbiotic unit, do we actually experience, actually and directly participate in, a single, whole world ...” (Faber 2004:223). This may apply to the fully conscious infant, but not to pre-conscious synaptic conditioning.

¹⁰ It may be true that the foetus has not yet developed the brain structures needed for a *conscious* apprehension of its condition. Yet it would be extraordinary if the experience of the foetus in the womb would not impact the emerging synaptic network in its brain.

¹¹ Faber 2004:216.

¹² Robert Cole found that “90 percent of nearly three hundred youngsters between the age of five and ten draw a simple human face when asked to render their personal perception of God. They do not draw a body; they do not draw a giant; they do not draw a delineated creature of any kind.” Quoted by Faber 2004:215.

Because of her perceived infinite superiority, “mother” becomes the yardstick for what can pass as the authentic self, long before external cultural influences impart assumptions, values and norms.

In time, the attitude and behaviour of the mother and other handlers suggest a difference between what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. The infant experiences the potential terror of disapproval, anger, potential rejection and abandonment. Acceptance and belonging are no longer self-evident. They must be earned through conformity and achievement. One has to play by the rules, and the rules have to be learnt and internalised. This is the foundational experience of a discrepancy between the “moral” (rather than the vital and environmental) dimension of what ought to be and what ought “not” to be. With the emergence of normativeness, intentionality and agency, the infant becomes a rudimentary subject.

Beyond mother

By this time reality has become much greater than “mother”. In contrast with the womb, she does not constitute the all-encompassing environment. While she may be the most significant part of external reality, she has become an “other” – a part of a greater universe, alongside the self and an increasing array of other such parts. She also proves to be too feeble and too unreliable to act as a substitute for the womb.

The personal child-mother bond may indeed act as an “attractor state”, “a neurally based perceptual and emotional configuration that strives to locate and draw unto itself a wide range of subsequent experience.”¹³ But it has to break through these bounds and penetrate the wide range of impersonal experiences. As one awakes to full consciousness, the postnatal environment demands alertness, active experience and intuitive integration of this experience. Toys can be manipulated. One’s actions can make an impact. Some things seem to work, others don’t.

It may be that it is at this juncture that the bifurcation between “mother” and God consciousness takes place. If the God-concept gets stuck in its fixation on “mother”, God may become a “supernatural” part of immanent reality, nothing but a provider, a helper in need, a comforter, and a moral authority.¹⁴

Psychologists do not always realise that this would be a severely truncated concept of God. What they believe to be the essence of God-consciousness may prove to be an infantile leftover that can and must be superseded by a more mature sense of God, or “nature” for that matter. As we go through infancy, childhood, adolescence and maturation, reality proves to be greater – infinitely greater – and infinitely more complex than “mother”.

While she may embrace, caress, feed and clean the toddler, she is an inadequate substitute for the womb. She is also too small, fallible and unreliable to function as an image for God. There is a greater beyond – bewilderingly complex, open, unpredictable and threatening. As one’s life world unfolds, one cannot help but be confronted again and again with the question whether this greater whole is hostile or benevolent, how one fits into it, whether or not one is acceptable in it, and what the range of one’s own control might be.

The autonomous self and the dependent self

At a certain stage the child begins to shift its affection, expectation and trust at least partially to something that is not “mother” and that is under its own authority and control – a doll, a teddy bear, or a blanket.¹⁵ It can also be an imaginary object or “pal”, with whom the child has extended and intimate dealings and discussions.¹⁶ Such an object is typically treated as if it were a person. What else? The child also tries to assert its will against the will of the mother with a display of resistance and stubbornness – an early experimentation with emancipation and mastery. During puberty the child’s urge towards emancipation and mastery reaches its climax. The role of the “significant other” shifts from parent to peer, film star, sports hero, or teacher. The message is clear: I can choose my own “mother”, if I need one in the first place.

An important bifurcation in personality types seems to take place at this stage. In some persons self-confidence and competence may become powerful enough that they are willing to appropriate the glories and dangers of autonomy and mastery over their life worlds. Reality is supposed to be vanquished, transformed and utilised. Leadership ambitions flourish. Adaptation and accommodation to circumstances become strategies rather than imperatives. The risks of defeat, failure and pain are faced boldly and defiantly. The ego has become the centre of reality.

