

**FIVE REASONABLE PEOPLE
THE UNDERLYING STRUCTURE OF
MORALITY**

CHAPTER 9. RELIGION AND THE AXIAL AGE

Polytheism and monotheism fit on the Y and X axes and 2-ism resolves the contradictions. Monotheism arose with the “Axial Age” around 500 BCE as a way for 3-ism to spread beyond a small group.

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POLYTHEISM AND MONOTHEISM

Religion is a human universal and there is an enormous literature attempting to explain it. I ignored it for years. For one thing, I didn’t know a contrasting pair of religious issues from which to form the four “truth values” needed for a WOLT analysis. For another, though pre-scientific societies needed religion in order to feel in control (see box), religion does not play a significant role in modern society, so it was evidently not needed to live socially—therefore, WOLT did not need to consider religion.

This evasiveness ended when Angus Algie proposed *polytheism* and *monotheism*. Here was an obvious contrasting pair which, it turns out, not only locates religion socially but shows religion to be a major reflection of the fundamental division between 1-ism and 3-ism.

Control via religion and magic

Why are humans religious? Shouldn't a tribe which just dealt in facts outcompete tribes which believe myths? Obviously, it does not work like that.

The answer is that humans, like other animals, need to feel in control of things that affect them. Humans have a special problem because we see broader events affecting us—the weather, the seasons, earthquakes, fire, disease, death—and in a pre-scientific society the only way to control or influence them is with supernatural help.

This is actually long recognised. James Frazer, a century ago in *The Golden Bough*: “whereas magic aims at controlling nature directly, religion aims at controlling it indirectly through the mediation of a powerful supernatural being or beings to whom man appeals for help and protection.” Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski was of the same opinion.

When we feel we have control we perform better. The football coach and the infantry officer know morale is vital: if we believe we can win, we have a better chance of winning. Conversely, if we think we can't cope, we won't try and may become depressed and incapable. Voodoo deaths and prisoner of war anecdotes indicate that to “lose heart” can kill.

The *belief* of control gives *real* control. Experiments show that humans and other animals who feel they lack control are in fact less capable.¹ Subjective belief in control confers real, practical advantage.

It is widely asserted that religion fulfils a need for explanations. No such need can be shown. Religion provides solace and sociality but is not necessary for them. Academic hypotheses about the cause of religion are legion, some complex, all speculative, and all circular. The need that only the supernatural can fulfil in pre-technological society, is our need for control.

If spells and gods control the truly uncontrollable, their assistance will also be sought for hunting, courting, promotion, harvest, battle and whatever else is important. In pre-scientific societies, religion or magic must permeate every practical endeavour.

There is an alternative: the Type 5 disdain for the worldly. Marcus Aurelius: “The more we value things outside our control, the less control we have.” But *social* people value worldly things.

The immediate cause of a person’s belief is their parents but the underlying cause is our ancient animal need to feel in control. For perhaps millions of years, supernatural belief was the only way we could meet it. It follows that the supernatural will continue to thrive where life feels precarious and to fade where people have real control over their lives—as is possible in modern, industrial society.

¹ Peterson, Christopher, Steven F Maier, and M E P Seligman. (1995). *Learned helplessness: a theory for the age of personal control*: Oxford University Press.

“Polytheism,” Angus declared, “goes on Y and monotheism goes on X.”

“How can that be?” I objected, “The 2s combine the Y and X axes so they would have to be both. They cannot possibly have one god and many gods simultaneously.” I should have known better.

“No problem. They just proclaim monotheism and then bring on the saints and angels.”

Is there any contradiction 2-ism can't resolve? Angus pointed out that, like polytheist gods, saints are usually tied to specific earthly localities, and each specialises in a particular field of human activity or difficulty, waiting to be called upon by mortals when their expertise is needed. Saints are polytheist gods by another name. By contrast, the pure monotheist relationship is with a heaven-dwelling, omnipresent, omniscient God who is due obeisance regardless of mortal needs.

Table 9.1. Polytheism and monotheism, YX

<i>Poly-</i>	Y	Yes	1	2
<i>theism</i>		No	4	3
			No	Yes
			<i>Monotheism X</i>	

What about the 4s? To put polytheism on Y and monotheism on X is to make Type 4 neither polytheist nor monotheist. (Table 9.1) “It is not that the 4s are atheist,” Angus said, “all the types can be religious and the 4s, who anyway incline to superstition, will profess the faith of their society. But it doesn't make any difference to them. God, gods, fate, luck, or powerful people—it's all the same.

