

Neolithic Cosmotheism

1. Welcome to this next video lecture on the co-evolution of religion and technology. In this lecture we will look at how from the hunter-gatherer religious alterity relation to prey and ancestors, Neolithic herders and farmers extended an alterity relationship to their surrounding environment as well, deifying the celestial, climatic and natural phenomena upon which they relied for a flourishing life. Such religion has traditionally been referred to as “polytheism” but more recently it has been argued that it is better framed as an immanent *cosmotheism*, in contrast to the acosmic, transcendent *monotheism* of later axial religion.
2. If what one holds sacred is what is most important, then upon which one is utterly dependent for a meaningful existence, it only makes sense that the locus of the sacred would shift from (1) prey for hunters, and bounty for gatherers to the (2) fertility of livestock and soil for herders and farmers. So too it only makes sense that sacred time would be marked no longer by the (3) seasonal migration of prey but by the natural cycle of the seasons.
3. Thus with the Neolithic we begin to a shift from (1) sacred wild animals to (2) personified deifications of natural phenomena. We also find (3) patron deities overseeing social norms such as truth telling and promise keeping. And finally we see a shift from (4) ritual re-enactments of the hunt to (5) ritual re-enactments of the seasonal cycle.
4. We have some access to the Neolithic pantheon and its sacred rituals and myths thanks to ancient transcriptions by early Bronze Age urban temple scribes of what were for them already ancient, oral myths about the gods and ancestral sacred rituals of praise and thanksgiving, worship and petition.
5. In particular the Iranian Avesta and the Northern Indian Rig Veda bear so many common affinities, extending even to the very names of the gods, that religious historians have sought to reconstruct the ancestral Neolithic religiosity of the Iranian plateau.
6. What follows is a general, greatly simplified presentation of what are very complex, controversial and sometimes inconsistent historical reconstructions of ancient Indo-Aryan deities, beliefs and practices by leading researchers, especially Mary Boyce and B.G. Sidharth.

7. The reason that the oral traditions upon which the Avestas and the Rig Vedas draw can be thought to reach back even thousands of years before the rise of writing is due to an Indo-Iranian technological innovation that enabled the accurate generational transmission of oral story and ritual: the intensive education of an elite caste of priestly families. Starting at the age of seven, young boys would be trained to memorize stories and rituals word for word by their clerical fathers whose position they would ultimately inherit. As the boys got older, they would join schools where students would jointly recite the sacred narratives and rituals ensuring standardization. Strict memorization would also be enforced by the belief that ritual prayers must be recited accurately word for word for the ritual to be efficacious.

The effectiveness of this technology for oral preservation is demonstrated in the history of Zoroastrianism: while linguistic evidence traces Zoroaster's reforms back to at least the first half of the second millennium, his teachings and rituals were not put to writing until the Sasanian Persian Empire in the fourth and fifth century CE. While the religion of a literate empire already for a thousand years, earlier Zoroastrian priests considered the transcription of sacred stories and prayers a profanation to be avoided.

8. Plato and some other ancient sources date Zoroaster back 6,000 years, which would place him at the advent of the Neolithic revolution in Iran. Perhaps it is not Zoroaster himself but the traditions he reformed that extend back that far. For Zoroaster did not so much change ancestral stories and rituals as give them a moral, spiritual reinterpretation, along the lines of later Israelite prophets.

In any case, whether the Avestas and the Vedas represent the cutting edge of cultural evolution or a backwater, the Zoroastrian, and Vedic texts presume a farmer and herder, Neolithic village context, prior to the rise of extensive agrarian city states. Consequently in this lecture, I operate on the assumption that the Avestas and the Rig Veda do indeed offer us a window onto the oral mythologies and rituals of Neolithic religion.

9. As I mentioned at the outset, what we find in the ancestral Indo-Aryan oral religious tradition is the familiar adoption of a mimetic and oral alterity relationship to heavenly bodies, climatic phenomena, the four elements, fire, air, water and earth as well as the

recently domesticated plants, and domesticated herd animals. In addition to wheat and barley goddesses, ancient towering trees were held sacred both for their longevity and their visibility as a marker for sacred places. Sacred too was the juice of the homa/ soma plant, an intoxicant central to many religious rituals. Most sacred among domesticated livestock were cattle. The bull was the embodiment of masculine strength and fertility while the cow, provider of milk and cream, butter and cheese embodied maternal nurturance.