“Emancipated” individuals may not necessarily be capable of gaining and maintaining this defiant sovereignty. By the looks of it, most young people become enslaved by multiple psychological and social forces – emotions, attachments, anxieties, resentments, desires, fancies, fads, peer pressures, heroes, role models, family and community expectations, professional duties, ideologies, social norms promulgated through the advertising and entertainment industries, and so forth.¹⁷

But this is not the point. The point is that not all youngsters feel sufficiently endowed, competent or entitled to take the plunge into autonomy. There are always those who retain a deep sense of derivation, dependence, vulnerability, mortality, obligation, and accountability. The lives of these people remain eccentric at least to a certain degree. They cannot imagine life without the authority, the protective canopy and the personal comfort of a benevolent other. And at this stage it can no longer be the parent.

¹³ Faber 2004:209.

¹⁴ “God is an extension of the empathetic object ... a version of the internalized caregiver we have seen and loved during the course of our early experience.” (Faber 2004:216).

¹⁵ During the phase when the child separates from the mother, it creates transitional objects, “imaginary, illusory substitutes for the gradually relinquished parent ...” (Faber 2004:24).

¹⁶ Richard Dawkins equates the notion of God with such a childhood fantasy he calls ‘Binker’ (2006:347f).

¹⁷ Initial successes at the attempt to gain mastery, recognition and praise may be critically important at the bifurcation point. Failure, ridicule or punishment may subdue the child’s thrust towards autonomy.

Such persons are grateful for the chance of being alive and well in the first place. They feel a deep obligation to respect, submit to, and serve a higher authority. Transgression and failure cause anxiety and restlessness. Peace can only be restored through forgiveness, restitution and reconciliation. As the world becomes more complex and unpredictable, this other increasingly needs to be the authority that is ultimately in charge of reality as far as it lies within one's horizons. Relationships with others, the community, society and nature are superseded by the relationship with the transcendent source and destiny of reality.¹⁸ Paradoxically, this distance between the "penultimate" and the "ultimate" may lead to freedom from the world and responsibility for the world.

In time a picture evolves that integrates the personal and the impersonal aspects of reality. Largely depending on the cultural environment into which the child is being socialised, personal impressions may dominate impersonal ones or vice versa. Under the impact of socialisation and ongoing experience, ultimate reality can become a divine person, a timeless principle, a cosmic law, a causal network, or a meaningless fate. If a divine person, it can be perceived as benevolent or malevolent, demanding or gracious, engaged or indifferent. This confusing array of possibilities calls for some kind of sub-conscious resolution, if not for profound reflection. Needless to say, this is where theology has its indispensable task.

Moreover, we may never really outgrow the subconscious desire to return to the mother's womb – enriched and potentiated by the subsequent experience of the significant other as a personal counterpart. The hidden memory of this experience provides a sort of subliminal Garden of Eden. But it is impossible to retrieve the past. Time relentlessly moves forward. What ought to become can now only be expected from the future. But the criterion of a wholesome future – comprehensive wellbeing – has been defined by the womb as the absence of need, suffering, alienation and conflict.

Father

Two qualifications must be added to the picture gained so far. The first is that the synaptic infrastructure of God-consciousness is not only based on the experience of "mother", but on other relationships as well, notably that of "father".¹⁹ In a healthy nuclear family, "mother" and "father" play distinct roles.

While the experience of "mother" may be more important for the development of the image of an ever available divine caregiver, the experience of "father" may be more important for the development of an awareness of divine authority. Simply by virtue of his strength, no-nonsense attitude, deep voice, rougher handling of the infant, and relative remoteness and infrequency, he tends to be experienced as a more demanding, less forgiving, less easily available, higher placed authority.²⁰

These are vast generalisations and I am only indicating a trend.²¹ In a patriarchal context, the association of the concept of God with overwhelming power and ultimate authority obviously suggested that God must be male, rather than female. However, even in the patriarchal context, the female is present for the child as an authority in her own right. Conversely, "father" also has loving, caring, forgiving characteristics. So while quite distinct, the functions do overlap.²²

Under modern circumstances, where patriarchy has yielded sufficiently to bring about the impression of gender parity, the status difference between "father" and "mother" may be levelled out in the minds of their children at least to some extent. However, one should not underestimate the differences in the primeval experiences of "mother" and "father" in psychological terms. Their respective impacts on the subconscious of the child are simply dissimilar.

