

Ancient Myth, Religion, and Philosophy

*"Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness...
when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual.
Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it...
this is the condition of children and barbarians,
in whom instinct has learned nothing from experience."*

George Santayana

Thinking about the future has a rich and deep history.¹ There is much to be learned from past ideas and images of the future. In fact, contemporary views of the future, in many significant ways, are inspired and derived from earlier ideas and theories. Understanding our present views of the future requires looking at how different ideas and approaches to it have developed through the ages. The past puts the present into perspective; the present has been built upon the past. In biological evolution, many of the features of earlier life forms are carried over into later forms. Evolution in biology is to a great degree cumulative. The same is true for the history of future consciousness and, for that matter, the entire history of the human mind – ideas, insights, and discoveries build upon themselves. To borrow a metaphor from Isaac Newton, the futurists of the present can see outward as well as they can because they “stand on the shoulders of giants.”

In this chapter, I examine the earliest recorded ideas, in printed word, on the future. These ideas build upon the prehistoric foundations described in the previous chapter and add new themes and concepts that have contributed to the ongoing evolution of future consciousness. Although prehistoric “mythograms” and other artistic representations may contain prophecies of the future, there is presently no accurate or reliable way to decipher the detailed meanings of these ancient images. According to J.T. Fraser, there is no clear evidence in prehistoric art that early humans thought in global or universal terms about either the past or the future.² Christian states that, as best as can be ascertained, prehistoric humans appeared to have thought in relatively concrete terms about local and specific concerns.³ Questions about the origin or destiny of the universe, or even of humankind, do not seem to have occurred to them. Still, it was the basic themes and concerns of prehistoric life – of reproduction and death, of hunting and the kill – that led to the development of future consciousness and the first recorded views of the future.

The earliest written ideas about the future dating back around five thousand years are mythological and contain both descriptions of the past and prophecies of the future, including explanations of the origin and purpose of humanity and the cosmos. Within these ancient myths past and future are causally and thematically connected – the future flows out of the past. These ancient mythic views of the origin, history, and future of humanity and the cosmos invariably contain references to deities, gods, and goddesses. The past

and future in ancient myth are personified. These deities are variously seen as supernatural - above or separate from nature - or as part of nature, actively involved in directing physical events and human history – they are both transcendent and immanent. Often these deities are responsible for the creation of the universe and humankind and often they significantly influence or determine the future and the ultimate purpose of the cosmos. The future is often seen as controlled by destiny, fate, and the will of the gods. Mythic views are usually expressed in narrative form, involving personalities and personal challenges, interpersonal conflicts, adventure, and drama. The life of the universe and the saga of humankind are conceptualized as stories.

Ancient myths with their gods and goddesses would provide one primary source of inspiration for the development of traditional religions around the world. Socially organized religions incorporated into their belief systems earlier mythic stories and prophecies, as well as rituals and moral systems of behavior that provided direction for how to live. Myth would also impact the development of ancient philosophical views regarding reality, time, morals, and the future.

In this chapter I cover the history of myth and religion from around 3000 BC (or BCE – Before the Common Era) to the rise and flourishing of Christianity and Islam around 1000 AD. I examine both Eastern and Western religion and myth, including Egyptian, Mesopotamian/Babylonian, Zoroastrian, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Greco-Roman, Judaic, Christian, and Islamic ideas on the past and future. As a prelude to the next chapter, where I describe the rise of rational-scientific approaches to the future in modern times, I also describe in this chapter the beginnings of Western philosophy in ancient Greece (600 to 300 BC). Although Greek philosophy, in so far as it approached reality from a rational and abstract point of view, was in many ways at odds with religious-mythic thinking, Greek philosophy did influence the development of Christianity in the first Millennium and any complete explanation of the Christian vision of the future needs to discuss the influence of Greek thinking.

The Power of Mythic Narrative

*“...myths are archetypal patterns in human consciousness and
where there is consciousness there will be myth. ...
In the moments when eternity breaks into time, there we will find myth.”*

Rollo May

Myths provided the first systematic explanations of history and the first prophecies of the future. For most of recorded history, the primary mode of understanding both the past and the future has been the myth – stories and sagas describing the challenges, meaning, and purpose of life.

The first meaning listed for the term “myth” in *The Oxford American College Dictionary* is “a traditional story.” The term “myth” can also mean a superstitious or fanciful tale without factual support. Although early myths do

indeed contain references to spirits, fantastical creatures, and supernatural beings, and describe cosmic or earthly events that are scientifically implausible, ancient myths were invariably grounded in important facts about nature and the meaning and psychology of human life.

The fact that our earliest written explanations of the past and future were mythic in form can be placed in an evolutionary context. According to Merlin Donald, in his *Origins of the Modern Mind*, the third fundamental stage in the cognitive evolution of hominids, after the “episodic” and the “mimetic,” was the “mythic,” which was associated with the emergence of modern *Homo sapiens*. (For Donald, *Homo erectus* behaved and thought in a “mimetic” fashion, an advance over *Australopithecus*, who functioned at an “episodic” level.) Probably coincident with the emergence of cave art and mythograms, humans began to develop organized explanations of nature and human reality in the form of narrative myths. When the earliest modern *Homo sapiens* (circa 100,000 to 50,000 years ago) thought or spoke about their understanding of nature it was in the form of myths or stories. This new integrative cognitive capacity was intimately connected with the emergence of language – language provided the tool to produce and communicate integrative explanations. According to Donald, in fact, the initial primary function of complex spoken language was narration and myth creation.⁴ Hence, when humanity began to record in the written word (around 3000 BCE) the explanations of nature handed down from previous generations, the form these explanations took represented a certain way of thinking characteristic of the early history of our species – a narrative mythic way of thinking. Myth and narration represent a way of understanding the world that was an early stage in our cognitive evolution.

According to Leonard Shlain in his book *The Alphabet and the Goddess*, the two central myths in prehistoric times seem to be the stories of the “**Goddess**” and the “**Hunter**.” These myths provided two different interpretations of the saga and meaning of human existence.⁵ The goddess myth highlighted the eternal cycle of life and death, whereas the hunter myth emphasized the necessity of killing in order to survive. The goddess myth was connected with feminine qualities such as nurturance, the giving of life, and the importance of community with both nature and fellow humans. The hunter myth was connected with masculine qualities such as dominance over nature, conquest, and physical violence.

We should recall from the previous chapter that the two primary deistic figures found in early urban settlements in the Middle East around 10,000 years ago were the goddess and the bull. (Shlain’s description of the hunter myth closely corresponds with those qualities associated with the bull.) The Goddess figure seems to occupy a central or supreme position in these early representations and Shlain, in fact, does acknowledge that the goddess was the central deity early in our history.

But as a general trend, Shlain sees a movement away from worship of the goddess toward an elevation of the male with his hunter traits and values in the period roughly from 2000 to 600 BCE. As one example, Shlain states that the earliest Sumerian and Babylonian myths in the Middle East dating back to the

beginnings of recorded history (circa 3000 BCE) identified the goddess – the giver of life – as the central deity, but later Babylonian mythology displaced the goddess as the supreme deity and “life myth” with a supreme male deity *Marduk* and a central “death myth”.⁶ Marduk achieved dominance and control of the world, as the story goes, through the slaying of the more ancient and primordial goddess *Tiamat*. In Shlain’s mind, this mythical tale symbolizes the social and religious transformation that occurred in ancient Babylonia as it moved from a goddess centered culture to a culture dominated by men and masculine deities.

Taking the opposing point of view and based on his review of Upper Paleolithic art and artifacts, Bloom contends that more homage was given to the hunter than to the goddess even in prehistoric times. In particular, the bull as a male mythic symbol of fertility was revered as a great source of power and the giver of life.⁷ But as Bloom also acknowledges, prior to 2000 BCE, Mediterranean trading cultures practiced Mother Goddess centered religions. This is clearly the case in the highly advanced Minoan civilization of ancient Crete.⁸ Overall the bulk of scholarship supports the view that the goddess was the central deity in prehistoric religion and myth throughout much of the world.

According to one popular theory, early goddess centered cultures in the Middle East and the Mediterranean were overrun and replaced by waves of Indo-European invaders that came out of the north starting around 2000 BCE. These nomadic horsemen had a patriarchal social order and they valued war and conquest more than trade. A similar shift, one that had an equally negative impact on goddess worship, took place in India around the same time when it was also overrun by Indo-European people coming from the west. The feminist writer Riane Eisler describes in great detail and passion, and with much psychological insight, the demise of earlier goddess centered cultures during this period of nomadic invasions in two of her books *The Chalice and the Blade* and *Sacred Pleasure*. According to Eisler, goddess centered cultures valued social partnership, cooperation, balance and equality of the sexes, whereas the male god centered cultures that subsequently emerged valued social hierarchies, sexual and philosophical dualism, and the superiority and dominance of males over females.⁹

An opposing theory is that the shift from goddess centered to male centered myth and religion was due to the growth of large cities and urban civilization. As cities grew, and along with them standing armies to protect these cities, males achieved greater control and leadership in human life. Military leaders – all men – became increasingly powerful. Of particular note, early cities often had large central areas that were occupied by religious temples and structures, and the individuals who controlled these urban religious centers were male priests. It was these male priests who often “conferred godlike status” on the male political rulers of early cities. Political, religious, and military power in such cities resided in the males and quite naturally, the cosmologies and theologies came to reflect this male dominance in urban social affairs. It wasn’t the nomads who destroyed the goddess, but city life and the consequent growing social power of men within cities.¹⁰

Undoubtedly both hunter and goddess mythologies had a great influence on ancient human cultures. In fact, we should recall from the previous chapter that the respective roles of the hunter and mother were intertwined in our ancestral biology, psychology, and behavior. The hunter served the mother by providing food and protection and the mother provided the hunter with sex and offspring. Love, bonding, and commitment united the male and female – the hunter/father and mother/nurturer. It also seems to be the case that the respective power and influence of the feminine and the masculine in both myth and human society has oscillated throughout recorded history, and has varied among different regions of the world. Whatever the specific details of the relative power of male and female deities across time and ancient cultures, and I more fully examine this topic in later sections of this chapter, it seems clear that our earliest myths were connected with fundamental themes of human survival and reproduction (which are future oriented themes) and highlighted the central contributions and values associated with each of the two sexes. To restate and expand upon the conclusions of the previous chapter, sex and the contribution of the two sexes, religion, and the future were intimately tied together in the minds and the myths of prehistoric humans.

Aside from the primary female and male deities, Watson lists the following additional “core elements” of pre-historic myth and religion: Sky gods associated with the sun and the moon, sacred stones (such as the megaliths of Stonehenge), and the beliefs in the power of sacrifice, in an afterlife, and in a soul which survives death.¹¹ It should be noted that all of these other core elements are also connected in one way or another with understanding, predicting, or controlling the future.

Although myths are often seen, especially from a scientific viewpoint, as forms of superstition without any rational or factual support, they are an expression of humanity’s desire to understand the world in a coherent and meaningful way. As Donald argues, mythic thinking is an evolutionary step in humanity’s attempt to make sense out of reality. Even the highly regarded scientist Murray Gell-Mann acknowledges the positive values associated with myths. According to Gell-Mann, myths give order to reality, provide inspiration to individuals and cultures, and give a society a distinctive identity.¹² The existential psychologist, Rollo May, concurs listing four primary functions to myth: Myths provide a sense of personal identity, a sense of community, support moral values, and deal with the mysteries of creation.¹³ Fraser and others would add that religious myths provide a sense of stability within the flux of time and address the anxiety provoking fact of human death.¹⁴ All of these functions of myths are of essential importance to the psychological and social well-being of humans. In that myths gave ancient humanity purpose they gave humanity its first verbally articulated sense of the future.

What is especially important about myth is that it embodies a distinctive mode of experience and way of thinking about life, history, and the future. Fundamentally, a myth is a story – a narrative – involving a sequence of connected events often containing a dramatic plot with both a resolution and some intended moral or meaning. Both history and the future can be described in

narrative form. The narrative is a dynamical and temporal description of reality – change occurs - something happens. But also, as many writers emphasize, the narrative provides a mode of understanding that gives life coherence and value.¹⁵ The events of life are causally connected together within a story and some overall meaning or point to the story unifies all the events within it. Conceptualizing life as a story is a form of temporal consciousness and gives meaning and order to change and the procession of time.

Further, myths affect people at an emotional and personal level. People identify with mythic stories because the stories contain human or human-like characters that encounter various life challenges and experiences. Mythic characters exhibit the whole plethora of psychological traits and moral qualities, both good and bad. The Greek gods and goddesses, for example, were each connected with distinctive personality types and traits. In most religions, the gods and goddesses, as personifications of characteristic attributes –are variously wise, playful, adventurous, and terrifying or frightening. Again, with the Greeks, each deity embodied a particular skill or ability – an area of excellence - be it warrior like, as in the case of *Ares*, or erotic, as in the case of *Aphrodite*. People found meaning, inspiration, and wisdom in these mythic characters. For Joseph Campbell, mythic characters and their exploits provide a form of “music” for experiencing life.¹⁶

Mythic characters, as “**archetypes**” or prototypes, often symbolize essential qualities of life or human psychology. The term “archetype” signifies a fundamental idea, theme, or motif usually represented through some image, persona, or symbol. Examples of mythic archetypes include the goddess, an archetype that represents love, procreation, and nurturance; the hunter who represents courage; and as in many early religions, the sun or sun god, who is the giver of light and life and often the ruler of time. Various gods and goddesses in ancient myths stood for justice, war, wisdom, fertility, renewal, and the forces and patterns of nature. All ancient cultures created and worshipped their own characteristic set of deities and mythic beings, whose exploits, adventures, and achievements were recounted in the myths of the culture and represented the central units of meaning or archetypes for the society. Depending on the important challenges and features of different environments and ways of life, different central archetypal deities were created. All ancient cultures though conceptualized the fundamentals of their distinctive reality in terms of some set of archetypes.

Modern scholars, including the psychologist Carl Jung, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, and the preeminent modern spokesperson for the “Power of Myth,” Joseph Campbell, have extensively studied myths and the archetypes embodied in myths.¹⁷ One general conclusion all these scholars have reached is that in spite of some differences there are common human themes that run through all mythologies and relatively common symbols and archetypes across different cultures. Carl Jung attributes these universal archetypes to common historical events and common thematic structures within the human mind.¹⁸ All cultures talk about love and strife; birth, life and death; men, women, and children; and morals and virtues.¹⁹ All cultures seem to have myths about the

past and the future. As I argue in this chapter, reflecting such common mythic archetypes, the different religions around the world show a great deal of overlap in terms of important themes and issues.

One essential question concerning the meaning and order of things that many myths attempted to address was the creation and origin of humankind and the cosmos. As Morowitz notes, speculation about the origins of the earth and the universe seems to be part of the human condition.²⁰ We look for answers to the big questions. According to Fraser the earliest creation stories occur in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE in Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, and India.²¹ These earliest creation myths were an important step forward in the evolution of temporal consciousness for such myths provided a way to conceptually organize the entire grand panorama of time – they provided a cosmic perspective on past, present, and future. The myths connected the deep past with the present and often identified key themes, such as the primordial struggle between order and chaos, which provided a way to understand the flow of events through time.

These earliest cosmic stories frequently personified the process of creation, seeing various deities as intimately involved in the process. An essential feature of narrative myths is that ancient people conceptualized reality as a personalized drama and saga, filled with archetypal characters defining the procession and meaning of time. Ancient humanity personified or anthropomorphized the forces and fundamental patterns of nature, and in particular, the reality of time. In ancient Egypt, for example, the journey through the sky of the sun god *Ra* is represented as a procession of different subordinate gods with different personal attributes and different meanings associated with each deity. In the Taoist *Yin-Yang*, which represented the basic rhythm of time, each polarity – *Yin* and *Yang* - is personified as female and male respectively, and associated with different qualities, such as darkness and the earth for the *Yin* female and light and the heavens for the male *Yang*. The ancient Greeks personified time as the god *Cronos*, who later became *Saturn* in Roman times, and “Father Time” in the Middle Ages. In Indian mythology, *Shiva* was seen as the god of creation and destruction – of becoming and passing away – of the giving of life and the inevitability of death. The ancient Zodiac, with its twelve signs or characters, represents the passage of each year, as well as successive ages, in terms of personified qualities, traits, and meanings.²²

In general, for ancient humankind, nature was filled with and animated by spirits (“**animate naturalism**”). Spirits and deities populated the earth and powered and directed natural events. As Karen Armstrong notes in *History of God*, in ancient times the “world was full of gods.”²³ Further, within many mythic narratives, humans and deities interacted and communicated. Such an encounter with a deity is referred to as an “epiphany.” For example, in the epochal stories of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Greek and Trojan characters felt the presence of their gods and goddesses, interacted with them, and spoke with them. The Judaic God communicated with Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Job, Jacob, and Moses, among others. In fact, ancient people believed that they frequently communicated and communed with gods and goddesses. The supernatural and archetypal personalities of ancient myths not only provided an explanation of

life's origin, meaning, and purpose, they also personally and intimately inspired and guided people (so they believed) through the struggles and adventures of life. Hence, future consciousness in pre-historic times often took the form of "internal dialogues" or voices guiding or directing individuals in their actions.²⁴

Ancient rites and rituals are connected with myths and mythic characters. Gods and goddesses presumably possessed various powers, such as fertility, wisdom, creativity, and even the capacity to resurrect the dead. As noted above, ancient deities pervaded, inspirited, and animated the processes of nature. Myths conveyed stories of the actions of such deities, and if one attempted to imitate these behaviors, one could hopefully share, so the ancients believed, in the natural and spiritual powers of the gods. Humans could participate in the reality of the gods and even become god-like.²⁵ Religious rituals are often efforts to emulate the archetypal behavior of deities as described in myths and partake in their god-like powers. Also, as noted earlier, one of the core elements of early religions was the ritual of sacrifice where the killing of animals, or even humans, presumably influenced the gods and increased the chances of good fortune in the future.²⁶

On a related note, myths also provided moral guidelines. Although not all deities or humans described in myths embodied admirable ethical ideals in their behavior, often they did, showing justice, compassion, loyalty, and other positive traits. Attempting to emulate the behavior and ideals of gods and goddesses gave ancient people moral standards and a sense of ethical direction. Myths provided role models for making ethical choices. There were, of course, mythic characters that represented negative, immoral, and evil aspects of life. They were archetypes of the "dark side." Figures, such as Satan in Christianity, still served a moral purpose, for they illustrated what to avoid, fear, or fight against in life.

The dark or evil side of reality, often projected onto the "other," is, in fact, a common belief in many cultures. This creation of a moral enemy is connected with a basic feature of human psychology and social organization: the "us versus them" dichotomy.²⁷ The beliefs and values of a culture, which include their myths, not only provide a core set of ideas that unite a culture, but these beliefs and values (what Bloom calls an "ideology") frequently create an oppositional adversary of other cultures. Those outside a group – the "other" – are often seen as a morally inferior enemy to which a double standard of values is commonly applied. Cooperation (and other associated virtues such as love and harmony) is encouraged and reinforced within a cultural group, whereas war, violence, and conquest are morally sanctioned toward other people and cultures outside of the group. (It is interesting that these two sets of standards closely align with the two fundamental forces of competition and cooperation discussed in the previous chapter.) Thus the ideology of a people not only gives them a sense of identity and distinguishes the culture but also sets it in opposition to other cultures and creates an "us versus them" mindset.²⁸

Myths contain drama, challenge, and frequently conflict. The "us versus them" dichotomy, as an essential element in these conflicts and challenges, is a feature in many myths. Judaic mythology, for example, describes an ongoing

conflict between the chosen people of *Yahweh* or *Jehovah* and all other people – in this case the “other” persecutes the followers of the one true God. Zoroastrian myth sets up an opposition between the forces of good and evil, and Islam creates a dichotomy between the followers of *Allah* and all others. In all these cases, the journey into the future is portrayed as a moral struggle between believers and non-believers the desired end of which is the defeat of non-believers through war and violent actions.

The stories that describe the lives, character traits, and beliefs of great religious figures of the past reflect many of the qualities of the myths described above. Understanding the meaning of life and finding inspiration and direction through the traditional stories of religious figures is a form of mythic thinking and consciousness. Buddha, Jesus, Moses, Abraham, and Mohammed, all probably real historical figures, led mythic lives. They all embody archetypes that address the meaning, purpose, and value of human life. They encountered challenges in their lives and successively overcame or transcended these difficulties through character virtues such as faith, compassion, love, courage, and commitment. All these figures presumably made contact with some deep or ultimate reality – something spiritual or divine – that provided enlightenment and a sense of direction. They all saw “the good” and attempted to live their lives in response to such ethical revelations – often in opposition to what they saw as evil or ungodly. Billions of people worldwide still read the stories of their lives and attempt to follow, through ritual and general behavior, the ideals and practices expressed by these religious figures. Mythic thinking about the future is still very much alive.

Ethical ideals expressed through myth clearly address the question of the future. Ideals are prescriptions for how to think, what to feel, and how to behave. The ideals in myths are usually conveyed concretely through the particular actions of the characters in the stories. Their behavior and choices provide ethical direction for the future. Although myths often describe events and characters of the distant past, they also point to the future and provide guidance for how to live.

Also of great relevance, myths frequently contain prophecies and plans of action for the future. Polak describes prophets as projectors of the future who draw upon the heritage of a particular culture.²⁹ The stories of the Old Testament are especially noteworthy in this regard. *Yahweh* spoke with many of the early Judaic prophets and religious leaders, telling them what was to come in the future and what they must do to realize the prophesized future. *Yahweh* made promises and gave directions to “His people” and early Jews attempted to have faith in such promises for the future and follow their god’s directions.³⁰

As we will see through a variety of examples in this chapter, mythic stories of creation and the deep past are often connected with prophecies of the future. As one example, events of the distant past and the prophesized future in the stories of the *Bible* are tied together giving the total history of time an overall pattern and direction. The drama begins with the fall of Adam and Eve. Humankind’s eventual redemption and salvation are foretold in the coming of the Messiah, and a final battle pitting the forces of good against evil is foreseen

bringing resolution to the conflict of good and evil. Temporal consciousness is integrated into a whole, connecting past, present, and future.

As can be seen, myths have great psychological power. Myths address all the main components of the human mind, including cognition, emotion, motivation, and the self. As narratives, myths organize time in a way that people can readily understand. These ancient stories provide meaning and a sense of purpose to the passage of time. Myths represent reality in a concrete, personalized, and dramatic way. Myths depict fundamental challenges and conflicts, giving life drama and, frequently, a fundamental enemy against which we must do battle. Following Campbell, myths provide a framework – a “music” and “song” – within which to experience “being alive.”³¹ Further, myths have great instructive value; myths contain ethical guidelines and values to live by. Myths both prescribe and explain. Mythic consciousness has been and still is a fundamental mode of future consciousness.

The Mythic-Religious Quest for God

*“Fear was the first mother of the gods.
Fear, above all, of death.”*

Lucretius

“In the beginning, human beings created a God who was the First Cause of all things and Ruler of heaven and earth... That, at least, is one theory...”

