

# The Academic Synopticon

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## Part Eight.

### Religion and Theology

To properly understand religion, accounts of religion cannot be essentially grounded in other basic human practices, such as musicality, morality, or artistry. Religious matters often involve re-adaptations or reinforcements of far older capabilities, but religious matters aren't essentially constituted by them. Religion involves novel cognitive/affective capabilities to humans and empowers human societies in novel ways.

#### Religion: The Core

Religion must be comprehended in terms of its essential practices. Three categories are jointly sufficient: the mystical, the magical, and the mythical. The "mystical" encompasses the experiential dimension that inspires spiritism and dualism. The "magical" covers human efforts at managing greater powers. The "mythical" supplies the explanatory dimension, situating humans within the world.

Without myth, religion wouldn't cohere into a cultural praxis, leaving strange experiences and traditional rituals unconnected and unmotivated. Myths are entrancing and empowering narratives about unnatural and spiritual matters. Ideas and beliefs from those narratives offers explanations for spiritualism and ritualism. Sacred performances are central to religions, but by itself the feature of 'sacred performance' requires thoughtful content – what is sacred, who is supposed to respond to the sacred, and what is the point of the performance? Myth is religion's central mode for communing and communication – without communication, religion would not exist, to be sure, and any religious idea had better employ an available medium for its social transmission over generations.

The way to avoid the dead-end of essentialism is to combine the family resemblance schema with a flexible essentialism of pragmatic functionality. Religions all do many things (but not always the same things) that bear a rough similarity to each other because religious practices have common functionalities for human living.

As for religion's relationship with morality, that matter is so complicated that a separate analysis is necessary. Briefly put, religion did not evolve primarily to invent/support/reinforce morality. Morality evolved many hundreds of thousands of years before anything religious emerged, and morality had already forged its powerful symbiosis with musicality for its reinforcement during the late development of Homo erectus (e.g. group dancing and singing were harmony re-enforcers for adult moral conformity and reconciliation). After religions emerged for Homo sapiens, these early religions initially were social competitors with the communing of music/morality, because they provided a second way for individuals to get relief from anxiety and tragedy besides group sympathy and comfort.

"A startling fact about the spirits and deities of foraging and hunter-gatherer societies is that most of them do not have wide moral concern.... The gods of hunter-gatherer bands vary in the degree of their involvement in human affairs, but typically are morally indifferent..." Norenzayan (2013)

Today, Stone Age shamanic figures get pictured as leading group dancing rituals, but that is a misconception; those were two different social roles. We automatically associate religion with group sympathetic support, but that is only because there was a partial symbiotic synthesis achieved before humans left Africa (a few myths state a divine origin for social rules and taboos), and a full synthesis in several civilizations during the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. That symbiosis didn't happen everywhere; for example, in China the shamanic mystics and healers were not allowed to merge with the priestly class and denied a significant social status. But we must stop here. The full story about religion and morality requires an account of theology.

Religion's relationship with theology is outlined in this paper. Theology isn't the same as religion, although all theology serves some religion or other. A theology no longer in service to any religion has mutated into philosophical cosmology or existentialist phenomenology. After religion is defined, theology's responsibilities and challenges are defined.

## Religion, The Basic Components

"There is no periodic table for elements of religion."  
– J. Jensen, *What is Religion?* (2014), p. 50.

The elements of religion, like the atoms of chemistry, are rarely found alone and unlinked outside of larger molecules. Nevertheless, those complexes, whether religious or organic, have their particular properties and powers due to the specific 'atomic' contributions. There is something like a periodic table to the elements of religion.

A preliminary list is assembled below, starting with animism. After the first five items, subsequent items require some previous item(s) plus additional developments. They are listed in not only logical order, but also (roughly) historical order. Animism is older than *Homo Sapiens*, for example. These items don't represent the end of religion, since new religious ideas have evidently come along since the chariot. However, every new religious idea is either a blending of older items on this list or a variant reconfiguration of one of them.

These items are not religious 'universals' in the sense of their scope; most religions employ only a subset of these items, and other kinds of belief systems that aren't religions may include a few. They are 'universal' in the sense that each one could be found in any religion to help make it religious, and they are 'universal' in another sense that any human society could easily reinvigorate or re-invent them as religiously needed. This list organizes items in order of the oldest to the youngest in chronological sequence.

1. animism – attribution of agency/sentience to entities in ways violating mundane categories, such as natural things able to intentionally move, help, or harm others
2. personism – attribution of personality/autonomy to entities in extraordinary ways violating mundane categories, such as natural things with minds or plants/animals with anthropomorphic personalities
3. transcendent – important and fundamental powers (perhaps with sentient features) are hidden 'above' or 'behind' or 'within' what can be observed
4. mysticism – interpreting dreamings, trances, hallucinations and the like as journeys/encounters concerning extraordinary beings and/or transcendent matters
5. afterlife – the mentality of a person survives death and continues in some transcendent condition, and can be accessible to the living through mystical states
6. spiritism – disembodied personal agents or features of dead persons can linger in the world or 'under' the world; they can be helpful, fickle or dangerous, such as ancestors, spirits, or ghosts
7. paraspiritism – a spirit can affect another, despite distance or time, to cause the sensing of spiritual encounters and to share/blend mentality (intuitions, feelings, thoughts, and so on).
8. transpiritism – a spirit can travel beyond one's living body for a while to go on journeys, join other spirits, or enliven another being or object.
9. mythic shaman – elicits group conviction by invoking paranaturality through rites that interventions in troubling situations (humans v. nature, or among humans) are undertaken and often accomplished
10. celestial being – a transcending power manifested in sky phenomena (the sun, moon, planets, comets, and so on) with anthropomorphic features and assigned responsibilities for nature's regularities

11. sacredness – special events/places/things in the world have a close relationship with important spirit, celestial, or transcendent matters or beings
12. taboos – specific rules for people to follow in order to avoid disrespecting or violating sacredness
13. superstitions – specific rules for avoiding unwanted relations with unnatural agents or transcending powers by taking odd precautions
14. omens – forecasts of incipient important events based on unusual natural signs that require humans to be forewarned and perhaps mobilized for group action
15. magic – causing surprising and even ‘impossible’ events through engagements with spirits or transcendent powers
16. spiritualism – living persons can use mysticism or magic to engage/cooperate with unnatural agents, honored ancestors, or a transcendent reality
17. divination – making predictions about ongoing/future events through signs from transcending powers (omens, augury) or unnatural spirits
18. sacred rite – regimented performance conducted by individuals or the community, usually involving magic or divination, for respecting and evoking sacredness
19. shrine – constructed site, often involving an above-ground structure and/or an altar, for enjoying sacredness and/or situating rites, in locations deemed sacred
20. sacred myth – aggregation of information into a relatable and compelling narrative about unnatural/transcending matters and their relations with the human world, helpful for interpreting and directing other religious matters
21. cosmography – mythic accounts of the organization of the whole world, usually into celestial, upper, and lower realms, and descriptions of each realm’s inhabitants (divine, demi-godly, human, ghostly, demonic, etc.).
22. dualism – features of human persons (such as the self or sentience) have a separate fundamental/co-original reality
23. reincarnation – special people can hope for another corporeal lifetime thanks to the survival and unnatural transmission of personal features past death
24. necromancy – communication with dead human spirits, usually for conjuring or divination
25. sorcery – interactions with dangerous unnatural powers/demonic forces to acquire paranormal abilities or to conduct magic, divination, or necromancy for selfish benefit
26. theism – one or more transcending powers are unnatural persons (‘gods’ and so forth) who engage with the natural world and humans
27. creationism – god(s) are responsible for the world’s development, features, and hospitality for humans living here; perhaps god(s) made the first people as well
28. holiness – special events/places/things in the world not only have sacredness, but they are accomplishments or manifestations of a god; special people deeply affected by holiness can be deemed holy, too
29. priest – a trained person, consecrated as holy, with assigned powers to render other matters holy

30. holy ritual – a performance for imaginative participation in events of sacrificial devotion or sacred creativity (in ‘mythic’ time, etc.), usually led by priests
31. temple – constructed building for situating rituals, in locations already held sacred/holy, or deemed sacred
32. miracle – unexpected event caused by a benevolent god, usually regarded as sacred and holy
33. tragicle – unwanted event caused by a fickle or malevolent god, usually regarded as regrettable or evil
34. revelation – miraculous communication of information from a god, yielding information usually deemed holy, and usually requiring religious interpretation
35. saintliness – special people in close relationships with god(s) because they accurately perceive holiness through proximity to miracles, having revelations, doing magic, and/or knowing taboos
36. veneration – ritual for displaying piety and obedience to a god, usually designed and/or led by holy people
37. invocation – ritual for eliciting the blessings/cooperation of a god through costly acts of veneration like worship or sacrifice
38. conjuring – provoking a god to help cause unusual events (healings, curses, etc.) or to imbue things/people with unusual powers (talismans, etc.)
39. theurgy – using an invocation of a god in order to obtain for oneself magical/paranormal abilities, or even divine powers and status
40. prophecy – relaying some information about divine wishes or plans from a communicative god, usually acquired after proving holiness or saintliness or displaying veneration, and typically involving invocation, conjuring, or theurgy

By 5000 BCE, all the items down to prophecy were extant in many geographical regions, especially where proto-civilizations were forming.

Items that one might expect to see on this list, such as monotheism, supernaturalism, scripturalism, a priesthood, fundamentalism, asceticism, karma, sin, heaven, free will, and the like, do not belong on this list of religious elements. They are all recent theological constructions, each one less than 5,000 years old, of a largely syncretic nature that particular religions eventually invented. For example, individual immortality acquirable for many people (expecting a personal corporeal or spiritual afterlife of indefinite duration, if the right spirits/demons/gods are venerated/invoked) is a younger theological idea, that was seriously developed by only a few later religions.

### **Definition of Religion**

Before considering any superstructural systems of abstract thought, we must comprehend the cultural praxis of religion and the function of myth.

**A religion** is any subset to that list above of Religion’s Basic Components #1 - #37 (including their prior requisites on the list) that gets inculcated thoroughly so that their cohesion makes more sense to adherents than any other subset, and adherents are sufficiently motivated to inculcate the next generation accordingly.

Inculcation is further demonstrable when adherents regard other adherents of identical or similar subsets, but concern different gods/rituals/taboo etc., as people who are practicing the “wrong” religion. If inculcation is rigidly reinforced by other social mechanisms and institutions, adherents will also be unable to regard dissimilar subsets as religions at all. If inculcation is incomplete or loose, or in tension with other social forces, then many or most adherents will deviate from

'orthodox' convictions and practices by modifying them, letting them atrophy, or dropping them. A religion must put large energies into re-enforcing orthodox convictions and practices among adults from time to time.

Witnessing/preaching is the effort to individually persuade new adherents, which usually must take into account what those potential recruits are able to understand and what they already believe. The inculcation of religion for small children couldn't be the same as it is for adults. Depending on the socio-cultural circumstances in which efforts at adult persuasion and adult re-enforcement are occurring, mythology and theology may arise.

A Catholic will sternly tell you that the priestly rite of chanting over bread during a Mass cannot possibly be anything like magical conjuration for invoking immortality; but of course that rite is exactly just that. The way that many self-identifying Catholics no longer regard Mass as having any efficacy concerning ethical worth or immortality only confirms how Catholicism is atrophying and decomposing, and has no bearing on the correct classification of the religious point of Catholic Mass.

A synchronic and static 'snapshot' of religious practices across a large population cannot reveal the adequate classification of religious practices – only the diachronic and developmental study of religion can do that. Religions are organically social entities, not structurally definable formulas. Structures have functions, and functions have structures; religious practices are designed to do things for people irrespective of whether people now realize it or care. When people are doing a religious practice without any religious intent, that doesn't mean that the religious practice has become impossible to correctly define; it only means that people have lost interest in its defined use. When bad replicas of great art fill working class homes, we don't say that the aesthetic point and worth of the original artwork has become impossible to detect or account for.

## MYST, MAGIC, MYTH

A tradition has been handed down by the ancient thinkers of very early times, and bequeathed to posterity in the form of a myth, to the effect that these heavenly bodies are gods, and that the Divine pervades the whole of nature.  
— Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1074b

The “Foundations of Religion” must come from Africa, before the migrations out of Africa around 100kya to 60kya. Because all mythology requires narrative about “counter intuitive” and usually unobservable deities (they are either of the distant past, or they inhabit places where human rarely go, or they visit humans in hard-to-detect ways), only fully syntactical speech can convey such conceptions about agency and inscrutability. (It is impossible to mime out “an invisible spirit lives in the sky and goes anywhere it wants”.) Because a basically similar mythology has gone wherever humans have gone, the earliest mythology has to go back to around 80-100kya.

Mythology is central to religion, but two other foundations to religion are older: Mysticism and Magic. Neither require narrative language, but they do require fourth-order intentionality, the communicative powers of ritual, and the cognitive ability of analogical inference.

Mysticism supplied the ideas that something spiritual enlivens all of us (and important animals too), this spirit can travel and observe places beyond the local world, and spirit does not perish with the body in death.

Magic proceeded from the ideas that great powers are responsible for the important features and cycles of the world, and humans can participate in the processes controlled by those great powers.

Mysticism and Magic require a basic cognitive inference: Analogy. Analogy is a four-term inference, asserting that the relationship holding between an initial pair of things also holds between another pair of things due to similarities between the pairs. Mystical analogy basically says, “Just as my mind is separable from my body, other people’s minds separate from their bodies.” Magical analogy basically says, “Just a great powers are controlling worldly effects, humans can participate with those powers to achieve the same effects.”

Mysticism starts from the pervasive human universals of dreaming and trancing, in which one’s own mind goes to other places without the body, and other people appear who are very distant or no longer alive. Dreaming is presumably a Primate universal, and the susceptibility to trancing is so typical for Sapiens that its basis in brain functioning lies as far back as *H. Habilis*, if not further back. Primates already possess second-order intentionality, passing the mirror test and the false-belief test, so *Homo* possessed the idea of other mentalities. The belief that mentality is separable from the body – “spiritism” – then became a *Homo* universal, probably for late Heidelbergensis, since both Neanderthals and Sapiens would have had this capacity. The key behavioral evidence is burial, which was independently done by both.

Qafzeh, Israel: several *Homo sapiens* buried in a cave, with 71 pieces of red ocher and ocher-stained stone tools, suggesting a ritualistic burial. Age: about 100kya.

Panga ya Saidi, Kenya: 3 year old *Sapiens*, possibly buried with pillow and shroud. Age: 78kya.

Shanidar Cave, Iraq: Neanderthal skeletons placed in dug-out depressions, with flowers(?). Age: 60-70kya.

La Chapelle-aux-Saints, France: Neanderthal burials in a cave, at least 50kya.

Because mysticism focuses on familiar spirits (we dream about people we have known well) and desirable spirits (we trance to have caring relations with spirits), Mysticism is an off-shoot from the symbolic sphere of KIN. This is in evidence from the way that Animism, an earlier simpler version of Spiritism, attributes shared mentality among humans and important animals regarded as kin with us. Mysticism essentially pursues the loving and blissful bonds of like-minded kin beyond the mundane and mortal life, and Spiritism is the Sapiens culmination of MYST.

Magic does not leave behind archaeological or artifactual evidence. Magic is a prevalent cultural praxis, however, as people have a proclivity and proficiency for magic in every human society. Two basic forms of magic, inherent to the analogical inference, are everywhere: Propitiation and Divination. Propitiation says, “Because a great power can control the world toward some end, our ritual imitation of that control signals the power to proceed at our direction.” Divination

says, "Because a great power is controlling the world toward some end, our ritual revelation of that control shows signs of its direction." An age-old ritual of propitiation found all around the world is the fertility ritual, in which a human ritual imitating a cosmic power's control over the seeding and birth of nature will cause that power to aid human fertility and birth. Another common propitiation ritual is "Homa", the fire sacrifice. The sacrifice of something that humans prize (foods, valuables, other humans) through destruction by fire is premised on the idea that a great cosmic power uses fire in its control over the generation and regeneration of the world. Sacrifice by fire gives to the "god" what it wants and needs to do its work, so this god will favorably provide more of what the sacrificing humans want.

Divination (such as augury from nature and oracles from chance) assumes that the work done by a cosmic power must be so controlling throughout nature that even the littlest patterns to mundane events must somehow be affected, so the specialist who can interpret these signs can foresee this power's disposition and its direction. Magic essentially develops the human capacity for *TECHNE*, where our notions of controlling and imitative making came from. Magic is a form of learning from a higher power how it does what it does and how to make something desirable happen, and then relies on *TEAM* and *RITUAL* so that groups of people can reliably participate in this greater power's abilities.

Mysticism and Magic, because they have very different foundations in the symbolic spheres, would not automatically have much to do with each other. Mysticism is highly individualistic: each person can only experience one's own spiritual journey, and an afterlife consists of many individual spirits. Magic is highly communal: rituals are easily crafted for group participation for group benefit. However, *MYST* and *MAGIC* do fruitfully cooperate in the ritual of burial, which is a *Sapiens* cultural universal. We bury our kin because we respect and love the spirit of the deceased in the hopes of evoking a cosmic power to sustain that spirit towards some sort of regeneration (either reincarnation, or at least a spiritual dwelling). Without respectful and memorable burial, humanity believes that love will be lost: this lost spirit will instead be doomed and dangerous.

Without *MYTH*, mysticism and magic would not have much more to do with each other beyond burial. Indeed, in many societies, the only social function for a mystical sage or hermit is to conduct the funeral rites. Buddhism plays this singular role in China, for example, while having nothing to do with solving human problems with fertility or health (those are Taoism's specialties).

## Proto-Religious Factors

Most of these foundations for MYST, MAGIC, and MYTH do not constitute religion or even primarily lend themselves to just religion, but they were probably essential to the earliest formations of what became religion. If shamanism counts as religious, then the later items on this list are religious. Animism, an initial part of religion, was actually itself a culmination of even more primal ideas going back in archaic humanity before 100kya. This list organizes items in order of the oldest to the youngest in chronological sequence.

1. extended consciousness – appreciation for all ranges of experiential states, across what is now classified as ‘normal’, ‘abnormal’ and ‘disturbed’ states
2. group performance – chanting/singing/dancing for arousing communing emotional states (euphoric or solemn, e.g.) among a group, sometimes also for reaching altered states of consciousness
3. plural naturism – the environment includes all sorts of neighboring and interconnected levels of reality accessible through various kinds of conscious and dream states  
  
[ cognitive capacity for minimal counter-intuitiveness by transferring an ordinary feature from one natural kind to another natural kind ]
4. vegetative imitation – individual or group activity aligning humans with natural vegetative cycles (plant lifecycle, seasonal patterns, etc.) that concern fertility, regeneration, and vitality
5. animal imitation – individual or group performance of animal behaviors relevant to understanding their ways, perhaps with decoration/costuming as an animal
6. animal mentality – transferal of animal mentality to humans by adopting the ‘mindset’ and behaviors of animals during special performances for group participation or at least group observation
7. sacrifice – the killing and disposal of vegetative or animal life, or perhaps human life, to adjust human-nature relations or inter group affairs for relieving group anxiety and tension
8. mimetic rite – specialized performance, perhaps involving animal mentality or sacrifice, by a skilled practitioner for mimetically enacting success with some endeavor, such as hunting or healing, in a dramatic fashion
9. artistry – decorative markings or material artefacts with non-functional features designed for symbolizing magnified significance and power
10. talisman – artistic object or figurine designed for evoking a helpful connection to natural ways or powers, such as those conducive to vitality or fertility
11. caching/burial – placement of deceased bodies into deep pits, or into shallow graves, sometimes accompanied by symbolic plant/animal parts, artistry, or a talisman
12. rebirth – after death an animal or human can live again, restored in a natural body of its own kind through the cycles of nature
13. trancing – deliberate entry into altered/disturbed conscious state in order to facilitate non-human mentality and/or convincing rites, often described as traveling through other realms or joining an animal mentality
14. mimetic shaman – elicits group conviction – through artistry, non-human mentality, rites, and trancing – that interventions in troubling situations (humans v. nature, or among humans) are undertaken and often accomplished

[ cognitive capacity for modest counter-intuitiveness by transferring a special feature of one natural kind to another natural kind ]

15. animal animism – transferal of human mentality to animals, so that certain kinds of animals can be anthropomorphic enough to attend to humans and commune with humans under special circumstances

[ animism is developed further ]

16. animal paranatural – attribution of extraordinary natural powers to certain kinds of animals, by regarding them as closer to, or embodying, primary ways of nature

17. animal kinship – unify the human group with a particular animal community at a mental level, probably to inspire mutually empathetic relations, and potentially to transfer animal abilities and knowledge to human individuals and/or groups

18. personification of nature – attribution of anthropomorphic traits or mentalities to prominent natural features (of the landscape, the weather, or the sky, for example) as particular powers responsible for nature's ways

[ personism is developed further ]

19. human paranatural – attribution of extraordinary natural powers to special types of persons, by regarding them as connecting with extraordinary animals and/or paranatural power

20. death survival – human paranatural permits the survival of something essential about a person beyond death, perhaps somewhere in the animal, natural, celestial, or transcending realms

21. paranatural decorations/implements – symbolic artefacts exemplifying, and sometime assisting the transfer of, paranatural powers of special persons

22. paranatural shaman – elicits group conviction – through mimetic rites invoking the suggestion of paranatural – that interventions in troubling situations (humans v. nature, or among humans) are undertaken and often accomplished

[ fully syntactic speech is developed ]

23. paranatural narrative – utilizing language to describe paranatural matters and recount relationships between humans and paranatural matters, allowing the generational repetition and development of shared tales

[ cognitive capacity for robust counter-intuitiveness by crediting a being with features/powers that violate its otherwise expected traits ]

24. mythic tale – a narrative relating paranatural events too far in the past or too paranatural to observe which recount the origins and histories of the human group (“the people”) within its earthly environs

25. paranatural geographical archetype – a prominent feature of the landscape, such as a huge rock, tall tree, or nearby mountain, imagined as the center of, or connection to, paranatural powers

26. paranatural animal archetype – a species, in magnified or fantastic form, embodied as a unique yet generic individual (“Crow” or “Jackal”, etc.) with an anthropomorphic mind, paranatural powers, and a characteristic talent/mission

27. paranatural creator – a magnified anthropomorphic being, perhaps quasi-animal or quasi-human, responsible for establishing the world's main features and providing conditions for the emergence of humans

[ transcendent is developed further ]

28. artistic graffiti – symbolic traces of artistry, such as petroglyphs or hand outlines, placed and preserved for later viewing in remote locations across generations, suggesting an imaginative communing with both ancestral and future generations.
29. artistic imagery of animals – for display under extraordinary conditions, such as remote locations or underground caves, probably conjoined with rites
30. artistic imagery of humans – depicted to suggest altered conscious states and/or transcending powers, sometimes by assigning animalistic capacities (e.g. the flight of a bird), for limited display and ritualized usage
31. artistic imagery of fantastic animals – painting or figurine artwork of ‘animals’ not found in nature, and of animal-human beings, usually an animal head on a human body, suggesting extraordinary mentality/power  
  
[ mysticism is developed further ]
32. spirit quest – the deliberate pursuit, usually with expert assistance, of transformed mentalities and paranatural powers through communing with helpful paranatural powers (such as an animal archetype)
33. spirit survival – the transformed mentality and paranatural power of a person, such an ancestor or shaman, can survive death and commune with the living, such as another shaman, to convey information and wisdom  
  
[ spiritism is developed further ]
34. mythic shaman – elicits group conviction – through artistry, mythic tales, and rites invoking spirits – that interventions in troubling situations (humans v. nature, humans v. spirits, or among humans) are undertaken and often accomplished

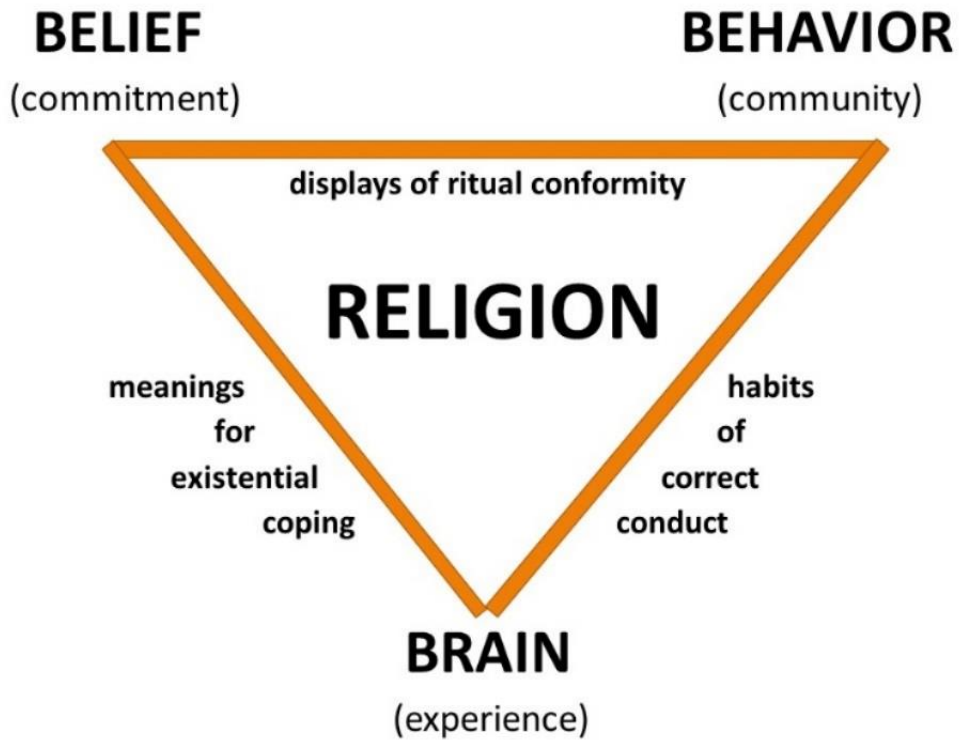
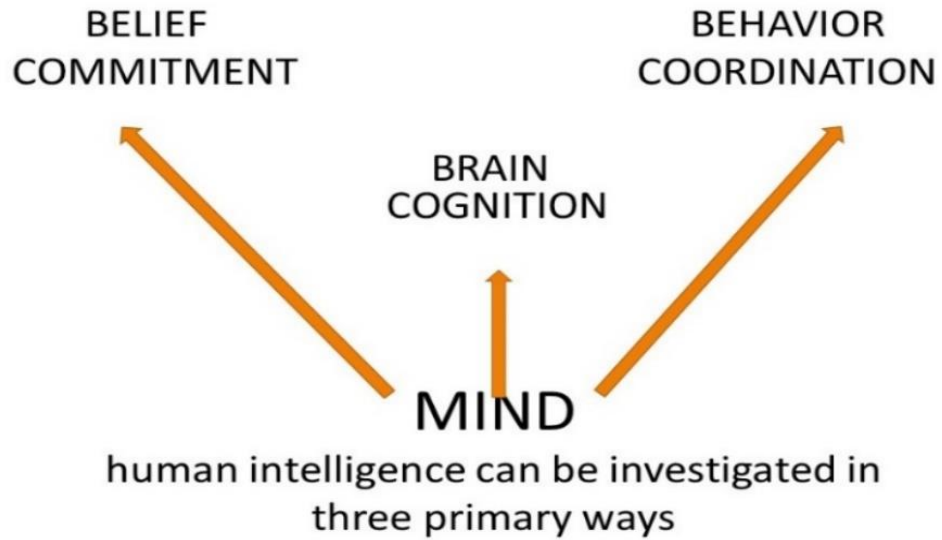
Cultural forms and practices that borrow from items on this “Proto-religion” list have always lasted since the Stone Age, right alongside numerous religions over the past 40,000 years. Does the mythic shaman exemplify a religion? It is unnecessary to make a clear determination, since any religion maintains refined versions of proto-religious activities, and mythic shamanism around the world sometimes did develop into this or that religion. Down to modern times, people have entertained and enjoyed all sorts of proto-religious activities, whether labeled as “superstition” or “paganism” and so on. Established religions naturally disparage and discourage quasi-religious practices that elude organized religion’s structures and rules. Nevertheless, proto-religious ideas are not going extinct. Much of the New Age spirituality movement, for example, easily revived chosen forms of #1 – #34 with enthusiasm.

**MYTH**

Myth relies on the power of narrative to transform group beliefs and behaviors.

Outdated View: Religious ideas originated when ignorance and fear overwhelmed and overrode human intelligence.

Scientific View: Religious beliefs arose through human intelligence dealing with natural curiosities, emotional tragedies, and small-group social dynamics.



## A Holistic Approach to Religion

“Religion is (1) a community’s hard to fake commitment (2) to a counterfactual and counterintuitive world of supernatural agents (3) who master people’s existential anxieties, such as death and deception.” [Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust*, 2002 p.4]

- (1) Communal behavior rituals for participation.
- (2) Extraordinary paranormal agents for relationships.
- (3) Consoling/compassion experiences for idealization.

We have encountered these three components to Religion in (1) Magic, (2) Myth, and (2) Mysticism. Each one, by itself, cannot yield relevant information for the other two. None of them can dictate terms or truth to the others, or even to versions of itself.

|                     | <b>MYST</b>  | <b>MAGIC</b>   | <b>MYTH</b>  |
|---------------------|--|--|--|
| Mystical experience | Each mystical episode is unique, unable to dictate how another episode should be experienced.                          | All sorts of mystical episodes might lend themselves to application in different kinds of magical rituals. | Mystical episodes are not detailed enough to determine which unnatural beings are more real.                 |
| Magical ritual      | One magical ritual calls for this sort of mystical episode while another ritual calls for a different sort of episode. | One magical ritual serving participants has nothing to do with the efficacy of some other magical ritual.  | One magical ritual calls on one particular unnatural being, while another ritual calls on a different being. |
| Mythical narrative  | A mystical episode can easily deviate from the dogmatic expectations set by a mythical narrative.                      | Magical rituals can be appreciated by participants no matter whether they also believe in the same myth.   | One myth about unnatural beings cannot disprove some other myth about different unnatural beings.            |

Religion combines Myst, Magic, and Myth so that they restrict and cohere with each other. Within a religion, a unified Myth dictates which unnatural beings are real, which religious rituals are legitimate, and which mystical episodes are valid.

It is impossible to give an “essentialist” definition of religion, because of its three distinct components and the way that each religion can combine them in unique ways. Here are three religions, each emphasizing a different component:

**Buddhism** – emphasizes the experiential dimension of mysticism and spiritualism. Some modest magic, and little dogma.

**Taoism** – emphasizes the ritualistic dimension of magic and divination. A little mysticism, and flexible mythology.

**Christianity** – emphasizes the mythical dimension of dogmatic faith in the supernatural. Restricted mysticism and ritual.

So-called “organized” religion accomplishes three unification tasks together: (a) the demarcation of the mystical to determine “genuine” religious experience; (b) the monopolization of magic done only by approved “experts”; and (c) the doctrinalization of the mythology preserved by status holders.

The “opposite” of a unified religion would resemble indigenous religiosity, paganism, or modern spirituality: any number of combinations of Myst, Magic, and Myth are enjoyed by anyone without trying to dictate techniques or terms to any other participant. Mastery and expertise is respected, but deference is not attached to in-group/out-group boundaries.

## MYTHOLOGY

“The poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities.” — Aristotle, Poetics 24:10.

Pascal Boyer has theorized that mythology, because it is (1) language-dependent, (2) has to be easily memorable across generations, and (3) easily picked up by children, consists of narratives about somewhat unnatural entities without going too far into entirely contradictory terms. Boyer describes the “minimally counterintuitive” concept: An entity is either given a property it shouldn’t ordinarily have, or an entity is deprived of a property that it ordinarily should have. Here is a table of minimally counterintuitive entities.

| Ontological categories | Intuitive-knowledge-domain violations      |                                    |  |
|------------------------|--|------------------------------------|--|
|                        | Psychology                                 | Biology                            | Physics                                  |
| Person                 | A person who knows everything              | A person requiring no food to live | A person who is invisible                |
| Animal                 | A snail that uses language                 | A dog that is immortal             | A bear that can be in two places at once |
| Plant                  | A flower that listens to people’s requests | A shrub composed of metal          | A tree that is weightless                |
| Artifact               | A hammer that feels neglected              | A shoe that sprouts roots          | A car that can drip through a sieve      |
| Natural, non-living    | An icicle that enjoys music                | A diamond that was born            | A rock that passes through solid objects |

Table 1 is based on Boyer by J. Barrett, “Exploring the Natural Foundations of Religion.” Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 4.1 (Jan. 2000): 29-34.

Here is a more complete table of all possible minimally counterintuitive concepts.

| Six Combos Five Categories | Person  | Animal                                      | Artifact                                      | +/- Mind  | +/- Body  | +/- Matter   |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| <b>Person</b>              | A person with two minds within the same body. | An animal with a human-like mind. (bigfoot) | An artifact with a human-like mind. (android) | Person+ = a person reading minds (a telepath)<br>Person- = a person lacking a mind (a zombie) | Person+ = a person who can’t be killed (a demi-god)<br>Person- = a person without a beating heart (a vampire) | Person+ = a person able to fly around (a fairy)<br>Person- = a person who is invisible (a ghost) |
| <b>Animal</b>              | A person with an animalistic mind. (werewolf) | An animal combining two animals (chimera)   |   | Animal+ = an animal talking to humans<br>Animal- =  | Animal+ = an animal belching fire (a dragon)<br>Animal- =   | Animal+ = an animal of huge size (giant)<br>Animal- =  |
| <b>Plant</b>               | A person turned into a tree (Zeus and Daphne) |   |   | Plant+ = a tree with a human-like mind (Ent)<br>Plant- =                                      | Plant+ = a tree of cosmic life (Yggdrasil)<br>Plant- =  | Plant+ =<br>Plant- =   |
| <b>Artifact</b>            | A person blended with technology (cyborg)     | An  |   | Artifact+ = a puppet becomes a boy (Pinocchio)<br>Artifact- =                                 | Artifact+ = an object repelling evil forces (amulet, talisman)<br>Artifact- =                                 | Artifact+ = a ring making the wearer invisible (Gyges’ ring)<br>Artifact- =                      |
| <b>Natural object</b>      | A person turned into a statue (Lot’s wife)    |   |   | Object+ = a statue becomes a woman (Pygmalion and Galatea)<br>Object- =                       | Object+ = a statue coming alive (golem)<br>Object- =  | Object+ =<br>Object- =   |

All legend, in order to exaggerate beyond factual lore, and any folktale and poetry expanding beyond the familiar, consist of narratives that employ counter-intuitive ideas. This deployment is able to enlarge the scope and power of analogy, metaphor, allegory, and other poetic functions.