“The Type 4 priority is to avoid tribulation and the last thing 4s will do is inquire how many gods there are. They know that sooner or later they are going to get thumped so they try to stay out of the way—and look forward to when the slot-machine god smiles.”

Polytheism on Y gives the 1s multiple, earthbound gods to do deals with—sacrifice a chicken to this one to ensure a good harvest, a goat to that one to grant the birth of a son—and among whom they can switch allegiance in case of unsatisfactory performance.

Morality and religion are separate

For an all-powerful single God to be worshipped, He must be caring, compassionate and merciful to His flock who must try, and inevitably fail, to match His perfection. God always helps sinners who repent. Polytheist gods, however, are not concerned for morality, either their own or mortals'. The polytheist god's morality is that of the Mafia boss: "Show respect to me!" and, as with the favour of a powerful person, help is at the god's pleasure.

Morality entered religion with the advent of monotheism. Prior to the first millennium BCE, 3-ism was limited to family and tribe—to the small group of related people who knew each other—and was separate from religion. Literacy and economic surplus¹ let monotheism become a vehicle for a consistent 3-ist story to expand beyond a person's immediate circle. (see also [Chapter 10](#).)

¹ Baumard, Nicolas, Alexandre Hyafil, Ian Morris, and Pascal Boyer. 2015. "Increased Affluence Explains the Emergence of Ascetic Wisdoms and Moralizing Religions." *Current Biology* 25: 10-15.

Monotheism on X suits the 3s who cannot tolerate the categorisation, inequality and division implied by more than one God. Where the 1s monitor the performance of their gods to determine whether the sacrifice was adequate or whether they might get a better deal elsewhere, the 3s' omnipotent God never fails. There is no question of checking up on Him—and to suggest bribing Him with a sacrifice would be blasphemy.

There are many implications. As we will see, WOLT provides an outline of an anthropology of religion and connects religion to every other social issue.

SCOPE: RELIGION AS GODS AND PRAYER

Way of life theory says that the four combinations, or “truth values,” formed by a contrasting pair of ethical issues must fit with the four WOLT types. Must. If two issues don’t fit then either the pair is outside the realm of rational sociality or else WOLT fails.

As a contrasting pair of religious relational issues, the four truth values from *polytheism* and *monotheism* do fit. Moreover, the truth values from pairs of characteristics of polytheism and monotheism also fit the four types—as they must. Table 9.2 lists many such pairs. The fit of some of them is discussed below.

The terms polytheism and monotheism have a singular merit in the present context: they refer exclusively to religion. Religion is notoriously difficult to define but gods occur only within religion so by dealing with gods, we are certainly dealing with religion.

A god is a supernatural being who is disposed to help mortals if approached in the right way—that is, propitiated by sacrifice or prayer. This definition includes saints and angels but excludes goblins, fairies, trolls, etc. Religion, for our purposes, is belief in God or gods and in prayer or sacrifice.

God-free religions, if any there be, are beyond the scope of this discussion. Buddhism officially has no gods and as such would be excluded. In practice though, many believers pray to Buddha.

Religions entail many more features than prayer. For example, because gods are powerful they will also be worshipped. Other phenomena associated with religion include mysticism, miracles, martyrdom, trance, higher purpose, creation story, ceremony, social harmony, social control, taboos, law, lore and more. These phenomena are not the essence of religion; though they are commonly associated with