Karen Armstrong

Religion grows out of myth. In fact, one blurs into the other. Myth is narrative, whereas religion integrates myth with organized practices of worship and ethical behavior, and often general forms of social organization with religious leaders and figureheads. Religion includes both explanations of reality and prescriptions for behavior, institutionalized and codified. Karen Armstrong, in *A History of God*, emphasizes the practical dimension of religion; according to Armstrong, religion provides a way of life.³² Similarly, Michael Shermer, in *The Science of Good and Evil*, acknowledges the explanatory function of religion while highlighting its ethical and social dimensions. Religion evolved as a social system to articulate and enforce rules of ethical behavior.³³

As with myth, religion usually includes ideas and beliefs about deities – of gods and goddesses. Armstrong contends that humans have been worshipping gods since we were first recognizably human. Armstrong contends that gods find their origin in prehistoric times, a view supported by the archeological evidence reviewed in the last chapter. Yet, in contrast to the view, that religion emerged as a response to the fear of death and the transitory quality of life, Armstrong states that the worship of gods expresses the wonder and mystery humans feel in response to the world.³⁴ Both explanations, positive and negative, certainly are

true. The two views embody the two polarities of human motivation – to approach and to avoid. Life is something to fear and something to love and embrace, and so is God.

According to Armstrong, there are numerous and often contradictory meanings associated with the nature of God, and ideas about God keep changing and getting redefined with each new generation. Reciprocally, the meaning of atheism keeps changing as well, for what is being denied in atheism depends upon what is being asserted in theism.³⁵ Yet, Armstrong does acknowledge that God is frequently identified with transcendence and ultimate reality. In this sense, the quest for understanding God (or the gods and goddesses if one is a polytheist) is a quest to understand what is fundamental and absolute within the world. Although religion and myth are often seen as archaic and primitive modes of thinking, many of the ideas first articulated in the mythic and religious quest for knowledge of God still influence contemporary thinking on time, the nature of existence, ethics, and the meaning of life.

Babylonia and Egypt: Order, Chaos, Life, Death, and Sexual Creation

One of the cradles of human civilization was ancient Mesopotamia surrounding the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Some of the earliest indications of agriculture and large urban settlements can be found in this region. The Sumerians who lived in this area early on provide the first evidence of written language – cuneiform writing on stone tablets. The Sumerians also invented the wheel, the chariot, schools, libraries, clocks, and created the first recorded written history and proverbs.³⁶ They produced some of the earliest religious texts, and, as Polak argues, along with the ancient Egyptians were “intensely preoccupied” with the future. Many predictions and omens on the future emerged from the ancient cities of this region.³⁷

According to J.T. Fraser, since these early people in ancient Mesopotamia lived in a turbulent and unstable environment with violent weather conditions, they imagined the world beginning in conflict. Their creation myths described an interplay and struggle between darkness and chaos and light and order.³⁸ The biologist Elisabet Sahtouris describes this ancient cosmology of order and chaos more in terms of rhythmic balance – the two forces seen as alternating in dominance.³⁹ Armstrong states that the Babylonians, who lived in this region after the Sumerians, believed that the gods and creation emerged out of chaos. Chaos preceded the emergence and evolution of order – it preceded the gods. This, in fact, was a common belief in the ancient world. (In one early Sumerian story of creation, chaos took the form of the primordial sea connected with the goddess *Nammu*.⁴⁰) According to Babylonian myth, the earliest gods were relatively formless and primitive, but through a procreative process among themselves evolved into more advanced and defined beings. Echoing Fraser’s view, Armstrong argues that for the Babylonians creation and the emergence of human civilization was an ongoing struggle against the primordial and the forces

of chaos.⁴¹ Babylonian rituals, laws, and ethical principles were ways to maintain order and direction amidst the presumed destructive and dissipative forces of chaos. As another common theme within ancient myth and religion, people often described their deities in a perpetual battle with the forces of chaos and death, and such deities were routinely invoked through prayer and ritual to assist humans in their personal struggles with these forces.

In early Sumerian myth, Ishtar was the “universal goddess” – the “queen of fertility” and heaven; she was extremely popular and revered and was responsible for the return of life in the spring.⁴² But as was mentioned earlier, in later Babylonia there was a transformation from a goddess-centered religious culture to a male-centered one. According to Shlain, this transformation took place around 1800 BCE. It was at this time that Hammurabi, the famous king of Babylonia, codified and instituted a set of basic laws to govern all the people in his kingdom.⁴³ For Shlain, the rise of patriarchal society and religion is invariably connected with a top-down hierarchical system of social control and abstract rules of order, as clearly represented in the social and legal system created by Hammurabi.

Central to this new male-centered religion was the story of *Marduk*. *Marduk* was the central god of Hammarubi’s new capital city of Babylon. *Marduk*, the Sun God, who was one of the younger, more evolved gods, defeated and killed in a great struggle the female goddess, *Tiamat*, who was an older, more primordial deity representing chaos and the abyss. After destroying *Tiamat*, so the story goes, *Marduk* brought increasing order to the world and created humanity.⁴⁴ Based on historical records, it appears, in fact, that as Marduk rose to pre-eminence in Babylonia, he appropriated many of the powers previously associated with other earlier gods and goddesses. Thus, in this one mythic story (and its historical backdrop) we see the evolutionary struggle of order versus chaos, of light versus darkness, and male versus female all tied together – with the male usurping the powers of the female. The male god is the deity representing order and light, while the female goddess is associated with chaos and darkness. Evolution or progress involves conflict, violence, and the conquest of the female by the male.

This general theory of progress involving an ongoing struggle and the triumph of order over chaos has been a highly influential idea throughout history. It provides a general description of the direction of time, connecting events of the past, present, and future. The original formulation of the theory though was evidently sexist and, as I will note later, this sexist slant on the struggle of order and chaos would continue into later historical periods.

The ancient Babylonians also thought about time in cyclical terms. They are well known for developing the discipline of astrology which is based on the cyclic theory of the **Zodiac**. Through astrology, they attempted to foretell their future. They believed that events in the heavens affected events on the earth. The year was divided into twelve repeating astrological periods or signs of the Zodiac which were connected with twelve major constellations in the sky. The sign of the Zodiac under which one was born presumably indicated one’s personality and pathway in life. The Babylonians also charted and recorded the

seasonal movements of the "planets" (wanderers of the sky) which, together with Zodiac signs, provided the basis for creating horoscopes that predicted the future.⁴⁵

As one final point regarding Mesopotamia and Babylonian ideas on the future, we come to the great literary epic *Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh was probably a real person and ruler of Uruk around 2900 BCE. The tale of Gilgamesh revolves around his quest for the secret of immortality – an obvious future related theme. Filled with great adventure, including an account of a great flood upon which the Biblical account of the Great Flood is probably based, Gilgamesh is ultimately disappointed in his quest; immortality is not to be gained for humans. Polak argues that in general Mesopotamia was rather pessimistic about the future; it is with the ancient Egyptians that he finds a more optimistic view including the belief that humans survive death in an afterlife.⁴⁶

Egypt was a second major cradle of civilization in the ancient world. As with Sumerian and Babylonian culture, Egyptian religion is populated with a great variety and assortment of gods and goddesses who often engage in conflicts and struggles with each other for dominance and control. As with the Babylonians, the gods and goddesses of Egypt were an integral part of human life. Ancient Egyptians routinely turned to their gods and goddesses for assistance and protection in all aspects of life. As Armstrong notes, in early pagan religions the separation between the world of humans and the divine was not totally distinct. Instead the pagan vision was holistic, where humans and deities were all part of the same interwoven and interconnected reality. As one important and illustrative example, according to myth the Egyptian pharaohs were direct descendents of the gods.

Throughout most of its history, ancient Egyptian religion was predominately polytheistic and its gods and goddesses were personifications (often in animal or partially animal form) of the diverse forces of nature. Yet among the pantheon of Egyptian gods and goddesses, the sun god (who had several different names) generally occupied a position of supremacy.⁴⁷ In fact, for a short period of time this supreme deity was seen by the famous Egyptian pharaoh Ikhnoton (ca. 1392 – 1362 BC) as the only real and true God, foreshadowing the subsequent rise of monotheism in Judaism.⁴⁸

Egyptian accounts of creation (and, as with the Mesopotamians, there were various versions) are similar to Babylonian views in that the world of order presumably rose out of a "sea of chaos." Having observed how mounds of sand arise out of the Nile after the river's flood waters recede each year, the Egyptians, in an analogous fashion, described creation as the emergence of a mound of earth – the "Risen Land" - out of the primordial waters of chaos. Egyptian myth is also similar to Babylonian in that the gods and goddesses then arose out of this fundamental creation through a process of procreation. In fact, it is especially evident in Egyptian mythology that sex among the deities is generally the means by which the great assortment of gods and goddesses came into being.⁴⁹ This central theme of sexual creation is undoubtedly an expression of the primordial human association of sex with the creation of life as evidenced in mother goddess mythology.

Two interesting exceptions to this rule concerned the “creator gods” *Atum* and *Ptah*. In one story of creation *Atum* is the first god to emerge out of the primordial mound but he does so in an act of self-creation; *Atum* is described as “he who came into being of himself.” *Atum* is self-caused – a view of the nature of God we will see more fully expressed later in Judeo-Christian-Islamic religions. The story of *Atum* anticipates the more modern theological and philosophical idea of a supreme being who is the cause of its own existence. In the story of *Ptah* on the other hand, the civilized world and all the gods and goddesses of ancient Egypt came into being through *Ptah* thinking and naming things into existence. The thoughts of *Ptah* create the world.⁵⁰ This more intellectual account of creation anticipates later Judaic thinking that God created the world through simply willing or thinking it into existence. The story of *Ptah* also anticipates the Judeo-Christian-Islamic rejection of coupling and sexuality as integral to creation, substituting a single masculine God who creates through a spiritual-mental act without the need for sex.

One central, highly influential myth in ancient Egyptian religion that combines a variety of important archetypal themes is the story of *Isis*, *Osiris*, and their son *Horus*. The goddess *Isis* and the god *Osiris* are sister and brother and grandchildren of *Atum*. Though brother and sister, *Isis* and *Osiris* marry and become rulers over Egypt bringing great “abundance and prosperity” to the land. Yet, a problem arises in the form of a rivalry. *Osiris*, the god of order, had a brother *Seth* who is the god of disorder. Again, as an expression of the idea that order and chaos (disorder) are fundamental conflicting forces in reality, a bitter rivalry develops between *Osiris* and *Seth* over who should rule the world. *Seth* kills *Osiris* and scatters his remains across the face of the earth, sending his soul to the underworld. Unwilling to accept the death of her husband, *Isis* with the help of the god *Anubis*, resurrects *Osiris* and they procreate, producing a son *Horus*. With the protection and assistance of his mother, *Horus* engages in battle with *Seth* to gain rule over the earth – his presumed birthright. *Horus* finally defeats *Seth* and becomes the ruler of Egypt. According to Egyptian mythology, all the pharaohs were descendents of *Horus*.⁵¹

Isis was probably the most popular of many fertility goddesses in ancient Egypt. She was the “Great Mother” as well as the goddess of magic and healing. As the above story illustrates, she also had the power of life over death. She not only resurrects *Osiris* but then gives birth to a “son of God” in the form of *Horus*. As Armstrong notes, the “death of God” and the subsequent resurrection by the Goddess, who possesses the power of fertility, is a common story in ancient times.⁵² Shlain argues, in particular, that the procreation and loving care of *Horus* by *Isis* predates and anticipates the Christian story of the mother of God and the love of Mary for Jesus. For Shlain, as it is represented in the story of *Isis*, (and one can also include the myth of *Ishtar*) it is the woman and the goddess who originally had the power of life over death, but with the subsequent rise of male dominated religions across the world, this power was taken away from the female and relegated to the supreme male god instead.⁵³

The Egyptians clearly believed in life after death. One central ritual performed each year revolved around the renewal of life through the goddess. As

with the Babylonians, the function of rituals was to partake in the power of the gods and goddesses – in this case, the power to create new life. The resurrection of life after death was seen by Egyptians in the return of life in the spring and in the return of the day and the sun after the darkness and the night. The Egyptian practice of mummification to preserve the body of the dead was another expression of their belief in life after death. *Anubis*, mentioned earlier in the story of *Isis* and *Osiris*, was the god of mummification. The Egyptians believed in the eternal cycle of time and the ascension of soul and body (as a whole) after death to a higher eternal realm.⁵⁴ Such was their vision of the future.

Although *Isis* as a female was clearly associated with the power of the resurrection of the dead, the sun god was also emblematic of this power. Because the sun symbolized the re-emergence of life after death, as well as being the “giver of life” through the light that it shines down upon the earth, the sun god became the central and most powerful deity throughout much of Egyptian history. The sun god had many names and was connected to and synthesized with the original creator god *Atum*. The name most frequently used for the sun god was *Ra* (or *Re*). *Ra* in fact was frequently identified as the father or grandfather of all other gods and goddesses, including *Isis* and *Osiris*. *Ra* is the god who presumably gave *Osiris*, and later *Horus*, dominion over the earth and human civilization.

Aside from being the giver of life, *Ra* was also the god of time. The movement of the sun through the sky during the day was seen as the journey of *Ra* on his boat across the heavens. As *Ra* traveled across the sky, he assumed the persona of a different animal god (for example, the scarab and the falcon) for each successive hour in his journey.⁵⁵ Each of these personae was archetypal representing different qualities associated with the animal gods. Time was therefore not some abstract and general quantity, but rather personified and connected with different aspects of reality. To recall, the Babylonian Zodiac also represented the passage of time through the year as a succession of archetypal figures associated with major stellar constellations.

When the pharaoh Ikhnaton (reigned 1379 – 1362 BC) came to power, he initiated a full scale revolution and transformation in Egyptian religion. He rejected all the popular gods and goddesses and replaced them with a single god – *Aten* – represented as a “sun disc” with neither a face nor any human feature. Ikhnaton destroyed many of the statues and images of the various deities in polytheistic Egypt and attempted to force all the priests and the general population, as well, into worshipping this single, faceless god. He attributed the total power of creation and dominion over all existence to *Aten*. As Durant argues, Ikhnaton is the first historical figure to clearly formulate and attempt to practice a monotheistic religion.⁵⁶ Although Shlain disputes the view that Ikhnaton believed in a pure, unadulterated monotheism, it is noteworthy that Ikhnaton represented his supreme deity without a human face or human characteristics.⁵⁷ This predates the idea that first developed in Judaism and early Greek philosophy that the supreme God (or the primary creative force of nature) can not be reduced to human or concrete terms. Ikhnaton also elevates *Aten* above all existence, again anticipating the Judaic idea that God is somehow

separate and “above” the world. To quote from one of Ikhнатon’s poems dedicated to *Aten*,

“Thy dawning is beautiful in the horizon of the sky,
O living *Aten*, Beginning of life.
When thou risest in the eastern horizon,
Thou fillest every land with thy beauty.

Thou art beautiful, great, glittering, high above every land,
Thy rays, they encompass the land, even all that thou hast made.
Thou art *Ra*, and thou carriest them all away captive;
Thou bindest them by thy love.
Though thou art far away, thy rays are upon earth;
Though thou art on high, thy footprints are the day.”⁵⁸

However we judge the intellectual and theological insights of Ikhнатon, his revolution ultimately failed and, after his death at a young age, the worship of the entire polytheistic and personified array of gods and goddesses was restored to ancient Egypt. Monotheism would later rise up again in the Middle East, in a stronger form, in the writings of the Judaic prophets. But it is also important to note that at least as early as Ikhнатon and the first Judaic prophets, monotheistic ideas were being formulated in ancient India as well.

Hinduism and Buddhism: The Eternal One and Cosmic Consciousness

A third cradle of civilization in the ancient world emerged around the Indus River in India. Archeological evidence seems to indicate that the early cities in this area worshipped both a female goddess of fertility and a male “horned” god.⁵⁹ But just as nomadic Indo-European invasions from the north swept down into the Mediterranean world around 2000 BCE, the Indus valley was also invaded and conquered by nomadic Indo-European or Aryan people from the Middle East during the same period.⁶⁰ These invaders brought a warrior and caste system to Indian civilization and a set of religious ideas that eventually coalesced into a polytheistic ten-book anthology of religious poetry and hymns, the *Rig-Veda* (“*Songs of Knowledge or Wisdom*”). In this new social and religious-spiritual order, the chief gods are male, including, for example, *Indra*, the creator and warrior god who overcomes evil, and *Varuna*, the sky god and, prior to the popular ascendancy of *Indra*, the ruler of all other gods.⁶¹ Though predominately polytheistic, the *Rig-Veda* did contain intimations of monotheism as well.⁶² To quote a few selected lines from the *Hymn of Creation*:

“By its inherent force the One breathed windless:
No other thing than that beyond existed...

The One by force of heat came into being.
Desire entered the One in the beginning:
It was the earliest seed, of thought the product.”⁶³

Those who created and followed the religious ideas contained in the *Rig-Veda* emphasized the importance of sacrifice, the universe and all the gods presumably having been created in such an act. (Recall Armstrong’s point that rituals were often attempts to imitate the actions of gods.) According to Watson, the composition of the *Rig-Veda* occurred through revelation in drug induced trance-like states around sacrificial ceremonial fires.⁶⁴ As we will see, visions of both the divine and the future as contained in other religious traditions were often attributed to revelations – presumably communicated from spirits and gods.

Beginning around 700 BCE a new set of religious writings emerged in ancient India, the *Vedanta*, literally “appended to or after the *Vedas*.” The *Vedanta* includes the famous set of writings known as the *Upanishads*. The writers of the *Upanishads* had become dissatisfied with Vedic beliefs and practices and wished to create a new spirituality that downplayed the importance of sacrifice and focused more on inner development. The concept of “Atman” – the eternal soul and most innermost self – first appears in the *Upanishads*.⁶⁵

The first clear expression of the idea of **karma** can be found in the *Upanishads*. Karma is destiny (or the life force), but a destiny that is determined by the individual. In order to understand the meaning of karma, the notion of reincarnation first needs to be explained.

Within the *Upanishads* is the theory of **reincarnation** (or *samsara* meaning rebirth), an idea that is common to many different ancient cultures. According to the theory of reincarnation, when a living being dies, its soul migrates to another living being, be it animal or human. Death is not final, but just the end of one cycle of life to be followed by the beginning of another cycle. In reincarnation, again we see the idea of life arising after death.

The *Upanishads* connects the idea of karma to reincarnation. The total set of deeds, good and bad, within a person’s life creates a person’s karma and determines the quality of his or her next life. A person may rise to a higher level of existence if his karma is positive or sink to a lower level if it is negative.⁶⁶ A soul can realize *moksa* and total salvation, becoming one with the absolute spirit of *Brahman* (discussed below), if all negative karma is eliminated and the soul overcomes the *maya* – the mistaken belief that the phenomenal world is real and that the self is a separate being.⁶⁷

The connected ideas of karma and reincarnation contain a clear conception and vision of the future, as well as of the connection between the future and the past. As a general principle, it is ethics that determines the quality of the future. After death, a soul moves to a higher or lower level of existence depending on his or her ethical choices and actions in the previous life. Each life brings with it a destiny created in the past life, but provides the opportunity for the person to improve his or her karma for the next life.

The idea of karma expresses a cosmological principle of justice. Unethical behavior must be paid for in this life or the next. Ethical behavior is rewarded

through the building up of positive karma and the reduction of negative karma. In essence, karma is the Hindu version of the principle of “what goes round comes round.” Life is a great balancing act of positive and negative; justice is always served in the long run. In several important respects Hindu thinking reflects the fundamental principles of cycles and balance in understanding time and the nature of reality. Reincarnation and karma is one prime example.

The future of the soul, as noted above, is also a consequence of achieving knowledge or enlightenment – in particular, realizing the “oneness” of the self with the cosmos and the illusory nature of the physical or phenomenal world. Both of these insights are central to Hindu thinking and, in fact, as we shall see, the renunciation and transcendence of the physical world is a common idea in many religious and philosophical belief systems. The ultimate future and absolute reality exist beyond the world of matter and time.

As noted, a soul, through enlightenment and the elimination of all negative karma, can be released from the cycle of reincarnation and achieve unity with the eternal oneness, transcending the wheel of time. A soul can become one with *Brahman*. The term “Brahman” which in the *Vedas* meant the sacred power of prayer came to mean in the *Upanishads* the sacred power that pervades, sustains, and animates everything. (Again we see the idea that nature is empowered and in-spirited by deities.) Everything is a manifestation of *Brahman* – *Brahman* is the absolute, all encompassing One. Although within the *Upanishads* there is the idea of *Brahman* made manifest, where personified qualities are associated with *Brahman’s* reality, there is a deeper sense of *Brahman* as the “un-manifest” One that is the ultimate source of all being – that is, in fact, “Being” itself.⁶⁸

With the emergence of Hindu monotheism in the idea of *Brahman*, God acquires a de-personalized quality. Whereas polytheistic religions personified the forces of nature, *Brahman*, as the ultimate spirit that animates all reality, is not in the strict sense a “person” at all. We will see this idea of an abstract and depersonalized ultimate reality become increasingly influential in the centuries ahead. Shlain associates this view of reality with the masculine mindset that grew to dominate both religious and secular thinking in the ancient world.

This distinction between the manifestations of God and the intrinsic real nature of God is also a common theme throughout many world religions. A related distinction also common to many religions is “transcendence” and “immanence.” In Babylonian, Egyptian, and Hindu thinking we have found the idea that deities pervade natural reality – they are “in the world” – and it is there that they manifest themselves – they have an immanent presence. Yet, beginning with Ikhnoton and Hinduism, we also see the idea that there is a supreme God who is beyond the world that is transcendent. The Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition clearly identifies a transcendent God that is beyond human comprehension, but yet one who also directs events on earth from “on high.” This idea that the flow of time and specifically the unfolding of the future are being directed by some transcendent being has been very influential throughout the history of humankind. It is part of the legacy of our religious heritage and traditions around the world.

Yet as Armstrong repeatedly notes, humans thirst for divine immanence. God must be part of our lives. The futurist Barbara Marx Hubbard believes that beginning around 3000 BCE a “spiritual impulse” arose in humanity, where at least some people attempted to make contact with the “Oneness” of all existence. Through subsequent ages humans have repeatedly tried to achieve a “cosmic consciousness” with God and ultimate reality.⁶⁹

Throughout the ages Hindu mystics have sought this oneness with *Brahman* through ritual and meditation, but so have practitioners of many other religions who have sought contact and immersion with the ultimate transcendent One. According to Armstrong, what we find in Hindu descriptions of this state of “cosmic consciousness,” as well as in descriptions from other religions and mystical traditions, is that the experience of enlightenment – of becoming conscious of the ultimate Oneness - is beyond language and beyond the powers of reason to grasp.⁷⁰ There is a common human experience of the One and this experience transcends human categories of understanding. This mystical – religious view of enlightenment has been ubiquitous throughout human history, and conflicts with the rationalist view (to be discussed later) that through reason and language humans can grasp, understand, and describe ultimate reality.

The Hindu belief in the unity of all existence extends to the relationship of individual souls and the universal spirit of *Brahman*. Reflecting the pagan belief that the divine is within everything, Hinduism contains the idea that the inner self of each person embodies the “spark” of *Brahman*, which is referred to as “**Atman**.” This most inner self is one with *Brahman* – enlightenment involves discovering this unity. Whereas generally Western religions clearly separate God and individual human souls, in the Hindu doctrine of *Brahman-Atman*, God and all souls are one.

Hinduism is a complex and multifaceted religion and contained within its teachings are also many polytheistic elements. There are numerous Hindu deities and **avatars** (incarnations of deities) who have been worshipped through the ages; avatars provide a way to personalize the impersonal quality of Brahman – the ultimate One.