10. The very word “deity” has its Indo-European roots in the Avestan *daēva* and Vedic *deva*, literally meaning “the shining ones,” perhaps a reference to the celestial and astral origins of the highest gods, but also likely an allusion to the sacred character of fire and light in stone age religion generally. The gods would also be called “the immortals,” in contrast to transient human life, being personifications and deifications of permanent features of their environment. Even animals and plants were treated as immortal, not at the level of their cyclical passing embodiments, but at the iconic, spiritual level of the species. Particular animals were sacrificed as ritual gifts and incarnations of their respective deities.
11. As at Çatal Höyük, too in the Avestas, lambs and kid goats were regularly sacrificed to the gods, but the most important sacred ritual was the sacrifice of bulls. In the Rig Veda pride of place shifts to the even more recently domesticated horse, that ally that enabled them to raid women and especially cattle from adjacent tribes as well as to migrate beyond the Iranian plateau to the lush five rivers at the headwaters of the Indus Valley in Northern India.
12. Sacred sacrifices involved the ritual slaughter and burning of these domesticated animals on fire altars. Fat and some internal organs, entirely consumed by the flames, as well as their smoke and aroma were gifts to the gods, while the barbequed meat provided food for the sacred festal meals that followed.
13. The central role of fire in these sacrifices made it a heirophany, or manifestation of the sacred in its own right. (1) With the building of homes and the creation of villages in Neolithic culture we have already seen how periodic public sacrifice was replicated on a daily basis at the domestic hearth—the locus of light, and warmth, cooking and eating. The hearth will remain the focus of familial day to day sacrificial offerings to the

ancestors and the gods throughout not only the Neolithic but also into scribal and classical cultures. Vestiges remain to this day in the appeal of fireplaces and the role of the kitchen as a central locus of familial life in the home. (1) Indeed the term “focus” comes from the Latin word for hearth.

14. The fire of the public sacrifice and the domestic hearth was personified and deified as Agni. The celestial fire of the sun by Mithras, Mitra in the Rig Vedas. Mithras/Mitra also became the patron of covenants, the foundation of cooperation beyond family members and so, also patrons of the sacred order of village life.
15. Finally, in the Avestas, the ultimate cosmic fire, of which the sun was merely a sensible manifestation, was the transcendent Lord of Light, Ahura Mazda. Ahura Mazda, literally “Lord Wisdom,” was revered as the highest divinity. For he was both creator and sustainer of all things, both heaven and earth, gods and human life. Zoroaster’s reform will involve the centralization of religious life in the worship of Ahura Mazda, all other gods being subordinated into ministering angelic spirits of order and goodness or adversarial demons of chaos and evil.
16. Water was scarce and so precious on the Iranian plateau. It was abundant, but no less essential to life in Northern India. In both the Avestas and the Vedas we find it too personified and deified in its myriad manifestations, especially in the Vedic high god, Varuna.
17. Indeed in lush Northern India, land of the monsoon, Varuna will displace Ahura Mazda as the creator of all things.
18. In the Vedas, the storm god Indra, from which India gets its very name, becomes a warrior god, the heroic leader of cattle raiders. Zoroaster, on the other hand, as a priest of herders and farmers, condemns Indra as chief demon. The Avestas will appeal to Mithras, the enforcer of social order as their own warrior champion to protect them from Indra’s destructive hosts.
19. I had argued in earlier videos that levels of human-on-human violence both within and between groups was likely minimal in migratory hunter-gatherer cultures where there was nothing *to* steal that would not quickly rot or encumber movement. One might think women would be a source of plunder, but hunter gatherers live a subsistence lifestyle. More children would be more mouths to feed and would encumber movement.