Table 9.2 Religion issues on Y and X axes and resolution by 2-ist monotheism

	Y polytheism doing: external deeds	X monotheism being: inner worth	Monotheist 2-ism's polytheist compromise
<i>body</i>	many specialist gods material gods (human or animal form)	one omniscient God immaterial God (holy spirit)	saints, angels saints, Hindu avatars, Islamic djinns
<i>god nature</i>	enhanced mortal: hero can rival	perfect being: rival is blasphemy	God + saint assistants
<i>location</i>	local presences	universal presence	local saints & shrines
<i>Powers</i>	specialised powers earth created gods	omnipotent God created earth	saints, angels saints, icons, statues
<i>use,</i>	contract for services	unconditional love	Covenant, prom. land
<i>purpose</i>	prosperity	eternal life	manage for eternal life
<i>knowledge of</i> <i>God</i>	hypothesis, subject to correction	total, revealed, eternal Word	rites may change but Book is constant
<i>residence</i>	in special places—best earthly real estate	heaven beyond sky—unreal estate	church, mosque, Ark of covenant, shrine
<i>temper</i>	gods quick to anger; vengeful	God quick to forgive (sad if bad)	penance, Hail Marys
<i>leadership</i>	god as agent leader specialised competence	God leads by example, perfect in all things	priests are both agent and example
<i>the service</i>	resources, confidence	love, reassurance	rules for both
<i>reliability</i>	gods fickle	God constant	constant + hot temper
<i>worship by</i>	public sacrifice for material request	private thanks for God's love	pray together but in private
<i>worship form</i>	actions, specific deals	words, whole behaviour	collection, ritual prayer
<i>sin is:</i>	venial: offence of broken contract	mortal: failure to live a good life	1: break rules; 3: bad living
<i>sin by</i>	commission—must act to sin	omission—must act to be a non-sinner	both: contravene or ignore God's rules
<i>stick</i>	public shame	private guilt	shame in congregation
<i>carrot</i>	earthly rewards	eternal life	church promotion
<i>human nature</i>	people bad but innocent till guilty	people good but flawed till saved	people can be good if guided and trained
<i>result of sin</i>	proportional penalty (e.g. crop fails)	absolute: wages of sin is death	venial and mortal sins
<i>expiate by</i>	loss, sacrifice	public confession	private confess, penance
<i>sinner suffers till</i>	penalty exacted	forgiveness granted	venial sin: penalty; mortal sin: forgiveness
<i>multiple sins</i>	sins cumulative; redeem piecewise: 1 sin = 1 penalty	one sin or many – equally deadly. forgiveness is total	venial and mortal sins venials add up; mortals do not
<i>sin access</i>	retain access to god	lose access till submit	still got access if venial
<i>government</i> <i>paradigm</i>	city of man: Athens, law	city of God: Jerusalem, goodness	Eternal city: Rome, bureaucracy
<i>mother nature</i>	primal chaos—man cannot affect	primal order—man sullies	priests ensure order
<i>miracles</i>	material (competition won)	epiphany; bad spirit cast out	3: exorcism; 1: saints intervene

Table 9.2. The last column is not Z. A Z column would probably just say authority (priestly decree, holy writ) on every line. This third column suggests the 2-ist resolution of simultaneous X and Y in a monotheism such as Christianity. Y and X may also be read as Type 1 and Type 3. The Y and X columns amount to distilled social images of leadership and service, offence and incentive, place and meaning—in short, of god(s) created in the images of man.

religion, they also occur outside of religion. Some of them—those matters societies must address—can be analysed using WOLT without reference to religion.

SOME YX ISSUES AND HOW 2-ISM IS BOTH

If polytheism and monotheism go on Y and X, then the properties of these two kinds of religion must also fit on the axes. Table 9.2 lists pairs of such properties or characteristics for Christianity and notes how 2-ism copes with the contradictions. Cope the 2s must, at least in modern pluralist societies where all four WOLT types openly co-exist. In particular, in the Christian West, Type 1 polytheist inclinations must somehow be accommodated within the universal monotheism—3-ism—of the New Testament. Much of Table 9.2 should apply to Islam though Jesus is more uncompromisingly 3-ist than Mohammed.

Creation story

The Bible begins by saying God created earth, as befits monotheist omnipotence. By contrast, pagan gods are likely to be born of the earth—the earth created them. If we place these two contrasting creation myths on X and Y it will mean the 2s have to believe in both creator and created while the 4s believe neither.

How can the 2s have both at once? The Type 2 solution in Western society is that the omniscient God created earth while His earthly intermediaries and agents such as saints, prophets and priests, are born of earth. 2-ism can then define these agents and arrange them in a hierarchy of importance and access to God.

The 4s, rejecting both X and Y, must presume creation, like everything else, is a matter of chance. Modern physics, which says creation was a Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago, would not disagree.

