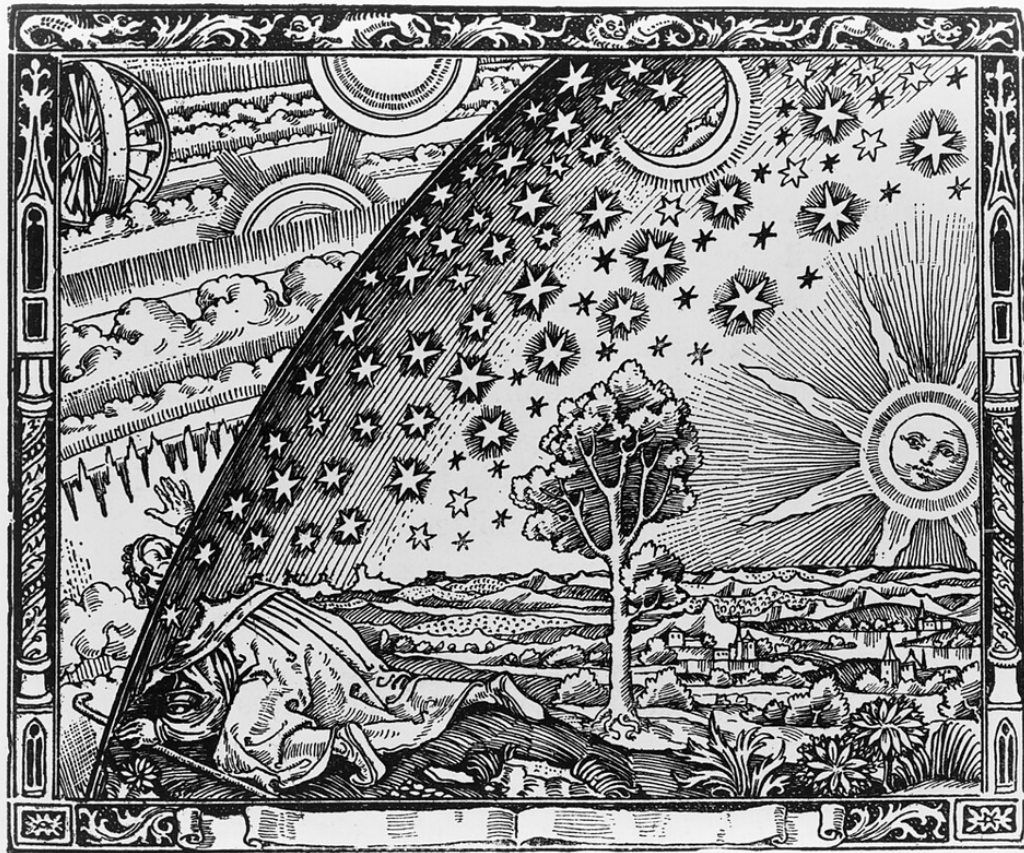


# Manchester Lit&Phil

## Philosophy Forum



unknown artist (1888) known as the Flammarion wood engraving

## From Earth to Earth via Heaven

Focus paper for the Manchester Lit & Phil Philosophy Forum

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Who are we? Why are we here? What happens after we die? Why is there suffering? Is anything out there seeing all this? If so, will they ever answer humanity's ancient questions? This paper traces a path through the ways humans have tried to answer such questions. It reveals an historical trajectory of how we see our place in the cosmos: from Earth-bound fellowship with the animal world via exaltation as a special divine creation and back down to Earth as a species evolved like all others. Ready for the journey?

