

Patriarchal Aryan Cosmotheism

1. Welcome to this next video lecture on the co-evolution of religion and technology. In this lecture we shall explore the vast Aryan or Indo-European migrations from the Pontic steppes above the Black Sea across the Neolithic world from Old Europe in the West through Iran and into Northern India in the East. A pair of new technologies catalyzed their sweep across the Eurasian continent, one local, horse domestication, and one likely imported from Mesopotamia: the wheel. The three are combined in a powerful weapon of war, the jet fighter of its day, the chariot. The Aryans invaders came with a new religion as well, patriarchal rather than maternal. Dynamic light, fire and wind symbolism will predominate over dark womblike caverns, snakes and fish, amphibians and waterfowl. The sacred too shall shift from fertility and domesticity to warrior power and conquest. Now older Neolithic spirituality will not disappear, but it will be subordinated to new sky gods embodiments of warrior prowess.
2. The steppes are grasslands, poor for farming but perfect for herding, stretching for thousands of miles across central Asia and horses are the perfect work companion for corralling cattle and pulling wagons. Horses will also contribute to the pastoral return to a more nomadic way of life, for unlike sheep, goats and even cattle, horses graze grasses down to their roots, eventually exhausting any pastureland they inhabit. Indeed “wide-pastures” becomes a divine attribute.
3. Water is even more valuable than ever, being scarcer yet, but the featureless treeless plains drew Aryan attention to the unobstructed sun and the boundless sky. Rain and storm displace streams and lakes as iconic personifications of the sacred. In short, the maternal and domestic Great Goddess makes way for the paternal almighty Sky God and his band of warriors.
4. Evidence for reconstructing Aryan religion is far more plentiful than for Neolithic religion as well, for the literate, scribal mythologies of Europe, Iran and Northern India are largely transcriptions of ancestral oral myths and sacred rituals reaching back to the original Aryan invaders. So too philologists have used comparative linguistics to reconstruct Proto-Indo-European, the language of the original Aryans and from the names and verbs of PIE seek to reconstruct the Aryans pastoral culture and solar piety.

5. In particular the oldest religious texts we have, 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 used them to reconstruct the ancestral Aryan 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, a thousand years or more before ever transcribed is due to an Indo-Iranian technological innovation that enabled the accurate generational transmission of oral story and ritual: their intensive memorization by 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 scribal 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.
8. 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.
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 to recently domesticated plants, and herd animals. Sacred as well was the juice of the homa/soma plant, an intoxicant central to many religious rituals. Cattle were particularly sacred. The bull was the embodiment of masculine virility while the cow, provider of milk and cream, butter and cheese embodied maternal nurturance. The horse sacrifice

would eventually supplant bull sacrifices as the most extravagant and elaborate sacred ritual, overseen by the ruler of what had evolved into a social hierarchy, literally the “sacred order” of society.

10. The very word “deity” has its Indo-European roots in the Avestan *daēva* and Vedic *deva*. The words literally mean “the shining ones,” perhaps a reference to the celestial and astral origins of the highest gods. The gods would also be called “the immortals,” in contrast to transient human life, as 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 their 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 in more domestic settings. 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 barbecued meat provided food for the sacred festal meals or home dinners that followed.
12. 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 Aryan and even later scribal and classical cultures. Vestiges remain to this day in the appeal of fireplaces as foci of attention 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.
13. 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 was also the patron and enforcer of covenants, the foundation of cooperation beyond family members and so, also patrons of the sacred order of social life.

14. Finally, in the Avestas, the ultimate cosmic fire, of which the sun itself was merely a sensible manifestation, was the transcendent Lord of Light, Ahura Mazda. Ahura Mazda, literally “Lord Wisdom,” was the creator and the sustainer of all things, both in heaven and on earth, gods and human life. Zoroaster in his reform of the Aryan religion of the Iranian plains
15. 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, who came to replace Ahura Mazda in the Vedas as supreme creator and Lord.
16. The Aryan storm god Indra, from which India gets its very name, becomes a supreme warrior god in the Vedas. He begins as the patron and leader of cattle raiding, a new form of violence that emerges with domestication. Horse riding would exponentially enhance the efficacy and frequency of such raiding. Indra is often depicted riding a bull, or a horse, or even an elephant, the largest land animal ever domesticated or even encountered by human beings.
17. Zoroaster’s preaching addresses the curse of cattle raiding on farmers and villagers. He condemns Indra as a 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.
18. 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.
19. With the Neolithic 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, was a source not only for milk and meat, but also for biopower in farming and hauling. Thus, while not yet private property, village livestock, food stores and even women, could be raided and plundered by warrior bands from neighboring villages.