Divine residence

Polytheist gods are local, inhabiting special places such as a particular grotto or mountain. The monotheist God has to be everywhere at once so must live somewhere unearthly. Polytheist gods tend to live in the best real estate; God inhabits an unreal estate.

If we put *local* and *everywhere* onto the Y and X axes then, logically, the monotheist 2s can achieve both at once by having God in heaven while saints and priests provide local services.

But an omnipotent God is not bound by logic and nor are the 2s who see to it that God, present everywhere, is more present in some places than in others: at a mosque or a church, or at a synagogue in which He is even more present in the Ark of the Covenant. Though God is omnipresent you can get nearer to Him by a pilgrimage to a holy place.

The 4s want nothing to do with the residences of the gods; if you keep clear of the places they inhabit perhaps they won't notice you.

Reliability of gods

Pagan gods are fickle; sometimes they do not respond to entreaties and sometimes they require a bigger sacrifice. Their fickleness is because they are made in the human image: they feast, fight, cheat and have sex. Pagan believers would try not to rely too much on such gods but develop self-reliance. Respect is appropriate because the gods have supernatural powers and play favourites; in some circumstances a mortal may become a god or a demigod.

Such colourful conduct is unthinkable for a monotheist God who is aloof from human-like diversions. The monotheist God is perfect and constant and never fails. No mortal can approach His perfection; mortals may be created in His image but

cannot match Him. Consequently, He is perennially disappointed with their behaviour—and perennially forgiving.

If we put *fickle* and *constant* on the Y and X axes, monotheist 2s can satisfy both at once by praying to God and simultaneously promoting a reliable hierarchy to formally recognise outstanding mortals as saints who have local supernatural jurisdiction and who retain their earthly histories and personalities.

The 4s do not see God or gods as fickle or constant; they are capricious. It is foolish to draw the gods' attention so sacrifice or prayer may be dangerous.

Material and immaterial

The Y axis gods are material beings, enhanced humans (occasionally other creatures) with human prejudices and appetites, living on earth in special places. They demand sacrifice of valuable property as payment and homage, and offer in return material benefits regarding the harvest, weather, battle, sons, etc. A failure in one of these material endeavours may be because the sacrifice was cheap. To anticipate this, the sacrifice should be public so everyone knows it was properly made. This has the added advantage of displaying the sacrificer's wealth and piety, yielding the 1-ist dividend of prestige.

On the other hand, the God of the X axis is an immaterial being devoid of prejudice who lives everywhere or nowhere. He has no interest in property sacrifice because material wealth can no more gain His favour than a camel can pass through the eye of a needle. Display of wealth is a sinful distraction from the worship of God Whose primary concern is for what His people have in their hearts. The heart is revealed through words and thoughts and is private. God created a perfect earth which is sullied by humans but to the sincerely repentant, God offers the

immaterial benefit of forgiveness. Being all-powerful, He can also offer eternal life.

If we set *material* on Y and *immaterial* on X, the 2s will cope with both at once by recognising saints (who were once material) and His priests will explain that God is an immaterial spirit beyond ordinary comprehension, with Whom only properly qualified (material) priests can communicate and Who demands immaterial pure hearts. He also requires material contributions to fund worship with the splendour appropriate to the head of the divine hierarchy. Quaker and Amish celebrants wear plain clothes and worship in homes or simple halls; Catholic priests wear elaborate vestments and worship in ornate cathedrals.

Around the ninth century the Christian church owned half the productive land in Europe¹ but the 2s' immaterial-material balancing act gradually got out of balance and the scandal of "indulgences"—God's grace for a monetary payment—was one trigger of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.

Deeds and words

In social life, *deeds* is on Y and *words* is on X. Religion exemplifies the distinction with costly sacrifice or sincere worship respectively. How do the 2s have both at once? By turning words into deeds with ritual. Where religious 1s have rites of sacrifice and 3s have rites of prayer, monotheist 2s use ritual to combine both kinds of rite.

Ritual is words spoken in a sacred, usually archaic, language, in a precise sequence, with sanctioned intonations, at a stipulated rhythm, at the correct times, by a properly authorised celebrant, wearing the right dress, accompanied by the prescribed body

¹ Lal, Deepak. 2001. Unintended consequences: the impact of factor endowments, culture, and politics on long-run economic performance: MIT Press. p. 85

movements. Ritual and pageantry transform words into actions. 2-ist ceremony is not the plain preaching of the 3s, and not the self-promoting deeds of the 1s, but costly, dignified and exalted celebration.