## 1 The unknown world

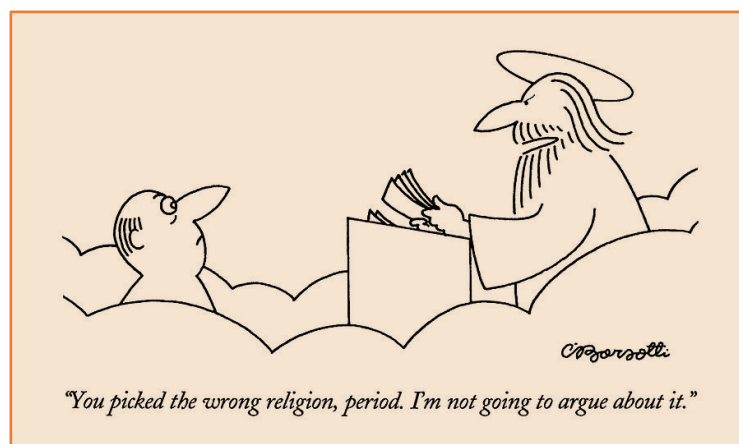
- 1.1 The first humans must have been in awe of the natural forces, animals and elements around them. Sumerian, Persian, Syrian, Anatolian, Greek, Roman and many other traditions saw the unending sources of nature which they could not control as sacred and holy, and declared them as gods and goddesses, and symbolised them. They built temples for their various gods and goddesses and hoped to keep them on their side during wars and other significant events.
- 1.2 The burial sites of the ancient peoples and the rituals of burial make us think that maybe it was actually the fear of death that made humans create gods and religions. If that is the case, in contrast to its importance for humans to help them in the other world, religions were quite pragmatic. The mythological gods, God of Skies, God of War, God of Fertility, or other minor gods and local gods were created as a result of this pragmatism . To cope with its own problems, every part of the world developed their own belief systems, religions and gods.
- 1.3 Anthropology defines religion as a mental attitude and patterns of behaviour related to supernatural beings and forces. Here 'mental attitude' means belief, and 'behaviours' are the rituals. Supernatural is outside what can be observed, and therefore cannot be scientifically explained. Religion is the mechanism through which humans get into a relationship with the unknown, and religion is a cultural universal: in all cultures we come across the belief that in the presence of a supernatural being or force one can be in touch with that force. Of course, in every group there are people who look at this belief with suspicion.
- 1.4 If religion is a mechanism of trying to create a relationship with the supernatural and the unknown, then science can be defined as the efforts of the humans to overcome the unknown. Yet, no matter how hard the humans try to solve the unknown and the problems they face via nature (and although we have been somewhat successful in this) they cannot control nature and the universe for certain. They always have some fear and anxiety about their future, about things they cannot control. Unfortunately, science demonstrates the infinity of the unknown and increases what the humans know what they do not know. However technologically developed humans are, natural forces beyond their control – death, earthquakes, droughts, storms - will cause the belief in the supernatural forces. In order to cope with events beyond their control, humans find refuge in religion. That is where science ends, religion starts.

## 2 The role of religion

- 2.1 From the time of the European Enlightenment, religion has become something to be studied in the West, rather than an unquestioned fact of life. One of the major conflicts between science and religion is that of between Creationism (religious concepts of intentional divine creation of all life forms) and Darwinism (the scientific concept of a universe evolving mechanically by processes such as genetic mutations and random combinations of elements).



- 2.2 Philosophical Anthropology – as a discipline within philosophy – seeks to unify the several empirical investigations of human nature, in an effort to understand individuals as both creatures of their environment and as creators of their own values; and Cultural Anthropologists, like other social scientists, look at the concept of religion as something to be studied and ask the question ‘why does religion exist?’
- 2.3 Consider the following replies to this question:
- Only the material world exists, and the divine is a projection of human qualities and emotions. Sigmund Freud (1856-1938) described religion as a collective fantasy, a universal obsessional neurosis – a replaying of our loving but fearful relationships with our parents. Religion gives us a God powerful enough to protect us from the terrors of life and will punish or reward us. Religious belief springs from people’s infantile insecurity and neurotic guilt, similar to mental illness. (Cf Sigmund Freud, 1927, *The Future of an Illusion*, English translation 1989 by James Strachey) Other scientific naturalists like Karl Marx (1818-1883) believed that religions have been created to manipulate people. Religions support power, and oppressors rule using religion.
  - A functional perspective to religion would be that religion is useful. Religion is the glue that holds social groups together. It helps identity formation. Religion also helps biological survival by bringing a group together. (However how about celibacy or killing oneself for a religion in order to be rewarded at death?) Religion may also help us medically: strong faith may help us to live longer - meditation helps our psychology. Or to create a sense of purpose for a reward later and create inner strength. Some religions offer systems of doctrines as absolutely true even if they lie beyond the scope of one’s personal experiences. This may provide some with meaning and orderliness. Religions may also provide rules for living, governing everything from diet to sex. These rules may be accepted as a reflection of the order that rules the cosmos.