Contained within Hindu doctrine is one well-known effort to synthesize the complex assortment of figures and deities into a trinity (“Trimurti”) of primary deities who are both a one and yet three distinctive supreme personae. This trinity consists of *Brahmā* (the male persona of Brahman), *Shiva*, the god of creation and destruction, and *Vishnu*, the preserver of the world. All the varied gods, goddesses, and avatars of Hinduism are offspring or manifestations of one of these three personae.⁷¹

Within Hindu cosmology, the world is created as a dream in the mind of *Vishnu*. The world of time, though lasting trillions of years, is eventually destroyed with great violence by *Shiva*. Yet after the world of time comes to an end, *Vishnu* dreams the world anew, and the cycle of creation and destruction begins again. In a somewhat different version of this tale, *Shiva* is the creator of the world as well as the destroyer, and the cyclic and epochal quality of time and creation/destruction is seen as “the dance of *Shiva*.”⁷²

There is, in fact, a famous statue of Indian art representing the dance of *Shiva*, with *Shiva* manifesting himself as the god *Nataraja*; with four arms and surrounded by a ring of fire, he gracefully balances on top of the demon of ignorance. Dance is highly significant in Hindu thinking for it is associated with creation. The ring of fire represents both destruction (through fire) and the light of truth. In contrast to the serene stillness and abstract quality associated with Brahman, Shiva is a god of fire and energy connected with the ideas of beauty and sexuality. In numerous Hindu temples in the cities of Orissa and Tanjore, considered among the greatest works of architectural and sculptural art in the world, can be found highly explicit erotic figures and scenes. Often these temples were dedicated to the worship of Shiva where the depictions of sex presumably represented a higher, more ethereal beauty awaiting souls in heaven. Even more strongly connected with sex was the development of Tantric Hinduism (and Tantric Buddhism). It is noteworthy that in these religious movements, female goddesses and the female principle again achieved a central divine power; in fact, true worship of the female divinity is realized in sexual intercourse.⁷³

Given the above examples, it is clear that not all features or expressions of Hinduism involved a rejection of the physical. Still, according to J. T. Fraser, in general Hindu cosmology is a prime example of how major world religions deny the finality of death and the ultimate transitory nature of reality. Within Hindu thinking what is absolutely real is eternity, rather than the passage of time. First, recall that *Brahman* – the One – the all pervading spirit - is eternal. Second, note that though the world is periodically destroyed by *Shiva*, eventually it begins again, making the ending of things only temporary. Existence (within the world of time) is fundamentally endless – an ever repeating cycle of beginnings and ends.⁷⁴ Since the world of time is ultimately an endless cycle, the future is fundamentally just a repetition of the past. Also, to recall, given the Hindu belief in reincarnation, personal death is only apparent for souls are perpetually recycled through multiple incarnations until all negative karma is worked off and the soul unites with the eternal *Brahman*. Finally, within Hindu doctrine, the changing physical world is illusory and enlightenment is achieved through seeing beyond this false reality. Fraser also includes Buddhism - the next tradition I will describe - as another belief system that denies the ultimate reality of time and personal death.

During the time of approximately 700 to 400 BCE, a period generally referred to as the **Axial Age**, (for human history seems to pivot on this age), a number of influential religious and philosophical figures emerged across Asia and Europe and produced a rich variety of new ideas and teachings on reality, knowledge, God, and the meaning of life. They were responsible for the creation of many new religions, spiritual practices, and theories of philosophy. They emphasized self-responsibility, abstraction, literacy, and a rejection of the authority of royalty. They expressed a movement away from polytheism toward inner development, morality, and an enhanced sense of individuality. This group of religious and philosophical leaders and figureheads included Isaiah, Socrates, Zoroaster, Lao-tzu, Confucius, and Siddhartha Gautama, or as he is more popularly known, the Buddha.⁷⁵

Buddha (563 to 460 BCE) was born a wealthy prince in India but observing the poverty and suffering of much of humanity, he renounced his wealth and noble position and went in search of knowledge, self-enlightenment, and a solution to the apparent misery and difficulties of life. Buddha was critical of the materialist and mercantile way of life he saw emerging around him and turned inward to find a better way. The answers that Buddha found formed the starting point for one of the major world spiritual traditions, Buddhism, which eventually spread over much of Asia in the centuries that followed his life.⁷⁶

Certain aspects of Buddhism reflect the influence of Hinduism, the predominant religious tradition in the region where Buddha lived. Buddha believed in reincarnation and the illusory quality of time, and he believed that the ultimate goal of life was to achieve a unity or oneness with ultimate reality. But Buddha rejected, or more correctly, he transcended, all aspects of personification in his thinking, including the most powerful form of all – the fact that we personify ourselves.

For Buddha, the ego or self is the source of all craving, suffering, and misery. The ego separates us from ultimate reality in that we distinguish ourselves in opposition or contrast to the world through this psychological construct. We conceptualize reality as “me and the world.” Because we separate ourselves from the world, we desire what we perceive as not part of us; where there is desire, there is frustration, disappointment, and suffering.

According to his teachings, the solution to life’s miseries is “right living” and “right thinking” (*dharma*) achieved through inner awareness and discipline. The truth lies within. We need to see that all worldly existence is flux and impermanent, and that the self is simply an idea that we use to conceptualize or understand our reality and not some intrinsic or absolute essence that defines who and what we are. We must see through the veil of illusion – including the illusion of the individual self.⁷⁷ For Buddha, it is egoism and the karma of the ego that binds humans to the Wheel of Sangsara – the cycle of birth and death.⁷⁸ Buddhist teaching puts forth the alternative idea of the Wheel of Salvation, which leads to the transcendence of the ego and time.⁷⁹

Once we achieve this insight – this state of cosmic consciousness – and break free of the wheel or cycle of unending reincarnations, we transcend time and achieve **Nirvana**.⁸⁰ Nirvana is the ultimate reality, even beyond the gods, and the state of complete “liberation.”⁸¹ Nirvana can not be adequately described with words. Reason can not grasp or understand its reality. In ways Nirvana sounds like the ultimate oneness of *Brahman*, for all differences and distinctions (all separation and structure) evaporate within Nirvana. But even the term “oneness” carries with it a conceptual meaning and Nirvana transcends all linguistic or conceptual categories.

As noted, the influence of Buddhism spread across much of Asia, including China and Japan. In China, a form of Buddhism called *Mayahana* Buddhism arose and became extremely popular in the first few centuries after Christ. Of particular note, in *Mayahana* Buddhism Buddha achieved the status of a deity and was believed to be the creator of the world. Furthermore, as a fundamental prophecy for the future, followers thought that incarnations of the

Buddha would time and again return to the earth to rescue it from the evil which, presumably, arose at regular intervals.⁸² Buddha, in essence, becomes the savior, with the world as a stage on which good and evil vie for dominance.

Thus, for Buddhism, as for Hinduism, time has a cyclic, derivative, and ultimately illusory reality. What is fundamentally real is beyond time – in Hinduism it is *Brahman*, in Buddhism it is Nirvana which is beyond earthly description. Hence, in both Buddhism and Hinduism, there is a metaphysical dualism encompassing the changing and differentiated world of appearance and the changeless, undifferentiated world of ultimate reality. And the ultimate goal of life – the defined trajectory into the future – is to achieve immersion or unity with a realm that is beyond time.

Taoism and Confucianism: The *Yin-yang*, Reciprocity, and Balance

A fourth major cradle of human civilization is ancient China. As with India, two great philosophical systems arose in China as well. Since neither of the philosophical systems, Taoism or Confucianism, is associated with any primary gods, goddesses, or deities, it would be somewhat inaccurate to describe these belief systems as religions. In fact, since Buddhism (discounting *Mayahana* Buddhism) did not depend upon any important deity in its principles or practices, it would be inappropriate to label it as a religion as well. Yet, Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, are usually identified as spiritual or religious traditions in general histories of world religions.⁸³

There are a variety of different readings and interpretations of Taoist cosmology. Piecing together ideas from several sources, the *Tao* (literally “the way”) is eternal – having no beginning or end - and is the cause, principle, and reason behind of all existence. The *Tao* animates and harmonizes all motion in the universe. Because the *Tao* is unbounded (some would say infinite) it cannot be restricted, abstracted, or captured in words. (Note the similarity with the idea of *Brahman*.) The *Tao* literally encompasses both being and non-being. As stated in the first stanza of the *Tao Te Ching* (“The Way of Life”) – the central philosophical work of Taoism,

“The Tao that can be described
is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be spoken
is not the eternal Name.”

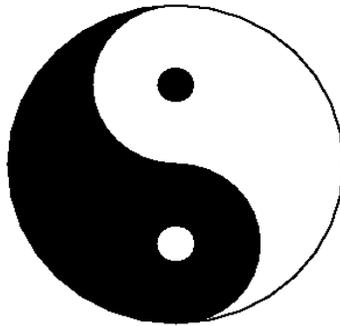
In describing the creation of the universe, in the beginning was *Wu Chi* – the nonexistent and without limit – the “ultimate state of nothingness.” Within this undifferentiated state of pure potentiality stirred the first motion, and out of this motion emerged the germ of the universe identified as the “Pearl of the Beginning.” From this arose the “*Tai Chi*” – the ridge or oneness that creates the

fundamental duality of ***Yin*** and ***Yang*** – the two primary forces within the universe. Or as stated more poetically from the *Tao Te Ching* in Chapter 42,

"The Tao begets One;
One begets Two;
Two begets Three;
Three begets the myriad things"

In the diagram below, *Yin* is the dark form, *Yang* the light form, and the *Tai Chi* is the sine wave defining the interface of the two forms. The expression "*Tai Chi*" also refers to the process of balanced interaction and interplay between *Yin* and *Yang*. Since the balanced interplay between *Yin* and *Yang* is also thought of as the *Tao* manifested within the world, the sine wave interfacing *Yin* and *Yang* can likewise be thought of as representing the *Tao*.⁸⁴ The Tao is the oneness that creates the two-ness of the *Yin* and *Yang*.

The Taoist Yin-yang



The flow of time and the organization of reality is described and symbolized in Taoism in terms of its fundamental archetype, the *Yin-yang*. In general, *Yin* and *Yang* refer to the basic polarities of existence, such as darkness and light, passive and active, and sky (heaven) and earth. *Yin* is the earth and the feminine principle of reality, whereas *Yang* is heaven and the masculine principle. *Yin* is often associated concretely with a bird and abstractly with matter and space; *Yang* is associated with the dragon, and spirit and time. It is noteworthy that the West traditionally had roughly the same set of oppositional associations around the male and female – the male being associated with heaven, light, and the active, and the female with the earth, darkness, and the passive.

In Taoism though, these two principles of the feminine *Yin* and masculine *Yang* are mirror images of each other and are united in their complementarity, interdependence, and balance with each other. Note in the diagram above that at the center of *Yin* is *Yang* and at the center of *Yang* is *Yin*, further emphasizing their interdependency. The forces of *Yin* and *Yang* are intertwined in everything and rhythmically oscillate within all processes of nature. The natural flow of time

has a cyclic rhythm involving the alternating dominance of *Yin* and *Yang* – time is a balancing, a circling of complementary forces. Hence, Taoism emphasizes the inherent unity, harmony, cooperation, and balance within the universe. The two are a one. In fact, the *Tao* – the way – is this unity, harmony, cooperation, and balance. As I stated above, the interface and interplay of *Yin* and *Yang* is the *Tao*. The rhythmic oscillation of the “Two” is the “One.”⁸⁵

Time then for the Taoists is an orderly process. There is a general pattern to the ebb and flow of events – a waxing and waning of *Yin* and *Yang*. Further, the Chinese, like their Middle Eastern counterparts, developed a cyclic and repeating Zodiac to describe the orderly procession of time. While the natural flow of the *Tao* can be momentarily unsettled by chaos, demonic influences, or human willfulness, in the long run, the *Tao* reigns supreme. In essence, it is a form of cosmic justice – an ultimate balancing that always finds its way to fulfillment and realization. Hence, it is important for humans to attempt to move “with the *Tao*” – not to resist or attempt to counteract the natural flow of events. The practice of Taoism at one level is simply trying to live in harmony with nature – with the forces of *Yin* and *Yang*.⁸⁶

Followers of Taoist philosophy did attempt to predict the future however. In fact, if there is a natural order to time, then it makes perfectly good sense to think one can predict what is to come. Yet the popular method that was employed is based on magical thinking and incorporates an element of chance. The Chinese believed they could predict the future through **divination**.

The *Tao Te Ching*, a philosophical book describing in poetic terms many basic principles of Taoism, was presumably written by Lao-tzu though the actual authorship of this book is debatable.⁸⁷ A second major book of Taoism is the *I Ching* (The Book of Changes), which is the book often used as a means for foretelling the future. The *I Ching* is divided into 64 sections, each section corresponding to one of the fundamental Taoist hexagrams. Each Taoist hexagram is a sequence of six *Yin* and *Yang* in different orders and combinations, and each hexagram has a specific meaning. For example, the first hexagram are six successive *Yang* that symbolize “The Creative”; the sixth hexagram is three *Yang*, a *Yin*, a *Yang*, and a *Yin*, representing “Contention”; and the sixty-fourth and final hexagram is *Yang-Yin-Yang-Yin-Yang-Yin*, standing for “Unfinished.” Through some type of quasi-random activity, such as the tossing of coins, the throwing of sticks, or the selection of plant stalks, a particular hexagram is identified and the hexagram is read, presumably providing knowledge about what is to come in the future.⁸⁸

Even if the Chinese believed they could predict the future, this did not mean that they believed they should attempt to control or direct it. In fact, knowing what was to come was a way to prepare oneself to stay in harmony with the flowing *Tao*. This general attitude of passivity toward life and the future is actually expressive of the feminine side – the *Yin* – according to Taoist philosophy. As the religious historian David Noss states, this feminine attitude in Taoist thinking and practice is due to the perception that human society is too *Yang* and needs to be counter-balanced with *Yin*. Philosophically the Taoists

believed in the balance and equality of masculine and feminine principles, and through their passivity attempted to bring balance into Chinese society.

According to Shlain, although the *Yin-yang* implied an egalitarian way of life between men and women, ancient Chinese culture was decidedly patriarchal.⁸⁹ As noted above, the Taoists themselves would have agreed with this assessment of their society. This quality of male dominance within their culture, according to the Taoists, was reflective of Chinese society being too “Confucian.” Confucianism as a philosophy stood for male domination over women, as well as for strong social hierarchies, written laws, literacy, reason, urban civilization, control, and abstraction – all values that were almost the antithesis of Taoism. Taoism valued intuition, the inexpressible, fluidity, nature, the concrete, and non-resistance.

This almost contradictory mix of philosophies in ancient China is itself a *Yin-yang*, but as the teachings of Confucius (551 – 479 BCE) gained influence, Confucianism increasingly superseded the earlier teachings of Taoism. Accordingly, women lost power. As Shlain states, even Taoism was perverted in this process, turning from the principle of “make no dams” to “making dams and stopping the flow.” China became increasingly more *Yang*.

Taoism and Confucianism were not completely at odds though. Confucius studied the writings of Taoism and frequently spoke of the value of Taoist principles. Confucius, in fact, identified the *Tao* as one of the key principles in his philosophical thinking.⁹⁰ If we look at the principle of the “**Golden Mean**” however, we can see how each philosophy, while supporting this idea of balance in life, interprets it differently. The “Golden Mean” teaches that one should never do anything in excess; rather, one should follow the middle road. The *Tao* and the *Yin-yang*, of course, symbolize the ultimate supremacy of balance in the universe, and presumably in following the *Tao* one would lead a life of balance. Yet in Confucianism, balance seems to turn into an authoritarian rule of action and thinking – something to be achieved through mental and behavioral effort and control. For Confucius, the Chinese world in which he lived was corrupted and in turmoil, and principles of order needed to be developed and implemented to bring happiness to his land. Thus, in seeing the chaos of things, he pushed for order, and if the ultimate order was balance, then balance was something that needed to be consciously and rationally imposed. Hence, whereas for the Taoists balance was something that would come naturally if one didn’t fight against the *Tao*, in Confucianism balance required self-effort and conscious direction.

Another important connection between Taoism and Confucianism, again having to do with the ideal of balance, concerns the principle of reciprocity. As noted in the previous chapter, early human cultures acknowledged the importance of reciprocity and practiced it in human interaction and economic exchange. Reciprocity served as a foundation for justice and equal and fair treatment of each other. The Taoist theory of reality is built upon the idea of reciprocity, in the sense of complementarity and interdependency. *Yin* and *Yang* require each other for their existence. Confucius, in turn, raises the idea of reciprocity to a central ethical principle. This is illustrated in the following story:

“Tzu-kung asked, ‘Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one’s life?’ The Master (Confucius) said, ‘Is not Reciprocity (mutual consideration) such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.’⁹¹

As can be seen, this statement sounds very much like the Christian **Golden Rule** – “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” In the mind of Confucius, this general ethical principle of behavior was based upon the idea of reciprocity. Yet as the religious historian David Noss points out, Confucius did not extend this principle to those people who commit evil acts, hence his sense of benevolence was limited in a way not found in the Christian version of the rule. For Confucius, if one commits an evil act, it should be repaid in kind; (actually he uses the word “justice” in the sense of retributive justice). His attitude is more in line with the Judaic principle, “An eye for an eye - a tooth for a tooth.”

In general, ancient Chinese philosophy and culture valued the principles of order and harmony, and both Taoism and Confucianism emphasized this fundamental perspective on life, each in its own way. If Taoism is more passive and accepting in its particular approach, Confucianism is more active and controlling. Further, Taoism highlights intuition and oneness with nature, whereas Confucianism highlights rationality and a strong concern for social community and social order.

As a clear expression of the importance of order in both Chinese society and Confucianism, during the highly organized Han dynasty (from approximately 200 BCE to 200 AD) Confucianism was an integral part of its dominant philosophy and system of government. The cosmos was believed to possess a natural order and harmony and this structure to things was reflected in Chinese social order as centrally controlled by the emperor. The Han dynasty, reinforced by its Confucian philosophy, was a hierarchical and authoritarian system that emphasized rules and duties. There was a continued concern with “right conduct” presumably to maintain resonance with the natural cosmic order of things.⁹²

If we turn to Neo-Confucianism, as it developed during the Song dynasty (960 – 1279 AD), we again see an explicit connection made between ethical principles for living and the cosmic order of things. For Neo-Confucian thinkers, such as the highly revered Zhu Xi (1130 – 1200), the principle of *li* explained the order and development of matter and natural reality, and if understood, provided direction for how to live ethically and achieve wisdom and happiness. Similar to Confucius, Zhu Xi was a rationalist and did not highlight supernatural forces or deities in his thinking; in fact, Zhu Xi believed that natural forces could explain the structure and pattern of nature.⁹³

As two final notes on Chinese philosophy as expressed in both Taoism and Confucianism, we find that with the emphasis on order and harmony, there is a relatively static conception of time; everything has its place, balance is important, and the *Yin-yang* cycles through time, forever changing, forever the same. Also, the orderly make-up of nature and the cosmos provides a template and guidance system for achieving happiness, wisdom, and the ethical good life; the microcosm should mirror the macrocosm. This second theme provides a bridge to the next religious tradition to be discussed – Zoroastrianism.

Zoroastrianism: The War of Good and Evil

Whereas Taoism conceptualized time and reality as a circle and an ultimate harmony of all forces in nature, Zoroastrianism, which emerged in ancient Persia, viewed time and reality as a battle between opposing forces that eventually would lead to a conclusion and victory of one force over the other. In this cosmic struggle the force of good conquers the force of evil. If Taoism is built on reciprocity, one of Bloom's two primary forces that shaped human history, Zoroastrianism is inspired by the other fundamental force, conquest.

Although Zoroastrianism is not a very popular religion in the present day, it is a highly influential belief system in the evolution of future consciousness and Western religion; in fact, its impact on Western religion as well as on futurist thinking is immense. The ancient Israelites, who were exiled in Babylon during the 6th Century BCE, encountered and appear to have taken many of their key ideas from Zoroastrianism which was then the dominant religion in Persia and the Middle East.⁹⁴ To begin with, as one example, the Judaic and Christian view of time as a necessary sequence of events leading to some culminating moral resolution, an idea that would also be taken up by Islam, probably derives from Zoroastrianism and the prophecies of its founder, Zoroaster (660 – 583 BC). According to Zoroaster, the supreme God *Ahura Mazda* ("Wise Lord") has been engaged in a struggle of "good and evil" with *Angra Mainyu* ("the Bad Spirit") throughout history and this struggle will eventually lead to a final apocalyptic battle culminating in the defeat of evil and the salvation of all good souls.⁹⁵ As another significant anticipation of Judaic-Christian thinking, Zoroastrianism contains the idea of a messiah, who will lead the forces of good against evil at the end of time.⁹⁶

Zoroaster framed time, both individually and cosmically, in moral or ethical terms. The flow of events through time is due to an ongoing conflict of good and evil. This conflict occurs at a cosmic level, but also occurs in the souls of all human beings. Through each of our lives we are engaged in an ethical struggle, attempting to pursue what is good, but continually being tempted and led astray by the forces of evil. The soul is the micro-cosmic battlefield and reflection of the macro-cosmic war of good and evil.

Zoroaster also saw time in violent and combative terms. We have already encountered the idea in Babylonian mythology that the flow of events in reality is due to an ongoing struggle between order and chaos – a conflict of opposites. For Zoroaster, time is a war of good and evil that will eventually lead to an ultimate and final battle. Good will triumph and the spirit of evil will be conquered and destroyed at the end of time but only through destruction and obliteration.

Zoroaster personifies the fundamental forces and dynamics of the universe. There are two ultimate spirits that represent the essential qualities of cosmic and human existence. There are also many lesser spirits who are expressions or servants of these two major cosmic personae. Although there is

debate over who first invented the idea of a supreme God, it is fairly clear that it was Zoroaster who invented the idea of the Devil. For Zoroaster, life is a drama – in this case a personified struggle between God and the Devil – with a concluding chapter that resolves the underlying conflict played out in the story.

Within Zoroastrianism, and in contrast to Taoism and all Eastern thought, time is a line rather than a circle. Further, time is not eternal but finite. Time eventually comes to an end. This linear and finite view of time would become a central tenet in the Christian conception of time. Also within Zoroastrianism, time is a progression rather than a repetition, as it is within Taoism. The triumph of good over evil signifies a positive resolution to the flow of time. A similar notion of progression can be found in Christianity.

Although Zoroaster believed that humans possessed free will – to choose between what is good and right and what is evil – the universe as a whole is destined to follow a particular direction. *Ahura Mazda* will triumph over *Angra Mainyu* at the end of time. So the progressive direction of time in the universe is pre-determined. This view of time is **teleological** (from the Greek “*telos*” meaning end). What happens in the world is determined by some ultimate goal to be realized in the future. In essence, the foreordained future determines what comes before. Christianity adopted a similar set of ideas regarding free will and the destiny of the universe. Still it is important to also highlight the significance of free will or choice in Zoroastrianism. Each individual can choose to follow either what is good or what is evil. This idea also anticipates Judeo-Christian thinking; each individual has the power to select his or her own destiny.