The 4s avoid commitment, whether words or deeds, to the extent they can. Spoken words are ephemeral, of no great import, and are not to be taken very seriously. Good manners are an affectation. The written word is to be feared because it is a tool of the powerful. Ritual can, however, guide behaviour. In a world where cause and effect are barely connected, it makes sense to do as the powerful decree even though you don't understand, and to repeat whatever worked last time—whatever satisfied the powerful people, whatever you got away with. So ritual might be not just 2-ist but also 4-ist, that means: it might fit on Z.

2-ISM AND RELIGION

The 2s handle the XY contradictions of combining monotheism and polytheism with their usual coercive Z measures of rules, ritual, rank differences, pragmatism and confidentiality.

Although polytheism and monotheism have their social aspects, in essence both are personal relationships with the divine. 2-ist monotheism extends the social side of religion, mediating the relationship with God via a priestly hierarchy and extending God's responsibility to cover everything else the 2s are interested in, such as civil order, military adventures, and their own retention of power.

A 2-ist takeover is not quite inevitable (for example, Amish communities have avoided it and practise a fairly pure 3-ism), however if a monotheist religion is to obtain over a wide area—a country—where people are free to exercise their preferences, then 2-ism has to provide some elements of polytheism if those inclined

to 1-ism are to feel included. In the USA and in Melanesia 1-ism is particularly strong—see box.

Polytheism has nothing to do with a caring, altruistic morality which, in a polytheist society, applies only to family and tribe. For a morality, religious or not, to be public, 2-ism is needed and the concentrated authority of monotheism can suit the sovereign, as its uniformity can facilitate the rule of dispersed lands, as can the self-policing effect of guilt and conscience.

American contortions of Christian 1-ism

We can infer from Table 9.2 that under an official monotheism the Type 1s will not be comfortable—whatever the concessions in the Y direction. In the case of Christianity this discomfort would be aggravated by the relentless 3-ism of the New Testament. The 3-ist opposition to 1-ism is well expressed by the seven deadly sins: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, anger and sloth. Sloth is a 4-ist sin but the other six constitute the sin of 1-ism.¹

To fit Judaism (or the Old Testament) to the American, go-getter ethos would be difficult. To fit the New Testament involves interpretive and psychological contortion. Turning the other cheek is just not the American way. Saints are insipid stand-ins for the full-blooded polytheist gods, and dealing with them as ranked, middlemen subordinates of the one all-powerful God is uninteresting to 1s. In Catholic—2-ist—Latin America saints are everywhere but in 1-ist USA they do not count.

1-ist societies professing Christianity need to mould it somehow into a competitive, incentive shape. The requirement for submission, fundamental to monotheism, is repugnant to 1-ism. However, if one can praise God and get something in return it may be worthwhile. The “Prosperity Gospel” movement which flourishes in the USA and also in the 1-ist

“big-man” culture in Melanesia, has Jesus with muscles, words become deeds through ritual shaking and arm-waving, and fervid praising of the Lord is done in the hope He will bestow material blessings.

According to Prosperity Gospel, God wants people to be healthy and wealthy² and in true 1-ist fashion, a gift to the church is an investment which will bring material return from God. It follows that the poor are poor because of lack of faith. In effect, a sacrifice is made and God is praised in advance to encourage Him to reciprocate, reversing the 3-ist practice of thanking God afterward for his countless blessings.

¹ The seven deadly sins are from Pope Gregory in the 6th century and Thomas Aquinas in the 13th. The 1s' six sins are of commission; the 4s' sin (sloth) is of omission. The 4s have been escaping the notice of social analysts for a long, long time.

² Attention to material prosperity and the body directly contradicts the Christian Bible but apparently, it claims divine imprimatur from III John 2: “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.” See Coleman, S. (2006). “Materializing the self: words and gifts in the construction of charismatic Protestant identity” in *The anthropology of Christianity*. F. Cannell, ed. Durham, Duke University Press.

THE AXIAL AGE, OR X-AXIAL AGE

This chapter's YX comparisons of monotheist and polytheist characteristics make a coherent story but before about 500 BCE it would have made no sense. That is when monotheism, and public 3-ism, first arose. Zoroastrianism and Hinduism had existed for some 700 years but until about 500 BCE monotheism as we know it did not exist.