20. With the transition to herding and farming and the adoption of a sedentary village life, there *is* now something to steal, at least at the level of the village—herds and grain reserves, particularly cattle, the most valuable of all, since it was a source not only for milk and meat, but also for biopower in farming and hauling. Indeed cattle will become the measure of wealth even beyond the Neolithic period. Thus, while not yet private property, the wealth of a village could be raided and plundered by warrior bands from neighboring villages. At Çatal Höyük, we noted that the outer ring of homes could have doubled as a defensive perimeter, and free-standing walls do eventually begin to appear around Neolithic villages, most famously the walls at Jericho.
21. The introduction of horses from the Northern steppes in the late second and third millennium, the traditional date for the Aryan migrations, may have catalyzed such raiding and perhaps the further migration of the Indian branch of the Indo-Aryan population into Northern India, where, as noted, the horse takes pride of place over the bull.
22. Indra is often depicted riding a bull, a horse, and later still an elephant, the largest land animal ever domesticated or even encountered by human beings.
23. Indra is also often depicted in the Vedas as drunk on soma, that juice extracted from the sacred plant in both Avestan and Vedic religion. Historians of culture and religion are not sure just what plant soma, *hoama* in Avestan, refers to. It was said to grow high in the mountains. It was a common element in sacred rituals, a portion or “libation” poured into the ritual fire, the rest drunken by priests and participants. It was prepared from the stems of the plant pulped by mortar and pestle or grinding stones, and then left to ferment, as we saw earlier at Gobekli Tepe with beer. In addition to being intoxicating, soma also appears to have had hallucinogenic properties. Also pouring some onto the fire would create a flash of flame, while drinking it would not only make one feel as strong and confident as Indra but also transport one from everyday awareness to “higher” states of consciousness, in communion with the shining ones.
24. Now the evolution of speech not only enhanced the personification of the sacred through ritual address, but also gave the gods individual personalities through storytelling. The story of Ahura Mazda creating the cosmos in particular provides illuminating access not only into the character of the creator but also into the Indo-Aryan Neolithic

understanding of their world. While the version of the myth in the Avestas is Zoroaster's moral revision of the myth, historians of religion have been able to reconstruct what may have been the original Indo-Aryan account. Here I draw upon the work of Mary Boyce.

25. The primal creation myth of the Indo-Aryans, adopted as its model the new sedentary technology of home building. (1) Ahura Mazda builds a home for humans in 7 steps: (2) in the first three stages he builds the structure. (3) In the next three he furnishes it. And finally (4) in the seventh stage suffuses it with his own fiery warmth and light. Ahura Mazda then provisions the home he has built through (6) performing the first sacrificial ritual, killing its original three archetypal inhabitants, the soma plant, the bull and the first human. This initiates the cycle of life and death, enabling the multiplication of new life beyond the three immortals to countless generations of living beings of all kinds. (7) Thus while introducing death into creation, this primal, cosmic sacrifice can be seen to be an act of provisioning our new home. For food can only arise through the death of previous life. Thus to the Indo-Aryans, death is necessary for further life, and all life, in being mortal, is food for other life.
26. Tellingly this organization is replicated in Genesis, (1) but with fire or light being moved to the first act and (2) death introduced not through a cosmic sacrifice but through a cosmic punishment for Adam's original sin. Thus for the Israelites, death was demonic, not part of God's original plan, but the cost of disobedience. For the Indo-Aryans on the other hand, it is the first divine act after creation, a blessing that enables humanity, as well as plant and animal life to multiply and fill the earth. (3) In Zoroaster's ethical reform, he will revise this myth of creation into a violent, cosmic battle between good and evil, light and darkness and (4) re-interpret death as the demonic consequence of the forces of evil.
27. But let me return to the original myth and flesh out the acts of creation: In the first act, Ahura Mazda, Lord of Wisdom and Order, like a potter, fashions and fires, (1) a rock hard crystalline shell, visible in the clear arid sky of the Iranian plateau. In terms of the technology of the age, one can imagine it as two mortars, one atop the other, rim on rim. Indeed, the Avestan word for sky, *asmān*, originally literally meant stone. Pythagoras would later speak of hearing in the still silence of his meditation, the harmony of the

rotating celestial spheres. Rock crystals continue to evoke mystical sublime connotations to this day.

