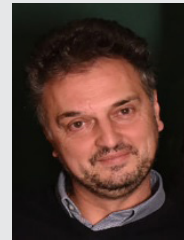


YAHWEH – THE TYPOLOGY OF THE DIVINE RELATIONAL IN THE THEOLOGICAL HORIZON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Abstract

The Old Testament summarises not only a large segment of the history of humanity but also the configuration of the relationship between man and divinity. The religious phenomenology of the general spectrum of humanity reveals to us the fact that the experience of the sacred created the premises for a projection of this experience expressed under a cultic, doctrinal, and mystical aspect. Upon an objective survey of the religious field of humanity, where the differentiation criteria stand out as obvious, we can notice the fact that the Old Testament outlines a particular architecture of the relationship between Yahweh and man, namely based on God's intention to enter a relational revelation with humanity, especially with the Jewish people. Our study explores this relational typology of the divine as it is highlighted throughout history and the theological developments in the Old Testament.



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The limits of rational knowledge are marked by the limits of language and empirical experiences. Beyond this limit, where language points at that “hereafter” of the sense of the divine, there is the distance or the proximity of intuitive or mystical feeling. The ineffable of the divine being is not apprehended using empirical instruments (language, senses, reason) that operate at this level. It is essential that the human construction of the relationship with the divinity, at least in the Old Testament, be always based on the act of discovering and making God's Self accessible to man. The relationship is initiated, made possible and materialised by God.

Revelation and Historicity:**The Transition from Abstraction to Personalization of the Divine**

The study of religions during the 19th-21st centuries was focused on man, in the sense that the religious fact gravitated around man, his relationship and attitude towards God (regardless of how it was perceived theologically and culturally), towards the world and concerning himself. This approach does not correspond to the biblical religious phenomenology, according to which God is the generating point of all configurations involving man, and the universe itself. The Old Testament lays a mark on history with a radical reinterpretation of the divine: overcoming abstraction and the limits of the plurality of gods towards a new revelatory condition: a personal God who communicates, who initiates through creation a relational, concrete, religious, spiritual experience with man, thereby entering a covenant relationship with the latter.

Although Christian theology operates with two terms borrowed from the philosophical field, namely immanent and transcendent concerning the divine nature, this does not create a confusion of understanding. God is immanent in the sense that He is present within the horizon of this world and not outside it, which does not imply His identification with the materiality of the world. God is transcendent because there is a discontinuity of being between Him and man, the created universe implicitly.

In ancient religions, somewhat contemporary with the Old Testament, such as the Greek, or the Indian, but especially the Mesopotamian, there was a tendency to subsume all the gods and their functions and to concentrate them on one supreme god. Thus, for example, Enlil was the supreme god: Shamash, the Sun god, was his eyes, Ishtar his hands, Ea his feet. We can decipher a unique divinity, a kind of monotheism composed of adjacent elements (gods). *Elohim*, one of the hypostases of the Divine in the Old Testament (Gen 1:1) refers to the monotheistic idea, of a single God who synthesizes all the powers, and the functions of the ancient multidimensional pantheon, in a fusion and concentration of all divine attributes (Muffs 2009, 3).

God is thus thought of as the all-encompassing divinity, synthesizing all in His omnipotence. He constantly appeared in multiple and ever-changing roles that met the needs of the Jewish people, in order not to be frozen and turned into the dumb idols that He despised. God is received and adored as a polyvalent personality that confirms his uniqueness (Ex 20:2-6), mirroring his multiple facets to man.

Here as well, there is a stringent need for clarifications, since there are tendencies to consider which stress that borrowing the configuration of the divine from the

religions present in Sumer, Babylonia, and Assyria led to the formation of the Israelite perspective on God. This assumption is completely erroneous and constitutes a historically unfounded idea.

It is true that religion itself, as well as all religions are dynamic realities, each with its version of thought, doctrine and cultic life. Religions have always interacted, because in their social component, alongside the theological one, they cannot stand in isolation (Smith 2001). As Yochanan Muffs points out, the Israelite way of relating to other religions was one of creative absorption (Muffs 2009, 9).