A religious mythic narrative differs from a fable in three ways:

- A. The religious entity remains an agent – a Person-like mentality that makes decisions and does intentional deeds. Humans pervasively apply a “hyper-active agency detection” mode of cognition due to evolution, and easily apply it from early childhood on, “observing” agency at work around them in nature.
- B. The religious agent possesses extraordinary Powers responsible for humanity’s existence, directly or indirectly. The existence and powers of nature’s ways need explanation, and agent-explanation is available and credible, so extraordinary agents – gods, demi-gods, demons, etc. – are ready for narratives about their great deeds.
- C. Some religious entities (perhaps supreme, or subordinate) can be provoked and propitiated by human activities. Agents have aims, preferences, values (and so on), so human deeds may be noticed for selective responses.

The religious entities at the heart of mythic narratives are Persons of vast Power with whom humans can Participate. In other words, religion is not just fable because one needs to understand, believe in, and cooperate with mythic powers.

The Clan is able to make use of MYST and MAGIC. Clans do not require MYTH to function well, and that is fortunate, since the Clan dates from much earlier than the development of narrative language around 100kya. However, it is interesting that the origins of TRIBE and the initial stages of MYTH would have been occurring around the same time, 120kya – 80kya. It is therefore an interesting hypothesis that the human need for Religion (the combination of MYST, MAGIC, and MYTH) became apparent to any human group reaching the scale of TRIBE.

Religions are Counter-factual and Fictional, but so what?

1. The significance of an unusual experience of existential commitment does NOT lie in correspondence with an external reality. Belief is not merely representation.
2. The significance of an existential commitment instead lies in its regulation of a person’s conduct. Pragmatism: not “X exists” but rather “I ought to be in R relation to X.”
3. The validity of an existential commitment depends on whether resulting conduct meets the standards of R.
4. Beliefs are religious to the extent that they commit one to a pre-eminent project of fulfilling an ideal relationship with a far greater whole.
5. As ideal, belief’s object (objective) is non-rational and non-natural. Commitment is to what **might** come to exist.

Religion in the TRIBE therefore combines MYST, MAGIC, and MYTH to accomplish these social goals:

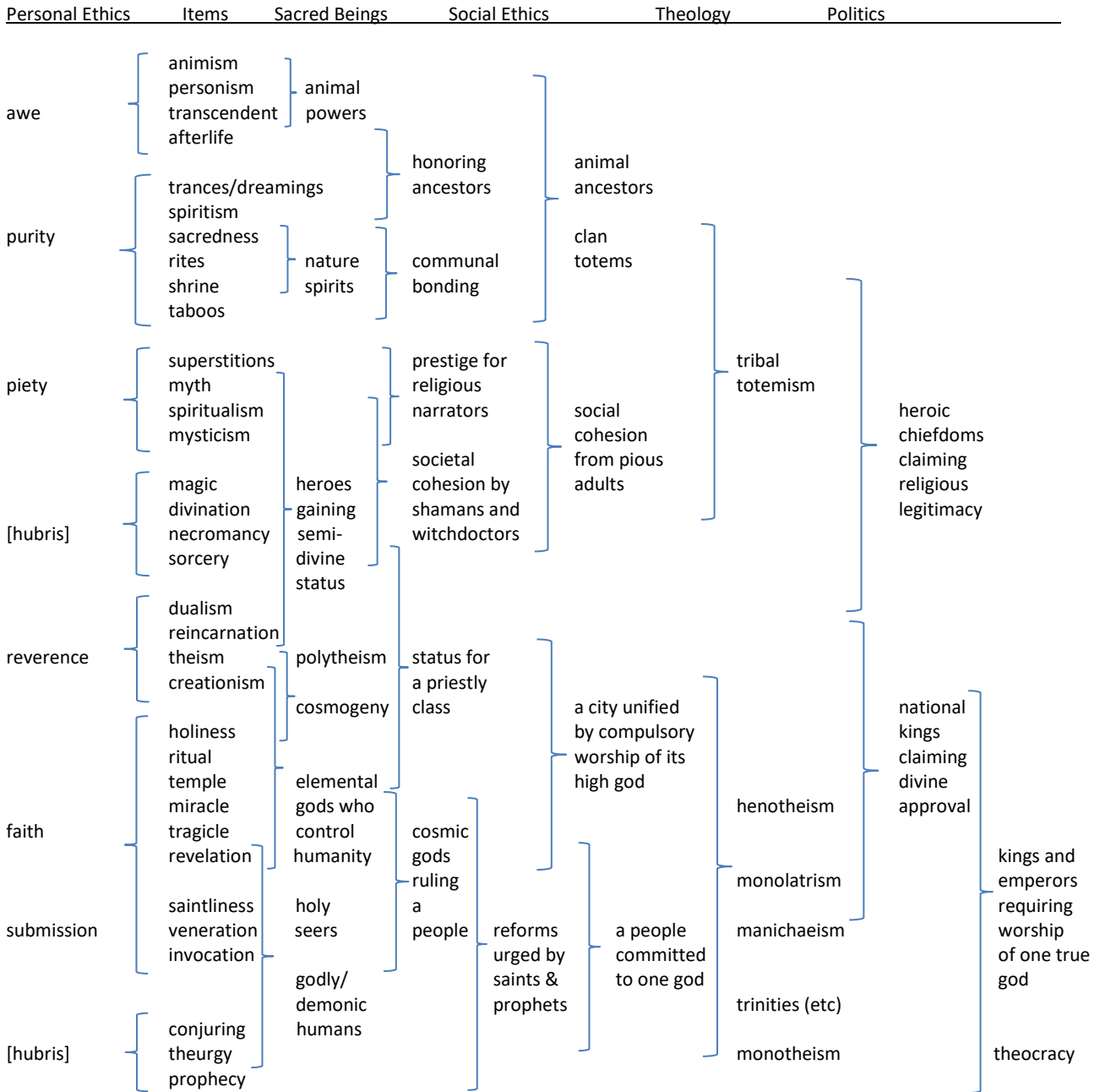
**Communal behavior rituals:** Societies can supply trade-offs, balancing other social goods and social “capital” in exchange for costly and risky rituals.

**Extraordinary paranormal agents:** False-positive beliefs in unnatural agents rarely have severe consequences, and they yield idealized narratives.

**Consoling/compassion experiences:** Commitments to religious beliefs can arouse personal consolation and social compassion in non-rational situations.

# The Cultural Development of Religion

This chart lists concepts that are foundational to religion in their chronological order from top to bottom.



## The Original Mythology

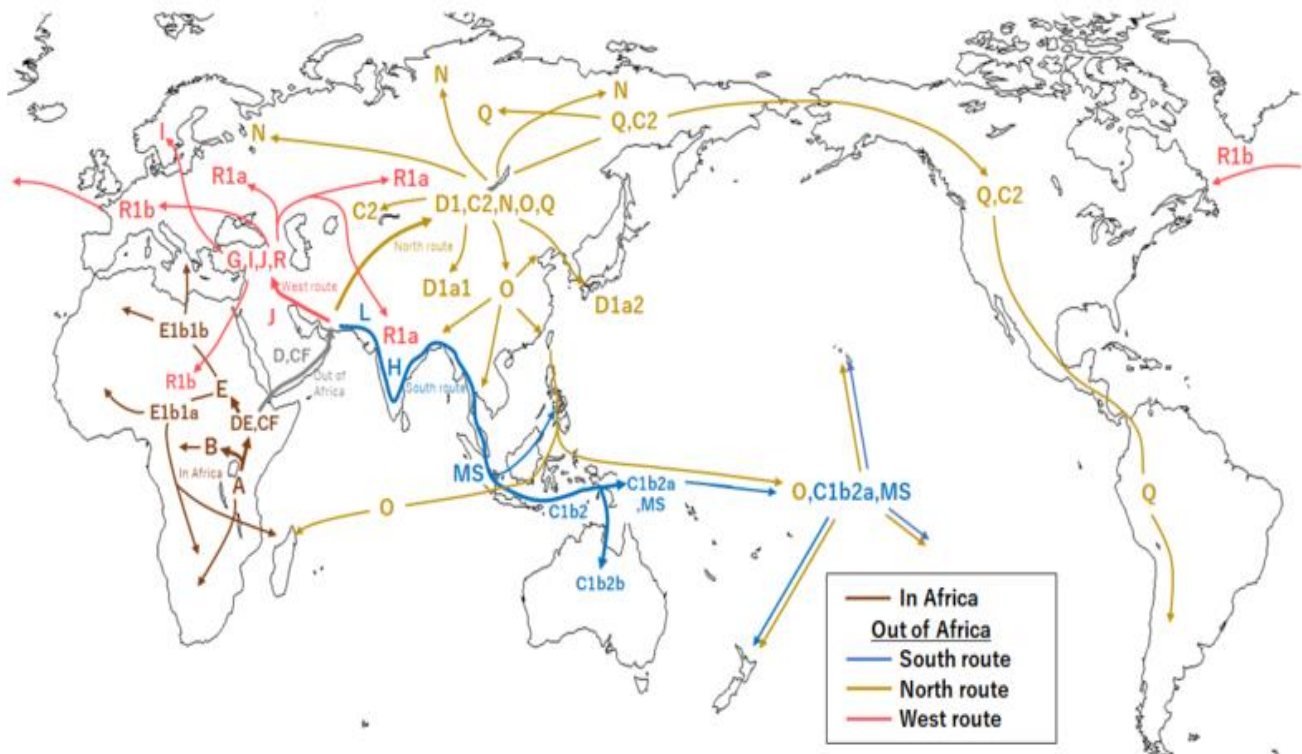
“Yes, let us strive toward the light, toward freedom and beauty – but not with a new beginning, sloughing off the past. Into each new home we must take the old gods with us.” [W. Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* v.8, 218-24, trans. in W. Kluckhohn, *Wilhelm Dilthey's Philosophy of History* (1956), p. 108.]

To uncover the earliest mythology, three steps must be taken. First, remove from consideration all theological expectations about the superiority or primacy of one religion or its core doctrinal elements. Second, eliminate ideological expectations about what the “right” sort of religion must include or exclude. Third, set aside complex concepts about gods or creation (etc.) that the late stone age (circa 120kya to 20kya) could not have conceived.

The scholar who has advanced the study of world mythology recently is Witzel, *The Origin of the World's Mythologies* (2012). He finds two kinds of mythology for humanity, the Gondwana and Laurasian. The Gondwana is found in the indigenous societies of Africa, southernmost India, and Australia. The Laurasian is found everywhere else.

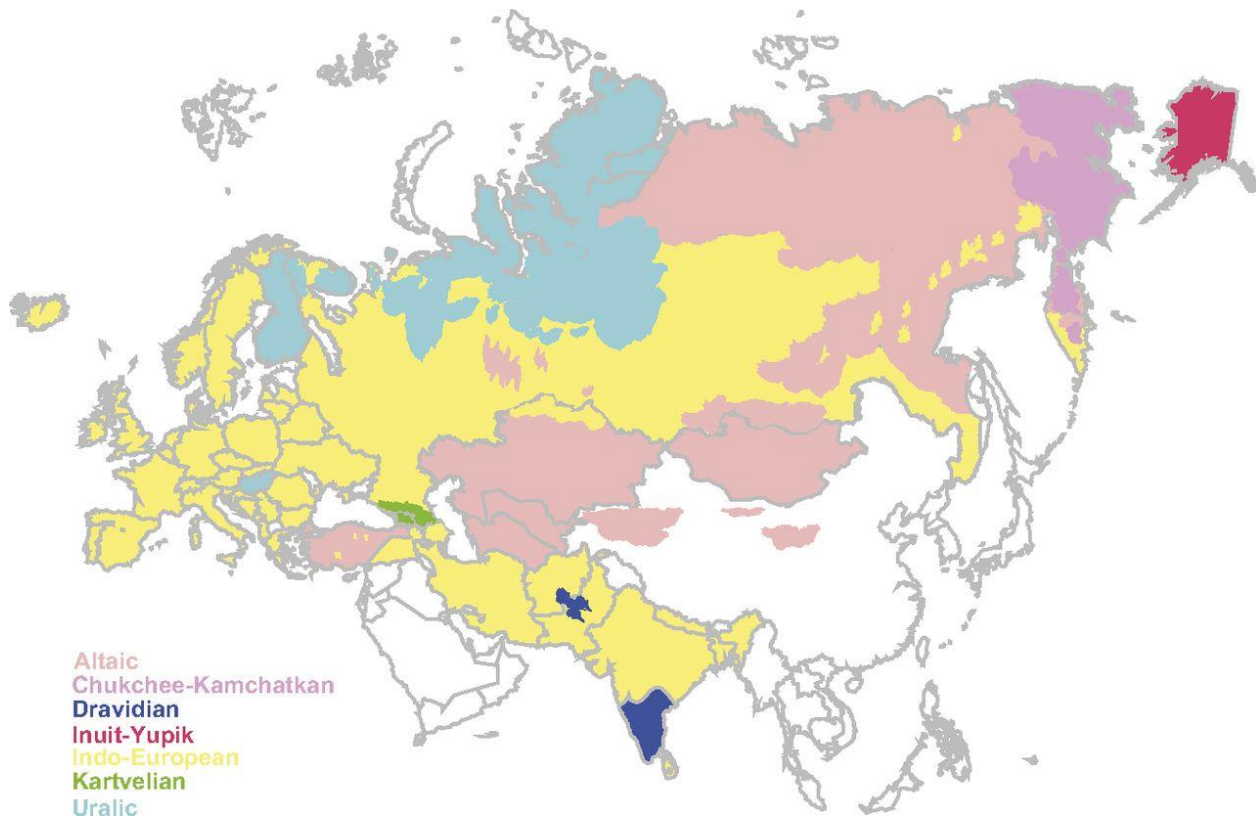
Witzel notices how mythology is entirely language-dependent, and that mythologies found in the same region of the world have deep similarities, just like languages do. Languages are “path-dependent” in the sense that your own language is the language of one’s ancestors, whose language had to descend with modification from an earlier language, and so on, so a language’s ancestry has to go back over the same ground where speakers had lived. Therefore, language has to form “families” that track human genetic families.

This is a map of human migration based on humanity’s genetics.



Notice the NM genetic juncture and how so much of the world is then descended from that line. This juncture coincides with the postulated “Nostratic” super-language family from around 15,000 years ago that later generated all the rest of language families on this map below:

## NOSTRATIC SUPER-FAMILY OF LANGUAGES



This region of the Nostratic language family shares similar mythologies. Witzel labels this “super family” of mythology as the Laurasian Mythology. Even ancient Chinese myths are similar enough to be put together as “Laurasian”.

Africa and Australia are not part of this linguistic heritage and ancestry. Witzel finds that African and Australian myths are separate from this ancestry too.

Analysis of maternal genetic lineages revealed that Aboriginal populations moved into Australia around 65,000 years ago, and all Indigenous peoples trace back to the first population in northern Australia living there around 50,000 years ago. They came from Sumatra, and got to Sumatra by coastline migration from southernmost India. There is evidence of Sapiens in India by 80,000 years ago, and a route from Africa through Saudi Arabia to India would have been the obvious migration route. Human genetics fits this southerly migration route.

Witzel therefore proposes that (1) Australian aboriginal mythology would have more in common with African mythology than either together would have with Euro-Asian mythology. His studies have revealed that this is the case. The African-Australian indigenous mythic super-family is labeled as the “Gondawana” mythology.

The mythologies of the aboriginal Australians and Papuas as well as those of most of sub-Saharan Africa represent distinct types that are very different from the Laurasian one. I will call them Gondwana mythologies—again, using a geological term that indicates the southern parts of the original supercontinent that existed long before the emergence of humans. It is significant that certain motifs are missing in the “tropical” Gondwana belt. Examples include the lack of creation myths that tell of the origin as well as the end of the world, as well as the preference for improvised magical spells that disregard the power of “true,” well-formulated, secretly transmitted magical poetry, so typical of much of Laurasia. Instead, Gondwana mythologies generally are confined to the description of the emergence of humans and their culture in a preexisting world. (Witzel 2012, p. 5)

**Gondwana basic myth (from Table 5.2, 5.3, p. 323):**

In the beginning heaven and earth (and the sea) already exist;  
A High God lives in heaven, or on earth, or ascends to heaven later;  
A series of lower gods, often children of High God, act as tricksters and culture heroes;

Humans are created from trees and clay (or rock), occasionally descend directly from the gods;

Primordial period ended by some evil deed of son of High God (or by humans);  
Humans act haughtily or make a mistake; punishment by a great flood; humans reemerge;

(an end to the world is missing)

**Laurasian basic myth (from Table 5.3 p. 323):**

Creation from nothing, chaos, etc.;

Father Heaven/Mother Earth created, separated;  
Father Heaven engenders:

Two generations (Titans/Olympians)

Four (five) generations/ages;

Heaven pushed up, sun released;

Current gods defeat/kill predecessors;

Killing the dragon/sacred drink;

Humans: somatic descendants of Sun god;

They (or a god) show hubris; are punished by a flood;

Trickster deities bring culture; humans spread, emergence of nobles, local culture begins;

Final destruction of world; new heaven and earth emerge.

**Laurasian** mythology, according to Witzel, is designed for Magic in a way that Gondwana mythology is not.

“Laurasian myth

– is an interesting story in itself, one that people like to retell constantly and elaborate upon;

– is based throughout on common human experience, something that, due to common human brain structure, is easily translatable, understandable, and applicable by correlation to the world around us; and

– offers an explanation of the human condition and of the world around us in our own (human) terms.”

Witzel (2012, p. 423)

In African and Australian indigenous tribes, elders who can relate the ancient myths are not the people responsible for conducting mystical rites or magical healings. The “magicians” and “spirit healers” (the “witch doctors” or “shamans”) only rely on Spiritism, not on tribal mythology.

Across the Stone Age world, it was Spiritism, not theism, playing the central cosmic role. Gods above and below were prominent examples of concentrated sentient spirit, but spirited vitality animated most everything of importance and salience. For Stone Age societies, no memory lingered about their ancestral intuition of universal spiritism; for them the world had always been vitally spiritual, and ritual evoked its powers for human purposes. Whether that vitalizing power is labeled as Mana (a Polynesian label) or any number of other words from many indigenous societies, its potency (and danger) is taken seriously.

How can we picture the public religion of a clan circa 30,000 years ago? Think first of a small rural town – what brings people together is what happens under the “big tent” or at a carnival, for the whole town’s entertainment and edification. A carnival assembly, ancient or modern, features these sorts of characters, each with a quasi-religious dimension that retains an original religious inspiration:

1. The Narrator
2. The Magician
3. The Animal Tamer
4. The Musician
5. The Healer

These roles congealed with one key figure to all of humanity's Stone Age religion from that time: the Shaman. Intimately familiar with the mystic, magical, and mythic powers of religiosity, the Shaman ('witch-doctor', 'medicine man', and so on) combined trance states and animal spiritism with music/dance, magic rites, healings, divinations, and communal rituals.

The Shaman, often with other elders, also preserved narratives about traditional cosmography and creation: myths about the establishment of higher and lower realms of the world and their inhabitants (godly, demi-human, human, demonic, etc), along with origin stories for the first people and their customs. Typical schemes are three-fold or four-fold: [sky – land – earth] or [celestial – upper sky – the lands – underground earth]

Some mythologies among indigenous peoples display additional complexities by becoming theogonies about generations of gods crafting the organized world, although theogony is a typical feature of Bronze Age religion. The Ancient North-Eurasian hunter-gatherers of the forests and tundras from Norway to Siberia and over to North America preserved this form of shamanistic religion the longest. However, this Shaman was not destined remain central for religion everywhere.

### Neolithic Mythology

After the arrival of the Neolithic transition, four mythic phases can be distinguished. The first phase of Paleolithic myth about *earthy gods* (such as the Goddess) going back 40,000 years supplied the enviroing context within which there arose the second phase of Pastoral/farming myth arising after 9000 BCE. The second phase both transmuted and supplemented the first phase, typical for not just myth but all ideology about social organization. The Neolithic experience of inhabiting endless grassy lands prioritized elemental *cosmic gods* in the skies and heavens who were receptive to sacrifices needed for worldly success.

By the start of the Bronze Age c.3500, the flourishing of pastoral/farming cultures across the fertile steppes around the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea instigated vast migrations to the east and west, that continued for the next 2,000 years (such as the Indo-Aryan migrations). During that time, an internal distinction arose between the subsistence farming communities on the fertile lands close to fresh water and the pastoral mobile tribes roaming the steppes. That nomadic experience of migration, fighting, and conquest prioritized *warrior gods* able to lead tribes to victories. The third mythic phase arose, even more patriarchal and militaristic, conjoining cosmic deities supplicated by priests with warrior deities followed by chieftains, while carrying along far older myths about local deities aiding fertility and earthly abundance. While these three socio-mythic strata (*priestly-cosmic*, *militant-warrior*, *farming-earthy*) were co-dependent, innumerable mythic tropes and dramas revolved around conflict and compromise among them.

Eventually the nomadic tribes proved to be militarily superior with horse-mounted warriors, followed by the addition of chariots (c.2000) and horse-mounted archery (c.1000 BCE). The age of cavalry had arrived and rapidly spread. This third phase of mythology traveled wherever the Indo-European (Aryan) tribal migrations went, supplying mythic themes and gods for Germanic, Scandinavian, Greek and Roman, Central Asian, and Vedic Indian cultures.

Where that third phase journeyed southwards, it promptly encountered a fourth mythic phase about urban kingly gods which radiated northwards after 2500 BCE from Egypt and Mesopotamia. The liminal zones of contact included the Mycenaean Greeks in the Aegean who encountered Egyptian myth, the Hittites in Anatolia who encountered both Egyptian and Mesopotamian myths, and tribes arriving from Iran such as Gutians who encountered Mesopotamian myth. By 1000 BCE, during the "Dark Age" after the Bronze Age collapse, all four layers of inter-mingled myth were available for further mythological development. Theogonies became complex and flexible, attempting to accommodate so many gods and their characteristic deeds and interrelationships. By that time, however, the Axial Age had begun, which would add a fifth layer of philosophical and theological sophistication.

The story of mythology in Sinai-Canaan-Arabia, northern India, and China did not display those four mythic phases. Another zone of liminal contact between mythologies was also occurring to the south, where Semitic peoples resided between Egypt and Sumeria. The Indo-Aryan migration around 1500-1200 BCE into northern India overlaid the Vedic cosmology with the indigenous Stone Age shamanism, resulting in the Upanishadic/Caste compromise of yogic/karmic reincarnation, exemplified in the Krishna theology. In China, the agricultural centers fostered kingdoms which converted Paleolithic shamanism into ritual divination, applied in a courtly hierarchy headed at the top by celestial ancestral royalty (*tian*).

Let's return to Western Eurasia. To the south of the Northern Forests, the transition to the Neolithic culture (animal domestication, pastoral herding, annual farming) was changing human societies. Where tribes gradually settled into semi-settled subsistence, territorial bounds dividing up nature came to be as important as cosmic bonds unifying with nature. This tribal complexity resulted in further specialization, social segmentation, and political hierarchy. Tribal organization characterized large-scale societies forming where pastoral and horticultural resources were abundant: e.g. the Eurasian steppe (e.g. Yamnaya, Samara, Bactria); Syria-Turkey; Niger; Central America; and Peruvian Andes. In the river valleys (Nile, Euphrates, Indus, Yellow) tribalism had to be subverted by an overriding loyalty to one's city-state and that city's chief deity.

Before the rise of agriculture, key symbols were connected with key social roles. For example, the goddess, the snake, and the chimera were late Paleolithic symbols found with rock art, carving, and sculpture. Each mythic figure underwent a dramatic change of status and character where Neolithic tribalism came to domination.

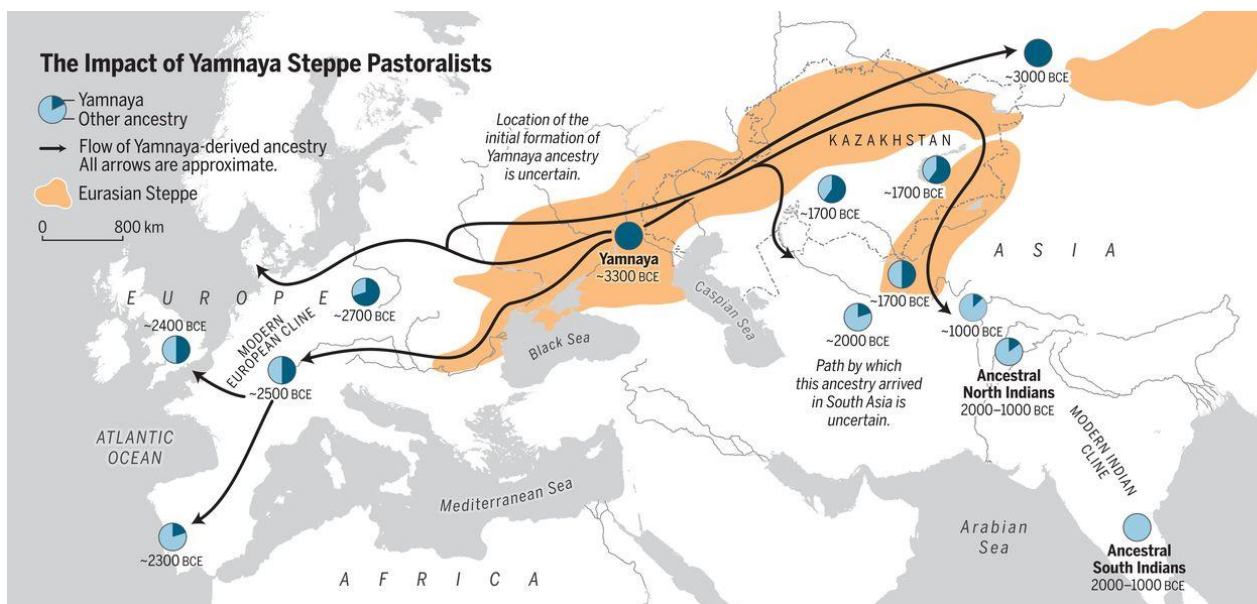
The goddess – represented motherhood and fertility – a symbol for nurturing and childhood protection. From the status of a primordial deity, the roles of wife, consort, or daughter became her fate as a companion to a male deity heading a patriarchy.

The snake – associated with death/rebirth – a symbol of fertility and immortality. Feminine. Akin to the Moon (cycles) and water. After patriarchic domination, the “dragon” had to be defeated by a demi-god male hero. The serpent remained a symbol of earthly and feminine healing (e.g. the Caduceus).

The man-bird chimera – associated with an atmospheric deity – a warrior and conqueror symbol. Masculine. Akin to an anthropomorphic mountain/storm deity, such as Indra, Zeus, Odin. Responsible for defeating a previous generation of primeval god(s) including a female deity (of water/moon/dragon motif).

Politics always re-writes legendary history. This is evident as far back as the Copper and Bronze age oral cultures (6000-1500 BCE). Neolithic farming and domesticated cattle (c.10,000-8,000 BCE) along with the domesticated horse and the wheel (c.3500 BCE) permitted pastoral and dairy abundance and novel technologies. The cow-pulled cart/wagon permitted the Kurgan-Yamnaya herders to migrate their Proto-Indo-European language in all directions. By 2000 BCE an offshoot of Sintashta culture of the southern Trans-Urals invented the horse-pulled chariot. The horse-mounted archer was a later development around 1000 BCE. Religious mythology recapitulates political ascendancy, in allegorical formats. Further examples, besides the displacement of the early Indo-European Goddess worship, are the mythic elevation of the sacred Bull, the goddess Cow, and the cosmic Horse (e.g. echoed in the Rg-Veda).

The cradle of the Proto-Indo-European language was the Yamnaya-Kurgan culture, which later fostered the Bactria-Margiana/Oxus culture and thus the Indo-Iranian “Aryans” by c.1700 BCE. By 1000 BCE these Aryan migrations had reached the Iran Plateau, Anatolia, Greece, Central Europe, and Scandinavia to the West, and entered northern India and Mongolia to the East.



[source: 2019 “The formation of human populations in South and Central Asia”]

### The Pastoral Age

Before the rise of the river valley civilizations around 3500 BCE (marked by intensive agriculture, walled cities, literacy, and courts), there were Euro-Central Asia pastoral/farming cultures going back to 9000 BCE, stretching from the Danube to Lake Balkhash (Hungary to Mongolia).

Two other significant Neolithic cultures were still around by 3500 BCE: the arid-pastoral Semitic culture between Egypt and Mesopotamia, and Anatolia (Turkey) with Çatalhöyük and later Hittites. (Migrating farmers from the Black Sea and Anatolia overtook Europe by 5000 BCE; India/Dravidian farming arrived from Iran and generated the Harappan-Indus civilization around 3300 BCE; then Southeast Asian farming later arrived from India.)

Like typical gods anywhere across Eurasia from Spain to China from the Stone Age until the Iron Age, the Indo-Irani-Euro gods were typically regarded as

- (a) willful persons of vast excellence, magnitude, and power (they are anthropomorphic);
- (b) primordial or born of primeval origins (they are archaic);
- (c) linked with celestial, elemental, or earthly features (they are cosmic);
- (d) ageless, indestructible, and deathless (they are immortal);
- (e) wielding special implements or animalistic abilities (they are resourceful);
- (f) responsible directly or indirectly for the first human beings (they are progenitive);
- (g) capable of endowing humans with abilities, skills, and crafts (they are helpful);
- (h) heedful of human affairs and desires (they are attentive);
- (i) appreciative of human praise and supplication (they are receptive);
- (j) present, openly or disguised, among humans (they are visitors).

Gods are actors on both celestial and worldly stages, doing mighty deeds viewed by humans as magical, miraculous, or cataclysmic. In many myths, certain primordial beings – sometimes a God, a Giant, or a First Man, or else a deific Cow or Horse, etc. – somehow got killed and dismembered to form the parts of the world. “Purusha” played this role in Vedic Hinduism; “P’an-ku” is recalled in ancient Chinese myth. Some gods fit into kinship structures as high ancestors, kings-turned-gods, or adoptive patriarchs/matriarchs. Rare are any primordial gods entirely aloof from human affairs; myths may mention them but humans wouldn’t rely on them.

These ten divine characters encouraged humans to do more than display reverence by engaging and negotiating with their gods. Knowing the currently dominant gods is essential; clinging to outmoded or outdated gods shows unwise traditionalism. Many pantheons mention an “older” class, generation, or race of gods that lost power or turned dangerous, who have lingering reputations for earthly fertility, demonic sorcery, or underworld dominion.

What was not expected from their gods? Three principal opportunities are largely missing: the gods do not take themselves to be moral paragons; they do not admit humans except rare heroes to join their immortality; and they are not preoccupied with instructing or enforcing ethical conduct. The gods can be helpful or vindictive on occasion, to be sure, and it was wise to have a divine ally when needed, but the divine was not part of the general ethical-legal structure of society. Essentially, gods care about humans because of some sort of kinship relation. Joint affection (divine blessing, human devotion) was the basis for mutual regard. The gods bestow their bounties to deserving supplicants, not to righteous puritans. By contrast, the river valley civilizations had moralistic and legalistic deities practically from their foundings.

Although certain individual deities are charged with the supervision of justice, contracts, and so on, in general the Indo-European gods do not have an ethical character. The essential thing about them is their power, which they can exercise at their pleasure. It is therefore important to have them as friends. [see Litchfield, Indo-European Poetry and Myth, pp. 130.]

Specific roles for this or that god in an Indo-European pantheon are usually limited to leadership or protection, such as (1) a Patriarch; (2) a King; (3) a Warrior; (4) a Matron; (5) a Shepherd.

Many gods had combined roles. The typical Euro-Irani-Indo pantheon was led by a High creator god, a Storm god (son/hero), and a Mother goddess. Often a twin-god motif was added, along with deified legendary kings. A warrior or shepherd deity may be protecting crops; a matronly deity can engender abundance as well as fertility. A distinction between more cosmic gods and local gods (which was typical for Stone Age cultures) adds a category for habitat, healing, crafty, and artful deities, along with a class of dangerous and demonic spirits.

By 2000 BCE years ago, the shamanic role was transformed or displaced from the vast Euro-Asian steppes southward. The dominant mythico-religious system across Bronze Age Europe and Asia featured these roles:

1. The Priest
2. The Prophet
3. The Sorcerer
4. The Oracle
5. The Yogi/Guru
6. The Qi/Chi Master

In a few cultures, one and the same figure was expected to fulfill multiple functions, but they were typically distinguished.