- (2) The second act of creation was that of filling the lower mortar with water. (3) In his third act, Ahura Mazda overlay a circle of muddy silt at the center of the primordial sea, that now encircled it. (4) A single mountain peak arose from the center of this central circle of earth, like a growing tree. In fact in the Vedas it actually is a central towering tree. Both candidates for the primal axis mundi, mountain and tree, will recur in later mythologies across Europe and the Middle East. In the bible, it is the tree of life that grows at the center of Paradise whose fruit confers immortality. Once Adam and Eve sin, God condemns them to eventual death by banishing them from Eden and so barring them from access to the tree of life, “lest they eat of it and become gods” themselves.
- Having thus built our home, in the fourth act of creation Ahura Mazda begins to furnish it, (5) with the creation of a plant. This first, primordial plant is identified as the soma plant, whose sap had hallucinogenic properties and was used in ritual sacrifices.
- The (6) fifth act of creation was the fashioning of an animal, a primal bull and the (7) sixth, that of the first human being, literally “the mortal one”. Again in contrast to the Hebrew Bible, in which the first human, Adam, literally means “the earthen one,” defined by the primordial clay into which God breaths life, in the Avestas our forefather is defined by his mortality.
- Having thus built and furnished the cosmos, in the final, seventh act of creation Ahura Mazda (8) lights it up, both visually and elementally but suffusing it with his own divine life, fire, evident not only in the vitality of plants, animals and humans, but also visible in lightning arcing across the sky in storms and congealing in the celestial fires of sun, moon and stars....
- In the beginning all creation was perfectly ordered but that also meant perfectly still and static. The sun stood still, high in the stone sky, as at noon; the waters were flat and calm; the original plant, bull and man created fully grown, lived in the center of an otherwise empty world.

28. Ahura Mazda then provisioned our cosmic home by performing the first sacrifice, a threefold sacrifice, (1) of the original soma plant, ground into pulp and poured over the land and into the waters, (2) the first-born bull, slaughtered and burned on the cosmic fire altar that is the earth, (3) and the ancestral man, in an archaic act of human sacrifice. From their pulped, carved and burned bodies, the three original living beings become food for new life that explodes in all of its diversity.
29. In the eternal reenactment of this primal sacrifice, the cosmos becomes a revolving wheel of becoming. Life is born, flourishes and dies to feed new life. Later Vedic ritual will revere and address the creative movement of becoming in the deity Vishnu. It will revere and address the corresponding dissolution into multiplicity and death in the deity, Shiva.
30. In this way the cosmos modeled on the Neolithic home is provisioned along the model of another literally revolutionary Neolithic technology- (1) -the wheel. Cosmic movement is cyclical, revolving around a transcendent, sacred axle, the axis mundi. Along this spinning wheel of nature all life feeds off death and becomes food in its own turn for subsequent life. Even among the primal elements, (2) fire and water similarly cycle continuously from one into its opposite. (3) Fire recedes as it is quenched in water and (4) rekindles in lightning from Indra's storm clouds. Lightning strikes in turn burn up the lush forest returning its water back into the clouds of billowing smoke. Fire and water thus mirror the cycle of life and death.
31. The seasons are also cyclic. Monitoring the seasons becomes central with the rise of farming. Fertility rituals and sacred stories associated with them, evolve that annually mirror and re-enact the sacred cycle of nature.
32. Take for example, the ancient Sumerian myth of Dumuzi and Inanna, an ancient fertility myth and cult that reaches back to the earliest transition from village to urban life. Thorkild Jacobsen draws together numerous versions of the myth in terms of the cycle of the seasons in Neolithic village life. (1) "Dumuzi the Shepherd," was the son of the ewe goddess Duttur, while to cowherds Dumuzi was the son of Ninsûna, "the Lady of the wild cows." (2) Inanna in turn is both Queen of Heaven and Goddess of Fertility. We have lyrical songs celebrating their (3) courtship and marriage. It's a time of feasting, drinking and dancing.