### 3 Origins of transcendental beliefs

- 3.1 The oldest archaeological evidence of religious beliefs is in burial grounds and temples. The ancients buried their death with their belongings, which show that they believed in life after death and even in a soul which would live after the physical decays. I would like to look at only two samples out of many from all over the world. One example is the burial site and temple at Göbekli Tepe (dating back to 10,000 BCE or more) in the borders of today's Turkey, and the other are the burial sites, some near today's Kazakhstan in Central Asia, dating back to the Scythians (9,000 BCE).

#### 3.2 Göbekli Tepe temple complex

- 3.2.1 Located in southeastern Turkey, Göbekli Tepe (Turkish for "Potbelly Hill") was initially discovered in the 1960s by a group of archaeologists from the University of Chicago and Istanbul University. They dismissed it as having little value, and it remained untouched for decades. In 1995 the site was revisited by a German archaeologist Klaus Schmidt. Schmidt led the excavation team at Göbekli Tepe for the next 18 years, and the work still continues.



Göbekli Tepe carvings

- 3.2.2 The Göbekli Tepe temple complex is dated to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period and is estimated to have been built around 10000-12000 BCE, making it 6000 years older than Stonehenge. There's still no consensus in the archaeological community as to what purpose the structures at Göbekli Tepe once served. Without a doubt, many of the buildings were places of worship of some sort. The T-shaped pillars have various images carved into them. They are mostly depictions of animals like wild boar, ducks, foxes, gazelles, donkeys, snakes, spiders, and more. Some carvings are also images of humans wearing loincloths, depicted in various positions, and engaging in a number of activities. The pillars are supposed to be anthropomorphic figures, representations of supernatural beings from another world. Historians and archaeologists are not certain whether or not the concept of gods existed in the Pre-Neolithic period. If, in fact, the carvings are deities, that would make Göbekli Tepe the first known monumental depiction of gods.
- 3.2.3 Recently archaeologists have also found evidence of year-round settlements, in addition to more pillars and mysterious imagery. Aside from living quarters, other interesting findings include grain processing and brewery equipment, as well as grinding tools. The newfound houses, cisterns, and channels for rainwater collection serve as proof that in fact, once upon a time, it may have actually been a bustling village with all sorts of establishments and activities.

- 3.2.4 The unearthing of this massive temple complex makes us wonder about prehistoric humans and their way of life. Most of us are taught that hunter-gatherer homo sapiens were incapable of building complex, lasting structures until the Agricultural Revolution, when humans first settled down, started cultivating crops, and abandoned their nomadic lifestyles. However, Göbekli Tepe is actually hundreds of years older than the earliest evidence of animal husbandry and agriculture. The focus on temples and religious worship shines a light on the priorities of hunter-gatherer societies and their ability to come together and create massive buildings in honour of a higher power. It has forced historians and anthropologists to reconsider the role of spirituality and religion in the development of civilization.

### 3.3 Scythian grave mounds

- 3.3.1 The Scythians were an ancient nomadic people who had migrated during the 9th to 8th centuries BCE from Central Asia to the modern-day Ukraine and Southern Russia where they remained established from the 7th century BCE until the 3rd century BCE. Because the Scythians did not use writing and they did not leave much material remains due to their nomadic lifestyle, most of the information regarding them has been pieced together from the accounts of outsiders such as the Assyrians, Persians, and Greeks, as well as from archaeological study of their burial mounds.