In his theory of reality and time, Zoroaster connected **eschatology**, which deals with the “end times” of humankind and the universe, and the idea of the “**apocalyptic**” which means the revelation and perception of the ultimate truth. At the end of time *Ahura Mazda* reveals the final and complete truth about reality. Again this anticipates Christian thinking. Zoroaster also introduces the idea that God (*Ahura Mazda*) will judge all human souls at the end of time according to whether they followed a life of good or a life of evil (“Judgment Day”). Hence one’s ultimate individual future is determined by one’s ethical behavior or lack of it, as seen through the judgment of a supreme being. Those who are judged good and worthy, having followed *Ahura Mazda*, will be rewarded with an eternal afterlife in Heaven or paradise; those who are judged evil, having followed the spirit of *Angra Mainyu*, will be punished and damned in Hell. For Zoroaster justice is ultimately served at the end of time.⁹⁷

In several respects, Zoroastrianism is strongly dualistic. **Dualism** is the theory that reality consists of two distinctive – often opposing – sets of qualities, components, realms, or forces. We have already encountered the philosophical doctrine of dualism in Hinduism and Buddhism, where the eternal or timeless realm is distinguished from the temporal realm of change. Zoroastrianism supports an absolute dualism of good and evil, truth and falsity, and body and soul.

The metaphysics and ethics of Zoroaster is though an interesting mix of dualist, polytheistic, and monotheistic elements. Although Zoroaster sets up a fundamental dualism in his theory of good and evil and truth and falsity - *Ahura*

Mazda is good and the source of truth – *Angra Mainyu* is evil and the teller of lies - Zoroaster sees one side of this dualism as superior to the other side. There is a single God – *Ahura Mazda* - who is all powerful, all good, the creator of the universe, and who orchestrates the direction and resolution of events in the world. This is similar to later monotheistic ideas in Judaism and Christianity. Zoroaster also carries this asymmetrical or lop-sided dualism into his theory of humans and his theory of ultimate value. He believes that humans possess a non-material soul connected with their material body, but it is the disembodied soul that survives physical death and is superior to the physical body. We are both matter and spirit but the spiritual side is on a higher level. In resonance with this lop-sided dualism of body and spirit, Zoroaster places more importance on the “other worldly” over the physical world. Paradise lies beyond time and the physical world. (This last idea is similar to Hinduism and Buddhism.) All these ideas on reality and the future anticipate similar notions in Christianity, and in many respects, Islamic religion as well.

Greco-Roman Myth and Philosophy: The Apollonian, the Dionysian, and the Theory of Progress

Ancient Greece is often identified as the fountainhead of Western Civilization. Yet, just as in China where we find the opposing philosophies of Taoism and Confucianism, we find in Ancient Greece a combination of opposites – of chaos and order – of love and hate - of madness and reason – of mysticism and rationalism – of myth and abstraction - this is the heritage of the West. Greece had its myths and personified deities, such as *Zeus*, *Aphrodite*, *Athena*, and *Hermes*, who engaged in all manner of melodrama, conflict, and mayhem, frequently involving earthly humans in their machinations. The Greeks conceptualized reality and creation in narrative form. Also, Ancient Greeks participated in numerous rituals and “mysteries” in which they believed they mystically shared in the powers of their deities. In particular, Ancient Greece had the cult and “mystery” worship of the resurrected, dark deity of *Dionysius* – the god of wine, dance, sex, emotion, and reverie. *Dionysius* is in many respects the Greek god of chaos. But ancient Greece is also the birthplace of Western philosophy – of the abstract and rational systems of Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle that came to challenge the validity of the whole edifice of mythic thinking around the world. If we follow Merlin Donald’s theory of the developmental stages of human cognitive evolution, it is in ancient Greece that we see the blossoming of the “theoretic” mindset layered on top of and juxtaposed with mythic thinking.⁹⁸ The theoretic mode of cognition involves de-personalized, abstract, analytic, and often dialectical thinking about reality. Yet, interestingly, the Greeks also had a god associated with reason and order – the god *Apollo*.

Aside from the contrast of mythic and theoretic thinking in ancient Greece, it is important to also highlight the contrast of reason and thinking with passion and emotion. Emotion and reason are frequently viewed as two different and opposing modes of consciousness (though to recall from my earlier discussion of

the psychology of future consciousness these two psychological processes are interconnected). In ancient Greek mythology the rational and passionate approaches to life were personified in the gods *Apollo* and *Dionysus*. The “**Apollonian**” perspective emphasized reason and order while the “**Dionysian**” perspective highlighted passion and disorder. Ancient Greek culture acknowledged both dimensions of consciousness, and in fact, valued a balance between passion and reason.⁹⁹

Although religion is often characterized as more emotional than rational, especially when it is contrasted with science, both reason and passion can be found in all religions. There are strong rationalist traditions in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that emphasize the value of reason in the search for truth and enlightenment. This rationalist side of Western religion owes much to the Greeks. Still it is important to note that various religious practices often highlight the passionate dimension of human experience. The sense of personal abandonment in rites, ceremonies, and rituals – of great collective expressions of reverie, ecstasy, and often music and dance – are Dionysian rather than Apollonian in character.

Hence, although emotion and reason are undoubtedly intertwined in human consciousness, we have two traditions in the West, going back at least as far as the Greeks, that have respectively emphasized either the passionate/emotional or the rational side of humanity. These two traditions, the Dionysian and the Apollonian, not only have influenced religious thinking but secular thinking as well. In modern times, the contrast emerges as a fundamental ideological conflict between the rational philosophers of the Enlightenment and the expressive art and literature of the Romanticists. The Greeks valued both sides of the human mind, but Western human history has witnessed conflict and oscillation between these two dimensions of human consciousness. Approaches to the future and how to guide and direct human life have been significantly impacted by which dimension of human consciousness has been emphasized.

Two of the most influential books ever written in the West are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by Homer (ca. 800 BCE). These are classic works of literature that many ancient Greeks read and revered. The *Iliad* tells part of the story of the siege of Troy – the saga of Helen, Paris, Agamemnon, Achilles, Hector, and a host of other Greek and Trojan characters. The *Odyssey* describes the journey and return of Odysseus to his home in Greece after the battle of Troy. In both tales the Greek gods and goddesses frequently interact with the humans. In fact, most of the major events in both tales are orchestrated and manipulated by the Greek deities. For example, the attack on Troy by the Greeks was presumably instigated by a personal conflict among the Greek goddesses *Hera*, *Athena*, and *Aphrodite*.

In his novel *Ilium*, a science fiction retelling of the siege of Troy, the contemporary writer Dan Simmons conveys, from a contemporary perspective, the vivid and psychologically compelling sense of the ongoing presence of deities in the experiences of the ancient Greeks and Trojans. The characters in *Ilium* behave and talk as if they are perpetually on stage before the gods and are being watched and judged; the characters in *Ilium* have great theatrical egos.¹⁰⁰

The Greeks believed that the gods and goddesses were a living and active reality in their lives. The gods and goddesses moved about and through the world influencing everyday events and controlling the forces and patterns of nature. “The gods ...were in the streets and houses of the people.”¹⁰¹ In fact, the gods may have also been in their minds. Not only did the gods and goddesses determine the events of nature, they were also seen as guiding or determining the thoughts, feelings, and actions of humans. As conveyed in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and recreated in Simmons’ *Ilium*, the ancient Greeks frequently attributed their behavior to the will and thoughts of the gods. They heard the voices of gods and obeyed their commands.

Using the writings of Homer as one primary source of evidence, the psychologist Julian Jaynes has argued that ancient people actually did hear or experience the voices of deities in their minds. Prior to the development of our modern rational mode of consciousness, where we experience our inner self as the source, cause, and instigator of our actions, ancient people did not have such a clear and singular conscious sense of self-determination. They felt the presence and heard the voices of other selves – which they identified with their ancestors, gods and goddesses, and various spirits. Their minds were more a multiplicity of wills and personalities than a singular voice. According to Jaynes, ancient people did not have a clear modern sense of self-responsibility.¹⁰² Whether one agrees with Jaynes’ theory or not, ancient people spoke and acted as if gods and goddesses appeared to them and gave directions for how to live. There are indications that during the Axial Age, which immediately followed the time of Homer, the human mind did go through a fundamental change in thinking and consciousness associated with an increased emphasis on linear rationality, literacy, and abstraction, and most importantly perhaps, a highly enhanced sense of self-responsibility. Records from the ancient world leading up to the Axial Age are populated with innumerable prophets, soothsayers, and visionaries who saw and felt the presence of deities and spirits. Even after the Axial Age, we still find some significant individuals, such as Paul and Mohammed, who experience voices and visions from God. But there seems to have been an overall shift sometime during the Axial Age toward an increasing sense of self-determination regarding the future.

Both Watson and Polak take a different view of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*; they believe that the beginnings of modern human consciousness are evident in these books and that, in fact, these books express the sense of the struggle of the human mind attempting to break free of subservience to the gods and achieve self-determination. This theme of struggle against the forces of the gods is one of the key developments in Greek thinking that would significantly influence later Western views on the future – in particular, the idea that humankind can determine its own future. For Watson, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are not histories but rather, in some respects, the first modern “narratives” populated as they are by heroic figures who are fully developed characters with both human strengths and weaknesses. The gods and goddesses in the stories are not unknowable or elevated above the world of humans but involved and present in the story, and these deities clearly have their own failings as well – the

wisdom of the gods is questioned. Of particular note, Watson argues that Odysseus achieves a sense of rational self-determination and independence from the gods by the time we come to the conclusion of the *Odyssey*. Polak states that these books embody both the tragic and the heroic, as the human characters struggle, not always successfully, against the will of the gods. There is a growing consciousness of free will expressed in the stories and a hopeful sense that the future can be positively directed through the efforts of the human characters. As both Watson and Polak argue, the ancient Greeks saw life as a struggle to realize one's potential and to determine one's destiny in the face of the gods, the forces of fate, and the inherent weaknesses of human character. As embodied in the heroic and yet tragic hero, the human character in Greek literature and thinking had come to the realization that fate was in one's own hands. This insight also brought with it the understanding that directing one's own life was filled with obstacles and challenges, some of which came from within. Still, Polak contends that the Greeks, beginning with *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, developed an optimistic vision of their own capacity to create a positive future.¹⁰³ In an interesting parallel, toward the end of Simmons' *Ilium* and continuing into its sequel *Olympus*, the human characters rise up in defiance against the manipulation of their lives by the gods.¹⁰⁴

Thus it could be argued that *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* capture the inherent psychological struggle occurring in the human mind as we evolved from a species that attempted to follow the will of the gods to a species that saw its destiny as a product of its own will and self-determination. As many have argued, especially for those who attempt to follow the will of God as they understand it within their particular religious tradition, this change in thinking brought with it human arrogance and hubris and a false sense of independence. It is a great debate within human history whether this shift in thinking represents an act of courage and maturity or one of arrogance and naiveté.

Turning to the early mythic elements in Greek thinking, approximately at the same time as Homer was creating his epic tales of humanity and the gods, the poet Hesiod was writing his *Theogony* in which he described the creation of the world and the origin of the gods. According to Hesiod, in the beginning was Chaos, and from Chaos came *Gaia* (the earth), *Tartarus* (the abyss), and *Eros* (love). Chaos also produced Night and Darkness, which mated with the help of *Eros* to produce the Day. Earth brought forth the Ocean, the Mountains, and Heaven (*Ouranos*). Earth and sky – *Gaia* and *Ouranos* – then mated producing the first gods and goddesses of ancient Greece. *Cronos* – a son of *Ouranos* and the ruler of the Titans who would eventually become the God of Time – usurped the power of his father, but in turn was overthrown by his son, *Zeus* who became the supreme ruler of all the Greek gods and goddesses. Most of the gods and goddesses in Homer's tales are either children of *Cronos* (brothers and sisters of *Zeus*), or children of *Zeus* and one of his goddess mates. Beginning in chaos, the Greek pantheon of gods and goddesses, consumed by internal rivalry, tumultuous romances, jealousies, and conflicts, emerged as an all-encompassing patriarchy with *Zeus* reigning on high from his throne on mythical Mount Olympus.¹⁰⁵ It is important to see in this mythic tale of creation that the two

fundamental forces at work are sexual reproduction and violent war and conquest; in the final analysis a dominance hierarchy of power is achieved by a male deity through conquest. As Polak states it, in their myths the ancient Greeks described creation as a result of battle, war, and chaos.¹⁰⁶

Greek myth and religion is an amalgamation of many traditions, waves of immigration and invasion, and local customs. Prior to the time of Homer, ancient Crete to the south of Greece, whose culture would influence the Greeks, appears to have practiced a strong earth Goddess centered religion. But Crete was eventually destroyed by the Indo-European invasions from the north that brought with them a patriarchal belief system. The god *Zeus* probably reflected the mythic beliefs of these invaders from the north. *Zeus*, a highly assertive patriarch and impulsive deity, raped innumerable goddesses and mortal women alike, and had a great sexual appetite.¹⁰⁷

One highly popular view of creation and time in ancient Greece is the myth of *Oceanos*, the great river that flows around and encircles the world. *Oceanos*, at times identified with *Cronos*, is eternal and represents the infinite and unending cycle of time. *Oceanos* is the world soul and the source of all creation, including the gods and goddesses. *Oceanos* was also connected with the mythical animistic creature, the snake or worm *Ouroboros*. *Ouroboros* was pictured swallowing its own tale – symbolic of the circular and endless nature of time. *Ouroboros* carried on its back the signs of the Zodiac, representing the necessary progression of events in time.¹⁰⁸

As can be seen in the above tales and myths of ancient Greece, the Greeks personified the creation of the universe and the forces of nature. The world was animated by various deities and spirits. Elisabet Sahtouris contends that up to the approximate time of 500 BCE, prehistoric and ancient humans saw nature as fundamentally alive, what she calls the “organic view” of reality.¹⁰⁹ Yet, according to Sahtouris, beginning in ancient Greece and eventually spreading around much of the Western world, a second world view arose, a “mechanistic” and “rationalist” view that transformed the human mind and human society. She describes this second, newer world view as proposing that there exists a fundamental unchanging order and single God underneath the flux of nature.

This transformation in thinking, as Sahtouris describes it, occurred during the period I have referred to as the Axial Age. There are different descriptions and explanations of this psycho-social transformation. I have already identified a variety of explanations in this chapter – the emergence of theoretic thinking, the blossoming of a belief in self-determination, and a turning inward to find truth and direction. One thing seems clear - there was a significant advance during this period in the powers of abstraction and reason in humans. In ancient Greece, this change is associated with the emergence of abstract philosophy (circa 600 – 400 BCE). A somewhat similar change in thinking occurred in Judaism in the Middle East around the same time, connected with the ascendancy of an absolute monotheism and transcendent God. Similar changes in thinking also took place in the Far East, in the abstractions of Taoism and Hinduism and the introspective philosophies of Buddhism and the *Upanishads*. Although Sahtouris identifies the Greeks as instigating this change in thinking, the change seems to

have occurred in concert across various areas of the world. Also, it should be re-stated that the Greeks valued both reason and order, and passion and chaos; even with the development of abstract rational philosophy, they continued to pay homage to their gods and goddesses and practice mystical rituals, such as the rites of *Dionysius*, and struggled with the issue of self-determination, as evinced in their great works of literature and dramatic tragedy. Still, the emergence of abstract Greek philosophy clearly epitomizes a new way of thinking and mode of consciousness that appeared during the Axial Age.

A good place to begin a review of ancient Greek philosophy is with a fundamental dispute over the nature of reality and time that emerged between the pre-Socratic philosophers, Parmenides (ca. 515 – 440 BCE) and Heraclitus (ca. 535 – 470 BCE). Parmenides saw ultimate reality as ordered and eternally permanent, as “being” rather than “becoming and passing away.” For Parmenides, time and motion were illusion and mere appearance. He espoused the concept of an eternal oneness, primary, absolute, and all enveloping. For Parmenides what is ultimately real is an all pervasive eternal oneness and unity. We have already encountered a similar view in Hinduism and the idea of *Brahman* (and in fact, Parmenides may have been familiar with the Hindu philosophy of his time). Yet for Parmenides, the basis for his monistic philosophy was logical reasoning rather than insight, revelation, myth, or mystical intuition. Parmenides reasoned that change must be unreal because it contradicted the “**Law of Identity**.” The “Law of Identity” states that what is, is, and what is not, is not; that a thing either is or is not – it cannot be both. Change involves becoming and passing away; what is not becomes what is and what is becomes what is not. This is logically impossible, according to Parmenides, hence time, change, and everything associated with the world of flux, matter, and distinct particulars must be unreal and mere illusion. Again, in parallel, Hinduism also saw the world of time and change as unreal.

Heraclitus, in almost complete opposition, saw reality as flux and change. Heraclitus is reputed to have said, “The father of all things is war” (conflict creates everything); “You can’t step into the same river twice” (although we treat things as constant or the same over time, everything keeps transforming); “The only thing that stays the same is that nothing stays the same” (what is ultimately stable is change); and “That which is in opposition is in concert, and from things that differ comes the most beautiful harmony” (an apparent contradiction of the Law of Identity, as well as similar in meaning to the Chinese *Yin-yang*.)¹¹⁰

There are a variety of significant aspects to this dispute between Heraclitus and Parmenides. For one thing, the philosophical disagreement is framed in an abstract form without reference to deities, spirits, or other personifications of reality. Heraclitus does use the concrete metaphor of fire to describe the world, but basically the argument is abstract. Heraclitus speaks of a “Law” of the universe to explain change (see below), rather than deities or spirits, and Parmenides bases his argument on the “Law of Identity” – another abstraction. Second, Parmenides supports his philosophical view through logical deduction and reasoning. There is no reference to religious authority or mythological inspiration. Third, the disagreement between Heraclitus and

Parmenides reflects a fundamental difference in attitude regarding the nature of existence. Is reality fluid and changing, or is reality constant and permanent? Do we believe that time – becoming and passing away – is basic, or do we think that the eternal is what is real? How we view the past, as well as the future, reflects whether we put an emphasis on permanence or change in our understanding of reality. Heraclitus did believe that there was an underlying order to the world of time – the “*Logos*” – but the *Logos* is a fundamental pattern to change, whereas Parmenides basically denied the reality of change and saw the eternal realm of stable, unchanging order as the only true reality.

Plato (427 – 347 BCE) is generally regarded as the most influential philosopher in Western civilization. Not only did he articulate most of the key philosophical issues that would be discussed and debated in later centuries, he also had a powerful impact on the subsequent development of Western religion, political theory, and science. His ideas, both in positive and negative ways, have significantly affected the evolution of thinking on the future in the West.

Plato states in one of his *Dialogues*, the *Timaeus*,

“We must make a distinction and ask, what is that which always is and has no becoming; and what is that which is always becoming and never is? That which is apprehended by intelligence and reason is always in the same state; but that which is conceived by opinion with the help of sensation and without reason, is always in a process of becoming and perishing and never really is.”

Plato attempted to synthesize the philosophies of Heraclitus and Parmenides by proposing a metaphysical dualism of eternity and time. Plato, though, elevated permanence above change, in arguing that what was ultimately real was an eternal order, and that time and change were derivative and mere appearance. (In this sense, he was closer in spirit to Parmenides than Heraclitus.) Plato separates reality into two different realms and elevates one realm above the other. Eternity was the realm of abstract or ideal forms, which could be known through reason; time was the realm of appearance and opinion revealed through perception. Eternity was the realm of order; time was the realm of chaos. Eternity could be understood. Time was confusion. Plato's dualism of eternity and time was connected with his dualism of matter and spirit, for it is matter, which is temporal, and spirit, which is eternal. Further, Plato is usually seen as the primary inspirational source of Western philosophical rationalism – that ultimate reality can be understood through reason.¹¹¹

Plato's philosophy of reality also reflected the influence of another ancient Greek, Pythagoras (ca. 581 – 507), who believed that the universe was fundamentally mathematical. Pythagoras first coined the term “*philosophia*”, meaning the “love of wisdom.” According to Pythagoras, mathematical truths are both abstract and eternal, and underlie the order of nature. Pythagoras is associated with the expression “**harmony of the spheres**” which refers to the order and coordinated orchestration observed in stars and planets in the heavens. Pythagoras is also well known for arguing that music is mathematical in form and that reality is a form of music. Plato adopted the Pythagorean metaphor of reality as music. He believed that eternity had a mathematical harmony, beauty, and order, and he associated the eternal with the heavens above,

whereas time and corruption he associated with the earth. Further, mathematical calculation is a prime example of rational thinking and for Plato, reality is something that fundamentally can be understood through reason.

Plato believed that the eternal realm was populated by abstract and ideal forms – in essence, the pure and presumably changeless forms of ideas, such as truth, beauty, and the good. These ideal forms were arranged in a hierarchy with the supreme “Good” at the top. Temporal reality consists of mere shadows or approximations of these forms, but as noted above, the ideal forms could be known through the mind and reason. Armstrong proposes that Plato’s forms are a rational (or rationalized) version of mythic archetypes. Reality is no longer personified and understood in terms of concrete metaphors; reality is organized in terms of a set of fundamental principles, ideas, and forms – reality is abstraction.¹¹²

As Armstrong and many other historians, philosophers, and theologians have noted, Plato would have an immense impact on later religious thinking and, in particular, on Christianity. Following Plato, many of the ancient Greeks believed that ultimate reality was eternal. The classical and medieval periods of Western thinking, both philosophically and religiously, tended to be Platonic in their metaphysics. Through Plato’s influence on St. Augustine, in particular, Christianity emerged as Platonic with its emphasis on the eternal and spiritual over the temporal and physical. Following Plato, the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition saw the divine as changeless and eternal.¹¹³ The Platonic trend in Western thought clearly identified the eternal and spiritual realm as more important than the temporal and physical realm. For Plato, and his numerous intellectual descendents, spirit and reason were elevated above matter and bodily desires. Consequently, Western thinking for a long time was generally not very concerned about the temporal or natural future, since it was not viewed as an important issue regarding the basic meaning or purpose of life. What is the promise or significance of the future on this earth if what is supreme or of a higher level of reality lies outside of time?¹¹⁴

Yet as we have seen, dualist thinking concerning eternity and time is not unique to Western philosophy and religion. Philosophies and mythologies in Eastern thinking also developed a dualism of a higher eternal realm and a lower temporal realm. Within Hinduism and Buddhism, the soul ascends through reincarnation and the cycle of life and death to Nirvana and eternal oneness. The world of time – of birth, life, and death – of individual desires and flux – is a journey and way station to a higher eternal realm.

Plato’s general theory of creation also connects with both Eastern and Western religious thinking. In religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, a Supreme Being or God is postulated as the source of all order and the ultimate foundation of all reality; time is relegated to a derivative status, presumably having been created by the eternal being. Hence, what is eternal not only exists above the world of time but creates the world of time. Similarly Plato believed that the realm of eternal order was the creative source of the world of time. Order precedes chaos and not the other way around, as had been the

common view in ancient mythologies such as those in Babylonia, Egypt, China, and pre-Platonic Greece.