33. We have many versions for what happens next. In some Inanna engages in loud lamentation when raiders seize Duzumi and take him to the Underworld. In another version, it is Inanna (1) who originally travels to the Underworld out of sheer curiosity, where she is imprisoned. (2) The Underworld is always depicted in ways that evoke a Neolithic village's storehouse of provisions at winter's end, barren with strands of dried out, smoked meat hanging from wooden poles. Inanna meets with her sister, Erishkigal, Queen of the Underworld, who kills her and hangs her corpse up on one of the storehouse poles.
34. Inanna is later revived and she pleads to return to the land of the living. But to do so she must recruit a replacement. She chooses her husband Duzumi who in this version, far from mourning his wife's absence, has been living it up. (1) In a jealous rage, Inanna lures Duzumi down to the underworld. She is thereby released, to great jubilation. As the goddess of fertility, all nature returns to new life.
35. This last version of the myth has resonance with the more familiar Anatolian and Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone also likely dating back into Neolithic life and culture. Demeter is the fertility goddess of the grain. Her daughter Persephone is (1) kidnapped by Hades, God of the Underworld, and likewise imprisoned. Demeter wanders aimlessly in grief for her daughter, finally entering the underworld herself. Deprived of her fertile presence, nature withers and turns barren. When Demeter frees her daughter from Hades, the pair return jubilant, nature blooms again, but having naively eaten a piece of fruit in the Underworld, the pomegranate, Persephone must return to the underworld for six months of every year.
36. Finally, James Frazer, in his voluminous *Golden Bough*, found similar "vegetation" death and resurrection myths and cults throughout oral tribal religions around the world and in similarly oral, European rural folklore. (1) Another British folklorist, Jessie Weston, drew on Frazer's work to argue that the Arthurian romances around the Holy Grail also had their roots in rural vegetation rites and the mimetic re-enactment of the cycle of the seasons. (2) The Fisher King, old and wounded, embodies winter death and scarcity. His kingdom is a wasteland, much like the Underworld discovered by Inanna and the natural world when Demeter descends into Hades. On the other hand, Percival, a Knight of the Round Table, is young and vibrant, but also naïve and innocent. In his search for the

Holy Grail he comes upon a mysterious castle with the old, weak and wounded Fisher King and his retinue inside. The King hosts a dinner where a procession of young maidens carry the holy grail or chalice containing the Blood of Christ as well as the lance that pierced Christ's side at the crucifixion, dripping with his sacred blood. Upon asking whom the Grail serves, and for whom the lance bleeds, the King is miraculously healed and his kingdom mystically restored to Spring vigor. The old King in gratitude for Perceval having healed both his Kingdom and his own wounded body, rewards the vigorous and virtuous young knight with the throne. Weston argued that this is but another mythic re-enactment of the cycle of the seasons, so central to rural herders and farmers.

37. *The Celts were at the furthest western reach of the Aryan migration. As with the Vedic people who were the furthest eastern reach of the Aryan migration, they too lived at the cusp between the late Neolithic and early bronze age cultures when they were conquered by the Romans in all but what is now Ireland and Scotland. (1-8)The Celtic cycle of festivals continues on often (9) after having been partially baptized into Christianity. So too (10) American holidays often align with the cycle of the seasons. Under whatever name, these festivals celebrate similar events in the agrarian year: spring planting, summer abundance, fall harvest, winter death resurrected to new life as the sun returns and days begin to lengthen once more.*

38. Later when we study the axial revolution, we will see how this imitation of the seasonal cycle of nature will become a model for the death and resurrection to eternal life of the individual. In the Hellenistic period, as literacy begins to expand beyond temple and court to merchant and warrior classes, mystery cults would evolve from these ancient vegetation rituals, where the focus would shift from nature to the individual. Such literate individuals were less concerned with the death of nature in Winter and the return of life in the Spring but vitally concerned over their own eventual death and hope for resurrection in a spiritual eternity.

39. But this is to get ahead of ourselves. In the next video we shall track the origins of literacy itself. We shall see how this new medium of communication revolutionizes Neolithic village life by enabling the large scale organization of people and agriculture across vast expanses. The result will be the rise of cities, kingdoms and ultimately

empires. Literate religion will look back nostalgically on the rural Neolithic lifestyle as a bucolic paradise, the Garden of Eden, from which humanity has since been banished. Neolithic tribal life was largely governed by face to face communal cooperation, food and goods largely held in common. Writing, as well as other technological innovations, especially the smelting of copper and tin and their fusion into bronze, would lead to exponentially greater wealth and power, but this will be unequally distributed, and enforced by endemic violence both within and between the new centers of power. And, of course, we shall also be tracking the new religious needs and sensibilities of a humanity that is no longer only domesticated but now “civilized.”