## **The Iron Age**

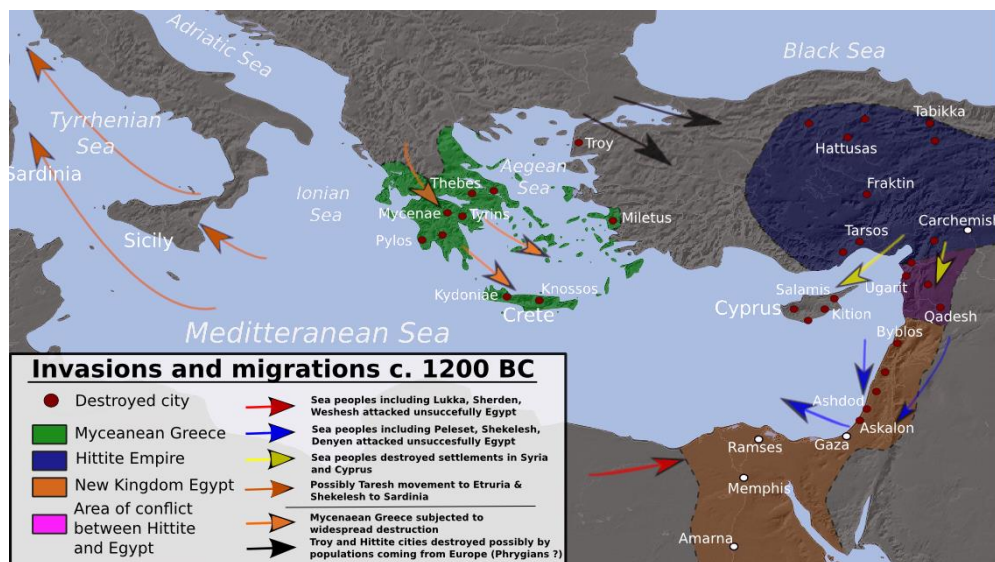
The use of iron did not arrive at the same time everywhere across Eurasia. However, by 1400-1200 BCE it was becoming widely available in the West and India, with usage in China a little later c.900 BCE. After the Iron Age settled in across the entire Eurasian continent (c.1200-800 BCE), the “Axial” philosophies and theologies emerged c1000-400 BCE.

Jaspers’s own term “the Axial Age” sounds to historians and anthropologists like the “Bronze Age” so they have assumed that Jaspers must have meant a duration in which (a) every society on the planet undergoes this Age unless it regrettably stays “primitive”, and (b) each society undergoes this Age in the same manner with similar outcomes. Jaspers did not endorse either (a) or (b) and in fact he discounted those expectations. The Axiality he finds is one of ideas, not of technologies or governments. However, it is too late to prevent misconceptions by non-philosophical disciplines, so we shall henceforth speak of an “Axial Phase” which by definition cannot be undergone by every society and could not happen at the same time in the same manner for each culture.

The Axial Phase was quite objectively real in human history, and not some modernist categorization imposed upon the past. First and foremost, the Axial Phase only applies to cultures in and from Eurasia descended from its original Laurasian Mythology (hence sub-Saharan Africa and Australasia are excluded). Secondly, only cultures affected by the Iron Age are Axial candidates (thus excluding cultures in the Americas).

The proponents of Axial systems (delineated below) were literary-minded but insecure and often itinerate. They could not reside at the center of national power, for there either was no such unified nation during their era (e.g. Egypt, Central Asia, India) or there was rampant political chaos (Iran, China). These thinkers did have access to oral legend and written text, and their systems were preserved in writings by devoted followers who maintained movements and schools of thought after political stability was restored. Their own bursts of creativity were indebted to that insecurity; ruling powers could neither maintain them nor quite control them. Beholden only to their bewilderment at the social instability around them, and their determination to reorient god and man within them, their Sage wisdom congealed into systematic thought about fundamental principles and ideals. During an era when nothing secure would be realized, their visions were idealized instead. They supplemented or replaced affection with alternative connections, such as theoretic reason (cosmology), elective submission (monotheism), yogic unification (Vedanta), or naturalistic integration (Daoism).

Political and social instability detonated across southern Eurasia after 1200 BCE, from the Mediterranean to China and impacting every civilization. Each region recorded their own version of a “Dark Age” and blamed economic tumult and brutal warfare. The Iron Age arrived in the Eastern Mediterranean and West Asia (from the Hittites), followed by Central Asia, India, and then China. Within a couple hundred years of iron’s broader availability in a region, that ending of the Bronze Age witnessed vast calamities. It is unnecessary to assert that iron’s availability directly caused those calamities since many factors were involved; however, iron-wielding peoples, armies (e.g. iron blades, iron-strengthened chariots), and navies exploited instability’s opportunities.



The troubles began in the Mediterranean. The Mycenaean (from an earlier Aryan migration) replaced the Minoan maritime economy after Crete’s collapse from the Thera volcano eruption c.1600 BCE. Dorians (more Aryans from the Balkans) then moved into their homeland with destructive force. After defeating Troy, Mycenaean pushed southwards, combined with Cretans and other displaced peoples, and contributed to the region’s descent into chaos.

**1200-800 BCE Mediterranean:** The Late Bronze Age collapse and Dark Ages. Practically every region of the eastern Mediterranean suffered political, economic, and cultural collapse. Droughts, natural disasters, resource failures, migrations, and wars were rampant. Many cities large and small across Mycenaean Greece, the Aegean, Crete, Phoenicia, and lower Egypt were either destroyed, partially abandoned, or impoverished. The long-standing Minoan civilization, only pre-dated by Egypt, had vanished. The Egyptian civilization survived, but the New Kingdom did not; however, its solar *cosmotheism* survived despite the loss of political integrity at the start of the Third Intermediate Period (1070 BCE). The 1100s BCE are also the age of the Trojan Wars recollected by Homer in lore and legend for the Iliad and The Odyssey. The Phoenician cosmopolitan outlook and its alphabet set the stage for *logocosmism*. The revival of Greece’s city-states during the 7th century BCE set the stage for philosophical Sage Literature such as Hesiod’s Theogony and the Sophists. Greece’s logocentrism led towards rationalist philosophers such as Parmenides and Plato. The other Axial system to emerge in this region was Ionian *natural cosmology*, which led towards the naturalism of Democritus and Aristotle.

**1200-800 BCE Levant:** The western chaos spread to Anatolia, Canaan, upper and lower Mesopotamia, Iran, and even Bactria. The Ugarit and Amorite states crumbled, Canaan fragmented into small kingdoms (such as Israel and Judah), and the Hittite Empire in Anatolia collapsed, while the Middle Assyrian Empire was severely weakened and Babylon and Elam fought for local dominance. Farther east, the Iranian Plateau harbored tribal migrations of contesting Medes, Persians, and Parthians, some arriving from Iranian Bactria. By the 800s, the Medes were consolidating Iran, the Neo-Assyrian Empire took control of most of the Middle East and Egypt, and the Phrygian Kingdom occupied Anatolia. Three novel theologies/cosmologies arose during 800-600 BCE. Bactria and northeast Iran was the epicenter for the god Ahura Mazda and the *duotheism* of Zoroastrianism. In Canaan, the Semitic Jews and their priestly class recollected and reconstituted *monotheism* for the god Yahweh during and after their Babylonian captivity. Around this same period, Babylonian astrology fostered mathematical astronomy to predict heavenly motions, eclipses, conjunctions (and the like) and then to formulate *nomotheism*: rational divinity is lawfully maintaining the cosmic order.

**1100-700 BCE Euro-Asia Steppe:** With so much instability to the south, migrating tribes across Germanic-Scythian-Yaz cultural areas from the Rhine to the west to the Oxus in the east expanded their control across northern Eurasia. Greek, Celtic, Germanic, Scandinavian, Russian, Caucasus, Pontic, and Khorāsān peoples sustained myths dating back to this turbulent Iron Age period. The bard re-telling the shining tales of legendary heroism began to supplement and then displace the shaman's murky incantations. In the West, the Greek heroism of Achilles and Odysseus was preserved in Homer's epic poems. Celtic-Germanic-Norse mythology similarly echoed a dimly-recalled Heroic Age. Danish-Viking, Irish, and British myths perpetuated these idealizations. Their poetic sagas and songs praised migratory folkways, ethnic independence, and *romantic individualism*. To the East in Central Asia, migrations of horse-mounted tribes on the Steppe displayed contrary ideals. The Cimmerian culture declined by 700 BCE, replaced by the Scythian and Khorāsān cultures to the north and east of the Black Sea and around the Caspian Sea. These invaders intensified their hierarchical nomadism and militarism with a mythic structure featuring *divine despotism*. Despite Scythian resistance against Persia, the arrivals of Turks into Central Asia and Romans into Europe then heavily suppressed traditional oral cultures, which were practically eradicated after the spread of Christianity and Islam. After 500 CE, the momentum of romantic individualism lasted in northern Europe to infuse its later democratic tendencies. The heritage of divine despotism survived with the "hordes" of Xiongnu, Hun, Avar, and Mongolian empires.

**900-700 BCE India:** Kuru Decline and Era of Janapadas. The greatest cultural and political center in Northern India, the Kuru state depicted in the epic Mahabharata, was conquered by neighbors and severely weakened. Numerous small kingdoms carried on episodic battles during this major dark period of North Indian history. The "second wave of urbanization" began India's recovery during the 600s BCE. The Upanishads displaced the older Vedic pantheon during 800-400 BCE. This *idealistic absolutism* posits an impersonal Brahman manifesting the world of appearance around immortal souls mired in the karmic cycle of perpetual reincarnation. This priestly Hinduism had an ex-urban challenger in Buddhism's *impermanent phenomenalism*: meditatively dissolving the illusory 'self' for karmic liberation into self-less nirvana.

**685-202 BCE China:** Hegemon Contests and Warring States Period. An era of cultural turbulence during the late Spring and Autumn Period to the Partition of Jin and the ensuing Warring States period. Confucius stood nearly alone during the 6th century BCE in his preservation of refined traditions for political order and stability, an axiological philosophy later known as Ru Classicism (儒) or *Confucianism*. His depiction of the Heaven-oriented Sage as a wise courtly official was promptly challenged by another axiological philosophy. Drawing on shamanistic myths about "The Way" dating back to 1000 BCE or before, the rural tradition of *Daoism* congealed around Master Laozi during the 5th century to advocate a simpler and close-to-nature way of life.

### **Axial Phases across Eurasia**

Having taken all candidate regions of Eurasia into account – the instabilities to the early Iron Age but the rise of literary renaissances – there are no obvious counterexamples or refutations to the Axial Phase category if properly applied.

Where Axial conditions prevailed its innovation was not evenly distributed, of course. Where no scholarly activity could be supported, in desolated areas or weaker kingdoms, imitating a neighboring culture was safer. Displaced and resettled scholars able to maintain literary communities found themselves on the peripheries of power, away from courtly influence but independent from coercion. Mythological and philosophical thinking first took the form of "Sage Literature"

during that time. At a time when the world seemed de-centered and absurd, sage thinking went inwards, as individuals were thinking for themselves and looking into their hearts and minds for answers.

With Sage Literature, personal responsibility and accountability came to the forefront. Didactic and discursive texts from Greece and Egypt to India and China sought re-orientations for people struggling to understand their proper place. Inventive updates for cosmology and orthology were urgently needed. Where historical Sage literature was produced in these regions, legend and lore looked back upon previous Great Ages of humanity, akin to a Golden Age (close divine-human relations, human excellence) followed by a Heroic Age (demi-god heroes, climatic wars) and a present-day Fallen Age (humans of small stature and low achievement).

The Axial Phase usually culminated in the establishment of academics: scholarly communities preserving and commenting on bodies of texts to advance systematic knowledge. Despite the “Fallen Age” that sages perceived around them, reinvigorating cities and nations elevated hopes for scholarly and academic communities. Philosophical thinking led the way. However, only seven of the twelve Axial civilizations developed academic Philosophy and other Ur-disciplines (such as History) after that. Overall, it appears to be the case that Sage literature accompanied and propelled each one of the Axial phases where it occurred, but Philosophy as an academic enterprise followed Axial innovation rather than leading it. Furthermore, sometimes academic Philosophy was unable to emerge in the wake of an Axial Phase, in some regions of Eurasia. Although philosophical thinking about matters divine and earthly is characteristic of Axial speculation, more than just an Axial phase is necessary for academics and Philosophy.

Five civilizations, of the twelve Axial world-systems, while they did develop Sage literature (at least in oral epic format, if not written down until later) but these five did not assemble academics. They are: Northern Europe, Central Asia, Egypt, Phoenicia, and Babylon. Two of them, Northern Europe and Central Asia, had their own robust complex cultures, but their intellectuals did not apply the technology of writing during their Axial Phases c.700-400 BCE. Although they had seen writing, and adapted some of its features for runic, messaging, and administrative purposes, these two cultures could not encourage scholarly pursuits for lack of sufficient resources and urban stability.

Setting aside peripheral regions – further east than Carthage and Greece; north of Greece, Cyprus, Assur, and Gandahari; and south of Thebes, Babylon, Magadha, and Chu – only three civilizations within those Eurasian bounds during 1100-400 BCE met the scholarly and political conditions for Axial innovation *without* establishing academic philosophy or theology: Egypt, Phoenicia, and Babylon. Nevertheless, they did produce Axial world-systems.

Any academic potential in those three regions – Egypt, Phoenicia, and Babylon – was prematurely crushed. Each one was conquered by another civilization with its own fully Axial worldview: by the Persian empire, and then the Greek empire. However, before their demises, those three civilizations did attain the level of Sage Literature, both philosophical and theological. Going further, they did invent an Axial system: Phoenicia was responsible for initiating logocentrism, while Egypt forged a cosmotheism, and Babylon invented its nomotheism.

Egypt's New Kingdom under the Ramesses dynasty witnessed modest diminishment of the priestly-courtly class. Akhenaten's political monolatry of his god Aten was nearly erased but not forgotten by the high priests. After Ramesses III, as Egypt was politically fragmenting into the Third Intermediate Period (began 1070 BCE), the Theban god Amun anchored a new cosmology of *imminent cosmotheism*: the solar divinity's hidden energetic spirit invisibly forms and animates all particular beings (including other deities and humans) above and below, thereby manifesting the entire cosmos of time, space, and world. This kind of solution to the unity-transforming-into-plurality problem has parallels with Upanishad and Daoist speculation during that era, yet it advanced no farther in Egypt. Its political upheaval from 1070 until the Persian conquest did not displace priestly scholars from their aristocratic positions and there was no periphery for them to inhabit anyways. The priestly temple-centered theology clung to conservatism and canonization over any criticism or speculation. Furthermore, writing itself in the sacral language of rigid hieroglyphics (not supplanted until the Demotic script c.650 BCE) was inherently resistant to heresy. Texts composed after 1100 BCE did continue a tradition of both cosmotheology and a body of “sage literature” that philosophically and ethically pondered the individual's place in the cosmos and the afterlife. Atum's cosmotheology was retained for the Memphite Theology of Ptah (c.700 BCE) in which Ptah takes over Atum's transcendent and imminently creative sovereignty. However, no independent scholarly activity had a chance to assemble and nothing like academic philosophy could have enjoyed freedom of thought. Axial originality in Egypt during 1100s-700s BCE was hence limited to its cosmotheology and sagely philosophical literature.

Phoenicia exploited its independence from regional powers during the late Bronze Age disruptions. That preoccupation with maritime commerce, along with Tyre's priestly aristocracy, and its eventual annexation by Assyria in the 700s BCE, could not foster much creative scholarly activity. Nothing philosophical or ethical appears to have been generated. The only record of cosmogony from the Bronze Age is found in a surviving source, the writer Sanchuniathon (as recorded by Eusebius). That cosmogony may have traveled with Phoenicia's merchants, echoing as far as Hesiod and Thales in Greece. More importantly, the Phoenician alphabet revolutionized not just scholarly composition but intellectual thinking as well. Liberated from iconic and metaphorical vagueness, terms could be written for precise concepts expressly for logical and theoretic purposes. Empirical classes could proliferate indefinitely; theoretic concepts could be imaginatively defined and refined without end. The transition from dialogue to dialectic to logical inference and argumentation (composable in propositions for textual study) was enormously facilitated by that dramatic expansion of conceptual vocabulary. If the word fully captures reality, then the world's creation was by the word. This "logocosmism" found fertile ground with the Greeks who added vowels for infinite flexibility while dominating Mediterranean trade. Phoenicia fell under Assyrian control, but cosmology, ethics, and law took its great leap forward in Greek-speaking lands during 700-400 BCE.

Assyria and Babylon fostered scholarly intellectuals fixated on empire legitimacy and astrological divination. The "Marduk Prophecy" from the times of Nebuchadnezzar I (fl.1120 BCE) exemplified a courtly obsession with re-writing myth and legend to justify yet another king or dynasty. The god Marduk, or Bel, never developed as a theological character and political mythology remained conservative. Exemplars of that "Naru Literature" go back to the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Legend of Sargon, and the Curse of Agade. Sage literature did get philosophical about values and life's meaning in the genre of disputatious dialogue. Only Babylonian astrology lead towards a cosmology. Its empirical astronomy and its mathematics predicted celestial motions, eclipses, conjunctions (and the like), replacing fickle agents manipulating the heavens with stable powers regulating the cosmos. The resulting Babylonian cosmology formulated its "nomotheology" by 900 BCE: rational divinity lawfully maintains the cosmic order.

By the early Iron Age, after the collapse of civilizations and then the reconstruction of civic order, myths from the Stone Age and pantheons from the Bronze Age no longer seemed sufficient.

A new type of literature, composed in narratives, histories, discourses, and poetry, asked original questions and proposed radically new answers. This genre is called Sage Literature, and it appeared in each region of Eurasia where intellectuals could write down their answers in literary works for others to read and contemplate. Sage Literature appeared first, circa 1800–500 BCE (first in Egypt and Mesopotamia, and later in India and China). Some of its Sage wisdom inspired a few Axial world-systems too.

Each of the Axial world-systems undertook an intellectual quest for a more powerful and permanent order above and behind the observable world. Going back into the Stone Age and throughout the Bronze Age, mythologies have provided their worldviews able to deal with four fundamental matters of interest to every human being:

|  |   |
|--|---|
| What makes us feel a sense of awe and reverence?     | A worldview will inspire our Wonder.    |
| What manages the entire cosmos and its proper order? | A worldview will explain a Cosmology.   |
| What maintains our secure and harmonious society?    | A worldview will support Social Order.  |
| What motivates the pursuit of excellent human life?  | A worldview will guide our Realization. |

Eight typical concerns and thought-provoking questions enlivened Sage Literature, and then provoked the Axial phases:

- What must be Supremely Powerful?
- What would be Most Responsible?
- What should be Reliably Valuable?
- What could be Securely Knowable?
- What makes us Piously Reverential?
- What helps us be Socially Conformable?

What guides our Ethical Character?

What encourages my Personal Excellence?

Plenty of intellectuals in many civilizations were starting to ponder questions like these during the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age. We can read their poetry and prose as Sage Literature. However, having a few good questions in mind and posing interesting answers was not sufficient to make their viewpoints fully Axial.

The twelve Axial world-systems each provided their own unique answers to these questions. In addition, each Axial system resulted from the additional intellectual effort to *coordinate* their six answers in order to assemble an overall *coherent* worldview. Only twelve world-systems across Eurasia during 1100-400 BCE managed that great accomplishment.

Axial world-systems can be compared by contrasting their distinctive answers to the six provocative questions listed above. For example:

|                       | <u>Judaism</u>          | <u>Hinduism</u>                 | <u>Taoism</u>                   |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Supremely Powerful?   | Personal creator deity  | Absolute pure consciousness     | Cosmic flowing energy           |
| Most Responsible?     | Yahweh's providence     | Brahman's manifestations        | Dao's dynamic turbulence        |
| Reliably Valuable?    | Divine benevolence      | Blissful (re)union with Brahman | Inherent healthy flourishing    |
| Securely Knowable?    | Revelations from Yahweh | Meditational selflessness       | Nature's own patterned ways     |
| Piously Reverential?  | Submissive faith        | Practice detached absorption    | Natural habits of simple living |
| Socially Conformable? | Obedying the Covenant   | Follow custom and caste         | Non-striving and not disrupting |

All of the Axial world-systems are philosophical, and also religious/spiritual as well.

A world-system that is philosophical (1) proposes an "ultimate reality" that is working in some way or another; and (2) recommends that humans live better by conforming to the cosmic pattern or course that this reality is taking.

A World-System that is more religious includes (1) and (2) while also adding that (3) the supreme reality values your life, and (4) it rewards good conduct beyond this earthly life.

Some Axial phases, for some civilizations, were designed to be more religious than other Axial phases in other civilizations. The religious phases made sure to emphasize the reverential awe owed to a supreme Being, and the devout piety that one should display towards that Being. Some Axial phases were more philosophical in nature. They did speculate about a supreme Reality, and they expected people to feel a sense of awe and wonder about that Reality, but as philosophies they were designed to wisely guide the worthy life, rather than to compel people to live a worshipful obedient life. However, even philosophical world-systems, by explaining how to live the worthiest human life, do offer some spiritual guidance and reassurance, perhaps getting a little theological.

The way that all of the Axial world-systems can be understood as both philosophical and theological can be expressed by pointing out that each system offers a cosmology (what is Real) coordinated with an Axiology (what is Valuable) and an Ethics (the highest Duty).

The full list of twelve Axial Phase systems from the oldest (c.1100 BCE) to the youngest (c.400 BCE):

| <u>Location</u> | <u>Cosmology</u> (reality) | <u>Axiology</u> (supreme value), <u>Ethics</u> (highest duty) |
|-----------------|----------------------------|---|
| Egypt           | Immanent Cosmotheism       | regimentation under sovereignty, respected by living justly   |
| China           | Cosmic Daoism              | integrity with natural ways, conducted with simplicity        |
| Iran-Persia     | Zoroastrian Dualism        | militancy alongside the light, from puritanical righteousness |
| Central Asia    | Divine Despotism           | domination over subjects, earned by winning every conflict    |

|                  |                        |   |
|------------------|------------------------|---|
| Babylon          | Nomothicism            | alignment with heavenly order, by consigning life to fate   |
| Phoenicia-Greece | Logocosmism            | knowledge of the real, by applying conceptual precision     |
| Northern India   | Idealistic Hinduism    | unity within absolute mind, from sacrificing the ego-self   |
| Canaan           | Monotheistic Judaism   | solidarity with the creator, by affirming submissive faith  |
| Europe           | Romantic Individualism | autonomy among co-equals, by gaining independence           |
| China            | Civil Confucianism     | harmony with the supreme, enacted with ritual deference     |
| Greece           | Natural Cosmology      | empowerment in control, gained by experimental learning     |
| Northeast India  | Buddhist Phenomenalism | liberation from all illusion, through meditative detachment |

Many more philosophical, theological, and ethical views originated during this period as well. Innumerable thinkers, sages, and seers populated the landscape during the Axial Phase, offering ideas nearly inconceivable anywhere before 1200 BCE. The twelve Axial world-systems held the greatest importance for the course of civilizations across Eurasia down to the present day. Jaspers rightly estimated that every worldview from theism and idealism to positivism and naturalism, and every religious society on the planet (except for indigenous/native tribes and peoples), descended from these twelve Axial systems, singly or in combination.

Jaspers saw in Axial systems a simultaneous reach for transcendence (cosmic unity behind plurality), universality (humanity ought to conform), individuality (people should all strive), and immortality (all spirits have afterlives). This salvific set of ideas are correlative, not contradictory. The unity of divinity accounts for the correctness of a world system to which many should adhere. If one world system rightly prevails, then one's individual significance increases, and merit brings lasting reward. Being part of the cosmic system arouses a sense of personal worth and entitlement. However, against Jaspers, many kinds of individuality emerged across Eurasia. An honor society depicts individual virtue very differently from a lawful regime or a caste system. Similarly, there are a wide variety of kinds of immortality.

In line with Jaspers, these early Iron Age civilizations maintained an intrinsic bond among rightness, righteousness, and harmony. Ancient Egypt used the all-important word "ma'at" to mean truth and justness, and cosmic harmony. In ancient Sumerian, the word for true, correct, honest, righteous, and justness is the same word, "zid". European languages inherited the word "right" from the Proto-Indo-European word "reg" for putting right, and its Ancient Sanskrit version "ṛta" to mean the truth or the right way. That heritage descended to Old Persian (rasta-), Greek (orektos), Latin (rectus), Old Norse (rettr), and German (recht). In the oldest religious inscriptions of China, zheng (正) means "upright" or "correct." Sage wisdom traditions in ancient China, visible in Daoist, Confucian, and Mohists schools, emphasize rightness or propriety (yi 義) fitting with worldly order (li 理) and that fitness makes something truly genuine (chen).

There is no comparable time of sheer originality in human history, besides the Pastoral Age of c3200-2500 BCE and the Modernity Age of c1600-1900 AD. That's the point of studying the Axial Phase in intellectual history, after setting aside Jaspers's own portrayal of his Axial Age as evolutionary and a fitting destiny for humanity's "progress". Only by studying that era synoptically – historically, anthropologically, archeologically, sociologically, economically, politically, mythologically, and philosophically – would a fair portrait come together about real-world conditions shifting ideas about other-world relations.

## Definition of Theology

**Theology.** Theology appears where literate scholars (of a priestly/academic class) living in polities (city-states, nations, empires) strive to align and update a religion with ongoing cosmogonic, social, and political developments. The intellectual effort to comprehend and justify widespread adherence to a religion under conditions when a rival religion or nonreligious worldview is accessible or even prevalent. Theology isn't the only effort to comprehend religiosity. Religion itself does not fail to offer its own internal narratives about what it means to be properly religious, and in the absence of significant competition, no theology is needed for adherents to comprehend and justify their own religiosity. Theology only arises when adherents may encounter rival religions or dissenting worldviews. In short, theology arises where there is doubt. Religion's engine is the transmission of conviction, not doubt; theology's engine is doubt when conviction is desired. The postmodernist notion that true religion requires great doubt and theology breeds undesirable conviction is a syncretic/philosophical viewpoint towards which certain Christian theologies have degenerated.

**Theology on Mythology.** Religion in a civilization is transformed by the intellectual discipline of Theology. Theology replicates that trio of the Communitarity, Paranormality, and Charity at more complex and intellectual levels.

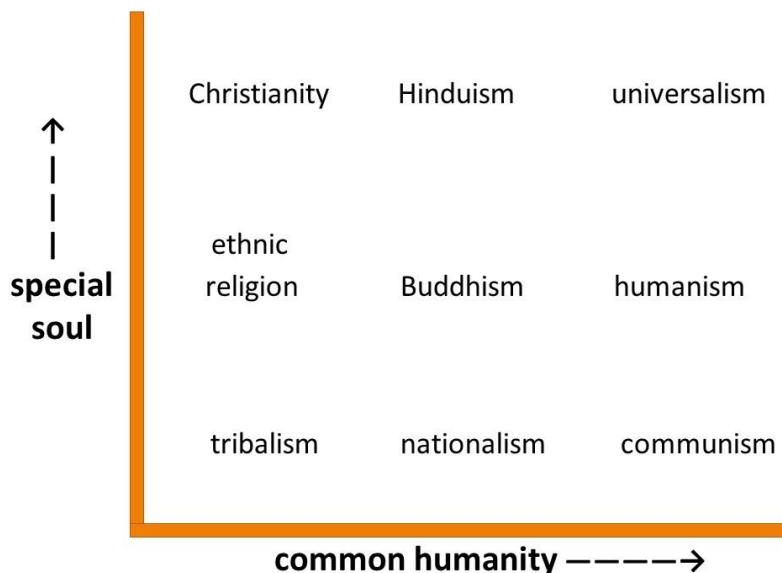
**Community:** Cities need to prevent cheating and to enhance trust and hospitality. Theologies try to heighten devotion to shared duties and increase inclusiveness with commonality.

**Extraordinary paranormal agents:** Unnatural agents get competition from rational/natural explanations. Theologies try to keep gods/spirits compatible with reason and nature.

**Consoling/compassion experiences:** Urbanization causes novel personal stresses. Theologies try to enhance devotion with higher individual value and unique irreplaceability.

(↑ duties + ↑ commonality) + (↑ empire) = GENERIC HUMANITY

(↑ value + ↑ uniqueness) + (↑ unnatural) = IMMORTAL SOUL



Like witnessing/preaching, theology should similarly take into account what adherents and recruits happen to already believe, and to that extent it is instructionally **systematic** rather than repetitiously **dogmatic**. Theology has to deal with

similar rival religions, secular institutions and their nonreligious ideologies, and worldviews (cosmologies/philosophies) too dissimilar to be religions.

**Dogmatic theology** only cares for discrepant beliefs in order to contradict them and reinforce correct religious convictions. Dogmatism usually happens when systematic theology is frustrated. Extreme dogmatism results in fundamentalism and fanaticism.

**Symbiotic theology** creatively modifies the ideologies supporting secular institutions to help reinforce religiosity in a population. In moderation, symbiotic theology can promote institutional cooperation and social stability. Symbiotic theology of a strong religion taken too far produces theocracy and religious totalitarianism. If a religion is weakening, symbiotic theology can become parasitic theology, forcing other institutions to sustain religiosity to their own detriment. The combination of fundamentalist and parasitic theology tends to cause civil wars or contribute to civilization collapse.

**Speculative theology** is the effort to mutually readjust religious convictions and secular worldviews (from history, civics, cosmology, philosophy, science) to reinforce justifications for religion. Speculative theology tends to accelerate a religion's development over centuries (instead of over millennia, if religions just drift).

By contrast, **speculative philosophy** mutually readjusts religions, cosmologies, histories, civics, older philosophies, and/or new sciences for trying to maximize coherence, typically establishing a new philosophy and sometimes a new religion.

**Syncretic theology** mutually readjusts core convictions of multiple religions (and perhaps civics and philosophy/science as well) to the extent that a different religion eventually emerges. When that new religion comes into view, it can appear to be an abrupt creation, but decades and centuries of preparation were in fact involved.

Syncretic theologies, by far the most common type of theology during and after the Axial Phase, typically seek a '**mono-theology**' – a single unified transcendent explanation for all realities – rather than radical pluralism for the divine. There are four archetypal mono-theologies, because they either rely on Deduced Coduction or Reduced Pancosmism, with the help of either the Principle of Explanatory Fertility or the Principle of Identity of Responsibilities. Two explanatory methods combined with two principles for unification yields four possible archetypes.

Deduced Coduction is able to modify its conception of the transcendent: no matter what features things in the world have, the transcendent (call it A for now) explains why. This complex schema of abductive justification looks like this:

1. Qs have F1, and If A then Qs have F1
2. Rs have F2, and If modified-A then Rs have F2
3. Ss have F3, and If modified-A then Ss have F3

N ... (and so on, for everything)  
plus either the  
Principle of Explanatory Fertility [If X can explain everything and Y can explain everything, then X=Y.]  
or the  
Principle of Identity of Responsibilities [If X is responsible for a set of things and Y is also responsible for just that same set too, then X=Y]  
So, A is real.

This abductive justification attempts to infer that A is real, and if any other transcendent B seems equally real, that's only because B actually is A. This is Deduced Coduction, by pan-fertility or by pan-responsibility.

The second kind of justification uses Reduced Pancosmism, another complex schema of abductive justification, because everything that can ever be in the cosmos is reduced to an effect of a single ultimate explanation.

1. There is no Z such that If A then not-Z [deducible from A's flexible definition]
2. All Z [everything in the world]

plus either the  
Principle of Explanatory Fertility  
or the

Principle of Identity of Responsibilities  
So, A is real.

This abductive justification attempts to infer that A is real, and if any other transcendent B seems equally real, that's only because B actually is A. This is Reduced Pancosmism, by pan-fertility or by pan-responsibility.

The four archetypal mono-theologies are exemplified by Greek Panpolytheism, Roman Stoicism, Christianity, and Brahmanic Hinduism.

**Greek Panpolytheism** declared that other nations' pantheons apply their local names to the one true set of gods genuinely responsible for all cosmic events, hence relying on Deduced Coduction by pan-responsibility.

**Roman Stoicism** relied on Deduced Coduction by pan-fertility, by attributing to uniquely supreme powers ('deities') the responsibilities for harmonizing all of nature's generative cycles and supportive habitats.

**Christianity** relied on Reduced Pancosmism by pan-responsibility, as the lone Creator effected (directly or indirectly) each natural thing.

**Brahmanic Hinduism** relied on Reduced Pancosmism by pan-fertility, as the transcendent reality endlessly generates (perceptibly or imperceptibly) all dualities and natural entities.

### Ecumenical Theology: The Study of Mythology

A mortal must think mortal and not immortal thoughts .  
- Epicharmus of Syracuse, Fragment 20 (c.480 BCE)

Theology should not forget its transformative impact on older mythologies. Nor should academic theology ignore the multiple ways that religions have undergone this theological development. Religious ecumenism pre-dates academic theology in the form of Sage Literature about religious ecumenism, as civilizations came into contact to share and blend theogonies and cosmogonies. Theology should at least be ecumenical with an interest in mythography and comparative mythology even if syncretism remains optional or avoided for this or that particular religion. All theologies, regardless of its "home" religion, have an ecumenical mode that encourages intellectual interest in mythology.

*Mythology* is the scholarly (or academic) study of multiple mythic traditions, whether grouped within one cultural tradition or found among several cultures, to collect myths into mythographies and explore their interrelationships. Furthermore, "religion" is not the same as myth or mythology. The conception of "religion" is entirely academic, not cultural, and arrives even later than the idea of mythology after academic theology arises. For example, among well-educated Greeks of Plato's day, thinkers grasped how their society had a different mythology than other cultures, but the notion of "religion" as a universal praxis across humanity was absent. Scholarly mythology may rest content with a generous polytheism, different gods for different peoples, or it may ponder how so many gods are actually legitimate because they are related, leading to Cosmogony.

Each Sage mythology coordinates an Origin myth with a Connection myth: by what powers did the Cosmos come to be, and how should Humanity engage with such power? Humans long for community with the cosmos. To commune with the Ultimate, revelatory communication must be possible.





As Sage mythology from the Late Bronze Age gradually transitioned into theological mythology during the Iron Age, each sophisticated mythology remained inherently connected to a far older revelatory ritual and practice.

In Mediterranean (Egypt, Crete, Greece, Rome) mythology, the fundamental engagement between humanity and divinity is The Command. Legitimate authority is founded upon the *kingly divine* that installs earthly representatives. Europe and the Steppes agreed— authority lies in the supreme will of the masses (democracy) or the conqueror (despotism). For the West, the essential task for human beings is justice: to respect lawful orders from the Ultimate sovereignty.