Although Plato is usually seen as the major starting point in Western philosophy for rationalism, there is another side to Plato - the mystical - that would also influence later thinking in the West.¹¹⁵ Reasoning is a linear cognitive process. When we reason, we move through a process of sequential inference, moving from one thought to the next one. Further, reason is connected with analysis and articulation – ideas are sharply defined and delineated. Yet, when people think, they often use intuition or insight as well as reason. Intuition (and insight) is an all-at-once process – a person “sees” or understands some fact, principle, or truth as a whole, in a flash. When Plato spoke about the acquisition and contemplation of knowledge he often described the process in “intuitive” terminology. The truth was seen or grasped by the human mind. According to Watson, what Plato meant by reason was the intuitive grasp of eternal abstractions, though as we will momentarily see below, Plato clearly also embraced and taught an analytical and logical form of reasoning as well.¹¹⁶ Western mystics in later years, who were influenced by Plato, would frequently describe the contemplation of eternal and higher truth as an intuitive process. Further, Plato described the contemplation of ideas as an aesthetic experience. There existed a sense of rapture – of love – of beauty – in the mental contemplation of the eternal forms. Truly, philosophy was the “love of wisdom.”¹¹⁷

Two of the most important influences on Plato's thinking were Pythagoras, and Socrates (469 – 399 BCE). Socrates was Plato's teacher, and Plato used Socrates as his invariable spokesperson in his *Dialogues* to present his own philosophical views. In the *Dialogues* Plato portrayed Socrates as a cunning and determined investigator who would question and debate others on innumerable philosophical topics. Socrates would attempt through cross examination, incessant clarification, and tenacious reasoning to arrive at the truth. Howard Bloom describes Socrates as a left-brain extrovert. Left cerebral hemispheric functioning is usually associated with an emphasis on linear logic, analysis, and language. Shlain supports this point contending that Socrates was one of the key figures of the Axial Age, which brought an increased emphasis on literacy and linear thinking to human society around the world.¹¹⁸ In the *Dialogues*, through the debates of Socrates with other individuals, Plato illustrates the dialectical mode of thinking where an idea is proposed and then criticized, with rebuttal and counter-rebuttal; the truth is eventually arrived at through this process of back and forth discussion and debate – hence the title of *Dialogues*. In this process of dialectical reasoning, analysis, the questioning of assumptions and logical deduction are clearly seen as critical in discovering the truth. In contrast, Bloom describes Pythagoras as a right-brain introvert. Right hemispheric thinking is usually described as holistic, visual, and intuitive.¹¹⁹ To recall, Pythagoras saw the universe in terms of music and harmony – intuitive and holistic metaphors, and Plato was influenced by this vision of the cosmos as well. Hence, just as Plato had brought together Heraclitus and Parmenides, one can also see Plato as synthesizing in his thinking both Socrates and his method

of rational inquiry and Pythagoras with his emphasis on intuitive insight. Plato's concept of reason involves both these modes of thinking.

Plato would not only influence philosophy and religion but Western political thinking as well. His most famous dialogue, *The Republic*, which contains the famous "Myth of the Cave," where he metaphorically distinguishes between shadowy appearances and the light of eternal reality, is also a treatise on an ideal society; it is probably the first fully developed example of Utopian thought in Western civilization as well.¹²⁰ Plato lived in a time of upheaval and change within Greek civilization, and his quest for stability and certainty in his metaphysical philosophy reflects a desire to find order amidst the world of disorder around him. His political philosophy, as developed in *The Republic*, also expresses an aspiration toward order in the midst of chaos.

According to Bloom, Plato did not approve of the liberal and democratic practices of Athens, where he lived. Instead he was attracted to the more authoritarian system of Sparta. Athens had become in Plato's time a web of commercial exchange, with many sub-cultures and a definite international flavor. Sparta, on the other hand, was more isolated, less materialistic, and based on a rigid system of conformity and control. Sparta was order – Athens was chaos. In the *Republic*, Plato argues against democracy as a viable form of government and instead supports the idea of a "Philosopher King" who would rule with wisdom, benevolence, and a sense of justice – much of the *Republic* deals with the idea of justice, approached dialectically and conceptualized as an ideal form or abstraction to be understood through reason. Not just anyone or everyone can rule in Plato's ideal society and Philosopher Kings must be educated and trained from youth to rule wisely and competently. Philosopher Kings must gain an understanding of the eternal principles of truth, beauty, the good, and justice, and not be overpowered by the flux and corruption of popular opinion, materialism, and time. In essence, for Plato, the determination of society and its operations can not be left up to the uneducated masses – it must be ruled by rational thinkers from above.¹²¹ Though Plato rejects democracy as a form of government, it is important to note that he does place the responsibility for governance and social control in the hands of humans rather than gods; in this regard, Plato expresses the growing Greek ideal that humankind, rather than the gods, is the master of its own fate.¹²²

As one final theme to consider regarding Plato, quite relevant to the topic of the future, Plato believed (as also did Pythagoras before him) in reincarnation, as well as an afterlife. At least some Greeks, including Plato, believed in reincarnation – the idea that the soul could return to the earth in a new human form, or even animal form. (The Hindus believed this as well.) Plato thought that the rational part of the human soul was immortal, that upon the death of the body it survived in a higher plane of existence, and that the soul could return from this higher realm. In fact, Plato also thought that the rational soul existed prior to its incarnation in a physical body and was of divine origin. As Watson puts it, Plato saw humans as "fallen angels." The idea of a divine origin of the soul was associated with the mystical Orphic tradition or cult of ancient Greece, which influenced Pythagoras in his thinking and, in later times, would form an integral

part of Neo-Platonic thinking as well. Also of relevance, connected with the Dionysian mystery cult was the idea of resurrection for, according to legend, Dionysius, after having been killed and torn to pieces by the Titans, was resurrected in a new physical body. (Orpheus, the central figure behind the Orphism, was reputedly also torn to pieces, interestingly by members of the Dionysian cult.) In addition, contributing to this set of connected ideas was the Greek idea of an afterlife. Though many Greeks did not believe in an afterlife, we do find the idea in Homer, where souls after physical death journey to Hades, in the underworld; later we find the idea of the Elysian Fields, a more appealing land – a paradise in fact – that human souls go to after death. Plato was aware of all these ideas and, as an expression of his mystical and Pythagorean side, he thought that souls did journey to a higher realm after death – the divine realm of eternity where they originally came from – and that souls could return to the earth in a new physical form.¹²³

In closing this review of Plato, a quotation from the contemporary cosmologist Lee Smolin is quite appropriate. Smolin does not mention Plato in this quote, but Plato is the most important architect of the philosophy that Smolin describes. Smolin states, “...we can see how Western cosmology and political theory arose together from the opposition of the spirit and the body, the eternal and the decaying, the externally imposed order and the internally generated decay.” This dualist contrast is part of the legacy of Plato, but so is Plato’s combination of the rational and the mystical-intuitive.

Plato’s most famous student was Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE). In some ways Aristotle carries on and further develops the ideas of his teacher, for example in his study of reasoning and logic. In other ways though, Aristotle goes off in a different, if not diametrically opposed, direction. In particular, Aristotle advocates in his writings for an empirical and naturalistic approach to the development of knowledge, and in this regard is much closer in spirit to modern science than Plato.

Along with the increasing emphasis on logic and reasoning found in Greek philosophy, a second important emphasis was the attempt to explain nature in terms of natural causes and principles, rather than in terms of spirits and deities. This philosophy of naturalism is evident in many of the pre-Socratic philosophers, including Heraclitus, but also Thales (640 – 546 BCE), who believed that everything was reducible to “water,” Anaximenes (585 – 528 BCE), who argued that everything was composed of air, and Democritus (460 – 371 BCE), who thought that all of reality was made up out of extremely small physical “atoms.” Such theories moved away from supernatural explanations of reality and rejected the dualistic systems of thought that proposed two realms of spirit and matter (though Thales is reputed to have said that “the world is full of gods”). Instead these naturalistic views explained the world in terms of primary or fundamental physical substances, entities, or laws.¹²⁴ This shift in thinking is highly significant for it represents the beginnings of science – of naturalistic explanations of reality and time.

For Watson, the emergence and development of Greek science, as well as Greek philosophy and mathematics, was a pivotal event in the evolution of the

human mind. According to Watson, a new way of thinking came into existence: the world could be known without the aid of the gods. Science in ancient Greece was free, individualistic, and argumentative, rather than ruled by doctrine and authority. For Polak, philosophy, science, and natural law, as expressed by thoughtful and argumentative individuals, replaced myth and the gods as a way to understand and control the world.¹²⁵

Aristotle further develops the pre-Socratics' naturalistic and scientific approach to the universe.¹²⁶ He identifies four basic causes behind any given natural phenomenon – the material, efficient, formal, and final causes – and through his investigations into physics, biology, psychology, and other areas of nature, attempts to describe natural processes in terms of these causes. Further, he follows Heraclitus in viewing reality as fundamentally change; Aristotle's causes are, in effect, factors that explain how and why things change. Also, Aristotle initiates the empiricist tradition in Western philosophy and science, attempting to understand nature by observing it rather than consulting sacred texts and myths. All told, in many respects he rejects Plato's dualism of two realms, contending instead that the form (formal cause) and the matter (material cause) of natural objects co-exist in the object. There is not for Aristotle a separate realm of ideal, abstract non-material forms as there is in Plato's philosophy.

One especially noteworthy and central theme in Aristotle is his emphasis on the process of natural growth. Because Aristotle studied biological life so extensively, he tended to see all of reality in terms of growth and self-actualization. Things in nature move toward natural ends (final causes) which are simply the realization of their inherent potential (formal cause). Aristotle was a teleologist, believing that change is directed toward specific ends ("telos") but his teleologism was naturalistic rather than supernatural or other-worldly. Events move toward ends which are determined by their own inner potentials. Although Aristotle saw time as basically cyclical, he highlighted in his naturalistic philosophy the concepts of growth and directionality in nature. This emphasis on naturalistic growth would contribute to the early Greco-Roman sense of progress in nature (see below).

If Plato was the inspirational source for Western rationalism, Aristotle was the most famous and influential teacher of the principles and practice of reason. Aristotle formulated and codified the various syllogisms of deductive reasoning and identified many of the basic types of logical fallacies. When logic was taught in the West in the coming centuries, it was Aristotle's writings that served as the foundation.

Aristotle's logic contains the well-known "**Law of the Excluded Middle.**" This law basically states that a thing can not both be A and not-A, or a statement can not be both true and not true. The Law of Identity is a version of this principle – what is, is, and what is not, is not; it is, or it isn't – it can't be both. Another way to state the principle is that logical contradictions can not be true. If a person is married, the person can not also be single. If an object is hot, it can not also be cold. This principle is the foundation of Aristotle's logic, and in fact, has been the basis of Western logic for the last two thousand years. Through the eyes of

Western logic, the world is to be understood in terms of “either – or”, “black and white”, and “right and wrong.” One could say that in the West, following the logic of Aristotle, the clear and absolute distinction is central to all thinking and inquiry.¹²⁷

Yet, if one considers the logic of the Taoist *Yin-yang*, it appears that the Law of the Excluded Middle is not only rejected, but its opposite is embraced as fundamental to the nature of reality. Features of reality that in the West we would describe as “opposites” and mutually exclusive, in Taoism are seen as co-implicative, co-existing, and mutually interdependent. You can’t have A without non-A. The darkness and the light, male and female, hot and cold, and hard and soft, among other opposite pairs, co-exist in reality and actually interpenetrate each other. If Aristotle and Western logic describes a world of black and white, Taoism describes a world where “truth is the color of gray.”¹²⁸

Although subsequent Western philosophy was strongly influenced by Aristotle’s logic and Plato’s theory of an eternal and unified order, two pre-Socratic philosophers expressed views that, contrariwise, had strong affinities with Taoist philosophy. These two philosophers are Heraclitus, already introduced above, and Empedocles. Though not as influential as Plato and Aristotle, Heraclitus and Empedocles embody a line of thinking that would be highly significant in later thought on the nature of reality and time. .

Heraclitus seems to have rejected the Law of the Excluded Middle. In fact, on reviewing statements and ideas attributed to Heraclitus, he sounds very much in resonance with Taoism. The historians of philosophy, G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, summarizing his views, state that according to Heraclitus there exists an “essential unity of opposites,” that “each pair of opposites ...forms both a unity and a plurality”, that the “unity of things...depends upon a balanced reaction between opposites”, and that “the total balance in the cosmos can only be maintained if change in one direction eventually leads to change in the other, that is, if there is unending ‘strife’ between opposites.”¹²⁹ Heraclitus refers to this underlying unity and perpetual balancing of opposites as the “*Logos*,” or the logic of change. The *Logos* of Heraclitus sounds very much like the *Tao*.

In these ideas on the nature of reality, Heraclitus juxtaposes conflict and plurality with harmony and unity. Although Heraclitus is remembered for his conflict theory of time (a view we have already seen expressed in Babylonian myth and Zoroastrianism), the contemporary psychiatrist Hector Sabelli, in his book *Union of Opposites*, argues that Heraclitus not only believed that “War was the father of all things” but that “Harmony was the mother.”¹³⁰ It should be noted that this “union of opposites” is the abstract analogue to the “Hunter” and “Goddess” archetypes and of the masculine and the feminine modes of thinking – of conflict and togetherness.

Empedocles (493 – 433 BCE) also emphasizes the themes of opposition and balance in his theory of reality and time. Starting from a naturalistic perspective, Empedocles argues that there are four fundamental elements – fire, water, air, and earth – of which everything is composed. These four elements are constantly being rearranged by two fundamental forces – love and strife. Love, which he identifies with the goddess *Aphrodite*, brings things together, while

strife, which he connects with the god of war, *Ares*, pulls things apart. Following Parmenides, there is no real becoming or passing away, only rearrangement of the primary elements. Love and strife exist at both a cosmic level and a personal level and respectively represent the “good” and “bad” sides of reality. Hence, discord is bad and togetherness is good, and the soul, as in Zoroastrianism, is the micro-cosmic mirror of the universal battle of good and evil. Further, love and strife oscillate in dominance in life, creating a cyclic nature to time. Balance is achieved, as is also the case in Taoism, through each force repeatedly oscillating in dominance with the other force. The philosophy of Empedocles is a clear expression of the idea that history involves a back and forth swinging between the forces of unity and plurality, peace and war, and love and hate. Yet, because he sees this oscillatory process as cyclic and eternal, there is no resolution or final conquest of one force over the other. Life is forever love and strife, inextricably bound together.¹³¹

Yet, Empedocles does include in his theory of the origin of the universe and humankind a set of ideas that sounds similar in some ways to contemporary evolutionary theory. According to Empedocles, life begins in a haphazard assortment of body parts which randomly combine together in all possible configurations. Some of these configurations are viable, whereas many other configurations are not. Those viable configurations survive, leading to our present array of life forms that function and are adapted to the environment.¹³²

Pulling together several lines of thinking in ancient philosophy and religion, it appears that two different views of reality emerged in ancient times, one which emphasized duality and one which emphasized reciprocity. Plato clearly separated reality into two distinct realms, a philosophy that would be taken up later by both Christianity and Islam. Also, we saw that Zoroaster, as a religious precursor to all later Western religions, divided the world into the supreme forces of good and evil set in opposition to each other, and, similar to Plato, distinguished higher and lower realms of existence, as well as body and spirit. Although Aristotle rejected Plato’s metaphysical dualism, he articulated in his principles of logic, an “either – or” system of thinking. On the other hand, both Taoism in the East and Heraclitus and Empedocles in the West formulated a philosophy that emphasized the interdependency and complementarity of presumed “opposites.” Whereas the Zoroastrian – Platonic line of thinking separated reality, the Taoist – Heraclitian - Empedoclean line treated reality as an interdependent whole. The holistic vision is realized by treating the forces of unity and plurality, harmony and conflict, and love and strife as reciprocities. The archetypes of the Hunter and the Mother, for example, are conceptualized as equal and co-dependent in the latter framework. This sexual or gender interpretation of theories of reality is supported by the historical fact that dualist views of reality tended to be sexist, with the male side clearly dominating the feminine side. The rationalist Greeks and the dualist religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all suppressed the female, in both their societies and their ideologies. The philosophy of Taoism, on the other hand, treated the feminine and the masculine as equal.

These different theories of reality, whether philosophically or religiously inspired, were connected with a variety of ideas regarding the nature of change and time. Parmenides rejected time; Plato gave it a secondary status, and though in the *Timaeus* he refers to time as “the moving image of eternity,” in general he sees time as corruption and chaos, at best only approximating the perfection of eternity. Zoroaster sees time as linear and progressive, leading to the triumph of good over evil, but still, treating the reality of time as below the higher reality of spirit and eternity. Heraclitus sees a *Logos* underlying time, but like the Taoists, sees time as basically rhythmic and cyclic. A common theme among many of these views is that conflict and discord is an essential feature of time, often contrasted with the idea that eternity is harmonious, unified, and peaceful.

Love and war, unity and plurality, and order and chaos are themes that run through ancient mythology and religion. Especially connected with the theme of order and chaos, is the issue of necessity and chance in the flow of time. As noted above, ancient mythologies, in personified and archetypal form, described the passage of time, giving time an ordered and structured reality. As Fraser notes, they provided a sense of stability in a world of change.¹³³ The circle or cycle - a fundamental archetypal form in both Eastern Taoism and the Western Zodiac - depicted time as possessing a necessarily ordered pattern that repeated itself over and over again. The ordered and necessary progression of the circle of time also shows up in Greek mythology in the image of the world river of *Oceanus*, which later transformed into the Greek god *Cronos* and the god of time. Yet the element of chance also appears in both ancient Greek thinking (*Kairos* or lucky coincidence) and later Christian thought (*Fortuna* the blind goddess). And in particular, although the Taoist *Yin-Yang* represents time as an ordered sequence, the *I Ching* acknowledges an irreducible element of chance in understanding the significance of events in life.¹³⁴

The orderly and repeating pattern of the cycle was not the only way in which necessity was conceptualized in ancient religious thinking. **Fate** or **destiny** plays a significant role in most ancient religions, from Egypt and early Hinduism (The Law of Karma) to Greek mythology (*Nemesis* the goddess of necessity), Judaism, and Christianity. The Greek gods, including Zeus, were at times powerless over fate.¹³⁵ As we have seen, the Greek mind wrestled with the idea of fate in its growing awareness and aspiration toward self-determination. Judaism and Christianity derived their concept of necessity from the Judaic idea that God had a plan for the world, and that the events of the world were guided by this plan of God. There was a historical necessity to the events in the world, following from the fall of Adam to the trials of Job and Abraham and the coming of the Messiah.

Hence, long before the emergence of science and modern philosophical thinking, in both religion and mythology, the question was asked, pondered, and debated: Is the future certain or uncertain? Different cultures and religious traditions have seen the future as filled with luck and chance, and conversely, as having a set purpose and direction. As a consequence of these different cultural and religious views there has been, on one hand, a philosophical attitude

throughout history that emphasizes individual control and responsibility over one's future, or on the other hand, another attitude that emphasizes acceptance of one's destiny or even fatalistic resignation.

The most popular historical interpretation concerning the ancient Greeks' view of time is that generally they saw time as either cyclic, or a corruption and decay of something higher, either in the distant past (a Golden Age) or a higher realm (eternity). Yet, there are indications that the Greeks also believed in a progressive theory of time. One central insight on their part that led them to this alternative viewpoint was their discovery of history.

As we saw, the writings of Hesiod contain a mythic account of the origin of the world. Yet, also in his writings we find the "myth of the ages," a historical description of the various ages of humankind preceding his own time. Hesiod clearly describes both advances and regressions in this history, but overall there is a sense of progression from very primitive beginnings to the present. Hesiod also recounts the "**myth of Prometheus**" who stole the secret of fire from the gods. Presumably, prior to this event, humanity existed in a less advanced state. The step forward represented by man's achieving control over fire is, however, the consequence of robbing the gods, rather than a singularly human achievement. Zeus punishes Prometheus for his act, symbolically reflecting the ambivalence and guilt humanity often feels about accomplishment and advancement. Perhaps we are filled with hubris and vanity, believing that we can ascend the ladder of progress and become equal with the gods – this theme we have noted is central to Greek tragedy and their striving for a sense of self-determination. The myth of Prometheus is not the only story in antiquity in which humans are punished for attempting to move upward, become masters of their own fate, and hence perhaps threaten the gods. The story of Eve in *Genesis* is another famous example of this theme – the theme of human hubris. Yet Hesiod also states in his writings that social progress and the growth of civilization can be accomplished through the efforts of humans and the implementation of principles of justice. Thus Hesiod clearly believes that humans have power over their own fate.¹³⁶

There are other ancient Greeks who, in considering the question of humanity's history, see a sense of progress across time. The great historian Thucydides (ca. 455 - 400 BCE), who described the military conflict between Sparta and Athens in his famous *History of the Peloponnesian War*, saw Greek history as involving an advance from a more primitive and barbarous state. Even Plato, in *The Laws* and *The Statesman*, describes humankind as first existing in a state of moral innocence with no art or organized society; as he states it, "Men lacked all tools and all crafts in the early years." Further, describing the process of social and political development from these early beginnings, Plato states that "doubtless the change was not made all in a moment, but little by little, during a long period of time." Plato invokes the metaphor of growth from a seed to describe the progressive advancement of civilization, a concept of growth we have already seen within Aristotle. The seed represents the idea of potential in describing the developmental processes of nature.¹³⁷

As I argued in the opening chapter, historical consciousness is intimately tied to future consciousness. Though prior to the writings of Hesiod and Thucydides there were various mythic historical accounts of the development of humankind and the universe as a whole, according to Watson, modern history begins in the work of these two Greek writers. What Watson emphasizes is that beginning with Hesiod and Thucydides there is an effort to research history, to collect data and evidence, and consider different points of view, rather than simply passing on the ideas of a singular tradition and authority; that is, there is an effort to be empirical and thoughtful in the histories of Hesiod and Thucydides. Further, Watson notes Thucydides in particular as doing away with gods, spirits, and supernatural explanations in his recounting of the past; history becomes naturalistic and secular.¹³⁸ This shift in understanding the past coincides with a similar change in understanding reality as a whole (the naturalistic and logical methods of Greek philosophers and scientists), and opens the door to further discovery unshackled by the dominating influence of tradition and religious authority.

According to the contemporary historian Robert Nisbet, the clearest example of the idea of historical progress to be found in the Classical period is within the book *On the Nature of Things* by the Roman philosopher and poet Lucretius (99 – 55 BCE). Lucretius has been seen as anticipating the modern concept of evolution, for he describes the cosmos as beginning in chance and physical forms coming together through collision and “conformation of atoms” (the order out of chaos theme) from which eventually comes forth life. For Lucretius, different living forms emerged in the primitive beginnings of nature; some survived and some became extinct, depending on their capacity to secure food and protect themselves. Those forms that survived reproduced and passed on their traits to their offspring, through a process that sounds similar to Darwin’s notion of natural selection. When Lucretius comes to the development of humanity, he describes early humans as existing in a hunter – gatherer state without clothes, weapons, fire, huts, or communities, and in general, not possessing any social constraints on their behavior. Slowly – through ingenuity and natural intelligence – humans develop all the different aspects of organized society, technology, and the crafts. For Lucretius, progress is not something stolen from the gods – it is a creation of humanity. This history provided by Lucretius is, of course, speculative, but it is quite striking how much of it comes close to the truth as we understand it today. Also, it is naturalistic.