I may add that for the Christian faith another figure encountered by infant, toddler, child and adolescent is the elder sibling specifically the elder brother. It is this synaptic structure that shows the closest affinity to

¹⁸ "The universe remains animistic, with a humanlike figure at its center, because we want the universe to remain 'like us'. Only if it remains so can we approach it with true intimacy and feel secure, special, and loved within its confines" (Faber 2004:213). But the personal Creator of the Bible is decidedly *juxtaposed* to the 'universe' as God's creation. An animistic view of the world would be considered idolatry in the biblical tradition.

¹⁹ This depends on the kind of family and the wider social context in which the child grows up. In an extended family, there are many mothers and fathers. In a defunct family, where the father has absconded, the mother is working, or has died of AIDS, Granny, Aunty, or even an older sibling may become the decisively significant Other.

²⁰ It is logically problematic to transfer God consciousness from a human 'Mother' to a divine 'Parent' – as if there was something neutral like 'parent' in the experience of a child! In no ways is the Father-God of faith the idealised version of maternal care and nothing more. The romanticised father figure of popular piety that exudes nothing but warmth, mercy and loving care does not ring true in (admittedly patriarchal) biblical terms.

²¹ Why not 'Mother God' as feminist theologians suggest? In rational terms, the transcendent Source and Destiny of reality must be deemed gender neutral. Conversely, every human being must be deemed the 'image of God', whether male or female (Genesis 1:26-27). What we are busy with here, however, is not rationality, but synaptic conditioning based on primeval experiences.

²² "(T)he maternal object resides in the figure of the paternal Almighty and is always perceived there unconsciously by the worshiper" (Faber 2004:31). This view is reductionist – and the result of the author's narrow 'Mother' theory.

Jesus Christ, our “elder brother”. The nature of “hardwiring” merits more elaboration which I have offered in another context.²³

Comprehensiveness and eccentricity

The second qualification of our findings is that God consciousness cannot be confined to particular aspects of reality. That too is not always recognised by secular analysts. “Mother” and “father” represent limited entities within reality. As a person who speaks and hears, God does have contours that resemble those of humans. Yet a mature God consciousness always implies the apperception of God as a great embrace that encompasses the whole of reality with all its personal and impersonal aspects. That is why “best science” can be integrated with best “faith”. They do not contradict but complement each other.

This is particularly important for social psychology. Failure to see the whole of social reality under one divine umbrella reveals an ideological concept of God. This is the god of the family, the tribe, the nation, the race, the gender, the class, the enterprise, the sports club. It is a concept designed to legitimise the pursuit of personal and collective interests at the expense of other such interests. This happens, for instance, when soldiers march into battle “for God, king and empire”, when football teams pray for victory, or when business folk request God to grant them a competitive edge.²⁴

The survival instincts located in the reptile brain are responsible for individual and collective selfishness and the emotional capacities located in the limbic system provide them with motivational force. But in humans the prefrontal cortex is capable of overriding such instincts and emotions and it must be expected to do so if humanity is to attain the quality of life it is capable of. This is not inevitable, not even in the case of a committed and dedicated faith in God.

However, seeing reality “from above with the eyes of God”, as it were, allows one to position one’s own location and function within one’s concentric contexts: the body, the community, society, humanity, nature and the universe. It goes without saying that this shift away from egocentricity to eccentricity is of immense importance not only for communal and social construction, but also for mastering the impending economic-ecological crisis.

An alternative explanation?

One has to concede that the “mother theory” of developmental psychology is not all that water tight. Questions arise from the fact that the experience of “mother” during infancy does not necessarily lead to personal God-consciousness. This is rather strange, since most of us had caring mothers, including agnostics and atheists. Where it actually exists, it varies across the wide spectrum of possibilities. The need for a divine “caregiver” is, at the very best, only one aspect of a mature God-consciousness. If the infantile experience of “mother” is universal, why does it not lead to a universal and at least formally homogeneous God-consciousness?