In Levantine (Middle East) mythology, the fundamental engagement between humanity and divinity is The Covenant. Judgments upon humanity from the *truly divine* are conveyed through a demi-god or holy prophet who can mediate with the divine on behalf of humanity. The essential task for human beings is fidelity: to follow the mediator's example of affirmation to the Ultimate providence.

In Indian mythology, the fundamental engagement between humanity and divinity is The Sacrifice. Even the gods originate from sacrifice to the *insightful divine*, and they sustain their powers by performing sacrifices, as humans do. The essential task for human beings is self-sacrifice: to shed one's selfish persona in order to perpetually regenerate with the Ultimate consciousness.

In Chinese mythology, the fundamental relationship between humanity and divinity is The Divination. The rituals of divination reveal how to coordinate the structure of worldly affairs with the *orderly divine* as directed by the high ancestors or the wise Way (Dao) of all things. The essential task for human beings is conformity: to continually manage life in order to harmonize with the Ultimate community.

|  | <b>WESTERN</b><br>(Egypt, Greco-Roman,<br>Europe)                                  | <b>LEVANTINE</b><br>(Jewish, Middle East,<br>Persian)                              | <b>INDIAN</b><br>(South Asia)   | <b>CHINESE</b><br>(East Asia)  |
|--|--|--|---|--|
| The Cosmos's ways are ...                | Agonistic  | Formulaic  | Confluent   | Recurrent  |
| Time is ...                              | Mostly discontinuous   | Mostly continuous  | Mostly continuous   | Mostly discontinuous   |
| Temporality is ...                       | Oscillatory  | Linear   | Cyclical  | Episodic   |
| If cosmic powers are pictured ...        |  |  |  |  |
| Successive eras are ...                  | Usually contentious  | Always providential  | Always duplicative  | Usually degenerative   |
| Transitions between eras are like ...    | Displacements  | Interruptions  | Repetitions   | Regenerations  |
| A new era is humanly experienced as ...  | A revolution   | A revival  | A reverie   | A restaging  |
| Engaging divinity is like ...            | Forming compacts   | Making covenants   | Offerings sacrifices  | Performing divinations   |
| Receiving divine approval is like a ...  | Judicious god granting earned favors   | Jealous god protecting the faithful  | Generous god sharing in ecstasy   | Mentoring god with wise counsel  |
| The signal of devotion is...             | An oath of fealty  | A vow of submission  | A gift of selflessness  | A display of deference   |
| The Divine-Human relation is akin to ... | Patron/Client  | Lord/Subject   | Yogi/Devotee  | Elder/Junior   |
| Deities besides the supreme god are ..   | Real, as personal confederates   | Unreal, as idolized temptations  | Unreal, as personified manifestations   | Real, as impersonal sacralities  |
| Humans are born as ...                   | Natural individuals  | Chosen by a god  | Selves on karmic chains   | Members of society   |
| Humans born guilty?                      | No – individuals are presumed innocent   | Yes – born into a fallen condition   | Yes – due to deeds of past lives  | No – communities are presumed good   |
| The body is ...                          | Like a craft   | Like a corpse  | Like clothes  | Like energies  |
| Free will is ...                         | Essential, and creative  | Essential, and deviant   | Inessential, and illusory   | Inessential, and risky   |
| Humans are connected by ...              | Voluntary commitments  | Conjoint service   | Essential oneness   | Communal relationships   |

|                                       |                             |                          |                              |                            |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| One's key duty is ...                 | Justice                     | Fidelity                 | Self-sacrifice               | Conformity                 |
| A fine destiny would be ...           | Remarkable leader           | Rewarded afterlife       | Reincarnated higher          | Respected ancestor         |
| The saintly hero is like a ...        | Vigilante                   | Prophet                  | Guru                         | Sage                       |
| Rightful rulership ...                | Ascends toward divinity     | Descends from divinity   | Sacrifices to divinity       | Negotiates with divinity   |
| Religiosity is more ...               | Public                      | Public                   | Private                      | Private                    |
| Divinity is like a ...                | Administrator for the world | Spectator upon the world | Enjoyer within the world     | Participant with the world |
| Divinity is representable through ... | Humanity                    | Language                 | Art                          | Nature                     |
| Spirituality proves ...               | personal worth              | divine approval          | godly unity                  | civic harmony              |
| Is there an afterlife?                | Only a literary afterlife   | One afterlife            | Many afterlives              | Only a ritualist afterlife |
| An afterlife is for ...               | All posterity               | Divine judgment          | Self liberation              | One's descendants          |
| When encountering another religion... | Expect social integration   | Compel conversion        | Expect spiritual integration | Compel expulsion           |

## Immortality

Who really wants to live forever? Not all immortalities are the same.

unusual longevity = one's life energies are sustained to prolong bodily life to extraordinary lengths. To surpass a typical lifespan by postponing death, curative measures and restorative practices are cultivated. Legendary sages are said to have achieved an indefinitely extended life while inhabiting remote or mythic locales on earth.

unnatural durability = one's bodily powers prevent internal deterioration or external damage for an invulnerability to all natural phenomena. At the higher level of indestructibility, one's powers join and perhaps merge with, elemental cosmic forces.

metempsychosis = one's psyche gets transferred into another living individual (already alive or just being born) so that the personal 'self' and its memories are transferred and recalled. This transferal may be repeatable.

reincarnation = one's life energy passes from a dying individual's body on to a newly born individual (human, or non-human) here on earth. The personal 'self' and its memories would not ordinarily get transferred too. Reincarnation may only happen once or a few times, with final extinction inevitable.

transmigration of the soul = only one's immaterial spirit gets transferred over for another life, but perhaps into a less material "body" in a higher realm. The personal 'self' and its memories from past lives may be transferrable in the process. Transmigration may occur multiple times.

psychical afterlife = only one's intellectual mentality (without personality) passes permanently into an entirely intellectual realm for an indefinitely prolonged duration. As pure thought or consciousness, absorption into the divine mind may be expected.

spiritual afterlife = one's created soul along with its personal self passes into an entirely spiritual realm for an prolonged second life. The duration of that spiritual life may depend on one's accumulated merit or high status during life, and an everlasting spiritual life might require a deity's approval.

eternal afterlife = one's eternally existing soul (always identical with god) passes through an indefinite number and variety of embodied lives forever.

## Syncretic Theologies and Speculative Philosophies

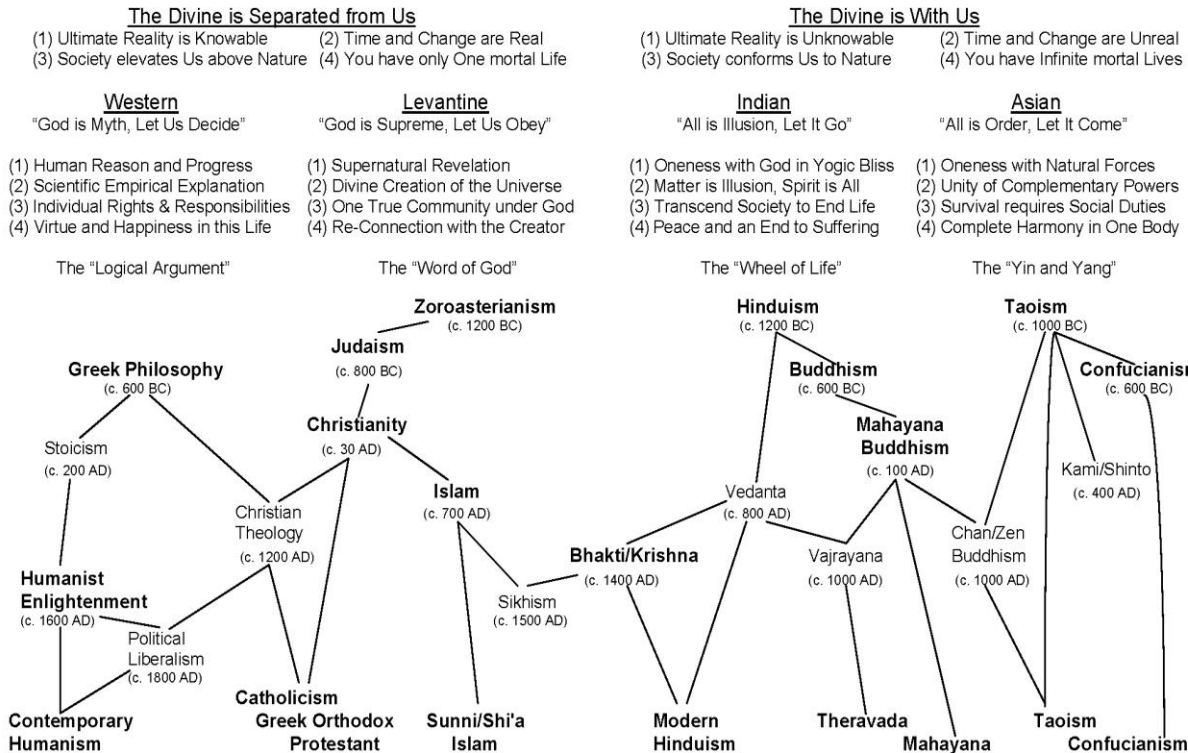
Following Joseph Campbell, we can distinguish four great domains of advanced theological and philosophical thought that emerged during the Bronze Age. They each syncretized, to varying extents, the available religious, theological, historical, cosmological, and philosophical thinking.

### World Belief Systems: A Chart of Theologies and Philosophies by John Shook, University at Buffalo

#### The Four Basic Functions of Religion (and Philosophy)

1. Inspire Awe and Reverence (Wonder)
2. Provide Cosmology
3. Support Social Order
4. Guide to Spiritual (Ethical) Realization

#### The Four Great Domains



## Religion under Theological Development

Theology is heavily indebted to philosophical ideas and logical argumentation. Theological arguments designed to defend the reality of one God over the rest can take a variety of forms and formats.

### Theology

People wouldn't (or couldn't) be properly religious unless provisions X, Y, Z are assured, but God's reality (with characters A, B, C) insures X, Y, Z; therefore God(ABC) is real.

### Natural Theology

Important features of the world are best explained by unworldly D, E, F; a single reality having (DEF) can be conceived; therefore God(DEF) is real.

#### Speculative Theology

A proper conception of God includes G, H, I; GHI are mutually consistent; therefore properly conceiving of a real God is God(GHI).

#### Historical Theology

Our religious tradition has properly conceived of God as J, K, L; JKL implicate each other; therefore our God(JKL) is real.

#### Immanent Theology

Some properly religious people experience M, N, or O; if God has characters (MNO) then God is accessible to people; therefore God (MNO) is real.

#### Negative Theology

What is comprehensible suggests a dependency on the incomprehensible; allusions to inconceivable P, Q, R seem incomprehensible; therefore God (PQR) is real(?).

#### Ethical Theology

If people are properly ethical then they are guided by S or T; if God has characters U or V then S or T are ethical; therefore God (UV) is real.

Speculative and syncretic theology can be responsible for the gradual development of a religion involving the degeneration or re-adaptation of practices. The strengthening of some items can require the weakening of others. Groups of adherents resisting those weakenings and sticking with traditional ways get castigated as 'occult' or 'pagan' cults.

For example, western monotheisms with their pan-responsibility premise have de-emphasized the mystical, tragical, magical, and the prophetic. These matters were either re-classified as taboo or monopolized for the priesthood. Subsiding belief in tragicals reduced superstitions and lessened the need for magical interventions. Venerations by the masses and the trances enjoyed by ordinary people both atrophied, and later merged together into a benign conception of 'prayer'. The western monotheisms which retained some tragicals (eternal damnations by the One God) either continued to let a magical priesthood mediate the individual's immortality (people prove their worth through rites by priests), or some monotheisms provided individuals with rules and rituals to satisfy largely on their own.

Systematic Theology is under intense pressure to hold together the shifting array of practices in a coherent manner for the masses. Once Systematic theology is established and has momentum in a religion, it largely creates its own problems, requiring further forward motion. Systematic theologians inevitably get into disagreements with each other about how best to maximize and sustain coherence. Unless a religion employs a powerful hierarchy allied with political leaders (Roman Catholicism, e.g.), the religion will develop multiple power centers, and this decentralized religious authority won't generate "the theology" for a religion. A religion can survive in good health for a very long time despite a lack of a centralized and hierarchical theology; it may prove more flexible during times of civilizational stress. It can also split into hostile sects, but no centralized theology can prevent that either, since rigidity just postpones demands for flexibility. There will always be opportunities for more and more systematic theology, and plenty of opportunities for syncretic theology too, after religions have had some subdivision and some new religions emerge.

Monotheisms aren't any less prone to internal divisions into sects, but they may be more prone to atrophy, unpreventable by even strenuous systematic theology.

Some extreme examples of monotheistic atrophy are Christian sects that emphasized the personal veneration and meditation upon God over all other mediated relationships to the sacred. After all mythic idolatry, mythology, magic, priests, and most ritual are removed, all that is left is some combination of creationism, mysticism, and artistic ritual (Shakers) or vague rituals and austere temples (Unitarian Universalism). Of course, members of such atrophied sects will declare themselves to be as religious as anyone; that conviction proves that a religion is still bonding together some coherent set of religious practices for them. Other members of these sects may instead say that it's not really a religion anymore; for example, many UUs prefer to say that they are ethical humanists and not really part of a religion.

Religions can mutate, die out, or entirely devolve into something nonreligious. Shakers died out because they couldn't transmit their mysticism effectively; much of Unitarian/Universalism deliberately dropped the last creationist vestiges to their rituals and promptly mutated and merged with the secular humanism accessible in wider society. The resurgence of theistic language in many UU churches is due to the realization that religion itself would fade away otherwise.

Monotheisms also provide good examples of religions that can decompose into their separable aspects. Speculative theology can arise as a last desperate resort, but its intercessions usually accelerate decomposition, because it allows other nonreligious ideas to become thinkable and even attractive options.

Under various internal (theological) and external (civic/secular) pressures, a religion can gradually lose its ability to make a cohesive subset of items more plausible than accessible alternatives. When this happens to a religion, many adherents are each looking at religious 'live' and 'dead' options (per William James) among the 30 items, and they can choose among the options that seem live to them. Religious decomposition is not (necessarily) religious death. Most adherents will not drift far from the religion of their upbringing.

From the perspective of orthodoxy, those drifting adherents are losing the religion, but it isn't really the case that they simply lose all religion. For example, the modern situation of becoming 'spiritual' rather than 'religious' isn't really a case of losing religion, but only shifting away from one religion in particular, since mysticism and dualism were always sublimated aspects to western religion. As another example, belief in the paranormal and the occult was always latent within western monotheisms, to resurface as separate belief systems if the dominant mono-theology weakens.

### **Spirituality**

The present-day western usage of 'spirituality' is ambiguous. It can either refer to the separable component of religion as just one among 30 items, or it can serve as an umbrella term to cover spirituality proper along with several other items among the 30 so that it can function as a religion itself.

For example, many 'spiritual but not religious' people accept a (more or less) coherent set: transcendism, trance, mysticism, spiritualism, sacredness, magic, conjuring, and perhaps a little divination. Where these spiritualists in the west usually divide is over creationism: some people require a divine design to the world (and perhaps an afterlife), while others only require fundamental powers enervating the whole cosmos. Both types appeal to westerners because they are decentralized and democratic in 'spirit'; they get politically protected by secularism; they are economically affordable and benign to corporations; they provide a cosmology more understandable for most people than advanced science; and they let ordinary people be more optimistically ethical than physicalist determinism allows.

These two spiritualism religions needed no theological leadership to emerge; they came into view automatically as the dominant theological monotheism of Christianity lost cohesion and credibility for many. Only later did Syncretic theologians step in to approve combinations with some science (quantum holism, eg) or with eastern religious ideas and practices.

Many opportunities co-exist for western religious thinkers today. Align with Fundamentalism and its Parasitic Right-Wing politics? Stay in the choir with the Catholic hierarchical mono-theology despite its lingering anti-modernisms (the anti-homosexual agenda, eg)? March with the never-ending Systematic questers for Liberal modernist religion in a scientific age? Trek off into the wilderness with the Spiritualisms and their appetites for Syncretic weirdness and woo? Align with the vaguely religious humanists who have plenty of ethical manifestos but little energy for civic activism?

If spirituality and spiritualism does not degenerate into a narcissistic obsession with just one's own personal immortality (e.g. a "heaven" or a higher "plane", or a reincarnation), then one's own personality fades from importance.

Confucianism, Buddhism, and Aristotle's philosophy, along with Plato's philosophy, are religious in a vague way, but philosophical too. They each talk about something divinely supreme and admire the human quest to be one with it. Yet, you can tell that philosophical wisdom is at work in the way that they treat the all-too-human desire to survive death. Consider this reasoning, at work in all four of their worldviews:

1. Something divinely supreme guides everyone's destiny after the death of the earthly body.

2. Whatever is truly divine and supreme -- let this be labelled as "God" for convenience -- must be perfectly good and beneficent. (Why worship or pursue an inferior less-than-ideal Being?)

3. God would not allow the infinite survival of anything evil or unvirtuous. (Obviously, God allows little temporary sins and evils to happen, but not for all eternity. Even the "Devil" will eventually be dealt with, for example.)

4. So, only the truly good aspects of yourself will be permitted to survive your bodily death -- most of what you call your memories, desires, habits, personality, temperament, and character (what makes you "You") has to perish with your corrupt body.

5. Therefore, there is no such thing as Personal Immortality. A purified soul will go on after death, but it won't know that it was "You".

For these Axial theologies, personal immortality is just a pleasant myth for selfish people, promoted by unworthy religions. Many religions are highly spiritual without promises of personal immortality. Consider this: If you are a truly good person inside, then you would not want to inflict all the bad and questionable stuff about you upon the realm of eternity. How could you really live with yourself as you are with so many flaws -- for eternity? No one else should have to endure you, and especially not God.

## The Argument from 'Miracles' for God

### Part I. Testimony about Miracles

Credulity exceeds rationality. That “leap” of faith sees where it wants to land, and the bound to be taken. Plain-spoken religiosity senses where reason is left behind as credulous belief steps forward. There is truth in sincere belief, all the stronger for its subjectivity, where faith and hope live. Logicality looks lifeless by comparison. Religion, alongside other cultural forms of craft, art, ritual, drama, sport, trade, family, and politics, do not answer to reason to exist and enrich human life. Cultural forms exhibit their own modes of sensible practicality. Strict reasoning can lend support where explicit inference tightens instruction, but reasonableness cannot dictate creative expression.

Where religion asks reason to confirm its beliefs and claims, reason must independently reply. Objectivity requires more than credulity, even as belief proclaims its truth. Philosophy stands ready: epistemology sets criteria for knowledge, and logic sets standards for inferences to what can be known. “How do you know that?” and “How did you infer that?” are questions appropriate at any point in an inquiry. Religion cannot protest that its beliefs are severely questioned and doubted, if it wants reason’s approval.

A miracle, to be known as a miracle, must survive critical examination to check for possible alternatives. Honest mistake, clever magic, and impressive myth can lead a person to hasty credulity. Religions understand this as well as any logician – telling the difference has always been a preoccupation of religions. Philosophy really isn’t testing credulity by standards unfamiliar to religion. However, each religion wanting the certification of objective reasonableness thinks that it can pass those standards better than any other religion. Philosophy cannot be so sure about that. Miracles are particularly questionable.

Common sense takes personal testimony to be quite convincing, so long as the testimony sounds familiar or at least fits with ordinary common knowledge. Something sounding unfamiliar or unusual naturally raises doubts. The most doubt is easily aroused by claims inconsistent with familiar understandings of the world. It is not part of common sense or ordinary rationality to easily agree with testimony about extraordinary events. A miracle would indeed be an extraordinary event. Extraordinary testimony cannot be reasonably credible without supporting evidence. What is rational to believe has to matter the most when the truth itself hangs in the balance.

What and where is truth? Both faith and reason profess their allegiance to truth. However, “truth” has several meanings that branch from a core meaning about what reliably survives test and trial, such as a person’s honorable statement that will never be found false (truth as veracity) or a fact’s stable statement never to be shown wrong (truth as verity). Religion rests on credulity, where personal sincerity and fidelity among believers transforms their perspective on life. Indeed, in all aspects of life, we rightly expect veracity from people’s words. Just as rightly, we expect verity from the world’s facts. We don’t want to be wronged, by either a vow or a fact. When someone avows that something is a fact, philosophy checks twice: whether the person’s ability to know can be trusted, and whether the fact to be known can be verified.

A second academic discipline next to Philosophy is Theology, which specializes in educational and intellectual refinements to a religion’s worldview and social mission. Borrowing and adapting philosophical standards about knowledge, a theology that defends knowledge about miracles will defend the testimony of someone attesting to a miracle, and defend that claim as something fitting criteria for a miracle. Arguments about miracles for God’s existence are theological in this sense, and critical examinations of such arguments are philosophical. Theology is well aware of philosophical standards, having borrowed them already, so complex arguments from theology are typically crafted to pass epistemological and logical tests. Getting to a conclusion about God from evidence and inference is the sort of argumentation happening on the common ground where theology and philosophy overlaps and collaborates.

Testimonial arguments about miracles for God’s existence are a particular kind of evidential argument for God. Where an evidentialist appeals to testimony as evidence for miracles, the character of that testimony takes center stage for both parties of the debate. Miracles may happen for credulous onlookers; miracles could also happen without onlookers but their effects are noticed by later observers. However, an unnoticed miracle would usually be considered as a divine intervention, rather than an evident demonstration of divine power. The point of a miracle, one would think, is to occur for

observers in real time so that the resulting astonishment and awe elevates religious interest and provokes attestation. “Yes, I saw that it happened too!!” Miracles have to be personal as well as public. When Mother Mary got pregnant that event was miraculous (as an intervention) but the point was baby Jesus, not onlooker surprise. Divine interventions in general are not examined here.

A testimonial argument from miracles for God in the hands of evidentialists has a different structure from a providential argument about miracles for God. A providential argument uses an abductive schema such as, “A deity would want miracles to be credible, and miracles sound credible with divine aid, so then a deity is involved with miracles.” Providentialism is rightly faulted for affirming the consequent and begging the question, so its theological role amounts to preaching to the choir.

Non-fallacious arguments from miracles offer inferences to the best (surviving) explanation: the best explanation for reports of miracles are actual objective miracles, the best explanation for reports of miracles are unnatural matters, and the best explanation for unnaturally-caused miracles is a supernatural deity. If monotheism rather than polytheism is the argumentative objective, a fourth inference is needed, that a single God best accounts for all supernatural involvement with miracles.

A complete testimonial argument for one God hence has four basic parts:

1. Credible evidence of a miracle is known to us.
2. Miracle evidence requires unnatural events.
3. An unnatural event is best accounted for by a supernatural deity.
4. A single God reasonably explains all credible miracles.

So, miracles are best explained by a real God.

First, miracles need to be candidates for serving as evidence of any sort of explanation. Proponents of skeptical common sense, empiricism, and positivism dispute premise 1 and need not proceed further, having halted the argument with disproof without having to appeal to science or naturalism. That disputation over premise 1 is elaborated below. As for premise 2, non-naturalists of all sorts could admit the possibility of unnatural events. Dualists can be comfortable with spirits; idealists doubt that science explains much; panpsychists expect deviancies from natural forces; and so on. Naturalisms of all varieties deny premise 2, even if some naturalists can countenance miraculous events, but naturalism aligns with skeptical empiricism to refute premise 1. As for premise 3, there are non-theistic supernaturalisms that omit deities, so theism must carry on this argument over miracles to justify 3 and 4.

Theism appeals to the mystical as well as the miraculous. Even the “miracle” of a deity directly and fully encountered in extraordinary experience, where no inference from event to cause appears needed (for the experiencer), that encounter is no self-justifying datum, since the possibility of misapprehension and mistaken identification (“Is that really God?”) still has to be ruled out. However, an argument from mysticism, dealing with mostly with phenomenological and conceptual issues, should accordingly be handled differently from an argument from miracles. A mystical experience needs no public testimony to initiate the argument from mysticism.

An testimonial argument must first prove that there is evidence of miracles, then prove that such miracle evidence requires some supernatural explanation, and finally show why one (or more) deity’s involvement is necessary to complete the account. The argument from miracles starts in the vicinity of testimony: a sincerely communicated attestation of an event as observed without exaggeratory intent. High-quality testimony passes additional criteria, but reports of miracles made by uneducated and astonished people should not be ruled out in advance.

We shall first discuss reports of past miracles, and then cover contemporary reports about miracles.

### Past Miracles

An testimonial argument from past miracles, as an evidential argument, has to scrupulously avoid fundamentalism on the one hand and providentialism on the other. Fundamentalism asserts the veracity of scriptural stories without evidence. Providentialism invents “just-so stories” to prop up its argument with faith that begs the question. A genuine evidential argument can neither take Bible stories as journalism; nor presume that divine interventions guide miracle reports.

The best-crafted testimonial argument from past miracles, sketched below with needed premises 1-7, cannot reasonably succeed. It either collapses into fundamentalism, lapses into providentialism, or undermines its own premises. Here, "miracle" refers to a possible event that happened long before living memory. Why would we grant any credibility to a report about such a thing?

1. A miracle is the sort of event that would easily inspire public testimony.

Actually, a typical person would be sensibly reticent about publicly describing a 'miraculous' experience. A reasonable person would instead attribute an odd encounter to perceptual distortion, misapprehension, false attribution, enjoying an illusion, falling for trickery, or any number of other cognitive errors. Why would "A miracle!" be the first thought? The sensible reaction is surprise at the marvelous, not surety at the miraculous. Most languages lack a precise word for 'miracle' since it is more of a specific cultural/religious than anything spoken in the planet's natural languages. If something still seems miraculous to someone prepared to observe it, it would be difficult to describe, or to openly admit to others. All the same, religion promptly says, its religious ideas and inspiration would make matters simple to proclaim: religion supplies the classification of 'miracle' and suggests which kinds of miracles are even possible. Interestingly, if miracles can be so clearly and convincingly recounted, wouldn't that imply that all religions are well-founded on miracles? But each religion thinks, Our religion has believers who rightly treasure evident miracles from the true God.

2. Live testimony (directly from a living person, and not hearsay) is usually veritable evidence that needs no further confirmation to be quite credible.

Actually, nowhere in adulthood or civic life would a sensible person agree. No institution such as education or law, and surely not business, takes this approach to veracity. However, religion says, live testimony provides veracity beyond reasonable doubt, especially (or only) about religious encounters. All the same, a religion undercuts #1 all the time, dismissing reports about miracles that sound weird, counter-intuitive, or akin to another religion. Interestingly, although all miracles are inherently bizarre to the rational mind, any religion thinks that the next religion's miracles are unthinkably false. Each religion thinks, religions wrong about God regrettably encourage their believers to make up miracle myths.

3. Live group testimony of the same event has more credibility than testimony from a single person.

Actually, a group giving the same testimony appears less credible than separate observers giving somewhat different reports. The odds of different people choosing the same description are so low that fabrication or coaching seems probable. If witnesses are not prepared or trained to reliably spot miracles, how would they give the identical account despite their astonishment and confusion? All the same, religion will say, believers are highly reliable about miracles, at least miracles that make sense to their own religiosity. Interestingly, religions do not accept #2 generally, preferring to accuse the faithful of other religions of spreading ignorant miracle tales. Each religion says to itself, Our believers are fortunate to hear true miracle reports but others can come attend to the truth too.

4. Tales of group testimony are just as veritable as live testimony itself.

Actually, tales about what groups have told in the past cannot be as credible as living testimony, for many good reasons. A reasonable person doesn't trust hearsay, and people aren't wrong for doubting tales despite (or usually because of) the frequency of repetition. Tales from long ago cannot be contradicted since we cannot go back to look for ourselves, but that doesn't make historical tales unquestionable. As history knows very well, the words of fable, misinformation, and propaganda are never out-paced by truth, especially when the message sounds extraordinary. This is the basis to Hume's argument against reports of past and present miracles: the odds of exaggeration are greater than factuality. All the same, religion asserts, oft-told tales about miracles only gain in credibility the more they are circulated. "Our miracle tales wouldn't have spread so easily unless they were true." Interestingly, each religion rejects #3 as a tenet, unable to credit group testimony from other religions with any veracity. Each religion prefers to think, Its not about having the *most* miracle reports, but its the most *sincere* reports like ours, that make a religion right about its God.

5. Transmissions of popular tales convey testimony as veritable as live testimony.

Actually, long transmissions of oral narrative almost never convey high-accuracy testimony from original live observers. Written transmissions through prolonged re-copying (and re-editing) are even less verifiable and veritable. Extant manuscripts are not photocopies of original interviews. If lengthy transmission trails could be so veritable, then the highest-fidelity transmissions of Vedic Hinduism (for example) warrant belief in the deity Indra rather than anything about Moses or Jesus. All the same, each religion holds that its sacred transmissions are specially marked by the character of veracity inherent to their testimony conveyed. Interestingly, religions deny #4 as a rule: each religion denies that scriptural stories from just any religion could be as true. Each religion tells its faithful, Our scriptural books are self-certifying with signs and marks of veracity that don't show up in other religious traditions.

6. Traditions around popular transmissions perpetuate them over centuries to preserve veritable testimony.

Actually, religious traditions ensuring the transmission of past tales are remarkably selective and generative, culling and combining features and themes of stories to forge more. No religious tradition has yet been found which fails to perpetuate disparate and often discrepant versions of its oral and written narratives. Any religion reading just a single text (e.g. the Qu'ran) was efficient about destroying rival components or versions early in its history, and any singular text still leaves its stitchings and interpolations exposed to scholarly view. All the same, a religious tradition preaches that early preservers of tales wouldn't have been so scrupulous about accurate transmissions unless they held the true faith inspired by such veritable testimony. Interestingly, each theology doctrinally rejects #5 generally, taking other religious traditions to be just enculturating or entertaining (but not educating) their followers. Each theology teaches its believers, Our devotion to scripture matches the early movement's zeal about hearing the testimonial truth.

7. Theological supervision over traditional textual transmissions guarantee their conveyance of some veritable testimony.

Actually, the honest history of theology displays how its intellectual involvement is always a transformation, not just a transmission, of any traditional narratives. The theological views of each age successively shape the language and import of allegedly historical matters. Believers seeking a non-theological scripture will look in vain; the oldest complete manuscripts date from centuries after crucial events and apocryphal texts are "heretical" according to theological doctrine. However, each theology claims that its particular interpretive methods innocently identify the veritable information out of the mass of transmitted texts. Interestingly, theology therefore rejects #6 as a principle; poorly supervised transmissions (especially those of other religious traditions) fail to compile and convey credible testimony. Each theology instructs its adepts, Our canon of approved scriptures reflects the finest hermeneutics fit for conveying the stories still resounding with truth.

C. In conclusion, if premises 1-7 are surely known to be true, then veritable testimony about long-past miracles is presently credible.

This conclusion cannot be reasonably accepted because none of the premises can be known to be true; indeed, each one is highly dubious. Religion and theology have to agree with philosophy: these premises 1-7 must each be rejected as general tenets or rules. There is no extant evidence of a past miracle.

Interesting, religions and theologies both agree and disagree with a negative assessment of this argument from testimony. They agree that any other religion/theology must be rejected on miracles due to reasonable problems, as described above. Each one disagrees as well, insisting that their own miracle testimony survives critical scrutiny so that premises 1-7 happen to be right for just their own testimonial tales. Let's compile the typical justifications given to support this special pleading:

1\* Each religion says that its religious ideas and inspiration would make matters simple to proclaim, by supplying the classification of 'miracle' and suggesting what miracles are possible. Our religion has believers who rightly treasure evident miracles from the true God.

Criticism: Are these "evident" miracles so evident just because your religion has been reciting them? That's fundamentalism. Are these events "miracles" due to your God's intent to impress true believers? That's providentialism.

2\* Each religion says that its own live testimony provides veracity beyond reasonable doubt, especially about religious encounters. Religions wrong about God regrettably encourage their believers to make up miracle myths.

Criticism: Are these testifiers (why them?) to be trusted just because their miracle reports were repeated and recorded? That's fundamentalism. Are these miracles (why those?) just what would be expected from a revelation of divine power? That's providentialism.

3\* Each religion says that its believers are highly reliable about miracles that make sense to their own religiosity. Our believers are fortunate to hear true miracle reports but others can come attend to the truth too.

Criticism: Are your religion's miracle testifiers heard to be in agreement because their testimony (and no others) deserved to be preserved? That's fundamentalism. Are your religion's testimonial reports accurate because your God wanted those truths heard? That's providentialism.

4\* Each religion asserts that oft-told tales about miracles only gain in credibility the more they are circulated. The most sincere reports, like ours, make a religion right about its God.

Criticism: Does a religion think that miracle testimonials only circulate widely because people know them to be true? That's fundamentalism. Does a religion think that divinely-caused events surely inspire the highest sincerity? That's providentialism.

5\* Each religion holds that its sacred transmissions are specially marked by the character of veracity inherent to the testimony they convey. Our scriptural books are self-certifying with signs and marks of veracity that don't show up in other religious traditions.

Criticism: Does a religion assert that testimonial veracity illustrates how its transmitted reports are sacredly accurate? That's fundamentalism. Does a religion assert that the divine character of testimonial reports was infused into its traditional scriptures? That's providentialism.

6\* Each religious tradition says that early preservers of tales wouldn't have been so scrupulous about accurate transmissions unless they held the true faith inspired by such veritable testimony. Our devotion to scripture matches the early movement's zeal about hearing the testimonial truth.

Criticism: Does a religion claim that the way that transmissions were repeatedly preserved is what guarantees that those miracle reports are true? That's fundamentalism. Does a religion claim that its miracle reports wouldn't have been transmitted so faithfully unless God knew they were true? That's providentialism.

7\* Each theology claims that its particular interpretive methods innocently identify the veritable information out of the mass of transmitted texts. Our canon of approved scriptures reflects the hermeneutics fit for conveying the stories still resounding with truth.