In the tradition of the Greek naturalist philosophers, Lucretius saw change as due to natural rather than supernatural forces and the will of the gods. What Lucretius adds to this naturalist viewpoint is that progressive change is due to forces in nature. The line of religious thinking running from Zoroastrianism to Judaism and Christianity also articulates a vision of progressive change, but one that is orchestrated by God. Lucretius sees historical progress as due to inherent forces and principles in physical nature. In fact, he turns the question of the relationship of God, nature, and humanity on its head. Instead of gods having created the world and humankind, the physical world is the origin of humankind and it is humanity that, in fear of nature and attempting to comprehend the

causes of things, invents gods as an explanation.¹³⁹ Thus, in Lucretius we see the psychological emancipation and the triumph of the Greek ideal that humans have been and can be, even more so in the future, the masters of their own fate and not simply pawns of the gods.

As Nisbet argues, in the Greeks and those Roman philosophers who were influenced by them, we find the beginnings of the insight that “civilization has advanced, is advancing, and will continue to advance” – which in essence is the modern theory of progress. Although many Greeks saw time as cyclic and filled with either conflict or decay, the idea of progress also can be found in their writings. And given the rise of rationalist, empiricist, and naturalist thinking within ancient Greek science and philosophy, this progressive vision of past, present, and future was not tied to supernatural or mythic thinking. It would though take another two thousand years before this secular progressive mindset would really take hold in the West. In the interim, the West was generally dominated by mythic and religious thought, and a spiritual sense of progress. The beginnings of this religious mindset are usually traced back to the development of Judaism in the ancient Middle East.

Judaism: Prophecy and Monotheism

Greek philosophy and Judaic religion are frequently identified as the two major systems of thought that would influence the subsequent development of Western civilization. Although Judaism and Greek philosophy are often contrasted, as expressing two different modes of thinking about reality, in at least one important respect the two mindsets are in agreement.¹⁴⁰ Both Judaism and Platonic philosophy elevated order above chaos and, in fact, saw a supreme order as the source of all creation. We have already seen this idea expressed in Plato’s philosophy of the abstract eternal forms as the source of all order. In Judaism, the supreme order behind the world was a singular and all powerful God.

Just as the Jews personified their metaphysics of reality in the form of God, they also personified and dramatized their whole system of belief in the form of a collection of stories – a threaded narrative – about their people, their history, their sacred principles, and their relationship with God. (In this sense, the Jews exemplify in their tradition and mode of thinking “mythic consciousness.”) This narrative, written, compiled, and edited by various historical individuals, is the Judaic *Bible* or *Holy Scriptures*, and as it is referred to in Christianity, the “Old Testament” of the *Bible*. The Judaic *Bible* contains stories associated with various famous historical figures, many who probably actually existed and others who were probably fictitious. Among these historical and mythic figures were Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Abraham, Noah, Job, Moses, Daniel, Isaiah, and Joshua. These characters in the *Bible* endure hardship, challenge, disappointment, and at times defeat and conquest by their enemies. They are tempted, punished, and at times beaten into the ground. But throughout the

narrative, a sense of hope, faith, and determination repeatedly rises up again and is expressed in response, if not defiance, to the difficulties and apparent chaos of life. Although the Judaic *Bible* incorporates numerous elements and ideas from ancient Babylonia, Zoroastrianism, Greek culture, and other Middle Eastern influences, an overall distinctive philosophy and sense of direction emerges, emphasizing faith in the future founded upon an ongoing, living covenant with God.¹⁴¹

The traditional starting point for the saga of the Jewish people is the story of Abraham who is instructed by God to sacrifice his son as a demonstration of his faith and obedience. At the last moment before Abraham carries out this act, God speaks to him again, telling him that he does not have to go through with the sacrifice, as he has shown, by his actions and his resolve, his faith and obedience. The drama of such stories in the Judaic *Bible* is to illustrate morals and lessons of life – in this case it is critical to have faith in God. After this test of obedience, God tells Abraham that he will be the father of a new nation of people that eventually will achieve greatness and power. God explains that He and the children of Abraham, as His “chosen people,” will form a covenant. God promises to guide and protect His chosen people if they worship and obey Him. Abraham, once again showing his faith and obedience, agrees to the covenant. Thus the Judaic God makes a promise for the future to Abraham; Abraham demonstrates his faith in his belief that God will make good on his promise, and the subsequent saga of the Judaic people begins.¹⁴²

Polak argues that the idea of a covenant between God and humankind, as a foundation for the future, is the key element in the unique image of the future created within Judaism. If one believes in God, then God will give His blessings and salvation. For Polak, the idea of a covenant places control and responsibility for the future in the hands of the individual. If a person follows the commandments of God, a positive future is secured; arbitrary fate is replaced with human control over destiny. Yet, as Watson points out, although the concept of a covenant with God is a central feature of Judaism, the idea may have been taken from Zoroastrianism where individuals, in choosing between following the good spirit *Ahura Mazda* or the evil spirit *Angra Mainyu* incur, depending on their choice, the consequences of either eternal reward or punishment.¹⁴³

The next major historical figure in Jewish history is Moses (ca. 1300 – 1200 BCE). In the book of *Genesis*, it is recounted that Moses is given the Ten Commandments from God and told to journey to Egypt and lead the Jewish people there out of bondage. (As a recurrent theme in the Jewish historical drama, the Jews are frequently held captive, conquered, or exiled from their homeland by other nations or people.) According to Armstrong, the God of Moses is *Yahweh* – a deity who evokes fear and terror – and in fact, inflicts great destruction and catastrophe on the Egyptians when the pharaoh resists Moses’s request to release the Jewish people. He is a lofty God who stands distant and above humankind and hands down his commandments from on high. But again there is a promise made between God and His people – Moses will lead them out of bondage and they will journey under God’s direction to the “promised land”

and find happiness and fulfillment. Again, God demands loyalty and uncompromising commitment in exchange for a positive future.¹⁴⁴

Another important theme in Judaism we see emerging in the story of Moses is utopianism. An ideal land and nation is envisioned, defined in terms of the ethics and values of Judaism, which will be realized in the future. As Polak notes, this “promised land” will involve the remaking of the earth; further, the idealized Jewish nation of the future will occupy an exalted and central position in the human world.¹⁴⁵ The realization of this utopian future is not only conceptualized as a reward for following the word of God but also a victory of the Jewish people over its numerous worldly oppressors and enemies. Thus, although Jewish utopianism has a spiritual and ethical dimension, it is also has a retaliatory quality. As Watson argues, throughout their early history the Jewish people felt trapped and buffeted about by other nations and empires and their evolving utopian vision of the future expressed a fundamental desire to defeat their enemies and achieve a sense of greatness and recognition.¹⁴⁶

Armstrong argues that even by the time of Moses, the Judaic religion had not completely articulated a thorough-going monotheism. The early Jews acknowledged other gods and goddesses besides *Yahweh*. In fact, the early Jews were probably polytheistic and *Yahweh* only gradually achieved a central or dominant position over time.¹⁴⁷ During the period of Moses, as well as Abraham before him, the Middle East was home to numerous deities and different religious practices. (Recall the various deities of Mesopotamia and Babylon.) In one of His commandments the God of Moses states, as Armstrong translates it, that there should be “no strange gods for you before my face.” This commandment can be interpreted as *Yahweh* demanding allegiance from among the many other deities. According to Armstrong, the “One God” of Judaism did not start off as an all-enveloping deity in the minds of His believers, but rather was in competition with other deities for allegiance. *Yahweh* was warlike, in part as a symbolic expression of His struggle to conquer and defeat the other gods and goddesses of the Middle East. (Thus the early Jewish God embodies the militant and competitive psychology that the Jewish people felt in relation to neighboring cultures.) Watson relates that *Yahweh* was probably originally a god of fertility and fire represented by the bull – which to recall was a popular animistic icon and archetype of aggression associated with the male.¹⁴⁸ Armstrong argues that the early history of the Jewish people shows an ongoing struggle to achieve complete loyalty to *Yahweh* amidst the temptations of other gods and goddesses. According to Armstrong, the early Jews wanted the sense of immanence and holism that derives from polytheistic religion, but *Yahweh* emerged as a transcendent and terrifying God separate from nature and humankind – thus there was an ongoing struggle among the Jewish people to feel a sense of complete allegiance to this one rather aloof God.¹⁴⁹

Shlain has a somewhat different view of Moses and the development of Judaic monotheism. Following traditional thinking, Shlain believes that Moses is, in fact, the starting point of monotheism in Judaism and that the Ten Commandments is a significant first expression of this religious doctrine. It is

worth describing in detail Shlain's views on this topic for his ideas dovetail and connect with several other themes in this chapter.

According to Shlain, a new dimension in religious consciousness became increasingly dominant during the Axial Age which, to recall, is identified as the historical period of approximately 700 to 400 BCE. Shlain emphasizes that during this time intellectual abstractions became progressively more important in religious thinking. He attributes this shift in religious consciousness to the rise of literacy and the creation of the alphabet. For Shlain, during the Axial Age there occurred a change in dominance from the visual image to symbolic language as the preferred way to represent and understand reality. In general, humans began to see and understand the world more through abstract concepts symbolized through written language than through concrete and personified images and visions. In the previous section, I described how Greek philosophy and early science, as revealed in the thinking of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Pre-Socratics, clearly demonstrates a shift in consciousness toward the abstract and what Donald refers to as the "theoretic." Shlain argues that the change in mentality during this time occurred in religious thinking as well as in philosophy, that it was connected with a shift in emphasis from imagery to abstract symbolism, and finally, that it was this transformation that further solidified the decline of the goddess in favor of male centered religions. In Shlain's view, during the Axial Age, any remaining central female deities or goddess cultures - which revered the image - lost power, giving way to law and text-centered male dominated cultures. (Shlain, in fact, traces this ongoing transformation as far back as Hammurabi (died 1750 BCE), king of Babylon and worshipper of the god *Marduk*, who is credited with creating one of the first extensive codes of civil law.)

According to Shlain, the first of the "word-centered" cultures, ancient Judaism, developed a supreme and absolute male God, a monotheistic belief system as opposed to the prevalent polytheisms of the ancient world. Moses presumably lived long before the Axial Age, but for Shlain, Moses anticipates the mode of religious consciousness that would spread around the world in the centuries ahead. The Jews, by the time of Moses, had developed an abstract alphabetic script and, starting with the Ten Commandments, they began to emphasize the printed word and the reading of a sacred text as the primary vehicle for religious understanding.

Shlain interprets God's first commandment to Moses ("I am the Lord thy God...Thou shalt have no other gods before me") as a clear expression of a singular God and as a rejection of the need for a female Goddess as a counterpart to *Yahweh*. Shlain interprets the second commandment ("Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image...") as a rejection of imagery in representing God. Unlike the earlier gods and goddesses with their visual and concrete embodiments, this new God, according to Shlain, had no face. The Judaic God was beyond the image - in fact, He explicitly forbids the making of any image of "any thing" as a way to represent Him. This new God had revealed Himself through symbolic language and had laid down His moral commandments to Moses as abstract rules. This supreme God of Judaism - a male - becomes an abstract "*Logos*" - the "Word" - the logic of the world. And interestingly, as

Shlain notes, nowhere in the Ten Commandments is there a directive or rule concerning loving fellow human beings. Love had been associated with the goddess and the emotional, as opposed to the rational side of life.¹⁵⁰

Reading and writing in alphabetic script are left-brain functions and support and reinforce linear abstract thought. The idea of a single God that transcends all concrete imagery and stands apart from physical reality is a supreme abstraction. The idea of a single unifying God is analogous to the philosophical belief that all of reality could be explained and subsumed under some absolute and unifying principle or law. The idea of a single God connects with the idea of a single absolute truth and a single set of moral principles and, according to Shlain, supported the authoritarian mindset of male dominant religions that arose in the West.¹⁵¹

Shlain places particular importance on the system of representation that humans use in thinking, understanding, and communicating. He believes that the human capacity for abstraction was given a significant boost with the development of a pure alphabetic system of writing. Previously, the earliest forms of writing, found in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China, were all **pictographic** to degrees – representing ideas in stylized visual signs or symbols that resembled in form the objects signified. Shlain argues that, on the other hand, the Jews may have been the first to develop a completely symbolic alphabet, even prior to the Greeks. The Judaic God of *Yahweh* had no face because of the emergence of alphabetic writing and abstract ideas in Judaic thinking where the idea did not require a visual representation of its meaning. Symbolic abstraction led to the codification of laws and the centrality of the text (in this case the earliest books of the Judaic *Bible*) in defining the nature of reality, of morals, and of humanity's meaning and purpose in life.¹⁵²

One essential element in the rise of modern religions was the emergence of central texts or sets of writings associated with each religion. For Judaism there was the *Bible*, for Hinduism there were the early *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, and later the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and for Taoism there was the *Tao Te Ching* and the *I Ching*. Later still, Christianity incorporated the Hebrew *Scriptures* with the New Testament to form the Christian *Bible* and Islam produced the sacred *Koran*, based upon the teachings of Muhammad. The functions of these texts were to provide authoritative statements on the nature of reality and morality, the existence of specific deities, humanity's relationship with these deities, and the origin, history, and future of humanity and the cosmos. These texts generally were comprehensive in scope, as best as their creators understood the world around them, and definitive and authoritative in tone. Although all these texts have generated extensive commentary by both followers and critics down through the ages, in every case the effort has been made to establish a standardized and official version of the text.

Shlain's general historical point is that a new mode of thinking emerged during the Axial Age – the capacity to form abstract ideas without the need for visual representation – and this new mindset significantly influenced and changed how people explained and described reality. Shlain connects this abstract capacity with linear, analytic, and linguistic thought as opposed to the

holistic, insightful, and visual mode of thinking associated with images. Where the image supports the psychological capacity of intuition, the word and abstraction support rationality and logic. According to Shlain, this new abstract and rational mode of consciousness would dramatically affect the future evolution of religion. Religions began to acquire an abstract dimension, above and beyond the narrative, visual, and personified mode of consciousness. This new dimension of thinking asserted itself as the alphabet spread across many parts of the ancient world.

Shlain argues that the two different modes of consciousness have produced significant differences in terms of social behavior. Although one of the main features of religion has been to provide a way to “connect with the whole” – to identify a cosmic meaning and purpose to everyday life and commune with the forces and beings that direct and determine nature and reality – religious belief systems do not necessarily produce peace and togetherness within humanity. Shlain notes, in fact, that image and goddess centered cultures have been much less war-like than abstract, male centered cultures. In the latter type of culture, one who did not accept the belief system adopted by that culture was vilified, killed, or conquered; to refer back to an earlier discussion, there was a strong “us versus them” psychology. On the other hand, pictographic and goddess-centered cultures have been nowhere near so militant and aggressive. Thus, according to Shlain, one of the most often cited weaknesses or flaws in organized religion – its intolerance toward non-believers – is a consequence of a particular culture being too male-centered and abstract in its mindset.

Hence by 500 BCE, two different modes of consciousness influenced human belief systems: the personified, concrete, and visual versus the abstract, logical, and textual. According to Shlain, the first mode of consciousness was mystical and passionate yet more peaceful and tolerant; the second mode was more rational yet paradoxically more militant and intolerant. As modern religions evolved, in both the East and West, these two different mindsets showed up in different cultures with varying degrees of influence. Further, the abstract and logical mode, though, according to Shlain, first appearing in religious thinking, began to separate from and eventually oppose religious belief systems.

To pause for the moment, and reflect and summarize, we see in Shlain’s historical analysis, along with the previously cited nomadic invasions and increasing urbanization theories, another explanation for the shift from goddess to male-centered religions in ancient times. We also see in Shlain a different version of the rise of abstract thinking; in Donald the primary cognitive shift or evolution was from mythic to theoretic thinking, supported by the development of written language, and it was first fully realized in the Greeks; in Shlain the shift was from imagery to abstract symbolism and it was first clearly expressed in Judaism. In general though, there is a consensus that the evolution of human thinking is intimately tied to the development of systems of representation.¹⁵³ (Recall the earlier discussions of cave art and language.) Though Bloom argues that humankind, in general, shows a history of ubiquitous violence and us versus them thinking and behavior, Shlain believes that it is male and left brain dominant cultures that show the greatest amount of intolerance and violence. Finally,

whereas writers such as Watson see the key feature of the Axial Age as a “turning inward,” away from sacrifice, external images, and ritual to find direction and meaning in life, Shlain highlights the shift from image to word as the key element.¹⁵⁴

Although Shlain describes Judaism as predominately left brain and abstract, Judaism clearly includes other important features in its approach to life and mode of consciousness. The Judaic God may not have had a face, but He certainly had a personality. Further, He may have possessed a transcendent and abstract nature, but He was also repeatedly involved in the affairs of humans. *Yahweh*, in fact, was a combination of transcendent and personified qualities, and He was understood both through concrete narrative and metaphysical abstraction. On one hand, idolatry – the worship of images connected with polytheism – was condemned. *Yahweh* was beyond any concrete manifestation or image, and His presence was too terrifying and powerful to behold. Yet, *Yahweh* shows a variety of personified qualities, including jealousy, wrath, and anger, as well as compassion and a sense of justice. The Judaic *Bible* is filled with prophets who encounter God and hear His words and receive His messages and directions. There are numerous stories of these encounters. Although the true nature and form of God presumably can not be grasped or perceived by humans, the Judaic God is repeatedly interacting with His people, revealing features of his personality, and influencing human events throughout history. As with His Babylonian predecessors, He is the embodiment of order – in fact, in Judaism He becomes the abstract *Logos* of all existence - yet He is in a constant earthly fight in the world with the forces of chaos. The Judaic God is both transcendent and immanent – beyond human comprehension yet filled with human qualities and emotions –aloof and yet in the thick of things.¹⁵⁵ As Polak expressed it, the Jewish God is a “reconciliation of opposites,” He is both loved and feared, strange and intimate, and mysterious yet revealing.¹⁵⁶

Judaism is often described as creating a “**salvation history**,” a progressive view of history that eventually leads to salvation, but the road to salvation is a difficult and dramatic uphill climb. The story that emerges from the early history of the Jewish people, as contained in the *Bible*, is that the journey to the promised future is filled with struggle, repeated set-backs, human misery, and much violence. *Yahweh* on various occasions assists His people in their battles with their adversaries, but when His people do not maintain their loyalty to Him – when they break the covenant - they are the ones subjected to His wrath and are punished. (The story of Adam and Eve is the quintessential and archetypal example of disobedience and subsequent punishment.) *Yahweh* is a God of justice and compassion, and justice is repeatedly served in the saga of the Jewish people, but there is much sin, disobedience, and inhumanity along the way that needs to be rectified and overcome.

This image of the future as a difficult and often painful uphill climb has had a powerful impact on the history of Western thinking. Perhaps it is, in fact, a highly realistic and prophetic depiction of how the future of humanity has and will continue to unfold. This view of the future and time though clearly owes

something to the ancient Mesopotamians and Babylonians with their emphasis on the struggle of order and chaos in the shaping of history.

Pivotal to the development of their salvation history were the writings of the great Jewish prophets (“One who speaks on God’s behalf”), including Elijah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah.¹⁵⁷ Presumably inspired by God, many of the Jewish prophets foretold of coming events in the future, in particular, pertaining to the future of the Jewish people. The Jews, of course, were not the only people in the ancient world who experienced revelations of the future; the Greeks, for example, often consulted “oracles” who presumably had divinely inspired visions of the future as well. But the Jewish tradition is especially associated with prophecy and revelation as an essential foundation to its beliefs about the future. A key feature of this mode of future consciousness is that the future is “revealed” or presented to the individual, whether in word or vision; the oracle or prophet does not actively reason or think out the future – they are more like a receptacle of knowledge of the future. According to Polak, the prophet is also important in Judaism in that he serves the role of a revolutionary, calling people to rise up, change their ways, and create a different world; the prophet challenges the status quo and makes everyone responsible for contributing to the creation of a better tomorrow.¹⁵⁸

One of the most important prophets was Isaiah. Interestingly, it is a common view that there were actually two different writers who contributed to the book of Isaiah: A first Isaiah who began writing around 740 BCE and a second Isaiah who lived perhaps 200 years later. Watson states that the first Isaiah, in following the prophets before him, focused on inner spiritual and moral development and a turning away from the materialistic and sensual world. Further, Isaiah predicted an age of peace in the future if people followed the spiritual path of God, and even prophesized, according to some interpreters, the coming of a Messiah who would lead the Jewish people into the age of peace. As Watson notes, this description of the future gives history a linear and progressive quality.¹⁵⁹

Armstrong contends that the Jewish belief in an absolute monotheism only appears in the writings of the second Isaiah. She states that the God of the second Isaiah had risen beyond whatever polytheistic elements remained in Judaic thinking and stood above the world and all creation. Isaiah saw the Judaic God as the creator of the world and he clearly expressed the view that this God is the only God – all other deities are false. It is this one God who conquered chaos in the past and will conquer chaos in the future. It is this one God who gives hope and purpose to the world.¹⁶⁰ As stated in the second Isaiah,

“No god was formed before me,
nor will be after me.
I, I am Yahweh,
there is no other savior but me.”

A number of authors, including the prophets, contributed to the writing of the Judaic *Bible*. One set of writings within the *Bible*, attributed to the priestly

tradition in Judaic thought, was compiled and finalized in the period 600 to 500 BCE, and has become known as the “P” collection or component of the *Bible*.¹⁶¹ The famous opening chapter of *Genesis*, describing the creation, is generally believed to have been written by “P.” In this description of God’s creation of the world, God has become absolutely transcendent to the world and no image or concrete likeness of Him is possible. God wills or thinks the world into existence apparently out of nothing. The opening of *Genesis* is a creation of the Axial Age.

If the opening of *Genesis* solidifies Judaic monotheism, for it is a single God who has made everything, it also further reinforces the dualist dimension of Judaic metaphysics. God is clearly separate from His creation and the world of time. We have already seen that Plato, in describing a realm of eternal abstract forms that gives the world order, created a dualism of the eternal and the temporal. This same type of dualism emerges in Judaism, for God is eternal, non-physical, and the source of all order and creation. Further, the Judaic God is self-caused, whereas the world is dependent upon His existence. The dualist elements of Judaism and Platonism would come together and reinforce each other in Christianity. In understanding how this dualist metaphysics applies to the time and the unfolding of the future, the important point to see is that the flow of time was initiated and is being orchestrated from a separate and higher distinct realm of existence.

Still, the God of Judaism, though standing above creation, as noted, was routinely involved in the events of the world, and this involvement in the world clearly comes through in the idea of a Messiah that became increasingly more important in later Judaic thought. Throughout Jewish history, Yahweh repeatedly promised his people victory over their enemies and the establishment of a Jewish nation. The prophecy and promise of a Messiah, who would lead the Jewish people to final victory and salvation on the earth, was a personified expression of this general belief that with God’s help and direction His people would triumph in the end. This prophecy of conflict and victory in the future can be compared with the Zoroastrian idea of a final battle between the followers of the good God *Ahura Mazda* and the followers of the evil spirit *Angra Mainyu*. And as Watson argues, the idea of a Messiah is probably Zoroastrian as well.