20. Indra is often depicted in the Vedas as drunk on soma. Historians are not sure just what plant soma, or *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 Göbekli Tepe with beer. In addition to being intoxicating, soma also appears to have had hallucinogenic properties. 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.
21. 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 Aryan 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.
22. 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. The later Upanishads will proclaim, all is food.
23. Tellingly this organization is replicated in Genesis, (1) but with fire or light being moved from the last to the first act of creation 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.

24. But let me return to the original myth and flesh out the acts of creation: Creation begins not with a cosmic egg, symbol of fertility, but with Ahura Mazda, Lord of Wisdom and Order, like a potter, fashioning and firing, (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, "asmän", originally 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 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 will become 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 barring them from access to the tree of life "lest they eat of it and become gods" themselves. Mortality however is essential to human nature in the Veda, where we too are food for others in the ever recurrent cycle of life.
- 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 discussed earlier whose sap was drunk in religious rituals and thrown on the fire in sacred 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”.
- Having thus built and furnished the cosmos, in the final, seventh act of creation Ahura Mazda (8) lights it up, both visually and elementally by 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.

25. Ahura Mazda then provisioned our cosmic home by performing the first sacrifice. It was 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.

26. 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.

27. In this way the cosmos modeled on the home is provisioned along the model of another literally revolutionary 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.

28. 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.
29. 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.
30. Zoroaster will offer a moral retelling of this Aryan creation myth. Rather than Ahura Mazda sacrificing the first plant, animal and human to begin the cycle of life, Zoroaster taught that the supreme demon, Angra Mainu and his minions raided creation, cutting the original soma plant, bull and human to pieces. Thus it is not the Lord of light but the prince of darkness and chaos who afflicts creation with death, now the bane of life, rather than its other side. Ahura Mazda responds to this violence by summoning all the immortals no longer gods, but still powerful spirits of light and life, who volunteer to do battle against the forces of evil. In the battle some spirits of light, the freveshi are surrounded and trapped in the material world. Every human being has his celestial twin companion spirit, his higher, ideal self, to help him resist the demons and draw him back to the celestial realm. At death, each must cross the Cervat bridge spanning the abyss between heaven and earth. On this bridge he encounters his celestial twin who has accompanied him throughout his life and asks him "who are you?" The just recognize themselves in their ideal companion and responds "I am you." Evildoers on the other hand see in their celestial twin only a terrifying all devouring enemy, who tosses them down into the dark abyss. Thus the good are rewarded with everlasting life in heaven, while the evil are destroyed forever. So too at the end of the world, the forces of light decisively vanquish the forces of darkness, fusing them into a single lump of molten metal which they then seal in rock. With evil banished creation is restored to its original paradisaical state and the good like the dead bones over which Ezekiel prophesies over are

bodily resurrected to eternal life. In preparation for this end of days, Zoroastrians will continue the Neolithic practiced of excarnation and storing of the bones of their ancestors, in faith and hope for the Eschaton.

31. With the Aryans, violence invaded the Neolithic social order of Old Europe, the Iranian highlands and tribal India. Cooperation and domesticity gives way to raiders and their victims. Social order becomes an ever steeper competitive hierarchy of winner and losers. With the rise of large-scale irrigated agriculture and the scribal literacy needed to track and trade the resultant surplus, property becomes private, and wealth and status become marks of divine favor. Cities, kingdoms and empires will be created and sustained by violence, especially war. Religious ritual will mimetically mirror such violence in sacrificial scapegoating. Scribal religion will look back nostalgically on Neolithic village life of family farms and communal herds as a bucolic paradise, the Garden of Eden, from which humanity has now been banished. For better or worse, indeed for better and worse humanity, its technology and its religion, has become “civilized.”