Criticism: Does a theology claim that the identification of veritable miracle reports is the proof that the right methodical interpretations are applied? That's fundamentalism. Does a theology claim that its correct hermeneutics is deploying divinely inspired methods of understanding miracle reports? That's providentialism.

How can religion and theology justify 1\*-7\* without collapsing into fundamentalism or resorting to providentialism? They cannot. They either cite testimonials and corroborating tales from scripture as though their very truth shined in their words, or they credit divine guidance with ensuring that the manner and mode of testimony and its transmission conveys veracity. "Our scripture says so!" and "Our God's aid protected testimony from error!" are questing-begging gambits that only convince their faithful.

### Present Miracles

Religion and Theology as a whole do not trust miracle testimonies. They expend great effort preserving a handful of time-worn tales, dismissing all the rest down to the present day, and disparaging miracle reports from other religious traditions. The greatest rational resistance to present-day miracles comes from churches as much as common sense. Precisely because miracles are so potently impressive, no religion can afford to credit too many of them, and no theology can afford

lax standards about proving a miracle. The Devil's Advocate in Catholic sainthood examinations was so rationally skeptical for good reason. This modern age of skeptical secularity has been immeasurably helpful to doctrinal religions, much reducing the flood of miracle reports from around the world, and making it easier to enforce orthodoxy. No religion wants to live in an enchanted age again.

The rational argument against present-day miracles denies premises 1, 2, and 3 above, for good reasons, so no amount of testimony from living witnesses could be credible. If religion makes its special pleadings, or appeals to theological assistance with premises 4, 5, and 6, then the counter-argument points out how fundamentalism or providentialism awaits, so the entire argument still fails. That's the end of the counter-argument, as far as empirical common sense is concerned.

Philosophy can take a particular epistemological interest in premises 3 and 4. A religion expects everyone to agree that a whole group of testifiers with the same account must be more compelling than any doubter who wasn't even there. Religions (understandably) confuse and conflate the marvelous with the miraculous. Religious faith needs only to feel amazed and humbled by the experience; whether an actual unnatural miracle actually occurs too wouldn't be necessary. The appearance and not the substance of a miracle is the point. All religions, and especially those with traditional or popular followings beyond theological control, are replete with magicians, illusionists, charlatans, masters of physical feats, and charismatic mental manipulators. Most of these mesmerizing performers may be entirely sincere about their fakery and fraud; their skills are predicated on their own inner conviction.

Why must group "testimony" be doubted, when you weren't even there and they were? The amazement of a group cannot be doubted while they sincerely express their feelings; whether this group witnessed something actually unnatural must be strongly doubted by any sane person, including those witnesses themselves. Witnesses insisting that the marvelous must be the miraculous are suspending rational judgment, and any resulting faith obtains free play to excite belief.

As for rational judgment, Hume's argument against miracle testimony captures the epistemological problem.

There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as the uniform experience amounts to a proof, then there is here a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle; nor can such a proof be destroyed, or the miracle rendered credible, but by an opposite proof, which is superior....no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavors to establish... (*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* 10.12-10.13)

Since the falsehood of miracle testimony by a few people is always more probable than the cumulative experience of all humanity, miracles must always be doubted. And so they are, millions upon millions of sincerely attested miracles down the ages and around the world today, all dismissed by family, friends, neighbors, and local clerics and sages who get worried about mental stability.

All the same, are there any miracles? Religions are still in charge of what sorts of miracles get to be witnessed and who gets to witness a miracle. The last person in charge of miracles would appear to be God.

## Part II. Observations of Miracles

A miracle at minimum should be inexplicable by current knowledge of nature. People confident about miracles are not (usually) experts about what is, or is not, naturally explainable. But those events are just nature being a little unpredictable to us humans. Nature's own "miracles" should actually be commonplace, and science agrees. From mutations inside cells to and meteors in the sky, nature can look pretty random at times. Science can know all the forces and laws, but no one will be predicting next week's weather with high accuracy.

Something surprising to you (recovery from illness, unlikely rescue, sudden great luck) is not automatically miraculous. Indeed, just the plain events of an ordinary lifetime will naturally permit a number of seemingly miraculous events. What do ordinary people notice? By Littlewood's Law, among all the events large and small that happen around us all the time, a

“one in-a-million” occurrence must in fact happen to a typical person about once a month. Most such extraordinary events, while deeply surprising, are not of the sort to inspire thoughts about miracles. Miracles seem both (a) desirable and (b) designed. When God causes a terrible event, that “tragicle” doesn’t bolster faith; and a bizarrely pointless event (so far as we can tell) wouldn’t be divine. Supposing that a miraculous-seeming event would only be a one-in-a-billion event, barely possible by nature’s ways, a person living to age 80 or 90 has an excellent chance of witnessing one personally. Going further, if a “genuine” miracle only happens at a one-in-a-trillion pace, a society of a million people will hear about a miracle from someone among them about ten times a year. No divinity required, just luck and delighted surprise.

Nevertheless, “miraculous” events can be highly convincing. Precisely because a miracle looks designed – the right thing happens just at the right time when all hope was lost – the fulsome randomness of nature looks inadequate. “That wasn’t just luck!” the onlookers agree. That appearance of a plan behind the event makes one think that the event is contrary to nature’s ways, so one judges that neither natural law nor natural luck can explain it. Whatever is so contrary to nature’s ways must be something that nature by itself cannot do. This evidential argument from miracles borrows from the general Argument from Design argument for God, asking us to infer a deity behind matters that nature cannot accomplish on its own. Nevertheless, human cognitive and emotional biases are behind that attribution of divine agency.

A “miraculous” event, while amazing, can be naturally explicable: either experts can explain it with knowledge of nature, or experts can explain it with knowledge of humans.

The “tough cases” that remain resist natural accounts because they look like carefully crafted events happening to good people at the right time when no natural causes could be responsible instead. These are the truly impressive events around which faiths are constructed. Miracles happen when and where people want them to: virtuous hopes and prayers are answered. The only person who thinks that a huge lottery win is miraculous is that winner (and some relatives). And no one thinks that an evil person’s fortunate escape from justice or lucky recovery from a gunshot wound would be a miracle (and that criminal may agree). Miracles are blessings and rewards, with strings attached. “Dear God, just help me now and I will believe all the rest of my days...”

Suppose that an event is indeed contrary to nature (and not just unpredictable) according to all current knowledge of nature’s ways. Must experts and laypeople now confess the miracle’s credibility? Not yet, no.

First, observers are fallible, and observers of extraordinary unexpected events are especially fallible. Scientists don’t trust their own eyes, or the “eyes” of their instruments, until all possible sources of distortions and misinterpretation have been ruled out and independent groups repeat and reconfirm results. Credibility standards for miracles should surely be higher than those for field observations or laboratory experiments.

Second, a genuine miracle would have to be contrary to nature’s own ways, not just confusing to humanity’s current knowledge. Our knowledge of nature is surely fragmentary and incomplete after only a few centuries of modern science. A genuine miracle must be incompatible with perfected scientific knowledge, and no one knows today what kinds of events are inconsistent with that ideal knowledge. Headlines shout, “Scientists discover what should be impossible!” but it’s just another plain case of experimental discovery or theoretical advance, as science is doing what it should be doing: gathering new evidence and admitting when old hypotheses need replacement. Yesterday’s scientific “miracles” are today’s textbook illustrations. We don’t even feel shocked by “medical miracles” anymore. (Patients and loved ones around the hospital bed are understandably impressed, however.)

Third, the most convincing observers of miracles are plain-spoken individuals without expertise or artifice but only honest astonishment. They have little concrete idea about why their minds get so convinced or their faiths are so strengthened (other than to credit their God), and they have no idea at all about whether the sum total of science could explain it. They just believe. And that’s all that religions can ask of them.

Philosophical skepticism, all the same, asks more of *us*, and directs us towards the right answer: there is no credible evidence for miracles (one by one, or collectively) that is sufficient to demonstrate an unnatural or supernatural cause at work.

## Religion and Science

Too much popular writing about science and religion relies on mistaken stereotypes. These simple stereotypes are useful for rhetorical attack. But they can leave wrong ideas about science and how it works.

### False contrasts between science and religion

Here are some false contrasts. Even if the first part of each contrast is right about religion, the contrast is misleading.

- religion supposes that there is a deeper hidden reality, while science only deals with what is observable
- religion projects wishful thinking onto an unknown reality, while science passively accepts the facts from a known reality
- religion relies on flights of fanciful imagination, while science relies on calculating rationality
- religion is not constrained by plain common sense, while science conforms to expectations of plain common sense
- religion talks about highly unnatural spooky things, while science talks about fairly ordinary natural things
- religion proliferates into innumerable varieties, while science settles straight into one account
- religion appeals to any numbers of strange powers to deal with, while science only uses one strict form of lawful explanation
- religion thinks that we can relate to higher powers to help us, while science thinks that higher powers are utterly independent and beyond manipulation
- religion is about guiding people towards a hopeful potential future, while science is about telling people what will necessarily happen anyways
- religion will never converge on one story for all the answers, while science will eventually have a comprehensive explanation for everything
- religion wants to think that it serves an irreplaceable role, while science can eventually replace all religious answers and functions

### Correcting the stereotypes

Science does propose that there is a deeper reality behind what can be observed. Science searches for the hidden underlying powers that are really responsible for what observable things are doing.

Science does not know what reality is like in advance. Scientists must actively project their best guesses onto the unknown world to find out what may be correct.

Science relies on flights of fanciful imagination even more than religion, since religion is typically conservative while science must occasionally try radical new ideas.

There is no limitation upon scientific imagination. Sciences occasionally postulate wildly counterintuitive and “unnatural” things that violate both common sense and what counted as natural according to older scientific knowledge.

Science doesn't settle into any simple account of reality. The sciences postulate very different kinds of things. Physics describes atoms and biology deals with cells, and cultures are very different from continents. The quantum level of nature is very different from our human-scale realm of nature.

There is a general method of scientific inquiry in which scientific laws can vary widely. Some sciences use precise mathematical laws in partial differential equations, some sciences only use statistical-probability laws, while other sciences can at best postulate habits/tendencies/bell curves (eg social sciences). The three main orders of nature (physical, sub-atomic, social) conform to three different modes of lawful behavior.

Science only understands nature as it relates to our interactions with it. Science confirms its hypotheses by demonstrating reliable control over expected experimental outcomes.

Science is the technology of reasonable hope for potential futures. Science helps people to technologically produce what they want as they manipulate nature into one future rather than another. Where there are limits to our powers, science also tells us why.

Science will never have a complete explanation for everything. For any “final” laws or set of “initial” conditions, science can always ask, and try to investigate, why just those laws and those initial conditions. “It just happened that way” is a halting of intelligence, not a scientific answer.

Science and religion differ mainly on the way they propose and confirm hypotheses. They primarily aim at **different aspects of reality**, they postulate **different kinds of things** in their explanations, and they **test their explanations in distinct ways**.

Science postulates habitual impersonal things (like atoms or forces) to explain patterns in the environment. Religion postulates unpredictable willful agents (like spirits or gods) to explain particular extraordinary events.

Science only resorts to postulating agents where impersonal things won't work as well (eg social sciences). Religion will accept natural forces so long as agents are ultimately responsible for those forces.

Science can secondarily explain particular extraordinary events after primarily studying nature's regular ways. Religion can explain nature's regular patterns only after first crediting a god for establishing the world that special way.

Science rigorously tests its hypotheses against novel and specific experimental results, trying to prove theories false. Religion always can invent a story about an unpredictable god so that any future outcome can always be vaguely explained, trying to prove mythologies true.

Science is an endless process because it seeks corrections from nature, replacing limited theories with better theories. Religion is not endless in this sense, because particular religions tend to fixate on absolute unquestionable answers.

Science is an endless process because it will never run out of environing patterns and initial conditions to empirically investigate. Religion is also endless in this sense because it will never run out of extraordinary events demanding explanation.

Science can never replace all religious answers and religious functions. Religion can forever dance beyond the extent of scientific knowledge, and religion is designed to perform functions for human societies that science is not.

Science and religion go about their respective explanatory tasks in sufficiently different ways so that a religion can avoid replacement by science.

The human mind naturally seeks explanations so desperately that it will habitually prefer bad explanations to no explanations. The triumph of modern scientific rationality is not really about its capacity to supply knowledge -- rather, its genius rests on a novel ability to tolerate ignorance. Knowledge has been accumulated of course, thanks to modern science. But the modern scientific mind, so grateful for explanatory knowledge, is even more grateful for its liberation from the tyranny of explanation. Scientific minds are the ones which are artificially abnormal, not religious minds. In order to have a scientific mind, you have to be trained to be comfortable with not knowing everything. You have to be comfortable with small facts, dimly perceived laws, and huge explanatory gaps. You have to be comfortable with leaving unknown things unknown for a while, perhaps for a lifetime, and perhaps forever.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, the famous French anthropologist, died last year at age 100. His book *Myth and Meaning* outlines the key difference between the pre-scientific mind and the scientific mind. The difference is not that one cares for evidence and explanation while the other does not. Quite the opposite: the pre-scientific mind has an intense practical obsession with every minute particle of evidence available in the environment, to a degree that makes us moderns seem blind by comparison. Rather, the difference lies in the degree to which an all-encompassing explanatory web is pursued by the

mind. The “primitive” or “savage” mind” (his words) spins out mythologies in order to guarantee that all evidence enjoys some rightful place in a total unified explanation of everything. Levi-Strauss explains the core function of mythology this way:

“... to reach by the shortest possible means a general understanding of the universe -- and not only a general but a total understanding. That is, it is a way of thinking which must imply that if you don't understand everything, you don't explain anything. This is entirely in contradiction to what scientific thinking does, which is to proceed step by step, trying to give explanations for very limited phenomena, and then going on to other kinds of phenomena, and so on.... So this totalitarian ambition of the savage mind is quite different from the procedures of scientific thinking. Of course the great difference is that this ambition does not succeed. We are able, through scientific thinking, to achieve mastery over nature -- I don't need to elaborate that point, it is obvious enough -- while, of course, myth is unsuccessful in giving man more material power over the environment. However, it gives man, very importantly, the illusion that he can understand the universe and that he does understand the universe. It is, of course, only an illusion.” (Myth and Meaning , 1995 edition, pp. 5-6)

This “totalitarian ambition of the savage mind” isn't really “savage” (the better translation of ‘sauvage’ from the French is “wild” or “primitive” in English) but only undisciplined by science's modern ways. The human brain, pound for pound, was just as intelligent a few thousand of years ago as a typical brain is today. Nothing evolutionary has changed the human brain that much in so short a time. Humans have always had plenty of overall intelligence, in general. How that intelligence is specifically applied to examine the world is what has developed since the Stone Age.

The foremost disciplinary lesson of science is not to “seek knowledge” – human minds naturally try and succeed all the time – but instead to restrain one's quest for comprehensive explanation, not seeking to entangle all of nature's ways into one thin net. The religious mind is the more natural mind, not the less intelligent mind. The mythological ambition is everywhere; it's not only in religious traditions, but it has persisted within philosophy as well. Aristotle's four modes of causation and his drive to prove one First Cause of everything is a totalitarian manifestation, as is Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason. We hear echoes of this “totalitarian ambition” in our contemporary theologians who demand explanations for everything and complain that faith in God must be preferred to science's halting steps towards partial knowledge. We hear the mythological mind at work when religious people challenge atheists to explain the whole universe if there wasn't a Creator.

The human mind naturally seeks explanations for everything – this is the glory and the curse of a large brain. Religion demands, and too easily finds, “explanations” for all evidence. Science likewise demands explanations for the evidence, but finds knowledge instead of myth by demanding that a genuine explanation must demonstrate an actual natural process at work. Religion does not originate in any lack of rationality, but rather in an excess of exuberant intelligence. Science is content with partial, fallible, and revisable knowledge, while mythology offers totality, infallibility, and certainty. Finding the totalitarian mythology so satisfying to the intellect, religious believers do not understand why they should abandon their religion. When non-religious people complain that believers just don't care for good explanations, believers reply that they already enjoy the best explanations. When atheists complain that believers must suffer from a rationality deficit, believers reply that the worse irrationality is to ignore a satisfying explanation when science has nothing so comprehensive by comparison. What looks like trivial illusion to the scientific mind actually looks like glorious reality to the mythological mind. This confrontation is not ultimately about evidence or rationality, as if one side has more of it than the other. This confrontation is about how two different kinds of intelligent minds do their work.

Avoiding replacement by science is the kind of work undertaken by a religious theology. A theological religion can, in theory, keep gods forever beyond the reach of disconfirmation by science. Western theologies have done this by constructing supernaturalisms on top of physical processes. Eastern theologies have done this by elaborating transcendental idealisms on top of psychological processes. Science will endlessly contradict particular religious answers about the world. However, science is not well-designed to directly oppose theologies. Science cannot accommodate religion, but theology can “accommodate” science on its own terms. Nonreligious thinkers can skeptically question theologies and build **philosophical naturalisms** (starting from the sciences) to deal with theologies over questions about ultimate reality. Philosophical naturalism is the place to start when pondering the plausibility of “religious naturalism.”

Science can never replace all religious functions. Science and religion offer their respective accounts for quite different purposes, so that a religion can avoid replacement by science. “Religion is (1) a community's hard to fake commitment (2)

to a counterfactual and counterintuitive world of supernatural agents (3) who master people's existential anxieties, such as death and deception." (Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust*, 2002, p. 4) Science can understand how religions do their work, but that ability is very different from science doing religious work. Science is not well-designed to offer existential coping with emotional situations. Theological religions are confident that only they can deal with existential and ethical problems. Science should not try to directly confront theologies. Science cannot directly construct morality, but science can understand how morality objectively fits into the natural world. Nonreligious thinkers can skeptically question theologies and build **philosophical humanisms** (starting from psychology, etc.) to deal with theologies over questions of meaning, value, and ethics. Philosophical humanism is the place to begin when pondering the viability of "religious humanism."

## Religious Naturalism

The term “religious naturalism” may only be the label for something impossible. Combining words nowhere guarantees a sensible conception of anything. Words can pair contrary terms, but comprehension does not follow. “Square circle” refers to nothing, not even a notion from the wildest imagination. Contradiction is a failure of imagination, and a fatal flaw for rationality. A “squarish circle” can be vaguely imagined and possibly drawn, in many different ways. Bending an idea a little opens the realm of conceivable possibility.

To say that “religious naturalism is a religion” only utters a contradiction in terms, and at most conveys an aspirational idea – “I feel like being religious naturally” – rather than anything sensical. Naturalism needn’t notice; it redefines religion and religiosity anyways, in the course of restricting the reference of words to only natural matters. At most, a claim like “My naturalism is a religion too,” could only mean “religious naturalism is a natural religion.” That statement meets naturalism’s own requirements: everything real has to be defined and understood as *naturally* real, or else it has to be unreal. For naturalism, nothing can be unnaturally real.

Something was unnaturally real, contrary to naturalism, would be of interest to religion. Proponents of naturalism often take a close interest in religion and its claims about unnatural realities, and some try to explain why religious beliefs and practices are so prevalent in humanity. That natural curiosity about religion could even inspire some naturalists to feel religious in some way making sense to themselves. They won’t have a religion, however, without additionally joining an actual religion. Naturalism is not a religion, and no variety of naturalism can do more than inspire and suggest religious ideas and sentiments, just as nature itself can easily inspire religious views.

To repeat, saying that “religious naturalism is a religion” only utters a contradiction in terms. The true answer to the question, “If a cat’s tail was a leg too, how many legs would a cat have?” is still 4: a tail isn’t a leg no matter what it’s called, because the nature of leg won’t be changing that way. The correct answer to the question, “If you let naturalists make up any meaning to ‘religion’, how many could have a religion?” is always zero: religion won’t be changing that way. Religion has long existed in the world regardless of anything naturalism may think, without any help from naturalism.

Looking at the history of religion back into the Bronze Age, few generalizations apply except for the common conviction that mundane nature isn’t enough for the mind or the heart: nature needs supplements because humans needs more than nature. If the earthly world had always been enough, no religious ideas would have seemed plausible or persuasive and no religions would have formed. Since religion did arise and propagate across all humanity, nature hasn’t been enough for most people. To say that “Nature is enough” as naturalism does, simply rejects religion. For naturalism to next say, “Religion is wrong to say that nature isn’t enough” is a claim without any historical basis and no contemporary plausibility. Where does naturalism have any ground to say what counts as religion? Religion would be scolded for telling science what really counts as science.

When a claim is made to the effect that religious naturalism should *be* religion, that claim only carries the sensible meaning of “Religion should not exist.” Naturalism has long dreamed of eliminating religion (strong secularism) and, short of that, possibly replacing religion. However, the only way to replace religion is to first select a few features of religion that naturalism could duplicate, and declare that those features have always been religion’s core features. That procedure places two heavy burdens on naturalism: (1) determining features (A, B, C, etc.) what naturalism could endorse as ‘religious’, and (2) convincing everyone that religion has only essentially been about A, B, C, and so on. That procedure explains why naturalism stays busy instructing religion what is “essentially” must be in order to be real enough to have naturalistic substitutes. Reducing religion down to exalted sentiments, profound experiences, communal bonds, ethical tenets, and the like, permit naturalism to (A) find room for such features within naturalism, and (B) leave behind anything unreal as “not really what religion is about” anyways so that naturalized pseudo-religion remains.

Coordinating both sides to this unstable arrangement, the religious side and the naturalistic side, can be done in any number of imaginative ways, since religions display so many features. When people talk about “religious naturalism” they may only be talking about some vague notion that has formed imaginatively, a naturalism that is sort of religion-ish, or maybe a religion getting a little naturalistic. Thus: affirming naturalism and noticing a little religiosity to it (awe at cosmic vastness, say); or affirming religion and admitting one naturalistic feature (some scientific knowledge, perhaps). These ways of bending naturalism, or bending religion, just a bit to accommodate a little about the other can seem quite possible and even sensible to anyone already committed to naturalism, or devoted to religion. Religious naturalism is not

difficult to formulate for yourself: either start with an idea of Religion and make it a little naturalistic, or start with an idea of Naturalism and find room for a little religiosity. That is why there are two main sorts of “religious naturalists”: (a) Religious people able to accept most of science, and (b) Science-minded people able to appreciate aspects of religiosity.

Such bending of religion and naturalism (without breaking) doesn’t approach compromise or mutual accommodation. This “soft religious naturalism” may be precisely the point for its adherents, since there’s no need to converge on any particular way of bending views. No consensus would come together, and hence “religious naturalism” would name nothing in particular, and most anything in general.

Let someone say, “I’m a religious naturalist” and no test comes to mind to check for orthodoxy. Like that popular label of ‘spirituality’, it can mean precisely whatever the adherent wants to think that it should mean.

Anything firmer than soft religious naturalism admits further blending, while avoiding the contrariness of internal contradiction.

### Religious Naturalism and Contradictions

Setting parameters for a sensible sort of religious naturalism finds boundaries at contradictoriness. What would it mean for naturalism and religion to be contradictory? Four kinds of contradiction for paired terms “Religion” and “Naturalism” could be involved.

Conceptual contradiction.  
“to affirm one denies  
the other”

A true statement about REL must be contradictory to a true statement about NAT. “Religion is supernatural while Naturalism never is.”

Semantic contradiction.  
“referring to one means not  
referring to the other”

Something that REL makes reference to cannot be something that NAT refers to. “Religion refers to gods but Naturalism never refers to gods.”

Epistemic contradiction.  
“their joint satisfaction cannot  
be knowable”

Even if REL and NAT may become jointly realized, no one knows when that could happen. “Religion will reach global spirituality in step with transhumanity’s enhancement through technology.”

Pragmatic contradiction.  
“to fulfill one prevents the  
fulfillment of the other”

Conditions where REL and NAT might get jointly realized won’t come together in practical reality. “Religions will agree on the true God when science eventually knows the origin of the cosmos.”

Let’s start from a criterial conception of Religion and a criterial conception of Naturalism. (Without criterial conceptions, retreat back to soft religion naturalism.) The project is to make REL and NAT somehow coherent: there’s no contradiction (of any of the four types of contradiction above).

Making REL and NAT consistent:

Select 1 criterion for REL and 1 criterion of NAT, and then demonstrate actual conditions for their joint coherent realization. Other criteria are deemed less important. “Thin religious naturalism”.

Making REL and NAT compatible:

Specify a set of core criteria for REL and a set of core criteria for NAT, and then show how conditions permit their inclusive coherent realization. “Thick religious naturalism”.

Make NAT be religious:

Formulate criteria for NAT so they are coherent with core criteria for REL. Anything anti-religious about Naturalism is abandoned. “Firmly religious naturalism”.

Make REL be naturalistic:

Formulate criteria for REL so they are coherent with core criteria for NAT. Anything un-naturalistic about religion is dropped.

“Fully naturalized religion.”

Contradiction Illustrations

- A Thin Religious Naturalism: “Religion involves elevated spiritual emotions, and naturalism expects the evolved human’s perceptual sensitivity to aesthetic features of the environment.”
- A Thick Religious Naturalism: “Religion requires (a) mystical experiences that (b) encounter infinite peace (c) when all sense of self vanishes; and naturalism admits unusual neurological states.”
- A Firmly Religious Naturalism: “Religion views the cosmos as sustained by supreme mind, and Naturalism can view the universe as holistically bound into existence by observing consciousness.”
- A Fully Naturalized Religion: “Religion requires worship of a prophet whose scriptural message moves the masses, and Naturalism acknowledges charismatic people inventing inspired moral ideals.”

There is one even higher stage for Religious Naturalism: Specific the necessary essential features of Religiosity, and specific the necessary essential facets to Naturalism, and then show how all of these features are jointly coherent. This project has never been realized, despite the efforts of major philosophers and theologians. So long as Religion is believed to require devout belief in a supremely creative and good Mind guiding mundane matters from beyond the natural world, Naturalism finds no place for that sort of deity. To be naturalistic, religion must be Godless. If Religion surrenders God, along with miracles, heaven, divine incarnation, divine signs, immortality, and similar unnaturalities, then Religious Naturalism beckons. Naturalism can be capacious enough to admit an absolute eternal reality responsible for all other entities, but this “ultimate” reality cannot be a sentient moralizer and meddler with natural laws.

Religious naturalism, generally speaking, offers some sort of naturalism compatible with human religiosity. Philosophers can arrange their mutual adjustment by settling what one side means and then conforming the other side into compatibility. For example, let religiosity require X, and next select some type of ‘naturalism’ not forbidding X (or even warranting X). Alternatively, let naturalism be sensibly defined, and then select some range of (natural) human matters to be ‘religious’. Camps prioritizing religiosity have mainly split along denominational lines, or they divided over the best ‘universal’ religiosity. For camps prioritizing naturalism, two primary types have been competitors since Kant:

Type A. Religious Naturalism is a narrow naturalism that allows for natural religiosity about human matters.

Type B. Religious Naturalism is a broad naturalism that includes natural matters calling for human religiosity.

For Type A naturalism, certain ranges of religiosity are eligible for some authenticity or validity, only to the extent that they can be ‘naturalized’ fairly easily by current science, so that those modes of religiosity can be classified as a merely human affair. As an example, philosophers looking to brain science for confirmations that mystical experiences are confirmable as neurological events can affirm, “Surely those mystical experiences really happen in a person’s brain, making it seem to that person that the infinite is encountered, but of course nothing trans-finite or supernatural is actually encountered by any brain.” Religiosity is naturally human, but only human.

By contrast, for Type B, a robust naturalism wider than just current science is shown to be philosophically defensible, and that broad naturalism includes real matters beyond the human realm that deserve religious attention. For example, philosophers who are comfortable with ecstatic and transporting experiences can affirm, “Surely those amazing encounters are really directed towards actually existing features of nature, even if those encounters are rare or difficult to achieve.” Religiosity is entirely natural, but more than human. Religion cannot help but cast suspicion towards any worldview ignorant of the Supreme. “What cannot prove supportive of the Supreme Value must be immorally against it.”

Anthropo-Religion – all agents, from the god(s) to earth’s inhabitants, pursue values.

Cosmo-Religion – all of creation as a whole embodies and exemplifies values.

Modern Science – no agents are unnatural, and the universe does not embody or exemplify any values

For Religion, we are wanted and meant to be here so we'd better behave. For Science, there is little about the universe that makes it "home", and we are entirely insignificant within the vast universe.

Naturalism is very humbling but lends no moral guidance beyond whatever cultures already teach to the young. Religion regards humanity as needed by the universe and also humbled by the universe, to motivate us enough to obey our moral duties. For naturalism, we can naturally be moral people, to minimum standards. Religion appreciates our natural moral values, but asks us to achieve higher ethical ideals. Religious naturalism offers a compromise combination: we can naturally think better about ethical standards that go higher than ordinary moral abilities bestowed by human nature and culture. In response, religion expects ethical standards to arrive from impressive religious experiences such as divine revelations and mystical realizations.

### **Religious Naturalism and "Experience"**

Naturalism promises the greatest respect shown towards empirical evidence. Naturalism claims that other philosophies and religions, but not naturalism and science, hesitate about accepting observational evidence. However, naturalism must deny religious experience when it points beyond nature. A person experiencing God unnaturally is a person who needs to be contradicted no matter how sincere that person's attestation may be. Naturalism by definition rejects the possibility of any experiential encounter with the unnatural. For naturalism, it is impossible to veritably encounter the non-existent.

No evidence from experience about the unnatural/supernatural is ever possible, so there is never any "evidence" of God to consider in the first place. No genuine experience, no real evidence, nothing to investigate, and no possibility of empirical confirmation. No theory of naturalism ever suggests, "If a person does have an experience with features X, Y, Z (etc) then that would truly be evidence of an encounter or absorption with the unnatural." No (X, Y, Z) matters to naturalism. As soon as a person says, "My odd experience had those features!" then naturalism would have to promptly retort, "Sorry, whatever happened in your experience, none of that counts, since experience can't actually reach the unnatural." Without any inquiry or investigation, naturalism bluntly says, "the person had an experience that seemed unnatural, but it really wasn't."

For naturalism, no experience can truly be "unnatural" because the religious experience itself cannot be unnatural (nothing unnatural is real) and the experience cannot be of the unnatural (nothing unnatural is real). At most, naturalism must say that person had an unusual experience (naturally) that *seemed* to encounter something unnatural. Naturalism can accept the phenomena "in the head" but deny that such phenomena are caused by the unnatural beyond the mind. People "see" ghosts and "experience" God – but such phenomena prove nothing, other than showing how a person gets susceptible to odd experiences. So long as a religious person is willing to say, "My odd experience inspired me to get religious, but nothing unnatural was really involved," then naturalism can even congratulate that person for getting religious naturally.

Naturalism is never really threatened by religious experience, having presumed that no experience can encounter the unnatural and no religious evidence could increase the probability of supernaturalism above 0%. Theology can get interested in the "naturalness" of human susceptibility to "unnatural experience" – but this sort of naturalized religiosity only re-confirms what naturalism asserts: people make up religions by themselves. Humanity is susceptible to mystical experiences that suggest mythic accounts about unnatural matters responsible for just those experiences. Each religion sets its own criteria for what "truly" counts as features of experience that "really" encounter unnatural matters. Religions even teach those criteria first, strengthening their members' proclivity for having just those sorts of religious experiences already approved by that religion. Religions help create the particular "evidence" for their peculiar deities.

### **Religious Naturalism and "Emergence"**

Religious Naturalism must appeal to science to account for alleged religious events and experiences, or even the consciousness of the qualitative world where anything spiritual appears. If naturalism cannot even account for experience, Theology can dismiss religious naturalism as forever unreligious in every sense, trapped in materialism. Enjoying natural wonder and meditative bliss shouldn't be able to happen, without naturalism's ability to show how they are natural in the first place.

After the 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosophers Samuel Alexander and C.D. Broad endorsed emergent naturalism, analytic-scientific philosophy proposed models permitting life, conscious experience, and all mental states to arise or “emerge” solely from physical objects and their properties. Leibniz’s classic objection always frustrates such models: at the crucial point in the explanation, psychical qualia and qualities are simply substituted for physical features or forces, with nothing more than an inexplicable miracle connecting them. Such has been the dead-end fate of every sort of dualism going back to Descartes. Naturalists just resort to hand-waving distractions and fallacious red-herrings, such as “Nature just works that way,” or “Science can’t be expected to prove everything about the world when its just about brute facts.”

Diversions on the road to explanatory emergence only appear to postpone that dead-end. Diversions are opened up by applying four different conceptions of “emergent” and tacitly switching meanings when convenient.

Consider the ontological differences between these four sorts of 'emergence'.

1. With composition, the parts can exist just as they are without the whole. An atom of hydrogen is still hydrogen apart from water and it is found without water around. Nothing about being within water changes the inherent features of hydrogen atoms. The nature of hydrogen is on display for detection regardless of whether any water has ever been around it. What is hydrogen inherently is, doesn't require any relational matters. The part is entirely responsible for the nature of the whole, and not the reverse.

2. With properties, the behavior of a thing is only displayed when put into a certain context and cannot be detected apart from that sort of context. Nothing has the property of 'buoyancy' quite apart from getting put into a fluid. Saying “ice would be buoyant anyways before getting put in water” proves the point here -- one only knows how that property could exist after a buoyancy test and not before. Predicting buoyancy based on density still requires calculations of relative densities, including the known density of the surrounding fluid for the test. Such properties must be relational, only existing where bodies are resting in contact. The two interacting things are jointly responsible for the whole result (of floating).

3. With dynamics, the properties of a thing can only exist due to the prior existence of the whole in which it is found. DNA only exists because organic bodies exist. Removing DNA from a cell doesn't prove that DNA exists apart from organic life, since that life had to exist first. DNA is never found where there has been no life. Furthermore, DNA isn't like hydrogen, since DNA is only DNA while functioning within living cells. The whole (the organism) is responsible for the creation and nature of the part (the DNA). If you reply that there must have been replicating strands before cells, very good, but the primeval strands weren't DNA yet. Strictly speaking, there are only complex processes here, not parts. Long strands of inert molecules, the same molecules found in DNA, only form a mere crystal utterly apart from interacting RNA and the like. It is impossible to define what DNA is apart from reference to its historical development within life.