Aside from the growing importance of the Messiah, Watson and Polak describe other important changes that occurred in Judaic thinking during the 500 years preceding the birth of Christ. For one thing, the Messiah evolved from a human-like figure to a more supernatural and spiritual being, who not only promised victory on earth, but an eternal paradise as well. The future and the coming of a utopian paradise acquired a spiritual dimension – Polak refers to this change as the “eschatological shift.” In general, new ideas on the future, of heaven and hell, of punishment and reward in an afterlife, and of Satan enter the picture after the Jewish people encountered Zoroastrianism during their exile in Babylon. Also, the idea of resurrection, another Zoroastrian concept, appears around 160 BCE. Further, Watson states that the Judaic *Bible* only acquired the status of divinely inspired text possessing absolute authority after 500 BCE. Although Shlain argues for an earlier date, Watson contends that the written word of the *Holy Scriptures* only become central to Judaic faith during the period

500 to 200 BCE – it was only by then that the pieces of the Judaic *Bible* were put together into an integrated and standardized whole.¹⁶²

Christianity: The Union of Opposites and Augustine’s Vision of Universal Progress

The story of the life of Jesus and his teachings is recounted in the first four books of the New Testament – the *Gospels* of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. All four of these disciples, who wrote their *Gospels* (ca. 60 to 110 AD) long after the life and crucifixion of Jesus, believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah sent by God to bring salvation, both spiritual and earthly, to humanity. Yet in spite of the rather rigid orthodoxy that would later emerge in Christian doctrine, the early history of Christianity was filled with numerous differences of opinion over the exact nature and identity of Jesus, what he meant by what he said, and his relationship with the one supreme God of Judaism. Christianity evolved over time.

The central doctrine of Christianity is that Jesus Christ was God incarnated. This idea that God could take on human form was a common belief in ancient religion and myth. God is humanized and made immanent.¹⁶³ The resurrection of Jesus - of God rising from the dead - which is one of the central “proofs” of the divinity of Jesus, was another common theme throughout ancient history as we have seen illustrated in the stories of *Osiris* and *Dionysius*. God has the power of life over death – God can transcend death. It is not that clear though whether Jesus ever explicitly claimed that he was God. He did reputedly say that he was “one with the Father,” but he also refers to the Father as someone he serves and obeys. There was also great controversy over the resurrection in the time following the life of Jesus. Not all followers of his teachings believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. The debate among Christians over the divinity of Jesus and his resurrection continued for centuries after his death, and was not made part of official doctrine till the fourth century AD.

As its beliefs and practices coalesced and solidified in the following years, Christianity combined oppositional if not contradictory ideas and themes. First, consider the prophecy of the Messiah. Jesus of course was a Jew, and according to Matthew, a direct descendent of Abraham and Daniel. Although there is some historical dispute on this point, Jesus appears to have believed that he was the fulfillment of the prophecy of the Messiah - (as he states he was “sent by the Father”) - but his vision and message, in important ways, differed considerably in spirit from the Judaic prophecy.¹⁶⁴ The Jews believed that the Messiah would lead them in an earthly battle against their oppressors and enemies and establish a permanent Jewish nation. Jesus, on the other hand, did not attempt to lead the Judaic people in a physical war against their Roman oppressors. Instead he preached love and forgiveness, even against one’s enemies, and though he apparently believed in a coming earthly utopia, he emphasized a spiritual and

“other worldly” salvation – a union with the “Father” in Heaven. Paul, in fact, came to especially highlight this spiritual meaning of salvation in his interpretation of the teachings of Jesus. Hence, the prophesized future of Judaism transformed from an earthly reward to a heavenly reward in Christianity and the road to salvation was through love, rather than war and violence.

Christianity added the earthly battle to its teachings in the final book of the *New Testament*, the *Revelation to John* (ca. 90-95 AD). As prophesized to John, Christ would return to earth in a “Second Coming” and lead believers in a great final conflict against non-believers and the forces of Satan. Hence, although Christianity begins with the idea of a spiritual salvation through love, it ends up combining this idea with the notion of a battle between good and evil that will result in both an earthly and spiritual victory. This final battle of Armageddon sounds very much like the prophecy of Zoroaster. In the “Final Judgment,” those who believe in God are rewarded with both an earthly paradise followed by an eternal heavenly reward, whereas those evil souls and non-believers are damned to Hell and eternal punishment. Again, this sounds very much like the prophecy of Zoroaster.

These two visions of the future – of an earthly utopia versus a spiritual salvation – are according to Polak, two fundamental, yet disparate lines of thought that run through the history of Christianity, from its beginnings up through the Middle Ages. Polak sees the earthly utopian vision as a continuation of Judaic thinking, and contends that the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, significantly reinforced by the book of *Revelation*, fall more in line with this version of Christianity. On the other hand, Polak sees the Gospel of John and the epistles of the Apostle Paul (3-67 AD) as emphasizing the spiritual vision of Christianity.¹⁶⁵ Watson argues that even Jesus, aside from his spiritual vision, anticipated the establishment of a “Kingdom of God” on the earth, and Jesus believed that he would rule in this new earthly kingdom.¹⁶⁶ As Polak states it, in the formative period of Christianity, the expression of “Kingdom of God” had both a spiritual and materialist meaning.

Early Christians believed that the coming earthly Kingdom of God was imminent. Jesus seems to have believed that it would occur either in his lifetime or soon thereafter; Jesus spoke with a sense of urgency regarding the future. With the death of Jesus and his reported resurrection, his early followers expected his return and the establishment of his earthly kingdom at any moment. According to Polak, Paul in his earlier writings seems to expect the return of Jesus very soon. Yet, as the years passed, Polak states that the tone of Paul changed, from urgency to patience. The values of faith and hope in the future – “of conviction in things not seen” – become paramount in Paul’s writings.¹⁶⁷

As Paul developed his views on the significance of Jesus, he also created a new vision of history and the future. Whereas in Judaism, the key event in the future was the anticipated coming of the Messiah, for Paul, the Messiah had come, marking a watershed point in human history. We were now entering a Post-Messiah period. A new covenant with Christ had been established and it was up to Christians to model the way of life that Jesus had exemplified. No longer emphasizing the imminent return of Christ and the creation of a Kingdom

of God on earth, Christians, in living the life of Christ, should look forward to a spiritual reward and eternal life in heaven. And further, as Watson argues, Paul universalized Jesus and the idea of the Messiah. No longer was the Messiah simply the savior of the Jewish people; Jesus the Messiah was now the savior for all humankind. Finally, for Paul, all of humankind was in need of salvation – we were all fallen from the grace of God – and it was only through Jesus – his life, death, and resurrection – that humankind had been saved. Humanity has only a hopeful future due to the intervention of God in the form of Jesus, the Messiah.¹⁶⁸

The first combination of opposites described above, of an earthly utopia achieved through war versus a spiritual salvation realized through love and forgiveness (as well as faith in Jesus Christ), is connected to a second pair of contradictory themes – the masculine versus the feminine within Christianity. Although Judaic thinking attributed compassion and love to their God, there were equally strong elements of retributive punishment and outright violence connected with God. *Yahweh* evoked “fear and trembling” in both believers and non-believers. According to Shlain, Jesus preached a much more feminine set of values than the masculine values associated with *Yahweh* and Judaism. Jesus stressed non-violence, mercy, compassion, sacrifice, love, nurturance, kindness to the weak and sickly, and the equality of all humans - all feminine values. (Polak identifies love, forgiveness, justice, equality, mercy, justice, non-violence, and sharing as the “new” Christian values.¹⁶⁹) For Shlain, Judaism, as expressed through such ideas as a judgmental God who stood on high, handed down abstract absolute laws, punished those who transgressed, and inflicted violence upon His enemies, was extremely masculine in its mindset and practices. If the worship of the goddess had steadily lost ground with the coming of male sky gods and male dominated social systems, Jesus represents a return of goddess values, albeit expressed through the voice of a male.¹⁷⁰

In some respects the feminine values that Shlain identifies in the teachings of Jesus align with similar values in Buddhism. As Watson notes, a common scholarly argument is that there is considerable overlap between the ideas of Buddha and Jesus. Both stressed an otherworldly attitude and an ethics of love, opposed violence, and renounced earthly satisfactions. Shlain, in fact, would agree that Buddha’s teachings contained many feminine values.¹⁷¹ The ideas of Buddha and Jesus emphasize a much less materialistic and much more peaceful and loving approach toward the creation of the future than the philosophy of power, greed, and conquest that has dominated much of human history.

Yet in other respects, Christianity, even in its earliest times, was not entirely feminine in tone. The crucifixion brought into the imagery of Christianity pain, suffering, violence, and death. The resurrection of Jesus, expressing the recurrent theme throughout Western mythology of life arising out of death, was connected with a male deity, the Father, who presumably raised Christ from the dead. The power of rebirth, such as in the story of *Isis* and *Osiris*, had been throughout the beginnings of ancient history generally associated with the female and the goddess. In the Christian story of the resurrection, that power has been usurped by the male sky god.

Even more so, after the life of Jesus, Christianity increasingly became male dominant in its thinking and practices. Within the emerging Christian world the male achieved and pretty much maintained a position of authority over the woman in sexual matters, and male controlled social hierarchies ruled the public and religious spheres of life.¹⁷² According to Shlain, the feminine side of Christianity was progressively suppressed in the centuries following the death of Jesus. Shlain sees Paul, the primary architect of Christian religion, as greatly responsible for this shift in focus. Although Paul believed that the message of Christ and salvation was open to everyone and not just some chosen people, he established that the church hierarchy be run exclusively by men. Paul argued that the woman should be subservient to the man. Shlain states that although in his writings Paul elevated love as the greatest virtue above even hope and faith, Paul may not have practiced very well what he preached in his interactions with women. In describing the Holy Trinity, no room was made for the feminine side of God – the Father and the Son were clearly male and the Holy Ghost was identified with a gender neutral term. Mary, the mother of God, was relegated to a lower position in the Christian hierarchy.¹⁷³ So although on one hand, following the teachings of Jesus, Christianity professed a philosophy of love, forgiveness, and the equality of all human beings in the eyes of God, Christianity created a masculine deity, a male-dominant social and religious order, and a God who, in the Last Judgment after the final battle of good and evil, behaves as the stern unforgiving patriarch and condemns the souls of non-believers to Hell for all eternity.

Another combination of opposites that emerges in Christianity is between the intuitive and the rational. From a cognitive perspective, Shlain sees the values taught by Jesus as more right-brain than left-brain – more all embracing and holistic than divisive. Shlain connects left-brain thinking with analysis, literacy, abstraction, dualism, and social hierarchies whereas right-brain thinking he connects with intuition, concrete imagery, holism, and equality.¹⁷⁴ Christianity contains strong elements of both modes of consciousness.

First, let us consider the right-brain dimension of Christianity. The philosophy of Jesus offered an alternative to and escape from the left brain dominant rationality prevalent in Rome. According to Shlain, as Rome became more rational and literate, as its power grew, its people became more alienated, individualistic, and filled with angst. As Armstrong describes the Romans during the time of Jesus, they were conservative, pragmatic, action-oriented, and distrustful of change. They believed progress lay in a return to a Golden Age in the past and they were attracted to Greek rationalist philosophy as providing the answers to the fundamental questions of life. Because of their rationalist bias, the Romans initially saw Christianity as mad and irrational. Yet having been exposed to numerous cultures and different ideas, the Romans were also increasingly restless. Although they espoused practicality and reason, many of them were drawn to the mystic rites of *Bacchus* (the Roman counterpart of *Dionysius*) and *Orpheus*. **Orphism**, a mystical cult going back to the Greeks, involved the practice of rituals that presumably would rid the self of evil. All told, feeling trapped in the confines of practicality, individualism, and reason, many Romans

felt the need for redemption and salvation through the mystical. The right brain holistic philosophy of Jesus – of love, community, fellowship, and the heart – which shared some important features with Orphism, offered an alternative to Greco-Roman rationality, practicality, and extreme individualism.¹⁷⁵

But again, after Jesus, Christianity integrates opposite elements into its philosophy, increasingly becoming more left-brain in its thinking and practices. Although the inspirational starting point of Christianity is the person of Jesus, who wrote nothing in his life and spoke in concrete metaphors and parables, the written doctrine of Christianity was created by Paul. Paul was a prolific and articulate writer and a grand theoretician – left brain qualities and strengths. In the battle in the fourth century AD between the Gnostic Christians, who were egalitarian, metaphorical, mystical, and intuitive, and the Orthodox Christians, who were dogmatic, rational, linear, literal, and guilt motivated, the Orthodox Christians won.¹⁷⁶

As Christianity evolved in the centuries after Jesus, it incorporated various elements – often opposing elements of Greek philosophy – of both right and left brain thinking. Although Plato stood for the supremacy of reason, to recall, there was a mystical side to him as well. Early Christians, influenced by the ideas of Plato, attempted to combine both Platonic rationalism and mysticism with Christianity. They also incorporated Plato's dualism of matter and spirit into their religion. For example, Justin (100 – 165 AD) believed that Jesus was the incarnation of divine reason – of the Greek idea of the *Logos* of the world. (As stated in the opening lines of the *Gospel* of John, "In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God.") Clement (150 – 215 AD) was a strong advocate and follower of Plato, whom he believed was a prophet. Conceptualizing life in dualistic terms, Clement saw an ongoing conflict between the pull of passions and the discipline needed to contemplate and know God.¹⁷⁷ Clement also thought that Jesus was the *Logos*, and if one followed his practices and precepts, one would become God-like and in resonance with the divine *Logos*. Another early Christian writer, Origen (185 – 254 AD), thought that through contemplation the soul could advance in knowledge of God and transform into the divine. The Gnostic Christians, sounding very Platonic, believed that the physical world was an imperfect emanation of a perfect God and through intuitive (right brain) processes (as opposed to reason) could know God. In general, many early Christians thought that through the contemplation of God – His *Logos* incarnated and revealed within Jesus – one could liberate oneself from the body and connect with the absolute spiritual "One." This deprecation of the body and elevation of the spirit and mind was clearly Platonic.¹⁷⁸

The rational versus the mystical is another opposition within Christianity. Orthodox Christianity identified with the rational and literate elements of Greek philosophy, whereas Gnostic Christianity identified with the mystical dimension of Greek philosophy. Although Gnostic Christianity was eventually defeated by Orthodox Christianity, in subsequent centuries, both the mystical and the rational aspects of Christianity would continue to flourish. Christian theologians, especially by the time of Scholasticism in the High Middle Ages, made great

efforts to rationally prove the existence of God and articulate and defend Christian doctrine through reason and analysis. On the other hand, there was the contrary line of thinking in Christianity that God could not be captured through reason and could not be described in terms of earthbound human concepts. God must be “experienced” and this experience transcends normal human understanding. In particular, there are various mysteries, for example, the “Holy Trinity,” that defy rational human understanding. This rejection of reason and rational categories of understanding as a way to know God has a long history, going back to early Judaism.¹⁷⁹

The dualism of spirit and the physical body in Christianity points to another interesting combination of opposites in Christian thinking. The central doctrine of Christianity is that Jesus Christ is God, in some deep sense identical with the eternal transcendent God that created the world. Somehow God and man are united within the personhood of Jesus. This belief brings together the idea of immanence – that God is with us in the world – with the idea of transcendence – that God is beyond the world. In Christianity, God is both beyond the world and yet within the world. This doctrine of the divinity of Jesus Christ also connects man and God. As described earlier, the Hindu belief in the identification of *Brahman* with *Atman* is one that also unites individual souls with the universal soul. In Christianity this identification of the universal spirit with an individual human is limited to one person, Jesus Christ, but still, the dualism of God and humanity is overcome in the reality of Jesus Christ. Christ bridged the presumed gulf between God and humanity and the world.¹⁸⁰ All told, although on one hand Christianity emphasizes the dualism of the spiritual and the physical, it attempts to unite the heavenly and the earthly in the person of Jesus Christ.

Another combination of opposites within Christianity concerns its offer of spiritual salvation to all humanity, on one hand, and the tyrannical intolerance that emerged in its doctrine as the centuries went by. For Paul, the message of Jesus was for all humanity, and not just some chosen people. According to Paul, Jesus had come to save the world and not just the Jews. Yet, as Christianity transformed from a minority religious practice, persecuted by the Romans, into the official religion of the Roman Empire as established by Constantine around 330 AD, it aggressively attacked and pushed out all pagan practices and beliefs within Europe and the Mediterranean world. (This is ironic since many Christian beliefs, such as the virgin birth, are pagan in their origin.)¹⁸¹ Christianity’s professed love and openness to all people transformed into an increasingly aggressive effort to convert all people to its belief system. Its good news that God had sent His Son to save the world turned into an absolute “Truth” that negated all previous beliefs. The feminine and right brain qualities of love and inclusiveness became the masculine and left brain qualities of “us versus them” and the conquest of all non-believers. What was intended to unite actually generated much divisiveness. It is, in fact, a fascinating feature of monotheistic religions that although the idea of a single God is intended to envelop and unite, it invariably creates conflict and war. The “One” can not tolerate the “Other”, and there always seems to be an “Other.”

Of special significance to understanding the evolution of future consciousness within religion, Christianity attempts to fuse disparate concepts regarding the nature of time. For the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould, Christianity attempts to synthesize the idea that time is a sequence of unique events with the idea that time is lawful. The history of humanity as recounted in the *Bible* traces a story of distinctive and unique events, and in particular, the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ as a singular and special event, never to be repeated again, that defines the direction of history. Yet, the *Bible* also expresses the cyclical and lawful theory of time as found, for example, in the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, where it is stated “that there is nothing new under the sun.”¹⁸²

According to Nisbet, Christianity combines the Greek idea of natural growth – that time involves the realization or actualization of what is potential – with the Judaic idea that history is guided and follows a necessary sequence. Both the Greeks and the Jews saw a teleological element to time, but to recall, Aristotle believed that the “telos” of change was inherent within nature. The Jews saw the “telos” of history as guided from God above. For the Christians, as expressed in the writings of Paul, the flow of events was both natural and necessary – intrinsic to the make-up of things yet determined by God. God had so designed the world that it would develop or unfold in a particular direction.¹⁸³

The Christian theory of time connects with and attempts to synthesize both past and future and eternity and time. God’s plan of salvation, “*oikonomia*,” through the death and resurrection of Jesus, though realized in time, was presumably pre-figured for all eternity in the mind of God. The crucifixion was foreseen by God in eternity. The conflict of good and evil and the triumph of God over evil is both an eternal pre-figuration and yet it is manifested and worked out, with great struggle, through time. (Recall Plato’s comment that “time is the moving image of eternity.”) Within this metaphysical scheme, past and future are connected as well. The meanings of past events become revealed through later events. Human sin and disobedience to God, such as in the story of the Garden of Eden, sets the stage for the eventual redemption of humankind through Christ. Judaic prophecies and the struggles of the Jewish people set the stage for the coming of the Messiah. Even the rebellion of Satan serves an eventual purpose, for without an evil one to tempt Eve leading to the “fall of man,” there would be no need for the coming of Christ.¹⁸⁴

A critical problem within early Christian thinking was how to reconcile the apparently contradictory beliefs that God is a one (monotheism) with the belief that Jesus Christ was God.¹⁸⁵ This contradiction was “solved” through the concept of the Holy Trinity. In 325 AD, in an attempt to reconcile various opposing camps of Christian thinking, Christian bishops at the Council of Nicaea established as official church doctrine the idea that Jesus Christ was God (as one of the three “persons” of the Holy Trinity), that God had created the world “*ex nihilo*” (out of nothing), and that because of inherent frailties and limitations, humanity and the world needed God and his eternal *Logos* to be saved.¹⁸⁶ The imperfect world required a perfect God. In a sense, the doctrine of the Trinity is an effort to synthesize the monotheistic and polytheistic in a mystical union.

Setting the direction for much of later Christian thinking, St. Augustine (354 – 430 AD) is the Christian theologian who is most well known for emphasizing the fundamental imperfections of humanity. Yet he also clearly articulated a linear and progressive view of human history and provided the theological foundation for Christian millennialism in centuries to follow. Augustine combines and synthesizes the antithetical themes of human sin and guilt with hope and the inspirational dream of eventual human perfection. Again we see in Christianity this effort to connect and unite opposites, and the writings of Augustine are a paradigm case. Augustine's impact on Christian philosophy has been immense; as Armstrong notes, next to Paul, Augustine was the most influential writer and thinker in Christian history.¹⁸⁷

Augustine sets the stage for his theory of human history and the future in his doctrine of "**Original Sin**." Since Adam and Eve disobeyed God's prohibition against eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, they fell from grace and innocence and were expelled from the Garden of Eden. This sin of Adam and Eve also irrevocably tarnished the souls of all their descendents – all humanity thereafter is born in a state of sin transmitted through generations from our ultimate parents Adam and Eve. Thus human history begins in a "**Great Fall**" and according to Augustine, because of this fall into sinfulness, humanity needs to be saved and redeemed by God. After the fall, humanity became a sick and suffering creature, a victim of its own freedom of choice, and helpless to do anything to change matters.¹⁸⁸ The guilt over human vanity, first articulated in the myth of Prometheus, is fully realized in Augustine. Humanity needs God to realize a better future – there is no other way.

Sex, the body, and women all acquire a bad name in the writings of Augustine and he uses his doctrine of Original Sin to support his negative views of physical sexuality and women. Augustine believed that Original Sin was passed on through the semen of the father. Sex therefore was the vehicle through which the sinfulness of humanity was transmitted. In his *Confessions*, Augustine describes how early in his life he was incessantly and powerfully tempted by his sexual urges. Sexual desire, an expression of the body, becomes the great adversary in Augustine's spiritual quest, and women were the source of this evil temptation. Of course, the ultimate temptress who first led humanity into sin was a woman – Eve. Influenced by the dualist ideas of Plato, Augustine sees the urges of the body, which he strongly associates with sexuality and women, as the lower and sinful reality of humankind, and the life of spirit, transcendent to the body and free of the carnal influences of women, as the ethically superior realm of existence. The feminine and the procreative power of the goddess are clearly denigrated and suppressed in Augustine.

Having established the fall of man, the resultant gulf between humanity's sinfulness and God's perfection, and the ethical dualism of the body and the spirit, Augustine develops his theory of the future of humankind as a rise from corruption and imperfection toward perfection and Godliness, all with the necessary involvement of God. Augustine clearly connects humanity's past with humanity's future. In his book *The City of God* he describes two alternative "cities" or ways of life for humankind. One is the "City of Man" ruled by physical

desires, human choices, and self-love. It is the way of sin. The other city is the “City of God,” a realm founded on the love of God where humankind follows the teachings of God. The “City of Man” leads to hell; the “City of God” leads to heaven. The unfolding of history is a struggle between the “City of Man” and the “City of God.” The ultimate goal of humankind for Augustine is the abandonment and destruction of the “City of Man” and the complete realization on earth of the “City of God.”¹⁸⁹

Augustine strongly attacks the cyclical theory of time and instead argues that time is fundamentally progressive. He believes that God created time (the Platonic idea that eternity creates time) and set by design an objective linear direction to time. He believes that this developmental process within time is irreversible and controlled by God. Augustine expresses great confidence in a positive future for humankind, for he has faith in God’s ultimate plan, believing that the historical development of humanity will culminate in a golden age of happiness on the earth. Synthesizing past and future, Augustine sees the developmental process of humankind as moving through a series of epochs or stages, advancing from the most primitive and infantile at the beginning of human history to the most elevated and mature at the end of time. Augustine aligns the six epochs in his history with different periods and significant events described in the *Bible* from Adam to Noah to Abraham and eventually to the appearance of Christ. Augustine believed he lived in the sixth epoch of human history. Though Augustine anchors his history to people and events in the Judeo-Christian world, he wants to include all of humanity in this developmental process – the “Unity of Mankind” doctrine in Augustine. All of humanity is moving forward. In the spirit of Christian openness, all humanity can be saved.