Monumental elite kurgan, Semirechye, southeastern Kazakhstan

- 3.3.2 For the Scythians, at the top of the divine-human feudal hierarchy was the categorically unique Heavenly God or God of the Skies (Tengri) who created the heavens and the earth as well as the one, semi-divine, Royal lineage. Although there were other gods (especially in frontier contact regions), they did not belong to the same category as Heavenly God, who was necessarily one. Since the Scythians believed that their rulers were descended directly from Heavenly God, that made God not only the ruler of Heaven but also the rightful head of the entire earthly feudal-hierarchical socio-political structure, from the Great King himself to his personally appointed vassals to those below them (the *nomoi*), down to the freemen at the very bottom.
- 3.3.3 The Scythians' long rule in the Eastern Steppe transmitted their God and his name to the peoples over whom they ruled and their successors. Later we see the idea of Tengri (God of the Sky) in the Turkic pastoralist nomads together with Shamanism and steppe animism – as the dominant pagan belief system. These peoples inhabited the steppe belt from the northern Black Sea basin to Mongolia. The Tengri idea was also prevalent among the Magyars (Hungarians) before they migrated to Central Europe and were Christianized. It is also worth mentioning the Steppe Animism, which was no unified system and came in

many forms, often varying per tribe. In general, it comprised belief in a chief god of the sky (Tengri) or in several gods, in the sacrality of landscape elements and natural phenomena, in animal and human sacrifices, and in a world of souls and spirits with which mortals communicated through a shaman or soothsayer. Many animist elements were 'absorbed' during Islamization and continued to exist in the folk practices of Islam. Steppe animism and shamanism are nowadays often called Tengrism.

- 3.3.4 The cemetery of Arzhan, located in northern Tuva, is one of the largest and most important cemeteries in southern Siberia, with countless monumental grave mounds, called Kurgans – a name also given to the people who built them. It is a burial complex with a platform built of stone, almost 100 m in diameter and only 3–5 m in height. Revealed underneath this platform is a wooden construction, which consisted of numerous rectangular to slightly trapezoidal chambers arranged radially in several rows around the centre. The timber grave chamber in the centre is surrounded by eight wooden coffins, which evidently contained the interred members of the entourage, who upon the death of the ruler, were slain and placed with him in the grave. Buried in various chambers grouped around the central grave are more than 200 horses, which likewise counted as possessions of the royal pair or were sacrificed during the burial ceremony in their honour. The burial customs show the special treatment of the ruling class, with the erection of monumental kurgans, the practice of family members and attendants following the leader into death, and the graves containing gold and other prestigious objects. The royal grave in Arzhan 2 Kurgan has almost 9000 objects. Aside from thousands of golden panthers attached to clothing, the double burial of the man and woman contains gold-ornamented hats and boots, a gold neck-ring, a golden pectoral, gilded weapons and much more.
- 3.3.5 Since the first opening of Scythian 'kings' kurgans' in the north Pontic steppes in the 19th century, we have known that rider-nomads of the earlier Iron Age of the 1st millennium BCE went to considerable effort to demonstrate the high status of their leaders, even after their death. Recent excavations at selected sites in northern Kazakhstan (Baikara), Tuva (Arzhan) and the Minusinsk Basin (Barsuchiy Log), augmented by geophysical surveys and supplementary excavations in the surroundings of kurgans in southeast Kazakhstan, in the southern Urals and in the northern Caucasus, have broadened our knowledge about funerary customs of the Scythian elites in the Eurasian steppe.