In Eurasia during the first millennium BCE human social psychology changed. Monotheism (Judaism)

arose in the Levant at the same time as other moral movements arose elsewhere. They included Buddhism and Jainism in India, Taoism and Confucianism in China, and classical philosophy in ancient Greece.

The near simultaneous occurrence (over several centuries) of these new thought systems, after thousands of years of 1-ist, polytheistic thought in farming and herding societies, was noted by philosopher Karl Jaspers in 1947 who called it the *axial age*, indicating it was a turning point. He observed that these new outlooks are still with us and the pre-axial moral systems have no currency.

The axial age concept is contested in the literature. Without a theory as a guide to what it *should* be (could be, must be), it seems random, coming out of the blue after millennia of countless empires and hand-to-mouth agricultural civilisations. As such, its characteristics are whatever historians judge to be significant, which means that many details of the psychological and philosophical change are disputed.

Overall, it was a turn toward 3-ism. Baumard et al (2015) describe it as:

the notion that human existence has a purpose, distinct from material success, that lies in a moral existence and in the control of one's own material desires, through moderation (in food, sex, ambition, etc.), asceticism (fasting, abstinence, detachment), and compassion (helping, suffering with others).²

² Baumard, N., A. Hyafil, et al. (2015). "Increased affluence explains the emergence of ascetic wisdoms and moralizing religions." *Current Biology* **25**(1): 10-15. The word "moral" is often applied in relation to 3-ist impulses. Political scientist, Daniel Elazar in his quite accurate intuitive approximation to WOLT's three pro-active types, named them *individualist*, *traditionalist* and

We could call it the “X-axial age” for it marks the moment in history when the X axis came to rival the Y axis in public life, the moment when 3-ist sentiments began to spread over the Eurasian continent.

Axial age causes: affluence and 2-ism

The striving for superiority and competence that characterises the competitive Y axis is common to all social animals. It drives evolution, operating without being organised. As a form of social relations, it is understood everywhere, perhaps even across species. The nurturing, cooperative X axis is also everywhere but its effect is confined to the family, or at most to individuals, usually related, who know each other.

To apply X axis policies of cooperation and support beyond the family or clan, will require belief in an ideology which transcends time and place. It will have to be a 3-ism seen as eternal truth, welcoming all and not preferring your relatives or people you know.³ Such a 3-ism will depend on (a) literacy so that written records can maintain a consistent message and (b) some economic surplus to provide leisure for thinking and discussion.

moralist (See [Appendix 5](#)).

³ Here are some examples of Christian universalism:

Matthew 10: 37 He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

Mark 3: 32 And the multitude sat about him, and they said unto him, Behold, they mother and they brethren without seek for thee. 33 And he answered them, saying Who is my mother, or my brethren? 34 And he looked round about on them which sat about him and said, Behold my mother and brethren! 35 For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother.

Luke, 14: 26 If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.

The invention of agriculture and settled living (~8000 BCE) allowed people to accumulate possessions which stimulated trade. It is the Y (or 1-ist) orientation which drives trade but trade also requires 2-ism to organise money, credit, treaties and police. 1-ism without 2-ism is not social.

On the Eurasian continent after agriculture began, cities developed, wars were fought, nomadic and hunter-gatherer societies declined, tools and weapons improved, trade increased. Millennia passed. Empires rose and fell, societies became bigger, administration became more complicated, 2-ism and aristocracies thrived until, in the first millennium BCE, Axial, 3-ist proselytisers could journey within the 2-ist rules-based order and take advantage of 1-ist networks.

Baumard et al use archaeological evidence of affluence (food type, house size and more) to show that in Greece, India and China, affluence increased in the centuries leading up to the Axial Age, whereas the agricultural societies of Mesoamerica and the Andes saw no such increase in affluence and no Axial Age.

Their analysis depends on a lot of meticulous archaeological evidence and employs statistical mathematics to find Axial Age sentiments to be correlated with affluence. Yet it could hardly be otherwise. Poor people could not adopt a philosophy which denounces excessive consumption. Only where there is surplus is it feasible to advocate self-denial.