Developmental psychologists ascribe these facts to cultural indoctrination. But why should mature adults be vulnerable to “ideological” propositions the validity of which cannot be verified? How does one account for the fact that there are individuals who are deeply “religious” without having a vivid God-consciousness at all, let alone a clear notion of God.²⁵ All humans are, consciously or subconsciously, aware of their derivation, dependence, vulnerability, mortality, obligation and accountability. They are also in need of meaning, identity, acceptability, belonging, authority and direction. Perhaps this “gaping void” is the fertile soil into which the seed of a spiritual message is thrown and where it can either germinate or perish, depending on whether and how it responds to these needs.

So perhaps the classical alternative to the “mother theory” merits consideration after all. Protestant theology believes that God becomes “real” for us when God speaks to us through the “Word of God”, proclaimed in the authority of God and in the power of God’s spirit and when this Word hits home in our consciousness as the demand and the offer of an authentic human existence in fellowship with God. This Word is a *verbum externum*, a Word coming from the outside of the human psyche, gleaned from the biblical tradition

²³ Nürnberger 2013:88.

²⁴ Notions of the clan God, the tribal God and the national God (and his covenant relationship with ‘his people’), have been important stages in the history of the biblical faith. But eventually it became clear that God must be perceived as the transcendent Source and Destiny of *all* humans, in fact the whole of reality, or ‘he’ is not God. With its focus on God’s unmerited, unconditional and inclusive acceptance of the unacceptable, the New Testament rendered the use of faith in God to legitimate the pursuit of personal and collective interests at the expense of others illegitimate (Ephesians 2).

²⁵ Karen Armstrong’s spiritual quest was so intense that she entered a monastic community, but the ‘reality’ of God remained elusive. But even after she had liberated herself from the constraints of her doctrinal heritage, she was convinced that “these early faiths expressed the wonder and mystery that seem always to have been an essential component of the human experience of this beautiful yet terrifying world ... not tacked on to a primordially secular nature by manipulative kings and priests ... (1993:xix). Apparently it is the same void that mystics speak about and that the existentialist Martin Heidegger tried to fathom with his concept of ‘Being’ – in contrast with the atheism of Sartre (Macquarry 1982).

and proclaimed by a community of believers. So let us briefly look at the Christian version of God-consciousness.

God-consciousness in terms of the Christian conviction

In ancient Israel, God was not addressed as “father” or “mother”, but as the God of the fathers of Israel, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God who delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, who granted an exclusive covenant to them at Mount Sinai, who gave them the law, who led them to the desert, who gave them the land, who appointed their king, who held them accountable, who punished their transgressions, who led them into Babylonian exile, who allowed them to return and rebuild Jerusalem as the centre of the dispersed nation. God – that was the sacred, ongoing narrative of a foundational relationship.

So for the Israelite believer, God is much more than a divine “womb”, “mother” or “father”. God is not necessarily experienced as the always available and trustworthy “provider”. God is also not experienced as present at all times. The Israelite God can be silent, absent, hidden, or seemingly indifferent. In fact, the experience of the “absence” of God, or the “wrath” of God, is typical for the biblical faith.²⁶

The Psalms are particularly vocal in this regard. They appeal to the sacred narrative of God’s past actions on Israel’s behalf. They proclaim God’s benevolent presence 'in the face of their current failures and predicaments. They believe in God’s redemptive commitment to Israel against all evidence to the contrary. In short, it is the “content” of God-consciousness that constitutes the Israelite faith, rather than a synaptic infrastructure based on infantile experiences, which most humans may have in common.

If we perceive God as an always present and always helpful “provider”, this may very well be an indication that our faith in God got stuck in our infantile past. A mature faith is more realistic than that. God-consciousness can be quite contradictory to the propensities laid down by foetal, infant, childhood and adolescent conditioning.

In the Christian faith, the contradictory character of God-consciousness has taken shape in the prototypical image of Jesus of Nazareth as the “crucified” Christ. He, and no other, is the messianic representative of God on earth. God – that is the terrifying 'creator' of the immense and highly ambiguous cosmic reality we experience. Christ – that is the amazingly gifted and miserably “crucified messiah”. Unsurpassable majesty and the pathetic failure – these are the parameters of a genuine Christian God-consciousness.

What seems to matter is the encounter with the possibility of attaining one’s personal authenticity in a close relationship with God’s in “his” benevolent intentionality. The expression “children of God”, as used in the New Testament, reflects something more than, and something different from, childlike dependence on a great “provider-parent”. Believers in Christ are fellow sons and daughters with Christ, the Son of God.