## 4 Monotheism: the example of Islam

- 4.1 Muhammad was born in Mecca around 570 CE. He was orphaned at the age of six and was brought up by his paternal uncle, who was a merchant. He married a wealthy widow and he himself was a merchant by this time. When he was 40, circa 610 CE, Muhammad reported to his wife that he was being visited by the angel Gabriel in a cave, where he often went to meditate and that he received his first revelation from God. In 613, Muhammad started preaching publicly what Gabriel revealed to him. He preached that there was only one God, and he was the prophet of God like others before him - among whom were Moses and Jesus. Gabriel would periodically reveal teachings (ayah) to Mohammed, which he revealed to his listeners, and this continued until his death in 632. Initially his followers received hostility in Mecca, and in 622, the Muslims moved to Medina. (This event – hijra in Arabic – marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar.) Meanwhile armed fighting and hostility continued between the Muslims and Meccan tribes. In 629,

with an army of 10000, Mohammed marched on the city of Mecca from Medina and the converts to Islam took over the city. When he died in 632, most of the Arabian Peninsula had converted to Islam. After his death his first followers became the leaders of the Muslim community. Ayah, together with Mohammad's reported teachings (hadith) and behaviour (sunnah) form the core of Islam and the source of Islamic Law.

- 4.2 The Qur'an is the collection of revelations that Mohammed reported to have received (between 610-632) and which were memorised and written in parts by the converts around him. Each section is known as 'ayah – sign of God'. The Qur'an contains stories and teachings similar to those of Judaism and Christianity. The difference with Christianity is that Jesus is not seen as the son of God but a chosen being, and he is not crucified because God takes him away.
- 4.3 Following Muhammad's death, the Qur'an was edited and compiled into a comprehensive book. The caliph Abu Bakr (632-634) had a text compiled in writing relying upon both textual fragments and the memories of those who had memorised the sections. As the Islamic Empire began to grow and Islam spread, differing recitations were heard, and the third caliph, Uthman (644–656) had a new version compiled. The surah is the name given to each part of the book. It contains 6,236 verses and 114 surahs. The language reflects the Arabic of the time and the changes that happened to the language over the years.
- 4.4 Qur'anic revelations laid down basic standards of conduct for the first Muslim community known as the sharia (Islamic Law). However, the Qur'an is not a legal code, and Muhammad, as the supreme leader of the community, resolved legal problems as they arose by interpreting and expanding the general provisions of the Qur'an. Islamic realm after Muhammad expanded and administration became more complex. Beginning in the second half of the 8th century, oral transmission of the sayings of Muhammad and the development of interpreting the Qur'an gave way to a written legal literature. Throughout the medieval period the basic doctrine was elaborated and systematized in a large number of commentaries known as the sharia law. There are different versions of sharia depending on the branch of Islam.

## 5 And where are we today?

Today, in many parts of the world, religion works mostly as a social control mechanism. It encourages socially acceptable behaviour and attitudes and condemns actions which do not fit the created rules. Therefore, as a moral system it helps to continue social order and at the same time offers prescriptions of behaviour. However, today, as throughout history, religion is used by groups to gain economic advantage over other groups and/or political gain and dominance. As such religion has become an ideological tool.

## 6 Useful terminology

### **Comparative religion**

Developed by Mircea Eliade (1907-1989). Attempts to understand and compare religious patterns found in the world.

### **The sacred**

The realm of extraordinary, imperceptible forces. The source of the universe and its values lie there. (Some religions do not make the distinction of sacred and the profane). Many nomadic cultures connect with their surroundings and feel that the spiritual power is everywhere, everything is sacred. Everything is alive and sacred.

### **Transcendent**

Reality can be understood as transcendent, in that it exists outside of the material world. The Judeo-Christian-Islamic religions believe in the sacred as transcendent (God is out there), whereas many Eastern and indigenous traditions believe that sacred being or beings are present with them in the world. Some religions label others as pagans or nonbelievers and take a rigid position. Then there is no position to argue that they may be talking about the same indescribable thing.

### **Theism**

Religions based on one's relationship to a divine being. Monotheistic: when the Being worshipped has a singular form. Polytheistic: many attributes and forms of the divine are emphasized.

### **Atheism**

The belief that there is no deity. *New Atheism* attacks religion not only as being unscientific and wrong, but also as evil because it can support violence (For example we see this in Richard Dawkins' works, such as *The Selfish Gene*).

### **Agnosticism**

Does not deny the divine but is sceptical whether it exists or not.

### **Intelligent Design Movement**

Claims that the complexities of life can be said to prove the existence of an intelligent designer because they are far beyond evolutionary processes.