Baumard et al ponder the causes:

One possibility, originally proposed by Jaspers, is that axial religions resulted from the emergence of a new class of scholars or priests who had the resource and the time to elaborate more abstract religions.

Additionally, economic prosperity could have changed religions through the development of literacy and schooling...

Surely, literacy and the scholar class would be prerequisites for the generation and propagation of abstract belief systems but Baumard et al find no supporting correlations of increases in urban life or literacy with axial sentiments. They wonder as to

...why the new upper class would have been particularly attracted by the condemnation of earthly pleasures, food, luxury, or social status...

This is a puzzle if you assume everyone should find “earthly pleasures, food, luxury or status” desirable. That is a 1-ist assumption. Those are Y axis desires and they apply to animals in general but humans talk and they see the social complications of self-interest. WOLT tells us that the 3-ist mindset is fully as logical as the 1-ist pursuit of earthly pleasures and at the immediate, overt level, God’s commands about care for others must be obeyed—which implies self denial.

WOLT cannot say how many people will adhere to the different WOLT worldviews and it contains no logic indicating any type will predominate. In Eurasia, for the ten thousand years of agricultural civilisations, up to 200 years ago, 2-ism and 4-ism would have been dominant. There is no reason to wonder why the whole world is not 1-ist. The advent of affluence alone would be sufficient explanation for the rise of 3-ism.

3-ism is universal. Mothers of many species deny themselves for their young and in social species individuals care for others in their community. Some anthropologists say that the hunter-gatherer societies of pre-history were paragons of 3-ist egalitarianism. This 3-ism was limited to family and tribe; neighbouring tribes were enemies, and often not considered fully human.

Irrespective of genetic relationship, 3-ism by its nature suits small groups; a bigger 3-ist group is liable to schism. It splits because the requirement for harmony

From 1-ist polytheism to 3-ist monotheism to scientific secularism—a plausible sequence

- ~8000 BCE polytheist hunter-gatherer overpopulation leads to agriculture.¹
- organised agricultural living needs more 2-ism.
- farms and herds are raided by Type 1 bandits.
- farms are defended by an extorting “stationary bandit,² initiating rule by an upper class.
- ~3000 BCE overpopulation leads to warring.
- cities are easier to defend; the Type 1 extortionist becomes a Type 2 king levying taxes for wars. 2-ism predominates until modern times.
- cities and 2-ist law foster 1-ist trade, diplomacy, literacy, bureaucracy, empire, wealth.
- ~500 BCE “Axial Age” literacy, affluence, 2-ist order allow stable 3-ist philosophies to evolve and spread beyond small groups. Zoroastrianism and Hinduism change, Buddhism and Judaism arise.
- the analogy of a single all-powerful God to earthly rule legitimates despotism.
- a single common religion along with 3-ist guilt facilitates government of large areas.
- ~1600 CE overpopulation leads to agricultural and military innovation, science and mass education.
- 2-ist justice is influenced by 1-ism and 3-ism.
- science leads to democracy, irrelevance of religion, wealth, less warring, overpopulation, low fertility.

¹ There are several theories of the dawn of agriculture; overpopulation was surely necessary, perhaps sufficient.

² Mancur Olsen, 1993. “Dictatorship, democracy and development.” *American Pol.Sci. Review* 87(3):567-576

cannot tolerate dissent and where everyone is equal, no one can enforce discipline. The only disciplinary mechanism to preserve cohesion is the threat of secession or expulsion. This is an extreme resort and if

it does happen, the schism may be bitter.⁴ In short, it takes special circumstances for 3-ism to apply widely.

Those special circumstances arose in the Axial Age: economic surplus allowed aristocratic 2-ism in larger societies, giving order and stability; literacy increased, initially for administration and trade but then for recording the 3-ist story and keeping it constant, and affluence became enough to make self-denial feasible.

Behind this must have been population pressure though Baumard et al do not find a correlation with population numbers. History is almost entirely about wars. War's proximal causes were pursuit of booty and glory but also about settling agriculturally productive ground. So if population is not a direct cause of the Axial Age it must have generated, over millennia, the increasing sophistication which created the wealth to make 3-ist philosophies practicable.