In biblical tradition, the “son of God” is a royal title that reflects a position of authority and responsibility, the position of mature, dependable, motivated and dedicated adults (Psalm 2). “Sons and daughters” of God are not helplessly crying infants, but mature representatives of God who have been entrusted with responsibility for their own lives, their life worlds and the wider contexts of God’s world as far as their mandate and influence reach.

But then there is also the negative foil: human beings are notoriously incapable of being genuine representatives of God. They want to be their own masters, whether or not they are entitled to such a status. They want to satisfy their own desires, whether or not these bring them true satisfaction. They want to pursue their own interests, whether or not this goes at the expense of the interests of others.

Humans want to be autonomous and self-sufficient “like God” (Genesis 3:5). And, of course, believers are also humans. There are neurological reasons for this phenomenon. They are universal. They are expressed in the myth of the fall into sin found in Genesis 3 and many similar narratives the world over.

This also shows why faith in Christ is something more than, and something different from, mere self-recognition in the mirror of “mother’s” face during infancy. The authentic self that Christ represents, in which we are invited to participate, uproots and replaces the empirical self in a process of constant confrontation and transformation. Or as Paul formulated it, dying with Christ to the flesh, we are enabled to participate in the authentic life of the “risen Christ” (Romans 6).

Potential consequences of a non-personal concept of God

²⁶ Faber believes that, having attained God consciousness, the child can now erase shortcomings of the caregiver “as he luxuriates in the psychic possession of a flawless, loving, masterful Deity ...” (Faber 2004:25). In terms of the biblical faith, this statement is simply wrong. The following statement comes closer to the actual phenomenon: “The upshot: our religion becomes our ongoing attachment narrative designed to enhance our inward stability, our calmness, our happiness, our vitality, in our always dangerous and always unpredictable surroundings” (2004:92).

All this seems to question the necessity of treating a personal concept of God as part of a “new natural theology”. What is natural about it? God, as such, is not part of nature and is therefore not accessible to our observation, exploration and explanation. What we are dealing with is an intuition, notion or concept of God, which is part of immanent reality, thus part of “nature” in the comprehensive sense of the word. We can analyse, describe and critique it. We can also explore the (immanent) consequences of a particular God-consciousness – or the lack thereof. We can ask, for instance, whether a personal God-consciousness, such as the one found in the Christian faith, has “evolutionary advantages”.

I found one clue when I analysed traditionalist notions of God, such as the Sotho-Tswana concept of *Modimo*, the supreme being.²⁷ Though mythologically personified, *Modimo* is existentially not experienced as a person. Traditionalists tend to be intellectually and emotionally vulnerable to the assumption of an unpredictable flow of “dynamistic-magical” forces, the ambiguous attitudes of the ancestors and the ever present threats of sorcery. This has serious personal and social consequences. Faith in a powerful, benevolent, thus personal God would obviate these anxieties.

Another clue surfaces when we consider the consequences of the secular rejection of a personal God. I suggested in other works that a humanity that cannot transcend itself towards a higher authority (or a greater whole) will “tend” to absolutise itself as the master, owner and beneficiary of reality. It may treat nature with great respect, or it may treat reality (including its own biological and psychological existence) as a quarry to be mined for personal aggrandisement, satisfaction and pleasure. That is entirely up to the autonomous human subject.²⁸ This is not necessarily the case, but it certainly dominates the modern secular civilisation.

Conversely, a human being that cannot transcend the reality it is faced with will tend to become enslaved by immanent forces such as personal desires, peer pressures, social conformity, ideologies, demagogues, totalitarian systems and the like. This phenomenon too is typical of secular modernity. Faith in God creates a distance between our “ultimate concern” and our immediate concerns, thus making freedom from reality and responsibility for reality possible.

Another clue is provided by the theory of emergence.²⁹ This theory posits a personal level of emergence that depends on various biological and physical levels as its infrastructure. It suggests that, if God is perceived as the transcendent “source” and “destiny” of reality at all, God consciousness must of necessity cover the personal level of emergence, or it is deficient. If not, one ends up with a mechanistic view of reality, including the reality of the human being, where “God” is no more than a machine.