But despite the roots of Abraham and the other Israelite patriarchs in the Near East, Abraham's calling by Yahweh produced a revolutionary exodus that still reverberates today in the world under a religious aspect: "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you." (Gen 12:1). This rooting of Abraham in the religious culture of the Near East and his sudden break from it are symbols telling of Israel's ambivalent relationship with its environment: a willingness to borrow external forms, on the one hand, and an almost total rejection of content their spiritual, on the other hand. As mentioned above, Yahweh completely forbids the worship of idols (Ex 20:2-6).

„Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you” (Dt 6:14). It is believed that the main characteristic of idolatry is the multitude of gods, but this assumption is blatantly wrong. Idolatry is the cultic act of worshipping some gods, designed by the human mind, but which in their mythological-religious versions are in total dependence on the Reality that transcends them. The gods are subject to destiny or cosmic law (*moira*), like the ancient Greek gods, natural impulses, magical powers, and time, which leads Yehezkel Kaufmann to call this realm, which the gods are subject to, the “meta divine sphere” (Kaufmann 1960, 21-59). In most polytheistic religions, there is a realm of natural reality that is distinct from the world of the gods. In the more sophisticated forms of pagan religion, this natural sphere is not just a mere collection of gods. Quite the contrary; it is conceived as a universal order, governed by its laws. This natural order can be understood in two ways: as a spiritual reality, which is the source of all things, and which manifests itself in the world through natural processes; as a material reality that is subject to physical laws and that can be studied through science. The first view leads to a form of mysticism, which sees nature as a manifestation of divinity. The second view leads to a form of science that sees nature as a system governed

by objective laws. Both views are impersonal because they do not conceive of the *meta divine* as a person. Personal gods are seen as mere personifications of natural processes.

Thus, the articulation of biblical Judaism on the world religious scene produced one of the greatest rational-religious revolutions. Judaism became the religious expression of a radically new theology that decoupled divinity from any material or metamaterial dependence. Yahweh is the divinity that is not subject to the rhythm of the universe, but it is He who creates the universe out of nothing by His own will and He is doing it with complete freedom. Yahweh establishes the laws of the universe according to which it unfolds (Ps 19), free from any determination.

In its essence, the Old Testament biblical process is a concerted dynamic that moves away from an impersonal, abstract, magical, mechanical configuration of the divine, proposing a reinterpretation of the divine as a personal God, initiator of a dialogic experience within the historical framework of the Israelite people. The universe is stripped of its sacred, magical character, it is desacralized, demythologized, its reality not being denied, but becoming the stage where Yahweh projects his revelation of Himself in communication with man, as well as the sphere in which man is called to exercise his becoming spiritual by observing the divine will. The desacralization of the cosmos is initiated by Judaism and perfected by Christianity (Cuțaru 2016, 14).

The change brought about by the new vision of the world is given by the fact that Yahweh concentrates the sacred within Himself. Nature remains transparent to the creative and pronating work of Yahweh, but it has a created character, unlike the philosophy of the pre-existence of matter in the religion of the ancient Greeks, receiving a secondary, auxiliary status to Yahweh. Monism and pantheism as philosophical hermeneutics used to explain the existence of the world are fairly outdated altogether.

We can conclude therefore that the religion of Israel makes the transition from the *archaic sacred*, characteristic of the pagan cultures that preceded the emergence and spread of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Middle East and Europe, to the *monotheistic sacred*. And this transition highlights a new way of understanding God as a Person. The rethinking of this configuration is both rich in significance and highly complex, carried out in several directions: the transition from magic to religion under the aspect of cultic organization, from a systematic regulation with supernatural beings – gods – to a concretization of the dialogical and personal relationship with the Divinity. In a radical shift in the understanding of the sacred that takes place across the

globe between 800 and 200 BC, in what Karl Jaspers calls *the axial age* (Wittrock 2004, 51-85; Peet 2019, 63-98; Joas 2012, 9-29).

The earlier religious concept of cosmological monism undergoes a gradual restructuring, evolving into a dualistic framework that distinguishes between “this” world and a transcendent reality perceived as existing “above” it. Historical religions, in ways vying with each other, embrace dualism and a rejection of the world, manifesting as a departure from the empirical world. This reorientation takes place through adherence to religious laws, by means of sheer involvement in sacramental systems.

As these religions emerge, religious concern shifts from the present world to the world to come, marking the first appearance of salvation as a central concern in religious thinking (Szerszynski 2005, 17-18).