Hinduism

We have seen that 2-ism can reconcile polytheism and monotheism by declaring monotheism-plus-saints. This is not the only way. Hinduism recognises thousands or perhaps millions of gods and the 2-ist reconciliation is simply by declaring all the gods as aspects of one supreme god. This might be Brahman, Vishnu, Shiva or others. Hinduism is a family of religions or denominations.

The Hindu gods are not the flamboyant, warrior, wheeler-dealer Greek or Nordic gods, and Hinduism is not generally considered "polytheist." Some term it "henotheist" meaning that one god can be worshipped but other gods recognised. The 2-ism to support this is the Indian caste system which is an especially intense form of 2-ism; individuals are born into their caste and

⁴ The ultra-3-ist Amish split amicably. They have large families and when a settlement gets large, it splits and a new settlement is created. There is no overall government.

the only prospect of rising to a higher caste is through death and reincarnation. Thousands of castes are recognised and at least in south India the castes accurately reflect WOLT—see Indologist Marriott’s analysis in [Appendix 4](#).

Hinduism and Jainism developed out of the (thoroughly 1-ist) Vedic hymns which date back to 1500 BCE; the ideological bridges between then and the Axial time are convoluted and gradual. Society then, and to some extent still, was organised into four *varnas* or classes. The story is complex but the four seem to approximate the four WOLT types.⁵

Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism had features in common with the Axial Age but scholars generally exclude it. Its place seems anomalous for it arose in Persia around 1200 BCE and seems to be the first attempt to transition away from the Type 1 commerce and gods-for-hire environment that had prevailed for millennia.

In India the early steps in adopting X-axis values are known but not in other locations. Zoroastrianism appears to have sprung into being as 3-ism.⁶

About 1200 BCE a tribal priest, Zoroaster (or Zarathustra) had a revelation and declared that the Lord of Light would combat the raiding and individualist, heroic violence practised among nomad cattle herders in southern Russia. The great god needed help from women and children and those who behaved correctly and obeyed his rule were promised

⁵ Basham, AL, 1954. *The wonder that was India: survey of the culture of the Indian sub-continent before the coming of the Muslims.*

⁶ Armstrong, Karen (2006) *The Great Transformation: The World in the Time of Buddha, Socrates, Confucius and Jeremiah.* Atlantic Books, London. Most of the content on Zoroastrianism in this section is taken from this source.

paradise after death while a river of fire awaited the disobedient.

Zoroastrianism was not monotheism; its X values were opposed by the equally powerful Lord of Lies. However Zoroastrianism became the religion of Persia and by the Axial Age the bad god had faded in status. Zoroastrianism was a milepost on the road to modernity. It probably contributed to Judaism (and hence to Christianity and Islam).

Its story is a case of 3-ist potency. 3-ism, preaching righteousness and self-denial, picks fights with 1-ism and eventually wins—see [Chapter 11](#) on power.

CONCLUSION

Religion, for present purposes, is belief in God or gods and in their propitiation by prayer or sacrifice. Polytheism goes on Y and monotheism on X and the 2s resolve the contradictions by declaring monotheism while at the same time having their omnipotent heavenly God assisted by specialised earthly saints standing in for polytheist gods. Numerous contrasting pairs of issues (Table 9.2) characterise polytheism and monotheism and these, too, fall on the Y and X axes.

3-ist morality—care and compassion for others—is the glue that holds families together throughout the animal kingdom. This applied to humans until about 500 BCE, the “Axial Age,” when, after thousands of years of agriculture, empires and wars, trade began to create affluence and leisure and literacy allowed stable 3-ist philosophies to develop. Thus 3-ism could transcend the family and apply over a wide area.

Monotheism—Judaism, then Christianity and Islam—was one vehicle for 3-ist philosophy. Over the subsequent two millennia they softened the overwhelmingly dominant 2-ism and curbed ruthless 1-ism. The X axis could rival the Y axis in the public sphere and, bound by pervasive 2-ism, human beings

could be friendly in groups far larger than the millions of years of natural selection had allowed.

In the West, monotheist religion eventually led to science, mass education, democracy, the taming of 2-ism, the prominence of the 1-ism versus 3-ism conflict, and to secularisation.□

[https://
www.pepperday.eu/wolt/files/Ch_9_Religion_axial_age.pdf](https://www.pepperday.eu/wolt/files/Ch_9_Religion_axial_age.pdf)
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