4. With behavior, the abilities of a thing can only make sense while that thing is interactively embedded within a dynamic environment permitting that ability. There is no “climbing” without climbable objects around; no “swimming” without swimmable waters around, and so on. Those enviroing opportunities wouldn't exist either in the complete absence of organisms able to take advantage of them. The first trees were not “climbable” before climbing life -- and to say “they would have been climbable by a squirrel” again proves the point, that another life form has to be introduced into the situation. This is J J Gibson's theory of affordances. Dewey labeled them as “transactions” - both parties are the way they are only because they have shared a history of common co-survival through mutual adaptation. Another example -- animals did not long ago suddenly start eating the available fruit hanging around -- “fruit” only evolved with its characteristic properties (shape, color, seed placement, sugars, etc) because animals were around first sampling them. Transactions/affordances are essential to evolution; anything organic takes advantages of surrounding affordances to display its kinds of behaviors -- and life causes modifications of its environment to encourage those affordances. Earth's atmosphere is the way it is, not “for” life, but because of life.

To summarize - (1) compositional emergence; (2) property emergence; (3) dynamic emergence; (4) transactional emergence. All four types of emergence are all ultimately just complex examples of emergent dynamics, scientifically.

Philosophically, emergentism is the other side of the reductionism coin, neither bearing worth or philosophical exchange value without the other.

Reductionism in philosophy of science says that knowledge of the isolated parts in their analyzed isolation not only suffices for knowledge of wholes, but is exclusively necessary for full real knowledge of any larger whole. In short, knowledge of life's active behavior "is nothing but" the dynamics of internal physiology; and knowledge of physiology "is nothing but" the interactions of properties of components down to the molecular level, and those components are best known through their inherent features revealed only after they are torn from their relational contexts. In short, only basic physical features are real and knowledge can rest. #4 emergence is really just #3 emergence, which is really just #2 emergence, which is all nothing but #1 emergence (which is really just due to inherent non-relational essences). The sciences studying #2, #3, and #4 types of emergence should eventually (when all bridging laws and theoretical reductions are accomplished in the future) just listen to sciences doing only #1 emergence about reality. The rest is just-so stories and fiction, even among the other sciences. This is the reductionist worth of emergentism, after the bluffing and sophistry gets dispelled.

An illustration about naturalism and the phenomenon of life will serve. "Life emerges from self-constrained chemistry" – this mantra may be accurate in one sense of emergence and mistaken in another sense of emergence. This statement encourages reductionism, not full emergence. Yes, life would not persist unless a great deal of chemistry is happening, but plenty of ongoing chemistry only exists because of life, not prior to life. Life itself creates its own kinds of chemistry never to found anywhere apart from life. Life created organic chemistry, not the other way around, if you take time and process and history seriously (which physics does not). The ability of a spider to sense a disturbance in its web is far from being just formal chemistry. When you get to your example of music, you are talking about dynamic and behavior emergence, highly contextual stuff. Music does not emerge from chemistry, no. So, the emergent naturalist must deny that life emerges from chemistry or deny that music comes from life. Now, the naturalist will protest, "No false dilemmas from a philosopher, please!" Yet, the emergent naturalist leaps from property emergence to dynamic emergence and then behavioral emergence and 'round back again, never noticing those unaccounted and unaccountable ontological leaps.

The sciences themselves contribute to that piece-meal yet incomplete naturalism, and that is science's privilege, because many sciences with different ontologies and distinctive modes of emergence are cooperating. However, that aggregate of small leaps never congeals into a philosophically satisfactory naturalism able to fully explain how consciousness could pop into reality just because some physicality is around.

One philosophy – the transactionalism of pragmatism – rejects the false dichotomy of group or individual evolution: instead, several levels of evolution operate simultaneously, especially for highly social animals. Reducing one mode of ecological evolution to another makes no scientific sense. Group evolution, in any case, is necessary for explaining distinctive human capabilities (play, music, morality, ritual, etc).

Because pragmatism is the philosophy most loyal to science (all the sciences), its view is easy to state. Everything that is knowable and real about any object anywhere consists principally of #4 transactional emergence. This is the qualitative world supplying all evidence of all reality, including experimental evidence for the other three kinds of emergence. The other three kinds of emergence lend details to explanations, but they are discovered analytically under constrained conditions and only hold validity under those conditions. Mechanism, for example, is useful for crafts, but nothing mechanical actually exists in nature apart from techno-savvy life forms (beavers, humans, etc.). Reductionists reverse that, claiming that everything that nature is really doing is just mechanism. Pragmatism reverses that view back again. Purely quantitative formulas and laws experimentally work under controlled conditions, but they aren't "really" at work in any more fundamental sense as if unaffected by the innumerable other energies and forces at other scales and durations. The laws of nature are all transactionally emergent too. Nature is a dynamic whole: nothing is what it is unless the Cosmos has allowed it to come to be the way it is, ever since its origins. This is not cosmic vitalism, but processual dynamism and transactionalism (biological vitalism is just a scientific corollary near stars).

A key advantage of pragmatism, aside from its devout coherence with all of science, is that there are no deep puzzles about where qualities come from, or what consciousness really is, and so on. Not having to produce a lawful reduction just to get accepted into reality relieves philosophy and science from much nonsense. Indeed, for pragmatism there is no need to fuss over whether mystical episodes or paranormal encounters are "real", and so on. Its all *real* – but real in its particular sort of context where such matters can proceed. Reductionism and emergent naturalism requires the forgetting of context, the distortion of science, and an unscientific retreat back to "nothing-but-ism."

In conclusion, only philosophical pragmatism could serve as the basis for a genuinely religious naturalism – just as it permits an aesthetic naturalism and a cultural naturalism. Nothing religious is compelled to nullify the natural, and nothing natural must negate the religious. Their mutuality in the ongoing enrichment of experience does credit and credibility to them both.

### **Atheism without Naturalism and Naturalism without Atheism**

There is no academic future for bonding naturalism together with atheism. Naturalism is best off leaving behind atheism while advancing empirical inquiry. Atheism cannot be tied down to naturalism while debating with theology.

Within the broad territory of secularity, finding atheists and naturalists in close company across Western societies is no surprise. These two viewpoints can be neighbors in their separation apart from theism and religious culture. Proponents of secularism take atheism and naturalism as two labels conveniently attaching to pretty much the same viewpoint. Secularist and humanist organizations presume that atheism and naturalism have cozy social and civic relations with each other. Most secularists nowadays think that convincing someone to agree with one view amounts to a conversion to the other view. In an era populated by scientists figuring that a pro-science stance kills God, in lock-step with secularists figuring that folks fleeing churches are Darwinists, being anti-religious could not look simpler. Advocating one doesn't sound much different than advocating for the other, when all the gods have to go.

Determining where there happen to be alignments between atheists and naturalists is a sociological matter for empirical research. The psychological matter of individuals possibly equating their naturalistic view with an atheist identity also merits study. As psychological or a sociological, these matters call for empirical inquiries undistorted by intellectualist presumptions. No investigation into what people think about atheism or about naturalism should start by taking these terms to be synonymous. Evidently the many billions of actual people around the world do not regard them as equivalent. And even if millions, nay billions, of people *did* like both atheism and naturalism, no validity follows from that consensus, any more than billions of religious people prove the existence of God.

As an academic matter, the projects of defending atheism and naturalism should not occupy the same domain. They are quite different endeavors. Each one would collapse in failure from tight intellectual relations with the other. Naturalism is not about atheism; atheism is not about naturalism. They should stay distant academically, despite their affinity socially.

It has never been true that a proponent of naturalism must endorse atheism. And it simply isn't true that an advocate of atheism has to endorse naturalism. The way that some people are comfortable with affirming both has nothing to do with whether atheism or naturalism need to rely on each other. They needn't even be paired together.

Asserting atheism is compatible with denying naturalism. And, asserting naturalism is consistent with denying atheism. A philosophical naturalist, like John Stuart Mill, can affirm agnosticism rather than atheism. Daoist and pragmatic naturalists have argued for their cosmic gods. As for atheists, they can prefer idealism or positivism rather than naturalism. Hobbes was a materialist, but Hume was not. Looking back, few of the great non-theistic thinkers from Europe to China were advocates of materialism. And, among naturalistic philosophers, some from Lucretius to Santayana ensured that the divine and/or the spirit was not excluded.

There is no incongruence for affirming atheism without naturalism, or for affirming naturalism but not atheism. From atheism's stance, gazing upwards at gods to see just void is not like looking around to know our world. From naturalism's standpoint, empirical science keeps it grounded, so of the gods there should be silence, not unscientific denial. Where terms of science bear the most meaning, atheist denials of God are fairly meaningless.

Going even further, the academic projects of defending atheism, or defending naturalism, cannot succeed while affirming the other. These two projects must remain aloof and apart while assembling their justifications and defending their superiority.

Let's examine logical relations (not psychological or social relationships) between atheism and naturalism: first deductively, next inductively, and then abductively.

### Deductive Arguments

A strongly deductive relationship between atheism and naturalism would permit a *sound* inference from one to the other without any supplementary information among premises. No such strong relationship presently exists. Neither atheism nor naturalism are demonstrably known to be true. The field of philosophical atheology has shown atheism's plausibility over theism. Naturalism's supremacy over all other worldviews is nowhere in sight, despite staying a step ahead of dualism and idealism. The academic endeavors defending atheism and naturalism are still ongoing intellectual projects.

A weakly deductive relationship between atheism and naturalism would allow a *valid* inference from one to the other while relying on empirical information among additional premises. A weakly deductive relationship would permit the project of one to intellectually substitute for the other. Unfortunately, no weakly deductive relation pertains either. It is impossible to validly deduce atheism from naturalism, or to deduce naturalism from atheism, without committing fallacies or adding controversial premises.

First, the meaning of "naturalism" does not analytically follow from the meaning of "atheism", or vice versa. No dictionary defines one in terms of the other. The terms do not share a meaning, and no definition of one even permits the derivation of the other. Defining naturalism as "not super-naturalism" is too circular. The meaning of "atheism" is "a reasonable worldview omits gods." Naturalism omits gods too, but that omission hardly defines naturalism. Naturalism does not semantically or definitionally follow from atheism.

As for naturalism, it claims that "the most reasonable worldview concerns only nature and natural matters." Different sorts of naturalism diverge somewhat over what counts as "natural". Dual-aspect views and epiphenomenalisms jostle with pragmatisms, emergentisms, and eliminativisms. Some naturalisms are hospitable to natural spirits and nature gods that inspire naturally religious experiences. Pantheism can also be grounded in a suitably capacious naturalism. An advocate of atheism would have to ponder whether religious naturalism or pantheism is "atheistic" enough. That shows how the meaning of atheism doesn't analytically follow from the intensional or extensional meaning of "naturalism".

Atheism doesn't even follow from a narrower "scientific naturalism." What if empirical inquiries into breadths and margins of experience ascertain phenomenological encounters with signs of divinity? Pondering phenomenology's scientific status is yet another contentious issue. Atheism cannot automatically follow from scientific naturalism so long as the import of the term "scientific" is a contested topic. Furthermore, atheism only fallaciously follows from pro-scientific naturalism. Examine the typical argument:

1. A is B. "To be naturalistic is to be pro-scientific."
2. B is C. "To be pro-scientific is to deny gods."
3. C is A. "To be atheistic is to be naturalistic."

That conclusion does not follow. Premise 2 about "pro-science being anti-god" isn't necessarily accurate, and the conclusion is only probable at most, since other routes to atheism are available. Consider a similarly mistaken argument: "To be conservationist is to be pro-environmentalist," and "To be pro-environmentalist is to avoid meat-eating," so "To be vegetarian is to be conservationist." The conclusion cannot validly follow, since vegetarians need not be so conservation-minded.

Second, the academic projects of atheism and naturalism do not validly proceed from one to the other. Naturalism has not yet been conclusively established, and the contests among varieties of naturalism does not lend confidence. It would be highly convenient for the project of naturalism if atheism were already verified, which it is not. However, even if atheism were known to be true, that knowledge couldn't establish naturalism. Just because there is no God, that doesn't thereby establish naturalism. Naturalism could still be inadequate or incorrect due to any number of philosophical objections and obstacles. The thought that "either theism or naturalism is correct" is a false dichotomy. Furthermore, theology would rightly complain that naturalism begs the question against supernaturalism while presumptively affirming atheism. Naturalism should have nothing to do with atheism while attempting to establish its own superior reasonableness as a worldview.

As for atheism, it cannot presume naturalism without begging the question against theism. Atheism's academic project must avoid naturalism as a worldview. Atheism relies on scientific knowledge and rational methodologies, but any presumption of naturalism as a complete worldview allows theism to fairly charge atheism with begging the question.

Theology is wrong to accuse atheism of begging the question against theism simply for appealing to specific sorts of scientific knowledge. Scientific method does not rest on a logical or empirical presumption of naturalism as a whole. Science is naturalistic, of course, but naturalism is a philosophical worldview that goes beyond the entire assemblage of all current scientific theory. No chemist or geologist places “naturalism” as a premise while judging the results of laboratory experiment or a rock analysis. Accusing ordinary scientific research of presuming naturalism is just lazy theology. For its part, academic atheism must neither presume naturalism nor think that science presumes naturalism.

In summary, there is no proper deductive relationship between atheism and naturalism.

### Inductive Arguments

Atheism and naturalism, as “isms” best defended by intellectuals, are academic projects. Both of them appeal to many disciplinary fields, from history, anthropology, and sociology to psychology, epistemology, and philosophy, and interdisciplinary areas as well. Other worldviews liberally help themselves to so many resources too. Survey all the different worldviews that originated since the invention of writing. No inductive argument suggests a trend of worldviews toward either naturalism or atheism, much less their mutual absorption.

Both atheism and naturalism remain minority views, even among intellectuals worldwide. They will probably remain so indefinitely, given the vast array of divergent philosophies and theologies, with more proliferating every century. No pattern to their careers on the global stage suggests that they are twinned views or two sides of the same philosophy. Even in the industrialized West during the 19th and 20th centuries, as naturalism acquired modest acceptability, atheism’s open denial of God lagged far behind until the 1990s. Many people uninterested in God remain just as uninterested in scientism or reductionism, lingering in mind-body dualism in most practical senses. People oriented by naturalism can become less religious in identity and behavior, but that’s not atheism. Instead of atheism, plenty of people drift into agnosticism by thinking that God is unknowable, or apatheism by not thinking of God at all.

Naturalism has no way to compel atheism. Why should there be a solid trend binding the fortunes of atheism to naturalism? Atheism has but one rival in theism, and applies atheology to rival theology. Naturalism has many, many competitors across the philosophical spectrum. Fortunately, atheism does not need naturalism. Atheism has always had other worldviews to call home.

Metaphysical dualism asserts both natural and non-natural realities, but it need not find God among them. Theistic supernaturalism is hardly the only kind of dualism. Transcendentalists gazing beyond the mundane sphere do not necessarily see God looking back at them. Neither Ralph Waldo Emerson or William James discerned Yahweh in an oceanic cosmic consciousness. The Dvaita Vedanta movement of Hindu philosophy speaks of the unnaturally impersonal Brahman, but its candidacy as a theistic deity is dubious. Maybe metaphysical spiritism is too religious for secularists, but atheism rejects deities, not dualism in general. Naturalism’s project has to stay wary against metaphysical dualism.

Idealism denies that nature is fully real on its own, yet the ideality to reality need not include divinity. Metaphysical idealists are notorious for debating whether the ultimate mentality is sufficiently God-like. Asking if Hegel’s Absolute Spirit is actually God may be the wrong question to demand from the Hegelian system. Some idealists, such as G.E. Lessing and F.H. Bradley, knew well how their philosophies were exposed to charges of pantheism or atheism. Again, idealism antagonizes naturalism, but not necessarily atheism.

Phenomenalism assigns reality to the phenomenally apparent but nothing godly enough may be manifest. Positivism embraces observation in a broader way, but an instrumental detection of God appears unlikely. Nontheist views are found among phenomenologies as well. Nothing prevents dualism, idealism, phenomenalism, positivism, or phenomenology from encouraging an atheist stance. Naturalism enjoys no exclusive hold over atheism.

Naturalism and atheism agree about rejecting supernaturalism, but having the same opponent doesn’t imply teamwork together. Why should atheism have to be slowed down by naturalism? Although naturalism and supernaturalism cannot both be right, they could both be mistaken. They each have their vulnerabilities to long-standing philosophical objections and critiques. Philosophy has ample epistemic resources for exposing weaknesses and critiquing both naturalism and supernaturalism, and other worldviews besides. When measured against such high standards, each worldview tries to be less implausible than the next, by enduring skeptical criticism the best. Naturalism may prove to be more plausible than

atheism, or, atheism could secure a firmer reasonableness than naturalism. As far as philosophy can say so far, they must fight for their own fortunes and fates.

### Abductive Arguments

We have been asking whether there is logical way to show that the projects of atheism and naturalism should mutually support each other. No deductive or inductive approach can demonstrate this mutual dependency. The remaining mode of logical inference is abduction.

An abductive argument for the mutuality of atheism and naturalism has this schematic format:

1. If atheism and naturalism are mutually supportive, a credible thesis "T" would be behind both.
2. A particular thesis T is reasonably credible.
3. Therefore, atheism and naturalism are mutually supportive.

Where atheism and naturalism are so mutually supported, they are academically coordinated, without any further philosophical argumentation required. However, if supplemental philosophical argument would be required to link their mutual support, the abductive approach fails.

Below are three examples of abductive arguments offering to coordinate atheism and naturalism. Each argument falls short due to philosophical gaps.

#### Example One: The Argument from Pantheism

Let thesis T be about "pantheism": God is nature and nature is God, in the ontological sense of "identity of indiscernables".

The argument: Atheism and naturalism blend together if God = Nature, and pantheism is credible, so atheism and naturalism are simultaneously correct.

This argument fails, due to philosophical gaps. Since atheism denies all gods, then atheism rejects pantheism. The reply, "But pantheism's God isn't really any sort of god that needs atheistic denial," is a controversial claim not necessarily endorsed by all pantheists, or all atheists. Surreptitious or blatant violations of ontological co-identity are typical. Some pantheisms impose godly features on nature, thereby warming it to ecstatic, sacral, sentient, or telic degrees, which may merit atheism's dismissal as "too godly". Some naturalisms effectively subtract anything the least religious from nature, thereby cooling it to mindless, mechanistic, or nihilistic levels, which may merit pantheism's disdain as "too godless". Each would-be pantheist offers a different recipe for a nature at just the "right" temperature. Personal temperament and taste prevails in that kitchen. Evidently, philosophical conversations are still on-going, of the sort all-too-familiar among pantheists. That philosophical gap prevents this kind of abductive argument from succeeding.

#### Example Two: The Argument from Science

Let thesis T be about "science": Scientific methodology yields the best knowledge of reality.

The argument: Atheism and naturalism are conjointly at stake if science knows best, and no gods are discovered, so atheism and naturalism are equally confirmed.

This argument fails, due to philosophical gaps. Let's begin where theology would, pointing out how science's vaunted inability to take an interest in unnatural matters places it in a poor position to disconfirm a God by confirming only natural matters. Natural theology adds its arguments from knowledge of nature towards knowledge of God. No matter what confidence atheism and naturalism place in science, all three need philosophy's intervention on such argumentative ground. Are there really no gods just because science sees no tracks, trails, or tails of anything divine walking this world? Science's omniscience to know all reality is not a capacity itself knowable by any empirical method, so that extraordinary claim requires philosophical adjudication. Nor can science by itself expose the fallacies and failures of natural theology, but philosophy can. To be sure, a presumption of either atheism or naturalism up front can exalt science and forestall theology. Yet the point of this abductive argument is to reason from science on to atheism and naturalism, not from them.

#### Example Three: The Argument from Irreligion

Let thesis T be about “irreligion”: Religion’s benefits for humanity are diminishing in the eyes of many. The argument: Atheism and naturalism both look plausible with irreligion, and irreligion is increasing, so atheism and naturalism are conjunctively prospering.

This argument fails, due to philosophical gaps. Leaving one’s church while keeping one’s God is the norm rather than the exception. Innumerable sorts of religiosities, mysticisms, and spiritualities beckon after organized or creedal religion. Obviously, atheists and naturalists aren’t impressed. However, their cynicism is a personal matter, while reasonable doubt about all religion is a philosophical issue. Persuading people that their gods are unworthy of devotion does little to advance atheism. Imagining better gods isn’t hard to do. Theology, when it isn’t mired in fundamentalism, gradually refines God’s beneficent or at least blameless character. In the meantime, theology also reminds the faithful how god-belief is still better for people than the materialism, egotism, or nihilism left in the wake of naturalism. In response, naturalists hold up ethical humanism. But that philosophical rescue again shows how this abductive argument cannot succeed on its own.

Atheism and naturalism are “isms” taking intellectual stands on what count as reasonable worldviews. They both require academic projects to justify their plausibility, and defend their superiority over rivals. Philosophy is required, bringing ample resources for assisting them. Defending both atheism and naturalism separately does not unduly tax philosophy’s resources. Philosophy knows better than to confuse or conflate them.

These two separate academic projects, in the very long run, could converge in eventual success over theism. From the standpoint of abductive methodology, independent confirmations from multiple fields carry realistic credibility. By staying in their own lanes, their arrival at the finish line of non-theism more convincingly defeats theology. Theology seems quite pleased to watch them limp along while tethered together.

## Theology and Ethics

Proximal obligations are towards those one actually encounters. Distal obligations require encounters and engagement, where proximal obligations then arise. *Morals* are proximal obligations, regulating civil encounters as they occur. *Morality* is mainly about distal obligations, affirming duties to engage anyone as needed. Both morals and morality are intrinsically about generic obligations: obligations to those people that one is likely to, or able to, have interactions with.

The virtues urge conduct conforming to morals and morality. Many virtues are self-regarding; they promote a life well-lived, instead of a dissolute or degenerate life (such as cleanliness, humility, open-mindedness, self-respect, temperance). Some virtues are both self-regarding and socially prudent so one doesn't become a burden on others (such as familial love, fidelity, courage, diligence, patience, perseverance). Some other virtues are a major component of morals, regulating all social encounters (such as kindness, generosity, forgiveness, tolerance, truthfulness). Only a few virtues are components of morality (such as respect, fairness, benevolence, loyalty).

Obligations to any person, no matter who or where they are, are a most peculiar sort, as are obligations to all people everywhere collectively. Ordinary morals and morality do not instill devotion to those universal sorts of obligations. Children understand by 'everyone' in an injunction like "treat everyone fairly" to mean all the people that the child can actually observe. That is why people's sense of moral obligation diminishes towards people who obviously aren't part of the familiar home community and don't look or behave much like one's community members.

The effort to extend morality distally to the extent of all humanity, individually or collectively, can be labeled as social ethics. Personal ethics, by contrast, is the effort to encourage universal commitment to the self-regarding and socially prudent virtues.

Social ethics can develop in stages. After local communal morals, the reach of one's commitment can be extended to one's tribe, and then up to the level of one's 'People'. The tribe consists of one's community plus all those having a shared ancestral heritage. One's 'People' consists of one's tribe (or subgroup, in modern times) plus all those who similarly share in a commonly understood narrative history and cultural purpose. A People may be capable of comprising a 'nation' (a People possessing expertise for governing themselves in a civil polity), and a Nation may additionally possess territorial integrity and full control over internal political affairs so as to be a 'country'. In order for a tribe to acquire stable civil polity, it is usually necessary to either reside in sparsely inhabited lands, settle in and around a city (or a few cities), or league together with other tribes to form a people.

A tribal social ethics is difficult to achieve because ordinary morality isn't robust when one encounters a stranger, especially if repeat encounters are unlikely. Tribes are large enough that many members are strangers to each other; neither the bonds of the extended family nor the familiarity of the local community are sufficient to keep one committed to morality towards all (especially where anxiety and fear get aroused due to unfamiliarity). On the social ethics side, how can each person's morality be fortified so that strangers can consistently treat each other well? On the tribal politics side, how can tribal solidarity be strengthened so that willing obedience to common tribal law can be reliable? Civil politics and social ethics are intimately related, of course – where a community already embodies social ethics, disruptions and violence are reduced, and laws require less strenuous enforcement.

What about ethics? Speculative theology usually has little to do with morality proper, since the conservative perpetuation of the cultural ways of life is the province of religion, not theology. Only when a rival sort of civics – with a different understanding of proper status hierarchy, social ethics, and citizenship roles – is accessible by adherents, would theology concern itself with rigorously defending traditional ways or adjusting them somewhat. The collision of rival belief systems of civics has been more frequently handled by experts in history and/or philosophy, if we glance across all civilizations in history.

Looking back to the distant past of early civilizations, few religions center around a chief deity watching for immoral human behavior. Traditional religions older than the Pyramids with heritages back to the Stone Age usually feature a "high god" as the progenitor of creation but minor deities bring social order to primeval humans. Deviant behavior may disappoint the gods, but dishonoring one's clan and ancestors was the greater shame. Custom, not god, is "king": living

morally, living religiously, and living ritually among kin are blended activities performed in accord with tradition. The development of the Bronze Age in Eurasia c.2000 BCE dawned across early civilizations arranging their pantheons of gods in hierarchies of authority rather than families in kinship. However, only rulers had to personally worry about divine disfavor; their authority and immortality was at stake. Gods dealt with heroes, kings, and priests in this life and the next.

Religions dominating the Bronze Age – of the Mycenaean Greeks, the Egyptians, the Hittites, the Mesopotamians, the Aryans in Central Asia and India, and the Shang in China – featured cosmically mighty deities too lofty to care for the problems and pleas of the masses. Only elites fixated on orthodoxy, reinforcing their status and eligibility for immortality. Priests supervising temples and shrines watched for orthopraxy from attendees. What religion practically meant to common folk was more about a cacophony of omens, spells, amulets, curses, healings, funerals, and innumerable rites to propitiate spirits of all sorts. Deities demand devout piety and sacrifice to them; they aren't monitoring how you treat your neighbor. No Bronze Age religion, any more than Stone Age religions, centered on a God fixated on *you* individually. A religion expected each individual to conform to customary morals because its gods approved your tribe, nation, or empire, and not because some god watches your daily conduct.

Only with the Iron Age in the West (after 1000 BCE) do any religions directly connect piety with personal righteousness: Zoroastrianism and Judaism. Not coincidentally, these are the first religions on the planet to declare that just one supremely Righteous God is real. Religions descended from, or heavily influenced by, these two pioneers – notably Mithraism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and Islam – depict moral norms as imperatives rather than customs or prescriptions. Rules are everywhere across human society, but imperatives *command* actions rather than just commending them. Where there is an imperative to obey, there must be an emperor to command, otherwise a rule lacks validity and force. Plenty of gods look like self-absorbed lords and kings; Imperious Moral Gods are rare. The East has never seen them. Hindu deities are either impersonal (Brahman, Shiva) or loci of devotion (e.g. Krishna). Pure Land Buddhism exalts the Amitābha/Amida Buddha offering salvation through spiritual purification, not just moralistic propriety. Chinese Daoism urges back-to-nature simplicity where the impersonal and impartial Dao has its Way.

Today, with the exception of the three Abrahamic religions, the world's hundreds of religions feature starring deities who approve customary morals they didn't decree, or maintain cosmic order without thinking of humans.

From the Stone Age to the Space Age, four sorts of high gods have been distinctive characters to play their parts upon the mythological stage:

Primeval Progenitor Gods

Cosmic Overlord Gods

Impersonal Absolute Gods

Imperious Moral Gods

No "trend" much less "progress" is in evidence here. Only Judeo-Christian and Islam religion undertook syncretic theology to combine all three types in monotheism. Nevertheless, religions around the world inculcate an expectation that proper moral behavior and pious religious belief are deeply connected. Theological ethics can adapt and upgrade religious morality for new times and circumstances.

What was most unusual about the "Axial Phase" is not the proliferation of speculative and syncretic religious systems (although that is noticeable), but rather the super-syncretic manner in which syncretic theologies were then simultaneously undertaking syncretic ethics as well. (Syncretic ethics offers creative philosophical blendings of history, social ethics, civics, pedagogy, and politics, within a civilization or sometimes at the overlapping regions of civilizations, to forge a new social ethics, with a corresponding personal ethics to match.) Early Buddhism was just as creatively synthetic ethically as it was theologically; indeed, its ethical originality powered its theological re-crafting of mysticism/meditation. Confucianism was similarly an original re-crafting of virtue ethics, pedagogy, ancestral reverence, and statecraft wisdom.

There is a great danger to a super-syncretic theological experiment, as the examples of Buddhism and Confucianism also illustrate, because (despite founders' intentions) they tend to decompose religions and establish new religions. Both Jesus and Paul are additional examples, although only one of them founded a religion (readers paying attention will rightly

credit Paul). However, super-syncretism is relatively rare. The last great effort at super-syncretism has been the post-Enlightenment synthesis of scientific naturalism, optimistic utilitarianism, civic liberties, and constitutional democracy, but the outcome of this effort is not yet in view. This secularism has been accused of placing Christianity in jeopardy, but Christianity was hardly affected; the destiny of Christianity lay more within Christianity. The devolution and decomposition of a religion can more frequently occur from the work of speculative theology, and Christianity is a shining example.

## Religion, Politics, and Theology

The intertwining of religion and politics must have a deep history, going back to the transition from clan-sized groups to tribes. Dating that transition could be approximate at best. Homo Sapiens emerged as a species with band-sized groups, like the Homo Heidelbergensis species that Sapiens evolved from in Africa around 250,000 years ago (250 kya), and the Neanderthals which also came from Heidelbergensis in Europe. Scaling up to clan-sized groups appears to have been a Sapiens specialty, where the archaeological remains suggest enough hunting and tool industry to require many adults, perhaps as many as 30 able adults in clan-sized groupings of around 50- 60 total. When we look around the world today, the oldest human societies among indigenous and aboriginal peoples are all tribal in nature. They date back to around 60 kya (Australian tribes have such ancestries arriving by way of South Asia) or maybe 80 kya (the Khoe-San and the Hadzabe of southern Africa). Tribal society therefore originated in Africa and was completed by 100 kya, proving so successful that no human group later devolved below that level back to just clans. Humans anywhere nowadays can seem “clannish” to this day as well, but our tribal nature is firmly established and any larger scale of society, such as the nation or empire, has to continually manage those tribalistic proclivities in both religion and politics.

Scaling up to tribe-sized societies from clan groups was a major achievement for humanity at some stage between 150 kya to 80 kya. It wouldn't have happened all at once for all human groups, but those clans able to live in proximity (due to abundant resources in an area) found the advantages to outweigh costs. The major benefit is the ample supply of inquisitive adults able to master various crafts and skills, so that expertise (just one in twenty adults is enough) can be taught to many and expertise can accelerate over many generations because expertise is not lost to forgetfulness or tragedy. Expert mastery was now available within each tribe for the twelve core cultural praxes: family, tribe, trade, games, morality, music, ritual, myth, language, teaching, techne, and art.

During that crucial period from 150 kya to 100 kya, tribalism has good company with the development of spoken language and mythological narrative. Mimetic language (guttural-gestural) and mythic ritual (imitating nature's ways) are far older and Homo Sapiens probably always had those capacities, inherited from Heidelbergensis. The ability of tribalism to hold clans together may have a great deal to do with exploiting the cohesiveness aroused by commonly shared myths about sacred powers (deities, demi-gods, spirits, ancestors, and the like). However, it was one thing to appeal to the spirit world to situate humans within whole cosmos, and quite another thing to appeal to the spiritual order for managing the social order. That inventiveness was apparently worth the experiments across tribes, because every tribal society ever since has harbored mythological beliefs and rituals about how (a) the divine was essential to establishing the human social order, and (b) the human ritualization of those origins maintain the current social order. This tribal-mythic synthesis was the primary stage in human history, settled in place for all human groups, by around 100 kya. As Homo Sapiens began migrating out of Africa around that time, they took their mythological narratives with them.

Stages of growing complexity would have characterized those earliest religion-politics blendings. The basic format relating (a) the individual, (b) responsibilities to the group, (c) what the gods approve, and (d) expected rewards would be this simplistic scheme.

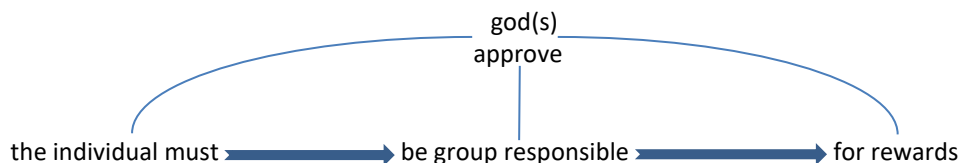
The thin line represents

a relationship of mutual cognizance

The thick arrow represents

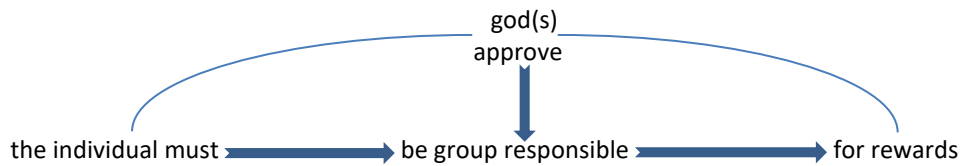
a connection of direct action

### Tribal-mythic schema 1.



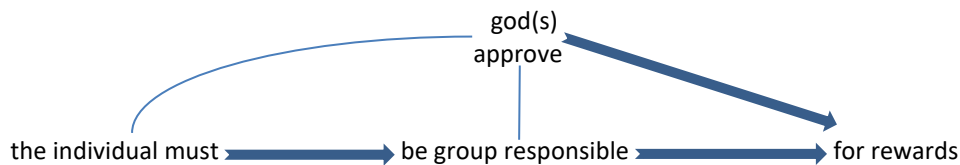
1. The god(s) approve of moral responsibility within the tribe without taking any action. The tribe wants divine approval of its social order and teaches individuals to be reverent. Sacred rituals mainly reenact mythic events of divine generation.