In this phase of Western religious history, the foundations are laid for some key ideas that will characterize the subsequent ordinations of the sacred. First, the break between the immanent sacred order and the idea of a transcendent foundation or source for all reality opens for the first time the possibility of a philosophical thought about Being. This possibility is because, within the archaic sacred, religious plurality was easily accommodated. Conversely, in a context where there is only one transcendent foundation, other religions are deviations from the truth, i.e. heresies. Second, with divinity progressively decoupled from the world of empirical phenomena, nature begins to emerge as a separate principle of its own. This separation is due to the withdrawal of divinity from the world.

As a result, nature begins to be seen more and more as something that humans can and must master, that is, be shaped in a systematic, technological way. Third, with the monotheistic sacred, with its sharper separation between human beings and divinity and with a clearer sense of the empirical human individual, the idea of society as a self-organized association of human beings with their projects and opinions. This idea is because, in the sacred monotheistic framework, people are considered equal before God (Szerszynski 2005, 18).

The Components of the Relational Dimension of Yahweh according to the Old Testament Theology

In the preceding section of the present study, we considered the radical revolution which the religion of the people of Israel accomplished, namely the personalization of the Ultimate Reality and the condensation in It of omnipotence. Since He is a per-

son (Lossky 1974, 111-23; Endean 2005, 223-38; Koterski 2004, 203-24), Yahweh is a relational deity who initiates an interpersonal relationship with man, himself through divine creation being the *imago Dei*. And this is the peculiarity in the horizon of ancient religious pluralism. Unlike biblical Israel, pagan religions lack a consistent and intimate relationship between a god and an entire human community. This relationship is not based on a simple favour or patronage, but on a mutual agreement, sealed by a covenant and an oath (“Behold, I make My covenant with you, with your descendants”, Gen 9:9; “will make the covenant Between Me and between you and your descendants, from generation to generation, let it be an eternal covenant” Gen 17:7). It is mediated by prophets, who act as mediators for both divine love and divine wrath. This unique combination of elements sets biblical Israel apart from other ancient religions.

In paganism, a particular god might grant favours to a particular king, but ordinary individuals are excluded from this divine intimacy. Furthermore, these relationships are fragile and unpredictable, with no guarantee of continuity for future generations. Divine interactions are subject to the same inherent instability that pervades human relationships and the cosmos itself. In Mesopotamian thought, for example, everything except human laws is subject to this inconsistent flux.

In Israel, the relationship between Yahweh and man is structured by covenant and law. It is not a relationship between the deity and the patriarch, but in this relationship every Israelite in the community is involved. Although comprehensive in a broad sense, the relationship remains a personal one because it involves a commitment to everyone. It is important to note that the norms of the Torah are formulated in the second person singular, a fact that implies the interpersonal relationship between Yahweh-man (Walzer 2006).

Man as man now becomes the centre of a permanent divine interest. This condition makes him responsible. Conformity with the divine will, social justice congruent with the divine law established in the interpersonal relationship, implies a moral behaviour of Israel, the cultic contribution being somewhat secondary: “to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?” (Is 58:5-7).

Yahweh’s character, and implicitly the relational character, finds its true expression in *love*. Love is the catalyst of communication, of dialogue. Yahweh is not an

Absolute that exists by itself and for itself, but a god that emerges from itself creatively projecting another *You*. Yahweh is made concrete as a personal identity and entity by engaging in a relationship with man. Love cannot be contained by the boundaries of the self, in a selfish sense, but needs to be expressed, articulated, materialized. Man, created as a person with self-awareness, freedom, and will, becomes a partner of this divine love, and in the experience of the Old Testament, this love and responsibility of Yahweh towards man is clearly expressed in the biblical prophecies, at the centre of which is the concern divine to man.