## 7 Interesting and useful resources

Beckwith, Christopher I. (2023) *The Scythian Empire: Central Eurasia and the birth of the classical age from Persia to China*

Eliade, Mircea (1987) *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion* (translated by Willard R Trask)

Kennedy, Hugh (2008) *Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In*

*The Qur'an*: English translation by M.A.S Abdel Haleem (2010)

<https://brewminate.com/kurgans-ancient-burial-mounds-of-scythian-elites-in-the-urasian-steppe/>

## 8 Appendix: philosophical summary and questions

Christopher Burke

8.1 The people of Göbekli Tepe, despite living 10000 years ago, were modern humans like us, born with minds/brains probably indistinguishable from our own. From the symbols all over the temple complex, **their beliefs seem to be some sort of Animism: imbuing animals especially with some sort of Earth-bound yet transcendental power.**

Q1 Do we do something similar these days when we deem objects to have a non-material influence over us: eg status markers, possessions of sentimental value, badges of allegiance, cultural nostalgia evokers or items provoking revulsion by association with atrocity?

Q2 Do these vestigial supernaturalist tendencies give us an insight into the minds of our distant forebears?

8.2 The Scythian belief system shows the **emergence of a transcendental entity dominant over all their fellow deities** – Tengri the God of the Sky. It is also an example of the use of religion in a society's power dynamics: rulers had divine authority. Challenging power became challenging the supernatural order.

Q3 Is this a historical stepping stone from a Pagan polytheism – the belief in many gods - towards monotheism, like Judaism, Christianity and Islam – the belief in a single god?

Q4 Was organised religion an ideological tool even in very early states?

8.3 Islam is just one example of **monotheism**, but it clearly shows **how such religions can impose an all-consuming authority over devout adherents**, offering comprehensive and detailed instructions about what they should believe, what devotional rituals to perform to demonstrate their allegiance and how to conduct their life. Through observance of these strict rules, it is deemed possible for humans to gain divine approval in life and reward after death. Monotheistic beliefs held sway over large tracts of Europe and Asia for millennia, all giving humanity, by divine decree, a special ranking in the hierarchy of creation.

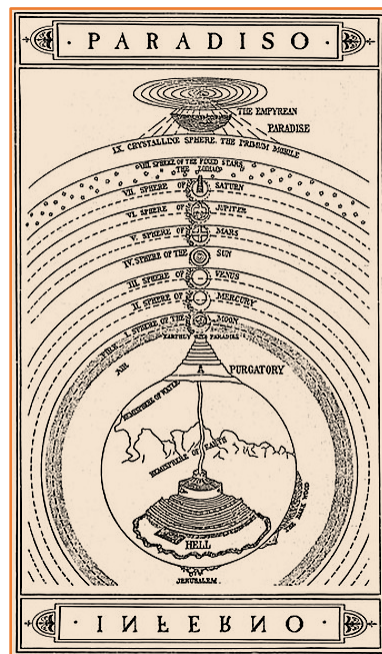
Q5 What are the personal pros and cons of humans having such an exalted status?

Q6 Does that supremacy over the rest of nature have cultural, ecological and political consequences?

8.4 Charles Darwin agonised over his **discovery of natural evolution**, realising its metaphysical implications for universally believed Biblical creation myth, Genesis, with its 6-day divine construction of the cosmos including Adam's and Eve's spontaneous arrival. His wasn't just the fear of establishment backlash and social opprobrium, but also what effects it would have on his family, his wife being a devout Christian. He finally plucked up the courage to publish in 1859, only when a rival threatened to beat him to it. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche ragingly lamented the terrifying consequences of humanity's loss: "God is dead!" he declared at the opening of his magnum opus *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* in 1883-85.

Q7 Does Darwin's discovery of natural evolution bring humanity back down to Earth metaphysically?

Q8 How has that affected the way modern people in relatively secular societies think about their species?



Dante Alighieri's  
(c1265–1321)  
structure of heaven and hell



Your notes