**Tribal-mythic  
schema 2.**



2. The god(s) approve the tribe and hence expects moral responsibility within the tribe. The tribe must inculcate both reverent piety and a belief in the tribe's religious legitimacy into all members.

**Tribal-mythic  
schema 3.**



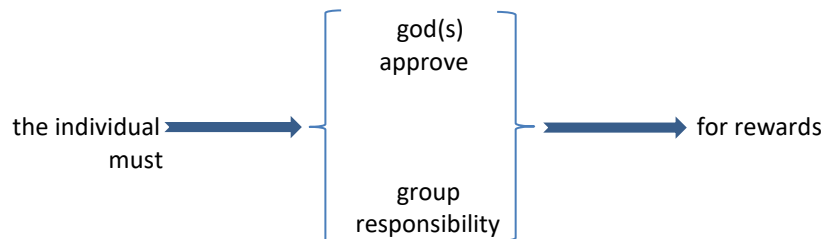
3. The god(s) approve of tribal responsibility and piety, and add divine rewards/retributions upon the tribe for its overall fulfillment of responsibilities. That standard of collective justice increases the religious pressure on individual piety.

**Tribal-mythological  
schema 4.**



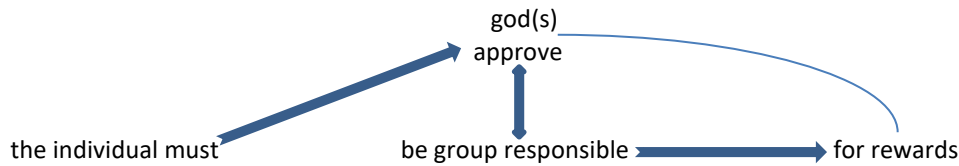
4. The god(s) want pious devotion from individuals, as proven by their moral responsibility, to get their rewards. The tribe indoctrinates its religion into all members so that individuals are motivated by divine retribution, sooner or later. The age-old oral myths are inadequate (i.e. vague, discrepant, ) for collective indoctrination so mythological refinement and consolidation is needed. This is the highest stage of complexity reached by oral tradition cultures in indigenous conditions.

**Politico-mythological  
schema 5.**



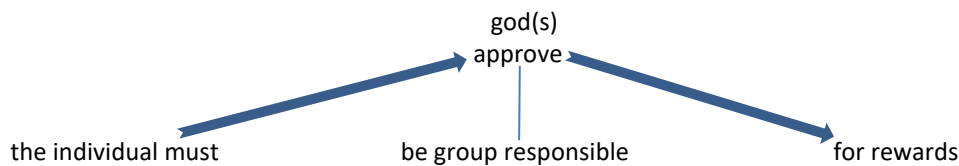
5. The city-state polity is the god(s) creation and responsibility, so the loyalty of moral members to the polity IS the individual's fidelity to god(s). Further mythological innovation is required in order to justify how the political order can maintain divine approval and assistance (and explain why political disasters occur too). Genealogical henotheism was accordingly transitioning towards cosmogonic monotheism. This schema has illustrations in early Iron Age civilizations: Egypt (Amun-Ra theocracy); Canaan (Second-Temple Judaism); Mesopotamia (Neo-Assyrian god Ashur); India (Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita); and China (Warring States worship of *tiandi*).

**Politico-mythological schema 6.**



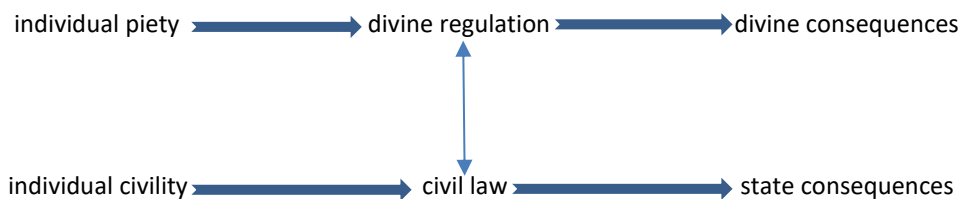
6. The individual’s personal piety towards the “true” god(s) is encouraged by the polity (city/state or nation-sized) which renders rewards/punishments for moral responsibility. Traditional myths are no longer adequate for this political management of god(s) formulated for their political roles, so priestly mythological innovation is required. The individual additionally anticipates justice in an afterlife, and that personal piety seems conservative and traditional in comparison to the “updated” official theology/theocracy.

**Politico-theological schema 7.**



7. The nation/empire supports religious indoctrination for all members to enforce personal piety. The polity heavily relies on that collective religiosity to motivate moral conformity and civil order.

**Politico-theological schema 8.**



8. The State expects a congruence of divine law with its civil law.

8A. A State’s religious ideology may say, “The legitimacy of our polity lies in its congruence with divine regulation.”

8B. Or, a State’s secularist ideology may say, “The legitimation of a religion lies in its congruence with our polity.”

**Religion, Secularisms, and Human Rights**

The Secularist’s Image of God

It is said, We have rights, equality, dignity (and so on) because we are “made in the image of God”. What image of God do people happen to respect? Surely people are respectful and devout towards an image of God that they can understand and appreciate. Or must they accept something less? A dilemma looms. Do people think they deserve X only because they see X in God’s image? Or, do they see X in God’s image because they firmly think they deserve X? If the former, then people would have to be satisfied with whatever image, call it Y, of God which happens to be already accessible. Aspiring to more than just Y is not relevant; God’s image yields Y and nothing more. On the other hand, if people aspire to X

instead, they surely can aspire to an image of God yielding X, and the second option is taken. If people say, "God would surely have an image yielding X rather than Y," the second option is taken.

Put the dilemma like this: either people's aspirations for moral dignity and rights can exceed what God's image yields, or God's image always yields people's highest aspirations. Can't we all prefer the latter? Secular people aren't seeing God, but they can be curious about that divine image that religious people think they see. Why look in that faithful mirror, unless you can see yourself as you truly should be? A divine image of God mustn't be ugly when one looks. If we expect that mirror to tell the truth, the mirror isn't creating the truth – we are making our truth. Belief makes the fact. If a secularist thinks about that "image of God," all there is to really think about is what all people aspire to truly be. Secularists already respect what all people aspire to be: equally worthy of moral dignity and human rights. Why feel it necessary to gaze into God's mirror, when we can easily see each other? In that immediacy and intimacy, there is truth. Besides, mirrors might distort. There are many gods, many images. The secularist can't get entranced by a vision of the chosen enthroned over the rest. Secularists truly understand what equality looks like.

### Religion's Challenge

*Main Question:* Can secularism, on entirely secular grounds, explain how humans could know valid justifications for human rights?

ASSUMPTION ONE: A genuine human right is universal, inalienable, and inviolable.

Universal: Every human has this right, simply by virtue of being human.

Inalienable: There can never be a contingency where the annulment or non-existence of a human right is conceivable.

Inviolable: There can never be a justification for violating a human right. If some other priority legitimately trumps a supposed human right, then that priority is the genuine human right.

Discussion: These three features of human rights together imply that having a human right is non-contingent, and any ultimate justification why a right is a human right is similarly non-contingent. If the best justification explaining why a right is a human right involves any contingency, then it is conceivable that this right might possibly not be a human right under differing circumstances. But that possibility is already ruled out by the definition of a genuine human right. Therefore, if some justification explaining why a right is a human right is conceivably contingent, that justification is inadequate.

CONCLUSION ONE: No valid justification for anyone's genuine human right could be conceivably contingent.

Question 1: Could any valid justification for a genuine human right involve divine or human decisions?

Answer 1: Since a decision is by definition a contingent matter (a decision is dependent on a non-automatic and non-predetermined process), no valid justification for a genuine human right involves divine or human decisions.

Question 2: Could any valid justification for a human right involve divine or human learning?

Answer 2: Since all learning is by definition a contingent matter (learning is dependent on happenstance available information and path-dependent cumulative inquiry), no valid justification for a genuine human right involves divine or human learning.

ASSUMPTION TWO: All human knowledge arises from some natural combination of deciding and learning.

CONCLUSION TWO: It is impossible for humans (by themselves) to justify what human rights are.

ASSUMPTION THREE: A God exists who determines human rights without deciding or learning.

CONCLUSION THREE: God's existence can ultimately justify what human rights are.

ASSUMPTION FOUR: Assumption Two is false – Some human knowledge comes from knowledge of God and God's determination of human rights.

CONCLUSION FOUR: Commitment to God is required for reasonably justifying human rights.

COROLLARY ONE: No secular person, in willful ignorance of God, can reasonably justify what human rights are.

COROLLARY TWO: If a secular person is committed to human rights, that commitment is somehow derivative from religious people and their commitment to human rights.

*Religion's Answer to Main Question:* Secularism, on entirely secular grounds, cannot explain how humans could know valid justifications for human rights.

COROLLARY THREE: Secular people by themselves could not be as committed to human rights and hence could not fully respect them, and they would live as if they were not very important.

COROLLARY FOUR: Only religious communities ultimately sustain civilized societies upholding human rights.

COROLLARY FIVE: Only governments following and prioritizing religion can maintain civilized nations upholding human rights.

### Secularism's Response

CHALLENGE to Assumption One: Is a genuine human right, such as the right to life, truly universal, inalienable, and inviolable?

Assumption One: All people always have an inalienable (mustn't be annulled) and inviolable (mustn't be violated) right to life. Does this assumption lead to any contradictions?

Situational Dilemma: A situation in which person P will kill person Q unless person R kills Q first. Presumably, R must not let P be killed because P has a right to life. Must R violate Q's right to life? If R does not act, R fails to respect P's right to life. If R does act, R fails to respect Q's right to life. No matter what the outcome, someone's right to life will not be respected. Is it really the case that all people have an inalienable and inviolable right to life under all situations?

Resolution A: R can respect P's right to life while doing nothing to prevent the violation of P's right to life. R must respect Q's right to life by not killing Q. The duty to respect a right to life is dyadic, not triadic: only R's relation to P matters, and R's relation to Q matters, with respecting rights. So long as R is not participating in P's death, R is respecting P's right to life while respecting Q's right to life by not killing Q. P has done nothing to cause the annulment of P's right to life; P's right to life is being violated by Q. In general, anyone must allow the violation of a person's right to life under such circumstances. Therefore, a person's right to life is never violable, except when it must be violable.

Resolution B: R can respect P's right to life while killing Q. R The duty to respect a right to life is dyadic, not triadic: only R's relation to P matters, and R's relation to Q matters, with respecting rights. R can kill Q because Q lacks a right to life while trying to kill P, since R does not violate a right to life where none exists to be violated. The only situational difference here is that Q is not respecting a right to life, while P and R haven't lost respect for a right to life. Q lacks a right to life while trying to kill P because Q is not respecting P's right to life. A person's own right to life is annulled if that person won't show the same respect for the same right to life of others. In general, everyone must allow the annulment of a person's right to life under such circumstances. Therefore, a person's right to life is inalienable, except when it must be alienable.

Resolution C: R can respect P's right to life while killing Q. The duty to respect a right to life is also triadic: R's relation to P implies that a relation to others such as Q also matters with respecting rights. R can kill Q because Q's right to life is violable while trying to kill P. The only situational difference here is that Q is not respecting a right to life, while P and R haven't lost respect for a right to life. A right to life is never annulled but it must be occasionally violable, in situations where the person to be killed has compromised one's own right to life. A person's own right to life is violable if that

person won't show the same respect for the same right to life of others. In general, everyone must allow the violation of a person's right to life under such circumstances. Therefore, a person's right to life is never violable, except when it must be violable.

*CHALLENGE to Assumption One is Upheld:* Contradictions within assumption one are unavoidable. It is impossible in the real world (where people can threaten to take lives) for a right to life to be universal, inalienable, and inviolable. Either a right to life is not universal; or, it is alienable or violable depending on circumstances.

Alternative Presumption One: An inalienable and inviolable right to life is only held by a subset S of humanity. This presumption is exposed to the same contradictions where P, Q, and R all belong to S. Therefore, for all humanity or any subset of humanity, a right to life is either alienable or violable depending on circumstances. This results leads towards Presumption Two.

Alternative Presumption Two: All people have an alienable and violable right to life. A right to life is annullable or violable under conditions where reciprocity is lacking. The right to life is a right that requires reciprocity (it is among the class of 'reciprocity rights') – meaning that a person can expect others to recognize one's own right to life so long as this person simultaneously recognizes the right to life of others. On this presumption, Resolution A is rejected, since it allows P's right to life to be violated even though P fulfills reciprocity. Resolutions B and C are accepted.

Next Question: Who are these 'others' in this reciprocity relationship grounding the right to life? These 'others' could be a limited number, or practically unlimited.

Discussion: There are two potential subtypes of reciprocity rights: generic and universal. If the group of 'others' only extends so far as those people who would normally be encountered locally by this person in the course of a lifetime, then the reciprocity right has generic status. "The individuals who I normally encounter are within this reciprocity circle." If the group of 'others' has no practical limit, including any 'other' human anywhere, then the reciprocity right has universal status. Regarding the right to life, we maintain Presumption Two, so the right to life is a universal reciprocity right: Each and every person who respects the right to life of all others (and no other qualifications are relevant) maintains one's own right to life.

We have found one Universal Reciprocity Right:

URR-1: All people simply respecting the right to life of all others sustain their own right to life.

This universal reciprocity right is passive, not active: a person only needs to remain innocent of threatening another's right to life in order to sustain one's own right to life. This is not an "opt-in" membership, but just an "opt-out" membership. However, this universal reciprocity right requires recognition eligibility in order to function in the real world. Although some members of the reciprocity community needn't fully grasp what this reciprocity community is doing or why (infants and children can be included, for example), it is necessary that a core to the reciprocity community does share a complete consensus about who is eligible for recognition. They all recognize each other as mutually holding that status, and they all recognize other persons as reciprocity-eligible even if those persons lack the cognitive capacity to provide that level of recognition in return. [If no single core to a group fulfils this consensus requirement, then no reciprocity community has been realized.]

The dangers inherent to trying to maintain a reciprocity community without that core of consensus are extremely serious. If core A recognizes a number of humans (set W, let us say) as reciprocity-eligible which another core B does not, then members of B won't respect the lives of those in W, and members of core A can judge that some Bs can be killed to rightly protect the Ws. As for Bs, who regard such a threat of death from As as a violation of reciprocity, can judge that As are rightly no longer recognition-eligible. These two cores effectively divide from each other as two separate reciprocity communities and regard each other with suspicious hostility. Therefore, a reciprocity community can exist only where a single core shares a complete consensus about who is recognition-eligible.

TERMINOLOGY. If an individual is accepted as reciprocity-eligible with a reciprocity community that respects the right to life, that individual is said to be a PERSON.

There are additional applications of reciprocity which may be incorporated or paired with personhood, lending the concept more depth and breadth. For example, personhood may encompass Moral Dignity, and personhood can be allied with Civil Freedom and Equal Opportunity.

URR-2. Moral Dignity: A person has a right to non-degradation – having as much moral concern shown for oneself that is expected by others. Degradation includes losing social respect and one’s sense of self-worth; feeling humiliated or ashamed of oneself; or feeling ignored and abandoned in one’s situation.

URR-3. Civil Freedom: A person has a right to autonomy – having as much autonomy as is capacity-appropriate (eg. less autonomy for children). Civil freedom rules out slavery (no control over the body), oppression (no control over living and lifestyle), and subservience (no control over deference to power).

URR-4. Social Justice: A person has a right to equality – having the same political equality, equal opportunity, and equal protection under the law as all others. Social justice in turn fosters the foundations to civil rights and liberties for effective functioning as a productive member of society and a participating citizen of a republic.

We now re-engage with the broader issue: Must it really be impossible for humans (by themselves) to justify what human rights are?

Discussion: Start with URR-1: All persons simply respecting the right to life of all others sustain their own right to life. The validity of URR-1 does not carry with it the reality of a rights community, in which (at least some) persons do actually commit to respecting the right to life of all others in that community (which potentially extends to all humanity). A Rights Community requires commitment. Where does this commitment come from? Religion may argue as follows:

1. No person would reasonably commit to a rights community without a guarantee that those rights have a reality and ground beyond just the community itself.
2. The only external guarantee so capable of grounding rights is the determination of rights by a god.

C. Therefore, commitment to god is required for reasonably committing to a rights community.

Interestingly, a religion burdens a person with an additional qualification to belong to a rights community: one must also affirm the god that determines human rights. A person unwilling to affirm this god cannot belong to the rights community unless granted reciprocity-eligibility by the core members of that community who do affirm god. Effectively, that core membership is entrusted with knowing the god that determines the genuine human rights. BUT many religions offer different gods that (allegedly) determine human rights, or gods that at least (allegedly) dictate fundamental human laws.

*CHALLENGE to Conclusion Four:* Commitment to a god is not a reasonable way to commit to a rights community.

Discussion: Given the information presented so far, there is no reasonable way to figure out which religion is dealing with an actual god, or the right god on human rights. There is no reasonable way to figure out what sort of rights community to commit to, among so many equivalent options. “If you want to know the right set of human rights, you would affirm our God, and you will know that you’ve selected the right God, since only this God did determine the correct set of human rights.” This fallacious argument begs the whole question, of course. More generally, there is no valid theological argument for figuring out the “real” God who determines exactly the right set of human rights. Every attempted argument will essentially try to reason from some actual set of fine-sounding human rights to a God who seems predisposed to authorize exactly that set. But this “reasoning” method can be accomplished for any set of human rights and any number of well-crafted deities. And if this theological reasoning does presume that a person already knows a set of genuine human rights from the start, no affirmation of God is additionally needed, since this person already knows those rights and needs no God to chime in. Knowledge of human rights is, in this context, more basic than knowledge of any god.

When a religion requires an individual to affirm the real God who determines human rights, it places an unreasonable burden on a person, who is left with an arbitrary decision and an unfortunate moral situation no matter what God is chosen. In the real world, it is not the case that everyone will affirm the same God and the same divine list of human

rights. Rights communities and their respective sets of human rights will remain divided over inscrutable religion. Furthermore, rights communities relying on the determinations of a god (which will not change over time) tend to endorse rights that cannot change over time. Are the rights regarded as most important for humanity 2,000 years ago still the exact same rights adequate for today, and tomorrow?

*CHALLENGE to Conclusion Four Upheld:* Commitment to a god is not a reasonable way to commit to a rights community. Whether a god's existence can ultimately justify human rights is a matter that must be deemed irrelevant and unhelpful to people here on earth.

Discussion. Conclusion Three has no standing here. Inscrutable gods are not informative about rights. Furthermore, even if some human knowledge comes from knowledge about this or that god, such knowledge cannot in turn reasonably justify commitments to moral communities. This verdict is not based on the evident fact that religions neither settle on a definite set of human rights themselves nor agree on some set of human rights among each other. That fact is also evident among nonreligious political systems. The diversity and fluidity to religion is a manifestation of its all-too-human origins. The concern raised about grounding rights on gods goes deeper than that. There will be no universal human rights, and human rights will only be a divisive issue here on earth, if the choice of a (correct) religion is pre-required of persons wanting to belong to a rights community. A rights community can also be a community endorsing religious devotions; but one's commitments to rights should not be predicated on those devotions.

If a set of genuine rights cannot be ascertained from a somewhat mysterious source, then only human decision and learning can justify genuine rights.

What about premises 1 and 2 to the above argument? Premise 2 is judged to be false. Premise 1 can be true, so long as correct identifications are made for the rights community and for the external guarantee. Premise 1 needs to be re-stated as follows:

Premise 1\*. Few people would reasonably commit to a rights community without a guarantee that those rights have a reality and ground beyond just the **present** community itself.

This re-stated premise has much truth to it. A few people may be capable of whole-heartedly committing to a rights community simply upon the simultaneous reception and responsive affirmation of the rest. The formation of a small community bonded together by abiding mutual interests can be arranged quickly, for example, if a measure of trust among them already prevails. But large rights communities would not be practically formed in this manner, and there appears to be no other satisfactory substitute.

The resolution is obvious: the reality and ground to the rights of an existing rights community lie in that community's continuity with the **past**.

Premise 1\*. Few people would reasonably commit to a rights community without a guarantee that those rights have a reality and ground beyond just the present community itself.

Premise 2\*. The external guarantee capable of grounding rights is historical success of a long-standing rights community perpetuated down to the present day.

Premise 2\* is compatible with the way that human knowledge arises from natural combinations of deciding and learning. Justifying human rights should prove to be within the capacities of natural humans.

*CHALLENGE TO Conclusion Two:* Must it be impossible for humans (by themselves) to justify which rights should be human rights?

Discussion: Secularism retains Assumption Two:

ASSUMPTION TWO: All human knowledge arises from some natural combination of deciding and learning.

Each person considering membership in a rights community can look to its distinctive history to evaluate how much confidence is wisely placed in that community. No two people need to evaluate that history in precisely the same way. However, the overall capacity of a rights community to fulfill the point of a rights community – to sustain full reciprocal

respect for every members' rights – is the basic matter to be scrutinized. Each rights community, and every individual evaluating those communities, apply their capacities for learning and deciding over time. A rights community undergoes accumulated learning from innumerable practical decisions taken by members as they try to maintain respect for rights. Although no single member could embody or even clearly express all that accumulated learning, the rights community as a whole embodies that learning in its successful practices. Similarly, no individual evaluating a right community could fully appreciate everything that makes that community (more or less) successful, but adequate evaluations are not beyond the capacity of typical adults. Some may ask, "Do the rights that I selfishly want protected receive adequate respect in that rights community?" Other may ask, "Do the rights that any reasonable person really need receive enough respect in that rights community?" And so forth. It is a separate question whether some ways to evaluate right communities are wiser than others. All that has been shown is that typical adults would be able to intelligently evaluate rights communities for the capacity to perform the function they are designed to perform.

*CHALLENGE TO Conclusion Two Upheld:* It is possible for typical adults to reasonably justify which rights should be human rights.

Discussion: The reasonable justification of a right worthy of status as a human right essentially involves the generation and maintenance of a rights community upholding respect for that right. Not all rights communities are the same – far from it. The greatest variety of rights communities have been formed and may be formed under wildly different circumstances of time, place, environment, social stresses, cultural strengths, technological advancement, and any other relevant factors. What rights communities have in common is their effort to sustain comprehensive respect for some right(s) understood by their core memberships as worthy of mutual respect. What makes those rights, rather than some other rights, truly worthy? Only the sustained evaluations and commitments of their core members make those rights worthy at all, and the collective judgments of others who haven't yet joined determine what the more worthy human rights should look like. A rights community of dubious provenance that is gathering few new commitments isn't promoting rights of much worth, while a rights community with an impressive heritage and an impressive recruiting and retention trajectory is promoting rights of greater worth.

This understanding of rights communities and their comparative worthiness carries three crucial implications:

Premise 3. At any particular period of time, many rights communities are flourishing of greater or lesser sizes, promulgating somewhat different sets of rights (some rights may be similar, too).

Premise 4. Over time, people educated about multiple rights communities will occasionally modify their evaluations of the relative worthiness of those communities and their rights.

Premise 5. Due to the multiplicity of rights communities, and the varying evaluations of those communities, some people will alter their community commitments during their lifetimes, either by compelling change within a rights community, helping to blend two rights communities together, or switching commitments from one rights community to another.

Together, premises 1\* and 2\* along with 3, 4, and 5 further imply that it is unreasonable to expect that any "fixed" or "final" set of worthiest human rights would emerge from this planetary process. Unless additional premises were added to supplement these five, there is no way to see how rights communities would gradually converge on the same list of human rights, or how any rights community can claim lasting status as the best, even if one currently enjoys more esteem than the rest. However, these premises do imply that (a) any dominant rights regime today could fall from favor if its practices and tactics lose the confidence of insiders and outsiders, and (b) a worthier rights regime could come from anywhere, including an overlooked smaller rights community with better ideas for the times or a quasi-religious rights community willing to flexibly adapt to planetary needs. An example of the former

Religious or ideological communities uninterested in timely flexibility or planetary suitability cannot look favorably on the view that fixed or final rights won't be an approachable outcome. The multiplicity of rights communities, the plurality of rights, and (ultimately) the contingency of the evaluation processes are disturbing matters for those conservative communities, which complain that justifications for genuine human rights must not be contingent. That assertion must now be challenged.

*CHALLENGE to Conclusion One:* Must a valid justification for anyone's genuine human right never be contingent?

Discussion: The religious basis for confidence in the validity of Conclusion One rested on the assumption that a human right that is universal, inalienable, and inviolable is a coherent conception. As discussed already, it is not coherent, and must be abandoned as unachievable in the real world inhabited by humans as we are. (Among angels, perhaps...) Upon abandoning that notion of a human right, we agreed that a human right has to be annulable and/or violable when reciprocity is broken. We accordingly formulated an initial Universal Reciprocity Right:

URR-1: All people simply respecting the right to life of all others sustain their own right to life.

Just as a genuine human right can be universal for humans yet contingently held in this reciprocity sense, evaluating a right as a worthy human right can be accessible to any informed adult while only appealing to ongoing evaluations of the contingent genealogies behind rights communities.

*CHALLENGE to Conclusion One Upheld:* A valid justification for anyone's genuine human right can be contingent.

Discussion: With Conclusion One, Conclusion Two, Conclusion Three, and Conclusion Four all denied as unreasonable, and an alternative process for forming rights communities and reasonably justifying them has been assembled, we have reached a final verdict.

**Secular Answer to Main Question:** Secularism, on entirely secular grounds, can explain how humans could know valid justifications for human rights.

Discussion: Secularism is not in itself a rights community, but it can serve as a template for a governing rights regime. Which rights community should secularism ally with? Without premises supplemental to 1\*, 2\*, 3, 4, and 5, secularism cannot proclaim its adherence to any demonstrably superior rights community and governing regime of enforcement. Different secular political theories, such as social contract theory, utilitarianism, socialism, pragmatic liberalism, communitarianism, and cosmopolitanism offer supplemental premises and design governments in the abstract. Various political secularisms can follow those alternatives, but no clear victor in academic debate or real-world practice has emerged yet.

Secularism in general surveys a planet hosting many rights communities, each with its strengths and weaknesses, and only somewhat relatively ordered from the more successful to the less successful. Secularism only needs to attach itself to one or another relatively successful rights community that includes URR 1–4 (personhood, moral dignity, civil freedom, and social justice), but does not require religious commitments, in order to be secularly well-grounded. Secularism has already done so, multiple times, over the past three centuries. That is why the current situation is one of “multi-secularism” – secularism in the U.S. is somewhat different from that of other countries, and no two countries enact secularism in the same manner. Comparative secularism offers studies of those differences across many countries, such as England, France, Turkey, Israel, Mexico, Brazil, India, and China.

The future of human rights for the planet lies with the conversations and negotiations among various secularisms and liberal religious regimes. Protecting human rights guarantees that they are real, but the real-world consequences of that protection Any rights regime, whether secular or religious, which tries to impose its will on unready populations not only betrays its own principles, but it betrays the trust it hopes to gain from the rest of the world. Reciprocity can never be ignored: the rights regime that uses illegitimate means will degrade the legitimacy of its ends. Defending rights wrongly cannot ennoble those rights.

# Psychology and Religious Violence

## Beliefs, Commitments, and Convictions

As philosophical psychology can amply attest, seeking “the cause” or even “a cause” for someone’s chosen conduct is usually speculative at best. A person’s stated account for his or her actions won’t clarify matters much. Any person can self-consciously mount a quick rationalization for anything done, without deeply understanding the underlying complex of motivations actually demanding expression in conduct. One’s “beliefs” turn out to only be what one is willing to admit to others; how one’s true convictions actually determine actions may remain obscure even to oneself. The things we normally like to believe about ourselves are modestly deceptive, a cognitive bias having commonalities with the disorder of self-delusion. (Turner et al 2010; Jarcho et al 2011)

That is why recited creeds and endorsed ideologies are poor predictors of people’s daily actions. What any doctrine specifically means in a situation calling for action depends mostly on the multi-faceted complexities to that situation, not on the doctrine’s formulaic message. Doctrines upheld by groups don’t reliably inspire consistent actions; a large group may appeal to a doctrine to justify peace-making, or militancy, yet few in that group may display commitment to that doctrine in their own actions. Militants appealing to an ideology point out connections between violence and ideological doctrine, but this can’t be a reliably causal relationship, since many other people share in that ideological endorsement yet they never commit violence (Gunninga and Jackson, 2011).

Whether that violence is sponsored abroad, or spawned domestically, the relationship between ideology and action is complex, multi-factorial, and highly sensitive to contextual socio-cultural dimensions (King and Taylor, 2011; Kleinmann, 2012; Mullins, 2012; Sedgwick, 2012; Stohl 2012). Giving a reason after an action isn’t anything like identifying a cause for an action. Typically, reasons aren’t causes. Psychological convictions can causally motivate patterns of actions in a reliable way, while stated beliefs usually rationalize and excuse actions only after they have been enacted. It is possible, but not necessary, for stated beliefs to correspond to true convictions. Sincerity can occasionally be heard, but it is difficult to verify who is sincere. Sincerity isn’t measured by the loudness or vehemence of repeating the ideological message – that display is more for show and status.

Beneath public displays of obeisance and sincerity, one’s actual commitments are generated and put into action by commitments and convictions, not “beliefs.” The concept of “belief” has lost scientific utility as a singular term. Its normative sense lingers on in religious studies and theology departments where comparing stated beliefs is easier than arguing over quiet faith. Its descriptive sense is retained by psychologists and philosophers learning how brains retain and use so much information gathered about the world. The polemical meaning of “belief” remains useful for propaganda: during conflict, any camp points to its own (obviously) good beliefs to uphold self-righteousness, and blame the opposition’s resistance on their “evil” beliefs.

The behavioral and brain sciences, and the philosophical psychology attuned to their findings, are objectively revealing mental processes responsible for real-world decisions and actions. In general terms, habitual manners of getting through daily life are powered by the little motivations and commitments about what we are supposed to be valuing, prioritizing, and doing. More powerful commitments able to regulate our choices concerning right and wrong despite distractions and temptations can be called “moral” commitments. We aren’t always moral, but we do sense our internal moral conscience even as we decide to follow (or deviate from) its urgings with due effort. (Caspers et al 2011) When we entirely break from daily routine, when we devote resources to something incompatible with who we think we usually are, that leap requires even greater

energies to compel us to “be who we should be” or to “be the right kind” of person. That kind of motivational energy is “major” conviction. To the extent that a major conviction makes one persist in resource-depleting and/or hazardous courses of action for the sake of an envisioned good or valuable end, it feels like one is surrendering to an ethical conviction. (Surrender to convictions leading to ends that one doesn’t take to be so good is only surrender to mental compulsion, not ethical conviction.)

When one has persistently devoted vast resources at great personal cost and risk for some envisioned worthy good or supreme end of ‘ultimate’ concern, that conviction has proven to be not only ethical in character but also “religious” in spirit (Dewey, 1938; Tillich, 1957). A religion, on the one hand, is a fairly stable body of commitments by a group (embodied in rituals, scriptures, etc.) to a worldview about “all reality” which determines what is sacred and supremely good for all life. (More precise definitions are highly contestable, but most every attempt includes both the metaphysical dimension and the axiological dimension.)

The vital psychological distinction between “belief” and conviction, and between “religion” and the religious, is crucial for the future progress of psychological and neurological inquiry into “the springs of action,” as David Hume labeled them. Faulting a “faith” or an entire religion for anything specific, much less any concrete aggression or violence, is now recognizably unscientific. Understanding some of the complexities to the moral life as lived in psycho- and socio- contexts, will in turn permit asking better questions, and getting more useful answers, about the religious life and its expression in social action. It is unwise to focus too centrally on the actor’s internal mental states in isolation. While it is important to understand underlying neuro-cognitive processes, it is unwise to focus exclusively upon the actor’s internal neural state and/or mentality in isolation; the enviroing dynamics of intra-group sociality and inter-group contact is vital (McCauley and Moskaleiko, 2008; Atran, 2010; Thomas and Casebeer 2004; Stohl 2012)

The psychology and neuroscience of motivation and conviction can open up vistas into our mental moral life and the religiously lived life.

### **The Moral Capacities: Typical vs. Abnormal**

The moral life as it is mentally lived is quite complex. Various kinds of decision processes, each labeled as “moral” cognitions, actually overlap only a little as they handle different sorts of decision procedures about what ought to be done.

Three primary modes of moral response have received the most scrutiny in behavioral, cognitive, and neuroscientific research: the utilitarian mode (recommended by the ethics of utilitarianism), the deontic mode (defended by deontological ethics), and the role mode (elaborated by virtue ethics). This theory about the multi-modal ways to be humanly moral has received ample confirmation from several disciplines. Investigations in moral psychology are confirming this multi-dimensionality to moral thinking and behavior (Narvaez 2008; Haidt et al 2010; Cushman, Young, and Green, 2010; Crockett, 2013; Greene 2014).

Normal human behavior and neurotypical moral cognition relies on all three modes to vary degrees, applying one or another, or more than one in concert, depending on the kind of interpersonal situation at hand to be navigated.