The ancient gods could not overcome their fateful condition, they were not concerned with man, but with their selfish condition fuelled by the worship of men. Instead, Yahweh in all the narratives of the Old Testament is concerned with man, he initiates a covenant with him that was aimed at regulating the social and religious conduct of the Israelite people. *Yahweh addresses man as a dialogue partner, called to the freedom of conformity to the divine will.* In Israelite logic, it is not man who must seek Yahweh, but He constantly seeks man. To this end, we can affirm that the communication of the divine will through the prophecies outlined a permanent institution of dialogue between Yahweh and the Israelite people. Prophecy is not mantic, it is not a magical act, it is not carried out based on the consumption of hallucinogenic substances as the oracles of ancient Rome did, and it is not suggested symbolically. Prophecy thus becomes the bridge of conversation, of dialogue that allows the intimate encounter between the divine Person and his human counterpart to take place.

Yahweh opened a way for man to dialogue with him, to reveal His will to him in an intelligible language accessible to man. And man could receive the divine message: “The Lord said to Moses” (Ex 3:7), “The Lord said to Aaron” (Ex 18:1), “The Lord said to me” (Ezk 23:36). The structure of the dialogue between Yahweh and man not only respects the direction from Him to humanity, but also implies the reverse of this direction: “And the Lord heard your words, as you spoke to me, and the Lord said to me” (Deut 5,28). Also, this personal dialogue cannot take place under any condition. Man must qualify himself spiritually and morally to be the recipient of the Lord’s word: “For is there any man who will hear the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have heard, and live?” (Deut 5,26).

Love is only possible in freedom. As two attributes of the relational or personal Deity, love and freedom are mutually involved. Communication and relationship with another person are defined in the understanding of freedom. Man is called to free-

dom (“you were called to freedom”, Gal 5:13). The whole of the Holy Scripture hails the freedom of relation, the cooperative freedom of dialogue as an integral part of the relationship of conformity and communion with God.

Yahweh’s relationship with the people of Israel, like any real interpersonal relationship, is free and structured, with clearly defined mutual responsibilities. Failure to meet these conditions of conformity brings wrath and disappointment from the deity. Here is the key to interpersonal freedom: Yahweh created man with all the necessary conditions to actualize his purpose in this life. Based on freedom, the Israelite people may or may not conform to divine standards. In the case of non-conformity, Yahweh is angry with the sinners. God gets angry with Israel and rebukes them through His prophets – but the people of Israel also get angry when God doesn’t seem to keep His part of the relational covenant (Ps 44).

God’s adoption of Israel is an illustration of His *human* character in the sense of making it accessible to be understood and received. This covenant relationship is based on love and commitment, just like a human relationship. Yahweh’s adoption of man cannot be revoked. Despite the unfaithfulness of the chosen people in certain historical circumstances, Yahweh remains consistent with the covenant through the voice of the prophets.

Another identifying mark of Yahweh as relational deity is *His name*. “I am who I am.” (Ex 3:14) calls Himself: “I am the God of your father [Yahweh], the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” (Ex 3:6); “I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty,[a] but by my name the Lord [b] I did not make myself fully known to them.” (Ex 6:2-3). One of the fundamental and essential features of biblical revelation is that God is not nameless: he has a personal name by which he can and must be invoked. A personal name is both a marker of personal identity and a concealment of the person’s true reality (Clines 1980, 323).

A game of revealing and enveloping, in that it specifies his identity in the relationship, but remains unfathomable in his being. At the back of the Israelite mind, the name was given a profound meaning: it was a mark of personal identity, but it also suggested the character of the person concerned, as well as his expression. Knowing a person’s name creates the possibility of a dialogic relationship.

The origin and meaning of the divine name Yahweh (Yahweh) have been the subject of wide debate in biblical scholarship. The name is most likely related to the verbal root *hwy* or *hwh*, meaning „to be” (de Vaux 1970, 59).

The name Yahweh had an eminently sacred character, being forbidden to be pronounced by the Israelites, but it was reserved for the priest only once a year when he entered the Holy of Holies.

It is noteworthy that in the Old Testament worldview, the divine attributes that are identified with God and yet exhibit some degree of independent identity (Lammert 2009, 195) – often called hypostases – play a much more important role than we are used to thinking. Charles Gieschen, in his work *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*, contrasts the typical Western way of seeing attributes as abstract concepts with the biblical (Eastern) way of seeing these attributes as tangible forms. He states that textual analysis supports the claim that it is legitimate to refer to the poses as aspects of God possessing varying degrees of distinct personality. It is essential to emphasize that contemporary modes of conceptualization often hesitate to assign a level of personhood to these divine attributes. However, the evidence derived from the biblical text guides us towards understanding a worldview rooted more in tangible forms than in abstract notions. Accordingly, in this worldview, the Name, Glory, Wisdom, Word, Spirit, and Power are not primarily abstract concepts but are tangible realities with visible forms (Gieschen 1998, 122).