The flaw of classical theism lies in the fact that it sees God “only” as a person that is as pure intentionality, or pure agency (*actus purus*), without lower level constraints, rather than as the Source of all personal and impersonal levels of emergence.³⁰ This is wishful thinking. Humans notoriously crave for freedom from constraints of space, time, energy and regularity. As Ludwig Feuerbach has shown, they tend to project their irrational desires into a non-existent heaven.

The simple fact is that there “are” such constraints in the reality we experience and that we believe God has created. Moreover, reality could neither exist nor function without them. According to the biblical tradition, these constraints are of God and exist for a purpose.

The theological solution suggested by emergence theory is that God has become a person for “humans” because humans are persons. Presumably, quanta, atoms, bacteria, trees and crocodiles have no God-consciousness, thus also no “personal” God-consciousness. To understand the whole of reality as the creation of God and to understand even the whole of the human being as a creature of God, God must necessarily be deemed much more than a person. Humans too are, after all, much more than persons.³¹

Finally, without a personal God-consciousness it is impossible for humans to deal with the impersonal aspects of nature and society in a personal way. This again is indispensable if we are to regain a sense of the dignity of the non-human world. Only if we accept that reality has been entrusted to our care, and that we are accountable to a higher authority, will we refrain from absolutising our autonomy, mastery, ownership and entitlement. Awareness of a higher overarching authority also creates a sense for the dignity of a foetus, a person with advanced dementia, or a hardened criminal.

²⁷ For detail see Setiloane 1976. Nürnberger 2007, chapter 2. For the socio-economic repercussions see chapters 5-6.

²⁸ Nürnberger 2010:113-114.

²⁹ For the theory see Kauffman 2008, Ellis 2008.

³⁰ The ‘Protestant Orthodoxy’ of the 17th century (which provided the blue print for conservative Protestant doctrine ever since) defines God as ‘Infinite Spiritual Essence’ or ‘the Most Perfect Essence’. God’s characteristics (including omnipotence) are then deduced from this seemingly axiomatic assumption of God’s perfection: all perfections observed in his creatures are ascribed to God, while all imperfections observed in creatures are subtracted (Schmid 1961:112, 117-121). It is clear that, although the authors pay lip service to the ‘sola Scriptura’ principle, this concept of God does not hail from the Bible, but from Greek metaphysics).

³¹ This insight also helps us to resolve the age-old, and exceptionally troublesome, problem of theodicy. The appearance of cancer in my body is not the result of my personal decision, but of a mutation in my genetic makeup; a tsunami is not the consequence of a personal divine decision to wreak havoc upon a sinful populace, but the result of tectonic shifts of the earth’s crust that follow natural laws – which are also of God.

Conclusion

I accept the neurological proposition that nothing in our subconscious or conscious minds can do without a neural infrastructure formed in our biological brains through the development of synaptic networks. I also accept the proposition of developmental psychology that infant and childhood impressions create a synaptic structure that may be conducive to God-consciousness. But can our God-consciousness really be reduced to our impressions as fetuses, infants and adolescents?

It should be clear by now that the “nothing but” argument is reductionist. God-consciousness is a new level of emergence that is more than, and different from, the network of neurons that underpins it. The neural infrastructure and the actual content of our God-consciousness cannot be collapsed into one.³²

The synaptic infrastructures in our minds can display an indefinite number of shapes and directions, from the most elementary to the most sophisticated, from the most wayward to the most helpful. It is “nurture” rather than “nature” that determines the content. It is the task of theology to find the most appropriate, substantive content in terms of God’s benevolent intentionality under constantly changing circumstances.

This content has its own evolutionary derivation, thus also its own differentiation into “sub-species”. In the case of the Christian faith, it goes back to the biblical tradition that emerged and evolved over more than a millennium of Ancient Near Eastern history. And that history is part of the evolutionary history of cosmic reality as a whole. It is, at such, “at home in the universe”, part of immanent reality, thus of necessity part of a “new natural theology”.

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³² “What we can only term a massive affective and neuron conditioning has prepared him psychically for the uncanny sensation of the Almighty’s engendering closeness” (Faber 2004:40). This statement is true if it refers to a lower level (provisional and malleable) synaptic structure on which a higher level of substantive content emerges that integrates inherited assumptions with new information and ongoing life experiences.