Each mode’s normal functioning has two counterparts: that mode in a reduced and subdued condition (the hypo-condition), and that mode in an increased and overactive condition (the hyper-condition). There are a total of nine possible moral mode conditions. Only six are relevant for this paper: the three modes in their normal condition, and the hypo-utilitarian, hyper-deontic, and hyper-role conditions. Let’s set them side-by-side for comparison:

The ordinary utilitarian response to a situation involving multiple people:  
suppresses direct emotional concerns for each person as a unique individual  
regards people as valuable persons, treats them roughly equally  
takes the time for considering their lives and interests impartially  
seeks a good response preserving the welfare of most/all and harming them the least

The hypo-utilitarian response to a situation involving multiple people:  
excessive suppression of direct emotional concerns for each person as a unique individual  
diminished or absent valuing of people as persons  
no time taken for considering the lives of people  
can quickly trade-off the lives of de-valued people for other valuable things

The ordinary deontic response to a situation involving multiple people:  
attends to emotional concerns for people as unique persons  
regards people as valuable persons, treats them as persons not to be harmed or violated  
considers the life of each person and his/her interests as important  
seeks a right response that doesn't directly cause harms or violations to each person

The hyper-deontic response to a situation involving multiple people:  
attends to emotional concerns only for people already regarded as being in the right  
regards righteous people as valuable persons, not to be harmed or violated  
considers the life of each righteous person and his/her interests as important  
seeks a right response that harms unjust people threatening righteous persons

The ordinary role response to a situation involving multiple people:  
attends to emotional concerns for those people having a proper social relationship with oneself  
regards people in social relationships as valuable persons, not to be harms or violated  
considers the roles of oneself and others in social relationships as important  
seeks a proper response allowing each person to fulfill their expected roles towards each other

The hyper-role response to a situation involving multiple people:  
attends to emotional connections with people who respect one's own role  
regards people in close social relationships with oneself as valuable persons to be protected  
considers one's own role as potentially or actually crucial for sustaining the whole network  
seeks a proper response confirming and expanding one's important role for the network

We can now empirically predict four main psychological stresses driving a person's normal moral modes towards a hypo-utilitarian, hyper-deontic, and hyper-role response:

- a strong suppression of generic emotional concern for people
- a strong enhancement of specific emotional concerns for special persons related to oneself
- regarding oneself as urgently crucial for upholding righteous protection of those special persons
- considering oneself as rightfully worthy of privileged status as defender of the network

This unusual combination of psychological conditions is quite distinctive and deserves its own unique label: Directed Emotion Favoring In-group Ascendancy Needing Triumph = DEFIANT. Unusual psychological factors such as these do not erupt from the inner recesses of one's mind on their own.

## The Social Self, Social Competencies, and Confrontation

People under the urges of that DEFIANT feeling typically do not release that energy in uncivil ways. The surrounding civic life and cultural heritage has available resources to mitigate aggression. Successfully participating in organized society binds a person into working for common good within decent institutions. Holding family, work, and community roles helps to keep one fulfilled and feeling needed. Many duties accumulate as one enters full adulthood and then middle age. Among ready cultural resources, religiosity can help alleviate anxiety from perceived underclass status or anger over prejudice and injustice. (Soenke et al 2013; Jost et al 2014)

Political action by non-aggressive means, if political structures are perceived to be legitimate and functional, can be an outlet as well.

The capacity for embarking on plans to enact DEFIANCE (Directed Emotion Favoring In-group Ascendancy Needing Confrontational Engagement) wouldn't grow without the civic/cultural realm's complicity and negligent failure. Where that failure occurs, reinforcing factors get influential opportunities.

The hypo-utilitarian mode of DEFIANT can worsen further where the absence of utilitarian goals and remedies leads towards frustration that community welfare can't be advanced by ordinary means.

The hyper-deontic mode of DEFIANT can get reinforced where one feels duty-bound to participate in swiftly remedying injustice and rescuing the community.

The hyper-role mode of DEFIANT can get reinforced where one can't gain a respected role in society by civil means but a heroic role awaits for those fighting for triumph.

The rare people who can nevertheless find the hopefulness and the strength to pursue the greater good by extraordinary public action express DEFIANT through civil expression and nonviolent means. Civil Rights movements have sometimes been able to stay mostly nonviolent, though civilly confrontational. However, if that hopeful utilitarian option doesn't take hold, while civic and psychological stresses and anxieties keep rising, the hyper-deontic and hyper-role modes can bloat and manipulate a person's convictions towards justifying confrontation. (Greene et al 2008; Hogg et al 2013) Confrontation may take any number of concrete forms, both secretive and public, aiming to confuse, hinder, deflect, obstruct, compromise, or destroy assets (human, material, cyber, etc.) of the target.

Belief systems stand ready to manipulate a person's convictions. There are more political, quasi-political, religious, and quasi-religious belief systems than encyclopedias can encompass. Much of DEFIANCE receives reinforcement from cultural and political ideologies having little to do with religiosity. Those ideologies can promise exaggerated roles of importance and status without having to appeal to religiosity at all. That is why many militants don't actually apply their religious lives to the cause and most couldn't even explain the religion properly. We focus only on religions here. (Consult Jurgensmeyer and Kitts 2012; Murphy 2011)

The close relationship between religions and morality, and religious experience with moral experience, has been amply confirmed from many interdisciplinary perspectives. (Morewedge and Clear 2008; Graham and Haidt 2008) All the same, religions do not uniformly encourage the same kinds of moralities or specific moral duties. That religious variability must be taken into account. Any religion can be moral; any religion can sometimes be immoral as well. Religions are no more "inherently" peaceful than they are "inherently" violent. Religiosity can be correlated with pacification, and aggression. Religiosity can elicit tolerance, and it can elicit intolerance; religiosity does correlate well with a felt need for greater control during times of instability. The modest relationship between strident religious adherence and tendencies towards aggression is detectible, but

this effect shouldn't be exaggerated. (Kay et al 2010; Van Tongeren et al 2013; Blogowska, Saroglou, and Lambert, 2013)

What is necessary for religion-related DEFIANCE is that a person's hyper-deontic and hyper-role modes are enhanced further by dutiful commitment and religious conviction. But DEFIANCE cannot be aroused by just any religion, and not necessarily by rigorous sects of religions. Religion per se, and most types of religiosity, cannot cause DEFIANCE. The key ingredient is just the right sort of religious convictions about the sacred to get mentally connected to the moral duties and roles peculiar to DEFIANT.

### **Generic Violence and Singular Sacredness**

It simply isn't true that monotheism has a tighter relationship with large-scale violence than other types of religions. Religions throughout recorded history, whether they worship one God or many, have been intimately involved with promoting or tacitly supporting wars of conquest, revenge, and honor, with few exceptions. The examples of entire religions denouncing aggressive war when the rest of society deems it just and patriotic are equally as rare. Smaller denominations and sects are more likely to defy society's judgment. This is seen when pacifist sects turn against a tide favoring war, and it is also seen when militant sects recklessly race ahead of a society seeking peace.

As matter of fact, religious sects classifiable as fundamentalist do display characteristics more compatible with hyper-deontic and hyper-role modes to produce a personal "moral ethos" controlling one's commitments. Fundamentalist sects do not encourage the sort of experimental questioning and thinking needed for changing society to improve the social good into the future; fundamentalists instead look to imitate a fixed notion of an ideal past society. That is why dutiful adherence and conformity is highly valued, clear lines are drawn between the In-group and Out-groups, and allegiance to strict rules is prized. Where fundamentalist sects can effectively control their social conditions, they distribute responsible social roles in hierarchical structures that typically include authoritarian lines of command.

Religiosity in general does not display significant tendencies towards strict dutifulness or authoritarianism, but the range of religiosity from conservatism on to fundamentalism does display that trend (Berns et al., 2012; Piazza, 2012; Young, Willer, and Keltner, 2013). Furthermore, participation in fundamentalist sects is often self-selected. While many are simply born into that kind of religion, many do leave, and many join later in life. Long-time fundamentalists are therefore more likely to be the sort of people who have a temperament that prefers dutiful and authoritarian groups. This correlation has been measured, and it may involve heritable traits (Ludeke, Johnson, and Bouchard, 2013).

Few fundamentalist sects promote that DEFIANT feeling and rarely encourage DEFIANCE with violence. The previous section explains why: DEFIANCE best inflates under certain deleterious socio-cultural conditions. Furthermore, fundamentalism isn't required for DEFIANCE: a single person, without any encouragement from a sect, can become the "lone wolf" perpetrator of violence. However, if a fundamentalist sect claiming to represent the best interests of a subjugated community persuades some followers that only immediate action can bring protection and justice to that community, the factors for DEFIANCE can come together in the minds of those already susceptible to that message. Religious DEFIANCE emerges in that matrix, capable of manipulating a religious person's moral ethos further.

Religious DEFIANCE, narrowly defined, appeals to a person's sense of sacred values and religious convictions, through a well-crafted narrative, to develop a DEFIANT attitude into a moral commitment to commit acts of confrontation, and perhaps aggressive conflict and open violence as well.

Religious DEFIANCE in its violent and warlike manifestations will display variations, depending on the type of sacred values promoted and the moral convictions involved. Again, the way that the moral ethos of a person gets manipulated by the religious narrative heard by each religious person, filtered by their own mindset, has great influence over resulting actions taken. In particular, the values people regard as sacred are connected to deontic stances refusing to compromise ethical principles. This can be the case even to the point where upholding those principles require precipitating open hatred and engaging in large-scale conflict and war. (Graham and Haidt 2011; Atran and Ginges 2011; Atran and Ginges 2012; Parker et al 2012)

In general, religious Defiance further distorts and exaggerates the moral ethos of a DEFIANT person.

A hypo-utilitarian ethos infusing DEFIANCE allows a rationalization that community welfare is best advanced by near-term confrontation and violence without moral discrimination among individuals targeted.

A hyper-deontological ethos infusing DEFIANCE rationalizes one's duty-bound prioritization, over all other duties, of remedying injustice and rescuing the community.

A hyper-role ethos infusing DEFIANCE rationalizes a heroic role, having authoritarian approval (by an actual person or a figural personage), to assume fighting status for communal triumph.

Religious DEFIANCE can occur within closely-knit communities, loosely networked nodes, or even with lone-wolf perpetrators inspired by mythical figures.

What sort of religious narrative about sacred values and corresponding religious convictions could supply all three kinds of infusions to DEFIANCE? The most efficient and coherent narrative would include all three distorted ethos in a mutually supportive way, blending together to bond them tightly.

Consider this hypothetical narrative:

“There is but one supreme God for the One true community under God. Only this God knows what is Good for this community of the faithful. All Good emanates from God and would not exist without God. This Good is communicated by God to the community, and obeying this communication without deviation or questioning is God's will, which is always Good. This communication includes commands to protect the true community by means that God approves. God approves war against oppressors of the true community. Oppressors, according to God, are anyone not in the true community. God has already judged the oppressors as infidels. Because infidels are not Good, they have no rightful claim to existence, and God suffers them at His will. When heroic members of the true community take the role of eliminating oppressors at God's command, they fulfill supreme duties of the faithful and enjoy high status in the community.”

In this hypothetical narrative (which is NOT a religion, but just a narrative trying to manipulate religiosity), all three distorted ethos are activated towards the rationalization of generic violence against anyone not in the true community.

Religious fundamentalist narratives supporting DEFIANCE accordingly tend to dictate what is supremely sacred, depict all duties ultimately deriving from some sacred authority, and teach that one's supreme duty is obeying divine authority. They draw a clear line between persons worthy of respect and those deserving no moral regard at all. They specify how a true believer can play a needed role in carrying out sacred ideals, and when a believer can know when to get DEFIANT. Unless the faithful are carrying out the sacred will, their own right to existence is threatened and they could become in some sense “unreal” from the fundamentalist (or divine

being's) perspective, creating an existential crisis of deep anxiety. Relief from that deep existential anxiety is only gained by submission and obedience (Griffin, 2012).

Because of the way that this role of DEFIANCE is rationalized by such a narrative, a person playing a violent role in a commanded war can rationalize the elimination of anyone outside the true community without any moral conscience lingering to question such actions. Such a person could regard that heroic role as a measure of horizontal status among respected peers and communal commanders for social status, and/or regard that heroic role in a transcendent vertical sense in relationship with the divine (Fricano, 2012).

According to this sort of religious narrative, the elimination of infidels is not wrongful murder, because (1) infidels are not in the true community according to God; (2) infidels have no goodness or right to exist by being separate from God; (3) the elimination of infidels is perfectly right and just when God wills it so; and (4) during war the infidels are eliminated by God's command.

To summarize, religious DEFIANCE can be manipulated towards various kinds and levels of violence through the design of a religious narrative about the sacred and supreme ethical convictions. The hypothetical narrative crafted above, and its extreme monotheistic theology, is but one of many possible variations able to combine religious fundamentalism, dutiful authoritarianism, and heroic role-playing.

### **Religious DEFIANCE and Just War Theory**

It must be emphasized that extreme religious DEFIANCE is quite compatible with extreme political violence for Machiavellian or utilitarian ends. There is no dichotomy between groups appealing only to religiosity and other groups appealing only to power. A typical group engaged in extreme violence will offer utilitarian rationalizations to those needing them, while simultaneously offering sacred rationalizations to those susceptible to such messaging. It may also happen that religious DEFIANCE can be restrained by cold calculations about long-term interests concerning future relations with neighboring nations and peoples. It should also be emphasized how religious DEFIANCE can be restrained by other staunch traditions upheld in a culture. One example of that restraint is Just War Theory.

Many religious cultures in previous centuries and millennia, all around the world, independently invented ethical standards for the proper conduct of war. Not surprisingly, many converged on some standards heard in the "Just War Theory" of the West. Rules about the permitted means of starting and conducting war, treating defeated combatants, avoiding the killing of noncombatants, and avoiding harm to women and children, are typical features to these standards. Islam did develop its own version of Just War Theory (Al-Dawoody, 2011).

Basically, Just War Theory prevents the worse abuses of religious DEFIANCE through counterbalancing its utilitarian, deontological, and role ethos distortions, by specifically (a) demanding that conducting war should intelligently aim at the long-term good, not just short-term retribution or disproportionate destruction; (2) requiring that only lawful commands from authentic authorities are obeyed; and (3) urging that heroic roles should not be involved with dishonorable acts towards noncombatants and the vulnerable.

A hypothetical narrative such as "Singular Sacredness" attempts an override of Just War Theory with hyper-deontological and authoritarian rigidity, sufficient for rationalizing indiscriminate havoc and killing.

In conclusion, there is ample support for the following recommendations:

The principles and traditions of Just War Theory, still alive in every civilization today, should be staunchly promoted and reinforced to global view to lend encouragement to those everywhere trying to restrain sectarian DEFIANCE.

The defusing and refutation of singularly sacred narratives would be wise, along with the stabilization of societies and governments so that there can be alternative outlets to those feeling DEFIANT. (Ashour 2020)

Ultimately, watching for the signs of developing DEFIANCE among those reaching a DEFIANT level is necessary, and the social and inter-personal factors encouraging that DEFIANT feeling should be counteracted at the local level. (Barlett and Miller 2012; Gorski et al 2013; Parkes 2014)

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## Religion and Secularism

Religions may not prove able to prevent their decomposition, and enough speculative theology can only accelerate that process. A religion can lose persuasive cohesion to the point where its aspects become separable and optional components as far as many adherents can tell, and when enough people are treating those aspects as optional as well, the religion itself is fading out. Those adherents are not becoming 'non-religious' or secular by default. Only if all religious convictions and practices are dropped would a person be quite secular.

The formulation and destiny of secularism depends on the course of that perennial debate between philosophy and theology. Philosophy starts from the position of epistemic fallibilism (rather than foundationalism) about any religious knowledge. Theology counters with epistemic foundationalism about knowledge of divine matters, and the presumption that religion (in theological hands) understands its own faith the best.

| PHILOSOPHY   |     | THEOLOGY  | MORAL THEOLOGY   |
|--|-----|---|--|
| <u>Epistemic Fallibilism</u><br>Any knowledge from learning could be inadequate or wrong   | vs. | <u>Revelatory Dogmatism</u><br>Knowledge from God can never be wrong.   | A religion's theology knows that religion's essential beliefs and moral duties.  |
| <u>Epistemic Individualism</u><br>One has responsibility only for one's own beliefs.   | vs. | <u>Social Theology</u><br>The religion has responsibility for everyone's beliefs.   | A religion holds all members morally responsible for their beliefs and their conduct.  |
| <u>Epistemic Objectivism</u><br>Non-followers can tell what a religion requires.   | vs. | <u>Epistemic Internalism</u><br>Only followers reliably say what is religiously required.   | A religion's theology has the exclusive knowledge about the moral duties of followers.                                       |
| <u>Sociology of Religion</u><br>Religions can be objectively sorted by their requirements.   | vs. | <u>Ecumenical Theology</u><br>Religions respect each other's internal authority over piety.   | Each religion is the authority over pious followers knowing their moral duties.  |
| <u>Politics of Religion</u><br>Each religion is objectively classifiable as "civil" or "uncivil".  | vs. | <u>Political Theology</u><br>Each religion understands how followers should be civil or not.  | A religion's theology knows when its pious followers should be civil, and when to be uncivil.                                |
| <u>Political Philosophy</u><br>Governments can neutrally classify different religions as either "civil" and lawful religions, or as "uncivil". | vs. | <u>Political Theology</u><br>Theologies can classify governments as either religiously oppressive or as religiously supportive.     | A religion's theology knows how to instruct its pious followers how to stay morally righteous by lawful or unlawful conduct. |
| <u>Political Philosophy</u><br>Citizens are told to control their beliefs so that their religion stays "civil" rather than "unlawful".         | vs. | <u>Political Theology</u><br>Citizens are informed about how to resist oppressive governments that try to regulate faith and piety. | A religion's theology justifies why pious followers must conflict with anti-religious governments.                           |
| <u>Political Liberalism</u><br>Religious citizens only have the right to be civilly religious and have no right to be uncivil.                 | vs. | <u>Political Theology</u><br>Religious citizens always have the God-given right to ignore laws restraining their pious conduct.     | A religion's theology justifies why pious followers must do what is required by their religion.                              |
| <u>State vs Church</u><br>A government only respects the   | vs. | <u>Church vs. State</u><br>A religion only respects legitimate  | <u>Pious Morality vs. Secular Evil</u><br>A religion's theology knows how  |

right of individuals to be lawfully religious, and only tolerates those religions sharing that politics.

governments that respect the freedom of its followers to stay pious and righteous.

to classify governments as either favorable towards religion or as driven towards secular tyranny.

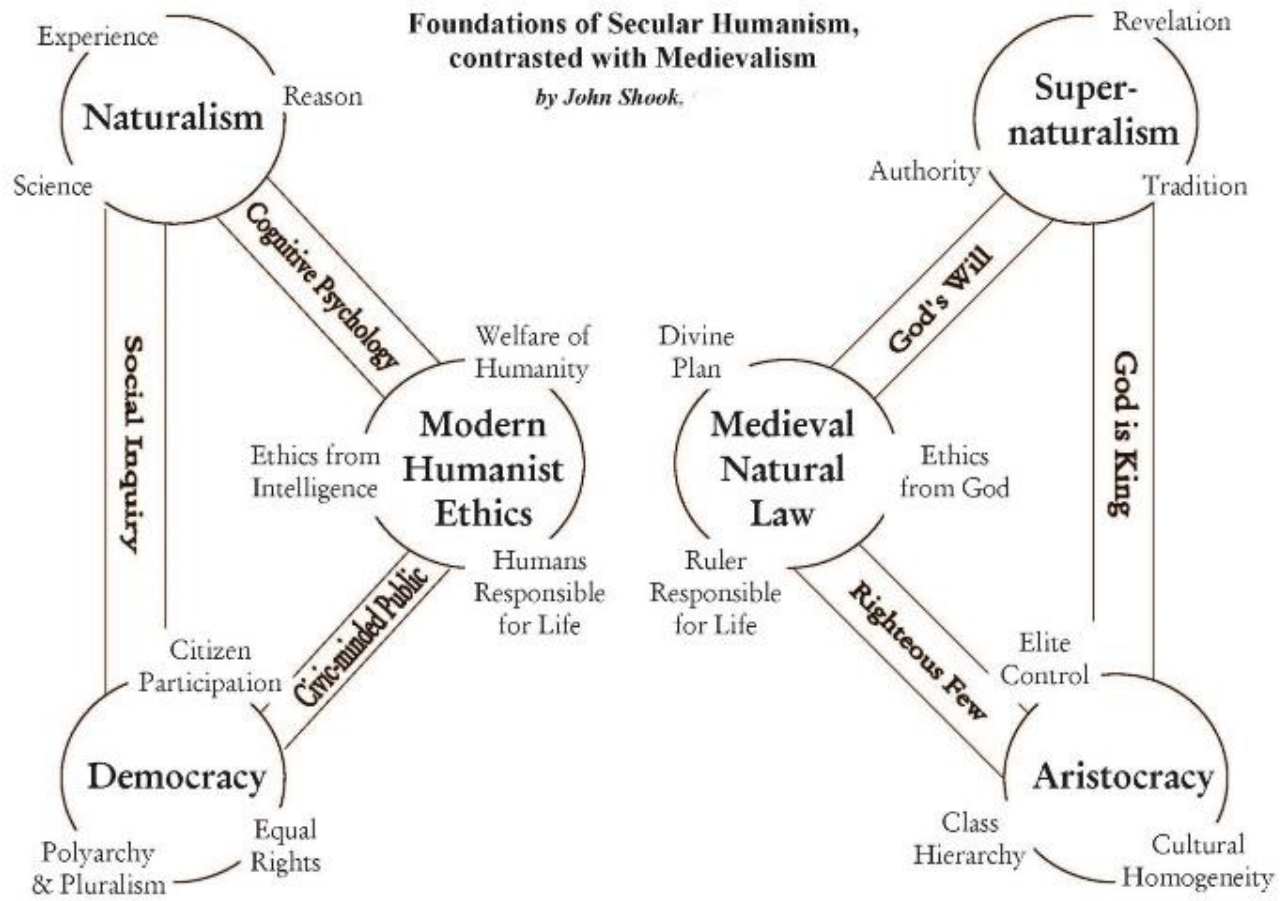
Furthermore, even if some religious convictions and practices get widely dropped due to persuasive secular ideologies or worldviews, that process of secularization isn't destined for culminating in the final secularization of society. Most adherents will re-adapt or re-invent other religious convictions and practices rather than become atheists. Atheism would only rise significantly in the long run if strong secular institutions have reasonable and beneficent ideologies and nonreligious worldviews had satisfying cosmologies and intelligible 'big histories'. Atheism by itself can be artificially promoted by materialistic totalitarianisms, but long-term results are unstable and undesirable.

Long-lasting secularisms rely on speculative philosophies for merging scientific cosmology and 'big' history, ethical humanism, and democratic political theory. In the west, the last great syncretic worldview was High Medievalism. The next great nonreligious worldview will be no mere "shadow" lingering from the death of God, but a comprehensive atheological alternative needing no sacred foundations.

Atheism is merely the view that it is reasonable to leave out deities (and anything supernatural) from one's worldview. Atheism is not the same as secularism. Atheism raises objections to god-belief in people's minds; secularism opposes the influence religion has over people's conduct and civic life. Secularism is the dedicated effort to reducing the influence of religion upon social institutions and personal lives. Political secularism specifically tries to reduce the amount of control that religion(s) and the government can have over each other.

Atheism by itself needn't object to lots of people being religious, so long as atheists themselves aren't the object of prejudice and discrimination. Atheists tend to be vocal and energetic secularists when conservative religion and dogmatic theology seek parasitic control over government.

The next super-syncretic worldview in the West may look like the following schema for 'secular humanism'.



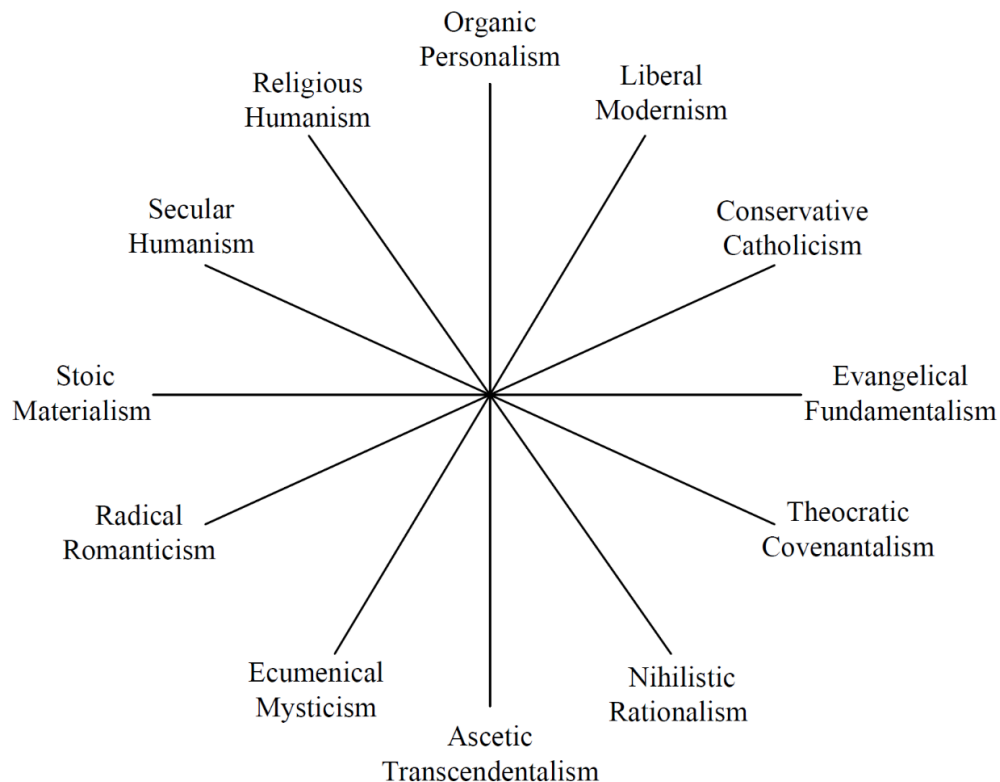
## Western Worldviews

Secular Humanism is one among several worldviews, whether secular or religious, continuing to be viable in Western Civilization. There are six primary worldviews, making six possible combinations of reason and faith, thereby offering three naturalisms and three supernaturalisms. The first two worldviews take the extreme options of either exclusive faith, or exclusive reason. The next two worldviews rely on faith, either a faith that dominates reason or a faith that relies on reason. The last two worldviews rely on reason, either a reason that relies on faith or a reason that dominates faith.

|                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| Ecumenical Mysticism       | Faith for encountering god without any reason involved                   |
| Nihilistic Rationalism     | Reason for knowing reality without any faith involved                    |
| Evangelical Fundamentalism | Faith about god and ethics by true revelation unchallengeable by reason  |
| Liberal Modernism          | Faith in god's transformations through symbolism adaptable with reason   |
| Religious Humanism         | Reason about nature and ethics with assistance from transformative faith |
| Stoic Materialism          | Reason for understanding nature and ethics unchallengeable by faith      |

Six additional worldviews fit in between the primary worldviews: ascetic transcendentalism between Ecumenical Mysticism and Nihilistic Rationalism; theocratic covenantalism between Nihilistic Rationalism and Evangelical Fundamentalism; conservative catholicism between Evangelical Fundamentalism and Liberal Modernism; organic personalism between Liberal Modernism and Religious Humanism; secular humanism between Religious Humanism and Stoic Materialism; and radical romanticism between Stoic Materialism and Ecumenical Mysticism.

These twelve worldviews are distributed across the range of combinations of faith and reason. They offer stably coherent foundations capable of justifying a comprehensive understanding of reality, humanity, and morality. Some of these worldviews have adherents, but this categorization is not about popularity, only intellectual integrity.



## The 21<sup>st</sup> Century and Beyond

The challenges of a new age, an Anthropocene Epoch, will determine humanity's fate. Pioneers integrating religion and science and ethics seek out a way to express an new Ethos of reverence.

Michael Dowd, author of *Thank God for Evolution*, has long spoken of Religion 2.0, blending the best of sacred traditions with science's knowledge. Put into few words, his worldview looks something like this:

A worldwide movement has been emerging for decades at the nexus of science, inspiration, and sustainability. Despite diverse backgrounds and beliefs, what unites us are shared values, priorities, and commitments. We all seek to transform ourselves and our social systems in service of a just and thriving future for humanity and the larger body of life. That responsibility demands our unwavering attention to understanding ourselves and our environment. In the words of cosmologist Brian Swimme, "The new cosmic story emerging into human awareness overwhelms all previous conceptions of the Universe for the simple reason that it draws them all into its comprehensive fullness. Who can learn what this means and remain calm?" Now that the threat of climate change is not only undeniable but manifesting in frightful ways throughout Earth's lands and waters, it is time for the religious to boldly step forward. It is time for us to re-state (and thus restore) traditional language in ways that can guide and inspire anew. Toward this end, I offer the following six translations. In each, a secular term is paired with a religious term in a way that can inform our choices, ground our decisions, and empower our actions. The resulting synthesized commitments can transcend distracting divides between the 'religious' and the 'nonreligious'.

1. REALITY IS OUR GOD. Whatever else we may mean by the word "God," surely it stands for nothing less than all that is inescapably real. Notably, this includes the powers of the universe and the laws of nature — to which human knowledge must conform and human actions must yield and adapt.
2. INTEGRITY IS OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. Faithfully growing in right relationship to Reality/God and helping others do the same is our foremost responsibility and our joy. Whatever else the word "integrity" may mean to us individually or collectively, we know that it also entails nurturing a mutually beneficial relationship to the air, water, soil, and human and non-human life of this planet.
3. EVIDENCE IS OUR SCRIPTURE. Henceforth, our responsibility to understand reality requires our reliance on scientifically and historically confirmable evidence — as our cultures can best interpret this continually revisable knowledge. While many of us will continue to value pre-modern scriptures and stories that long served our ancestors, we do not privilege ancient texts or handed-down wisdom over current and global collective intelligence.
4. BIG HISTORY IS OUR CREATION STORY. We thrill to learn of the 13.8-billion-year journey of the cosmos, planet Earth, evolving life, and the human species that gave us birth. We honor this epic of evolution as our species' first and only globally produced, evidence-based, and thus unifying creation story. We aim to interpret this story accurately, meaningfully, and inspiringly.
5. ECOLOGY IS OUR THEOLOGY. Just as the evolutionary sciences give us an expansive and shared identity, the ecological sciences offer vital guidance for living in right relationship with the physical, biological, and social systems of planet Earth. No matter our theological or philosophical differences, we all value ecological wisdom as the foundation for forging a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship, so crucial for our right relationship to God/Reality.

6. A HEALTHY FUTURE IS OUR MISSION. Joining with people of all backgrounds and beliefs in service of a just, vibrant, beautiful, and sustainably life-giving future for humanity and the larger body of life is our divine calling and privilege.

“All human activities, programs, policies, and institutions must henceforth be judged primarily by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore, or foster a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship.” – Thomas Berry

In my own words [John Shook] now, I can agree, even if we don't use religious language, that a worldwide movement has been emerging for decades at the nexus of science, inspiration, and sustainability. Despite diverse backgrounds and beliefs, what unites us are shared values, priorities, and commitments. We all seek to transform ourselves and our social systems in service of a just and thriving future for humanity and the larger body of life. That responsibility demands our unwavering attention to understanding ourselves and our environment. In the words of astronomer Carl Sagan, “A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge.” Now that the threat of climate change is not only undeniable but manifesting in frightful ways throughout Earth's lands and waters, it is time for the nonreligious to boldly step forward. It is time for us to re-state (and thus invigorate) modern theories in ways that can guide and inspire coming generations. Toward this end, I also offer six translations. In each, an ethical priority is paired with an ennobling vision in a way that can inform our choices, ground our decisions, and empower our actions. The resulting synthesized commitments can transcend distracting divides between the 'religious' and the 'nonreligious'.

1. REALITY IS OUR SUPREME BEING. Whatever else we may mean by the word “Reality,” surely it stands for nothing less than what must be ultimately supreme for us. Principally, this designates the powers of the universe and the laws of nature — to which human knowledge must conform and human actions must yield and adapt.

2. INTEGRITY IS OUR VIRTUE. Fidelity to growing into a better relationship to Reality/Nature and helping others do the same is our foremost responsibility and our joy. Whatever else the word “integrity” may mean to us individually or collectively, we know that it also entails nurturing a mutually beneficial relationship to the air, water, soil, and human and non-human life of this planet.

3. EVIDENCE IS OUR AUTHORITY. Henceforth, our responsibility to understand reality requires our reliance on scientifically and historically confirmable evidence — as our cultures can best interpret this continually revisable knowledge. While many of us can continue to gain insights from pre-modern wisdom traditions that long served our ancestors, we do not privilege ancient texts or handed-down dogmas over current and global collective intelligence.

4. BIG HISTORY IS OUR ORIGIN STORY. We thrill to learn of the 13.8-billion-year journey of the cosmos, planet Earth, evolving life, and the human species that gave us birth. We honor this epic of evolution as our species' first and only globally produced, evidence-based, and thus unifying creation story. We aim to interpret this story accurately, meaningfully, and inspiringly.

5. ECOLOGY IS OUR PHILOSOPHY. Just as the evolutionary sciences give us an expansive and shared identity, the ecological sciences offer vital guidance for wisely flourishing within the physical, biological, and social systems of planet Earth. No matter our ideological differences, we all value ecological wisdom as the foundation for forging a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship, so crucial for our commitment to relating to Reality.

6. A HEALTHY FUTURE IS OUR MISSION. Joining with people of all backgrounds and beliefs in service of a just, vibrant, beautiful, and sustainably life-giving future for humanity and the larger body of life is our ethical calling and privilege.

“A viable new Planetary Humanism focusing on a safe, secure, and better world should be our overriding obligation, and we should do what we can to engender ethical commitment. This commitment should apply to all people on the planet, whether religious or naturalistic, theist or humanist, rich or poor, of whatever race, ethnicity, or nationality.” – Paul Kurtz

The European mythology carries on in the West, no longer quite theological but still mythic in spirit despite its techno-scientific aspiration. Its expansive and humanistic message still resembles the ancient Laurentian myth from 40,000 years ago. In just a few propositions, it states our origins, purposes, prospects, and dangers.

*Intelligent life was inevitable in this  
organized Cosmos;*

*We are here to explore and learn from  
everywhere we care to go;*

*Our mission is using ever-improving technology  
to prosper anywhere we reside;*

*Our doom is strife among ourselves and conflict  
with other civilizations we meet.*