It could be stated, in support of our argument, that they are concrete ways of evidence of the personal and relational dimension of Yahweh (Byrne 2009, 334-49).

The anthropomorphic representation of Yahweh is another mark of His relational dimension. It should be noted that the anthropomorphic representation of God was unacceptable to the ancient philosophers, considering it completely unjustified, even immoral, the image and attribution of human qualities to the Absolute, in what we could call, with the rigour of the terms used, the “humanization” of God. In this projection of theological construction, the direction is from man to God, but on the previous foundation of divine revelation communicated to man.

In theological context, anthropomorphism denotes a conceptual framework in which God is understood in terms of attributes that are exclusively human, such as the capacity for discriminating judgment, the exercise of responsible decision-making and choice, and the ability to pursue long-term goals. A deity characterized by these qualities is adequately articulated using personal pronouns and transitive verbs, using expressions such as “possess”, “loves”, “judges”, “promises”, “forgives” and analogous terms. This manner of using language suggests a form of *psychic anthropomorphism*. Also, reading the books of the Old Testament, we can pick up another form of physical

anthropomorphism: the “face”, “hand”, “arm”, “back”, and “finger” of Yahweh. According to this approach, Jewish and Christian theologians of the first centuries accepted both *psychic* (feelings, feelings) and *somatic* (face, hand, foot) anthropomorphism as a basic principle of their faith (Howell 2014, 1-59; Smith 2016).

E. LaB. Cherbonnier (1962, 187-8) mentions that the God presented in the Bible shares a level of anthropomorphism comparable to the deities of the ancient Greek and Roman pantheon. The biblical God shows more affinities with these Olympian figures than with the Absolute of ancient Greek philosophy. The distinction between Yahweh and Zeus, for example, is not a logical or formal one, but rather a factual and existential one. The prophets do not criticize the pagan deities for their anthropomorphism, but for their real inability to emerge as all-powerful beings interested in the human condition, unable to explain the origin and purpose of human life, and unable to transcend the limits of their existence under the fateful empire of destiny or cosmic law (*moira*, *dharma*, etc.). Their character is formal.

A prevailing view suggests that the anthropomorphism found in the Bible is a mere rhetorical device, a symbolic representation of the hidden and wholly other God, which escapes all attempts at description. Several well-known passages are routinely cited to support the claim that the Bible transcends anthropomorphism. However, contemporary scholars, by situating these passages in their contextual framework and thus recovering their original meaning, challenge such an interpretation. Hosea 11:9 serves as an illustrative example: “I am God almighty and not man: I am the Holy One in your midst”. Judging it at face value, this passage contrasts God with humanity, repudiating anthropomorphism. However, contextual analysis establishes otherwise. Hosea, as one of the boldest anthropomorphic authors in the Bible, ascribes to God Himself the emotions and feelings of a husband whose wife has been unfaithful. The contrast between God and humanity is about their respective approaches to the situation. Instead of responding to Israel’s unbelief with punitive measures, as is usually expected of men, God refrains from any retribution. He shows mercy and forgiveness to change the heart of Israel.

Over time, alongside the process of diversifying the interreligious relations and with the interaction with the philosophies of the time, mostly based on the reality of the incarnation of the Son of God, biblical theology, in the variations of the interpretation of the biblical text, adapted the old anthropomorphic hermeneutics to some of the requirements of philosophy, given the fact that the Fathers The Churches were schooled,

in the first instance, in the philosophical directions contemporary to them: God is a person, a Trinity of Persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – but each divine Person is devoid of any somatic, physical content.

Conclusions

Yahweh's self-revelation within the historicity of the Israelite people produced a radical re-signification of the understanding of the divine. For the first time in the religious history of humanity, God communicates Himself as a person and initiates a historical dialogue with man. For all these reasons, the religious coordinates of the Old Testament confirm the transition from the impersonal to the personal, from the archaic sacred to the monotheistic sacred, and from mythology to a logical and theological systematization of the relational divine.

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