Although according to Augustine God sets the direction of time, time is not a simple and peaceful linear ascent. Augustine supports a conflict theory of progress and time. The developmental process of history involves a fundamental ongoing conflict between the two cities – of God and Man - and the forces of good and evil. (We have another paradox and combination of opposites here – God creates and controls time, yet time involves a conflict between opposing forces.) Augustine believed that the conflict of good and evil would continue through the sixth epoch, but would finally be resolved in the future in a seventh epoch or day. He predicts in the final resolution of the conflict the conversion of Jews to Christianity, the coming of the Anti-Christ, the culminating battle of Armageddon, the second coming of Christ, the destruction of evil, and the burning and renewal of the earth. He also seems to believe that the bodies of those humans who make it through the great conflagration will be transmuted and purified – “renewed in their flesh” – and that peace will be achieved on earth under the reign of a triumphant God. This utopian reality - the “**Millennium**,” or thousand year rule of Christ on earth - will precede the eventual ascension of souls into heaven and eternity on the eighth day and will be a time of total human equality, freedom, tranquility, security, and affluence.

On one hand Augustine describes the developmental history of humankind as an “ascension of mind over matter” – his dualist philosophy turned into a theory of progress. He states, “The education of the human race,

represented by the people of God, has advanced, like that of an individual, through certain epochs or, as it were, ages, so that it might gradually rise from earthly to heavenly things, and from the visible to the invisible.” Yet he also seems to believe that progress throughout history, and as most definitely realized on the seventh day, involves both material-earthly and spiritual advance. Human bodies are transformed and perfected and a society on earth is created that embodies all the ideal earthly social and political virtues. As Nisbet argues, Augustine’s view of progress, as well as that of many Christian thinkers both before and after him, is natural and “worldly” as well as sacred and “other worldly.” Again, quoting Augustine, “And by this universal conflagration, the qualities of the corruptible elements which suited our corruptible bodies shall utterly perish, and our substance shall receive such qualities as shall, by a wonderful transmutation, harmonize with our immortal bodies so that, as the world itself is renewed to some better thing, it is fitly accommodated to men, themselves renewed in their flesh to some better thing.”¹⁹⁰ Hence, Augustine continues the dual themes of earthly utopia and spiritual salvation in Christianity.

Although Augustine created a grand history and future vision for all humanity, he also focused on the individual soul and individual salvation. In his general theory for all humankind, the future is set and there is a grand purpose to it all, but for each individual, the future will be a matter of choice. Augustine emphasizes the dimension of free will in determining one’s future. Still he stacks the deck on this point, for the choice each individual has is between eternal damnation in hell and eternal happiness in heaven. Where is the choice in this? Polak contends that in the centuries ahead, Augustine’s emphasis on temptation, evil, eternal damnation, the inherent sinfulness of humanity, and free choice created an obsession with death and hell in the minds of medieval Christians.¹⁹¹

After Augustine, many Christians believed that there had been progress through human history and that a “golden age” lay ahead for humanity.¹⁹² According to Nisbet, medieval Christians believed in both an earthly paradise and a heavenly paradise in the future. Polak though sees the spiritual and material visions as two contrasting and often competing lines of thought through the Middle Ages. For Polak, the spiritual vision tended to emphasize the idea of destiny, whereas the earthly utopian vision stressed humanity’s ability to shape the future.¹⁹³

Yet many early Christians, continuing through Augustine and into the Middle Ages, saw the Second Coming of Christ as imminent. The Apocalypse was around the corner and there was a sense of urgency connected with time.¹⁹⁴ Hence, although the Christians, especially as expressed in the writings of St. Augustine, believed in both spiritual and material progress and a more advanced and better world existing in the future, they did not have a sense of deep time in the future. The same was true about their view of the past. The world, according to the chronology of people and events described in the *Bible*, was not that old; according to most estimates it had existed a mere five thousand years. As Polak notes there were numerous and varied predictions throughout the Middle Ages regarding when “the world would end,” but such predictions tended to be shortsighted. As one example, based on various references in the *Bible*, in the

year 532 AD it was predicted that the world would end in another 271 years.¹⁹⁵ As far out as people could imagine into the future, there was the prophesized millennium of the City of God on earth, which would last but a thousand years after the Apocalypse and the battle of Armageddon.

Although there was considerable debate and theological controversy in Europe during the Middle Ages, in general, Christian ideas about reality and the future dominated European thinking during this period.¹⁹⁶ The central concern about the future during this time was the coming “Kingdom of God,” whether conceived in more earthly or spiritual – other worldly terms.

Interestingly, the expression “the Middle Ages” was only first used during the fifteenth century as a retrospective designation to cover the period between Roman times and what we would now call the Renaissance. In contemporary historical thinking, the Middle Ages is usually divided into the early Middle Ages (400 – 1000 AD), which encompasses the period in Europe referred to as the “Dark Ages,” and the high Middle Ages (1000 – 1300 AD). In this chapter, specifically dealing with the growth of Christianity, I will end my discussion with the early Middle Ages and the “Dark Ages.” In the next chapter, in describing the emergence of modern views of the future, I will begin with the high Middle Ages, which in fact, according to recent historical scholarship, is the actual starting point of Western modernism.¹⁹⁷

In certain important respects, according to Watson, the “Dark Ages” in Europe were indeed dark. Compared to modern times, there was little sense of individuality; art, invention, and trade were significantly impaired, and the times were dangerous, unjust, and relatively unchanging. Illiteracy was high and the Christian church, in various ways, suppressed free and independent thinking and scientific and naturalistic inquiry. It was only through the word of God, as determined by Church officials, that the truth could be found. Because of the high rate of illiteracy and the scarcity of books, including the Christian *Bible*, not that many people actually read the *Bible*. In general, explanations of events in the world through natural causes were rejected in favor of explanations in terms of the will or purposes of God. In spite of some efforts to preserve them, many collections of books were burned and destroyed, and there was a general suspicion and antagonism toward the printed word.¹⁹⁸ To whatever degree people thought about the future, it was approached through theological dogma and blind faith. The emphasis on independent thinking, rationality, and naturalistic science inherited from the Greeks was repressed, if not lost in Europe, for countless centuries.

According to Shlain, after Augustine’s moral attack on the woman, during the “Dark Ages” of Christian Europe, the feminine side of Christianity made a strong but temporary comeback. The worship and veneration of Mary increased. Cathedrals were dedicated to her. Numerous sightings of her were recorded. Still, Mary had been de-feminized, being robbed of her goddess power of sexual procreation. She was the “Virgin Mary.” Also during the Dark Ages, the figure of Satan became more prominent. The image of a horned, serpent-headed and serpent-tailed red creature came into being – clearly an association between the animal nature within us and sin and evil. After the Dark Ages, when Europe

entered a new age of learning, literacy, and “enlightenment,” the feminine and the satanic were strongly tied together and the infamous and pervasive witch hunts spread across Europe and eventually to America.¹⁹⁹ Having begun with the teachings of Jesus, who preached love and the equality of all humans, Christianity had transformed into a worldview that deprecated women and saw sin, evil, and demons everywhere. This is part of the legacy of “the war of good and evil.”

Islam: Monotheism and Religious Conflict

Throughout history, monotheistic religions have had the tendency to preach and prophesize peace and togetherness on earth, yet to practice war and conquest. A case in point is the age old tension and conflict between Christianity and Islam – the two most influential and popular monotheistic religions in the world. Since the time of the Crusades, which lasted for roughly three centuries, when European Christians attempted to reclaim the Holy Land from the Islamic Empire, the Christian and Muslim worlds have been in a recurrent state of cultural conflict and antagonism and have on several occasions engaged in military confrontations with each other. What is both fascinating and disconcerting about this religious and cultural opposition is that in many ways these two belief systems are very close in philosophy. In describing some of the main features of Islam below, I will frequently draw comparisons with Christianity to illustrate the connections and commonalities between the two religions.

Mohammed (ca. 570 – 632 AD), the founder of Islam, saw himself as continuing the prophecies and teachings of Judaism and Christianity – the third great prophet after Moses and Christ – and the culmination of their teachings. Mohammed lived in a time when the Arab world existed in a state of relative barbarism, where different competing tribes practiced violent retaliation against each other for perceived injustices, and the values of greed and egotism increasingly dominated human life. He believed that the Arab world needed to unify itself in terms of some central principle that transcended individual or local values and desires. This aspiration toward unification eventually led Mohammed to a monotheistic religious doctrine that not only provided a common ground for the different people of the Arab world, but also provided a theological system that explained and encompassed other religious systems, including Judaism and Christianity. For Mohammed, there was only one true God “*Al’lah*” (which literally means “the God”) and all prophets and religious teachings point to this single God.²⁰⁰

Revelation played a critical role in the emergence of Islam, as it had in Judaism and Christianity. The traditional story is that Mohammed was awakened from sleep one night and felt enveloped by a divine presence, whereupon a voice commanded him to “Recite.” Mohammed later identified this voice as coming from the angel “Jibril” or Gabriel, who was presumably speaking for God (or *Al’lah*). Literally overpowered by the divine personal presence, Mohammed

began to recite the words Gabriel revealed to him. This recitation and Mohammed's subsequent efforts to record these divinely inspired words would continue, off and on, for the next 23 years and become the great religious text of Islam, the "*Qur'an*." For devout Muslims, the "*Qur'an*" is the revelation of God – of the nature of God – just as for Christians, Jesus is the revelation of God to humanity.²⁰¹

The religious belief system expressed through the writings of the "*Qur'an*" is a thorough-going, extreme monotheism. There is only one true reality – "*Al'lah*" – and the entire world around us is but a manifestation and creation of "*Al'lah*." (In this respect, *Al'lah* is similar to *Brahman*.) *Al'lah* subsumes all and demands total obedience; submission and surrender to *Al'lah* are critical within Islamic religion. The term "Islam" means "to surrender" and a Muslim is "one who surrenders." Although originally Islam was a highly tolerant religion, since in Mohammed's mind, all religions are efforts to worship and understand *Al'lah*, Islam became increasingly intolerant of polytheistic beliefs and goddess deities. All other deities were pushed aside – there is only *Al'lah*. Mohammed rejected the Christian Trinity for God must be an absolute "One" – there is no plurality within God; hence, Mohammed sees Jesus as a prophet for it would make no sense to say that God had a Son. Watson argues that the Islamic God is closer to the Judaic God than to the Christian God, for *Al'lah* is more a god of might than a god of love; *Al'lah* is all-powerful.²⁰²

The principles of unity and tolerance were integral to early Islamic ethics. There was an emphasis on the oneness and the equality of all humanity. The brotherhood of man was an important guiding principle and initially women had equal rights to men. For Mohammed, one major goal of Islam was the development of a just and equitable society. It was part of the mission of Islam to eliminate oppression and injustice in human society.²⁰³

As Christianity emerged as the dominant religion in Europe, its religious leaders attempted to influence and direct the workings of human society and politics. Islam, beginning with Mohammed and continuing to the present day, perhaps even more strongly connected politics and religion. Islamic leaders believed that it was the will of "*Al'lah*" to enforce their religiously based ethical principles in their own lands and to spread such ethical principles in those lands that they conquered and assimilated.²⁰⁴ In essence, the religion of Islam provided a basis for the ideal society, as well as an overall direction for the future of humanity.

Armstrong states that Islam did not begin as a militant religion; at first, there was no active effort to convert non-believers. As noted above, Mohammed believed in a philosophy of tolerance. But according to Armstrong, as the Islamic empire grew in the centuries after Mohammed, it became increasingly intolerant of non-believers, became more male dominant and repressive of women, and began to engage in aggressive conquest and conversion. Bloom, in fact, argues that contemporary fundamentalist Islam has turned aggression into a virtue. The Christian world has often thought and behaved in a similar manner; both religions have concepts of a just or holy war, where violence and killing is ethically and religiously justified.²⁰⁵ For both religions, warriors are often promised heavenly

rewards for killing the enemy. As a case in point, the Christian church, as a way to marshal support for the Crusades, offered “indulgences” (promissory notes to heaven) to knights who would participate in the retaking of the Holy Land back from the Moslems.²⁰⁶

In many other respects Christianity and Islam are similar as well. Both religions subscribe to the idea of one true, absolute, and transcendent God, though as mentioned above, Mohammed believed that he advocated a purer form of monotheism than the Christians and their doctrine of the Trinity. Still both Christianity and Islam see God as separate from and above the world. Hence, although monotheistic, Christianity and Islam are basically dualistic in their metaphysics and value systems, dividing reality into a lower material realm and a higher spiritual realm, and separating the moral realm into good and evil. Both religions see God as orchestrating the flow of events in the world. Further, both religions envision, as part of God’s divine plan, a final battle of good versus evil and the reward of heavenly paradise to those individuals who believe in God and follow His will. (Both Christianity and Islam are Zoroastrian in this regard.) In fact, it is critical in both Islam and Christianity that the will of God rather than human desires and aspirations determine a person’s path in life. (Recall Augustine’s allegory of the Cities of God and Man.) Extending back to their common heritage in Judaism, obedience to God is a central value in Islam and Christianity. Christians are supposed to follow the words of the *Bible*, and in particular, the teachings of Christ, who was the self-professed servant of the “Father.” Both Christianity and Islam, though beginning as egalitarian religions, eventually created patriarchal systems. Both rejected imagery and idolatry, though perhaps Islam more strongly – for God was transcendent and beyond any concrete representation.²⁰⁷

As the futurist Wendell Bell has argued, it is frequently our similarities rather than our differences that produce conflict among us and the recurrent conflicts of Christianity and Islam are a good example.²⁰⁸ Both Christianity and Islam polarize the world into good and evil, and both religions believe that they know the absolute truth and the absolute good. All other religions are false or mere approximations to the ultimate truth contained in their respective doctrines. Both religions are monotheistic and will not admit the existence of any other deities besides the “One” that their followers believe in. All other people, cultures, and belief systems embody elements of evil and need to be converted or assimilated. The intent of both religions is to convert the world to the one true faith. Since both religions, though professing peace as a central value, are associated with patriarchal and warlike societies, both Christian and Islamic civilizations have throughout their respective histories engaged in repeated war and conquest of other nations and people who did not subscribe to their beliefs. They have both pursued militant conversion in the name of religious enlightenment. If two groups of people are religiously intolerant, believe that they possess the only real truth, pursue global dominance, and are often militant in their interactions with other people, when these two groups meet, war is the natural outcome. As both religions evolved, they increasingly approached reality and other cultures in terms of an “us versus them” mentality.

In the centuries after Mohammed, as Islam spread across the Middle East and eastward through Northern Africa and into Spain, it encountered the teachings and ideas of many different cultures, both existing ones, as well as great past cultures. Through trade and conquest, Islam created a thriving economic and intellectual network across the Middle East during the time when Christian Europe had sunk into the relatively illiterate, chaotic, and unproductive Dark Ages. The city of Baghdad became one of the great cities of the world and, at first, was very open and tolerant to the ideas and practices of non-Islamic people.²⁰⁹ In the ninth century AD, one of the most significant intellectual events in the history of the world occurred – Islam discovered the ancient Greeks. Through the study of ancient Greek philosophy, science, medicine, and mathematics, coupled with their own genius and inventiveness, Islamic thinkers created one of the great intellectual cultures in human history. Armstrong describes this period as having features of both the European Renaissance and European Enlightenment. During this time, Islam produced a series of great scholars, philosophers, and scientists including Alkindi (813 - 880), Alhazen (965 – 1038), Avicenna (980 – 1037), Al-Ghazzali (1058 – 1111), and Averroës (1126 – 1198). Such philosophical thinkers and investigators of nature contributed significantly to the advancement of knowledge. While Medieval Europe had, to a great degree, closed its mind to pre-Christian traditions and culture, Islam opened itself to the multi-cultural heritage and intellectual wealth of the past and the present, and flourished. The lesson to be learned in this, building upon the model of Bloom, is that cultures that stay closed in both space and time stagnate, and those cultures that embrace and study both the past and other cultures move forward into the future. Also, during its apex, Islam was a culture of both faith and reason – of science and religion – attempting to synthesize these seemingly disparate elements in its philosophy and way of life. Yet it also should be noted that the conviction and enthusiasm of Islamic culture – that it possessed the all-encompassing truth – motivated and supported its efforts to bring all human learning under the umbrella of its belief system. In the final analysis, faith in *Al'lah* and the teachings of Mohammed reigned supreme.²¹⁰

Because of their importance and subsequent influence, several of these Islamic thinkers and the issues they discussed should be described in more detail. As Armstrong notes, after contact with ancient Greek ideas, an intellectual movement developed in Islam referred to as "*Falsafab*," which was a synthesis of abstract science and philosophy and practical guidance in life; the intent was to live a philosophically enlightened life. In encountering the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, Islamic thinkers attempted to integrate their religion with the rationalist and naturalistic principles of the Greeks. Early on, Alkindi, though a student of the natural sciences, came to the conclusion that the revelations of the *Qur'an* took precedence over reason. Al-Ghazzali, whom Watson identifies as the second most important figure in Islamic history, also argued that the *Qur'an* and the model behavior of Mohammed were a sufficient basis for living the good life. But other Islamic writers during this time came to different conclusions. Alhazen, for example, embraced science and, incorporating ideas from the Greek

atomists, created one of the great scientific works in the early history of the study of optics (which later would have a great impact on European science), presenting his ideas in a highly analytical and naturalistic format. Avicenna took the view that the universe was a rational and orderly system and although mystical revelation was important as a road to the truth, so was reason. In particular, Avicenna attempted to reconcile the ideas of Plato and Aristotle with Islamic religion and he developed rational proofs of the existence of God. Averroës, also attempting to synthesize Plato and Aristotle with the *Qur'an*, went even further, and articulated a highly rationalistic philosophy and theology, arguing that Greek reason and Islamic revelation were entirely compatible with each other.²¹¹

As a general point to make regarding these intellectual efforts, it is noteworthy that Islamic philosophers of this period struggled with bringing the rational-empirical and the mystical-revelatory approaches to life together into a synthetic whole. Armstrong describes it as an effort to merge monotheism with Greek philosophy and believes that the effort ultimately failed, allowing the mystical approach within Islam to life to maintain its dominance in the Moslem world. Further, after the great flowering of creativity, intellect, and imagination in the period being discussed, the Islamic world began to close itself off from outside influences, becoming more authoritarian and intolerant as a culture. But it is important to see that, for many of the great Islamic thinkers of the *Falsafab* movement, the scientific-rational and mystical-revelatory, which constitute two of the most influential approaches to the future and are usually seen as totally incompatible with each other, could be synthesized into a coherent whole.

The growth of Islamic culture became an increasing threat to the Christian world around the turn of the millennium. Not only was the Islamic world spreading across more geographical area, in effect, surrounding the Christian world on three sides from the west, south, and east as it spread up into Spain, but the ideas of Islamic writers were beginning to circulate through Europe. It was especially in the city of Toledo, Spain during the twelfth century that a large number of translations into Latin of works of Greek and Arabic philosophy and science were produced and distributed into other parts of Europe.²¹² In particular, the writings of Avicenna and Averroës gained considerable attention and reintroduced Christian Europe to the pagan Greek philosophers and notably Aristotle. Christian theologians and thinkers increasingly felt the need to respond to the ideas coming out of Islam, but also indirectly to the ancient Greeks and the naturalistic and secular views of Aristotle. Although the Crusades, which began in 1095 and were spearheaded by Pope Urban II and his promise of heavenly indulgences, could be seen as opening the door to contact and exchange between Europe and the Islamic empire, according to Watson, very little new learning was transmitted as a consequence of this military confrontation. In fact, the Crusades intensified the bitterness and tension between Islam and Christianity.²¹³ Rather, it was through the spread of Arabic and Greek texts coming out of Spain that Europe rediscovered its heritage and was, as a consequence, shaken free of its culturally isolated dogmatic slumber. The rediscovery of the Greeks and the past through Islamic scholars and their efforts

to reconcile reason and the *Qur'an* was one of the key events that triggered the rise of modernism in Europe. Christianity had been waiting for the Second Coming for a thousand years, looking toward a prophesized heavenly paradise in the hereafter, and the future meanwhile came knocking on the back door.

God, Religion, and the Future

Certain prevalent themes emerge in the historical review of myth, religion, and philosophy presented above. In following the logic of the Taoist *Yin-yang*, it seems that many major ideas can be described as reciprocal pairs – as complimentary and interactive throughout history. Though certain pairs of ideas, such as emotion and reason, the masculine and the feminine, good and evil, order and chaos, mysticism and rationalism, and monotheism and polytheism, can be seen as oppositional, following the philosophy of Taoism, what we take to be opposites actually are interdependent. Throughout the history of myth, religion, and philosophy such oppositional viewpoints and concepts are dynamically interwoven in theory, debate, and ways of life.

As a case in point, the idea of God is a weaving together of many reciprocities. God has been used as an explanation of reality. God is frequently the supreme archetype defining the cause, animation, purpose, and destination of humanity and the cosmos. In polytheism, gods and goddesses, forming an array of fundamental archetypes, provide the order, motive, force, character, and quality of the basic dimensions of life. Such conceptualized deities may create the universe from some primordial or chaotic base, or out of nothing through divine will. Reciprocally, just as the universe may begin in God, the universe and humanity may be heading toward a reunion with God at the end of time.

In the creation and animation of the cosmos, God may be seen as separate from the world, or God may be identified as the ultimate essence of reality, thus producing either dualist or monist views of reality. Gods and goddesses may be immanent and involved in the happenings of the world, or transcendent, standing outside of the world. The issue of transcendence versus immanence has been a point of significant and continued debate within the religious world – Judaism struggled with the question throughout its history, seeing value in both attitudes - and as in the case of Christianity, the attempt was made to synthesize the two views. In fact, as can be seen in this history of religion and myth, the themes of transcendence and immanence usually co-existed in various religious belief systems.

A recurrent issue throughout the history of religion is monotheism versus polytheism. A common belief, reinforced by monotheistic religions, is that polytheism is more primitive and as human history unfolded a shift occurred from polytheistic belief systems to monotheistic ones. Armstrong though notes that the opposite view has been defended – that monotheism came first and was later followed by polytheism.²¹⁴ At the very least, the earliest myths, according to Shlain and Bloom, involved both central male and female spirits corresponding to

the Goddess Mother and the Male Hunter/Father, a fundamental reciprocity at the heart of the beginning of human myth and religion.

Even if monotheism embodied some kind of evolutionary advancement in human thinking, polytheism had repeatedly pulled the human mind in the opposite direction, even since the emergence of monotheism. Polytheism reasserted itself in ancient Egypt after the monotheistic reforms of Akhenaton. Armstrong describes in great detail the continual struggle within Judaism between polytheism and monotheism. Although Hinduism identifies a single supreme deity – *Brahman* – it also embraces a vast assembly of lesser gods and goddesses, which include various different personae and manifestations of its central deity. Christianity has particularly wrestled with the issue, due to its belief in the divinity of Jesus, attempting to achieve reconciliation in the idea of the Holy Trinity which is both paradoxically a one and a many. (Hinduism has an analogous mystery in its Trinity of *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, and *Shiva*.) Further, Christianity throughout the ages has been populated with angels, demons, and the spirits of innumerable saints who have special powers concerning different aspects of life. The Holy Virgin Mary, in particular, though not officially part of the Godhead, has added a strong polytheistic element to Christianity. Monotheism and polytheism are often reconciled through spiritual hierarchies, with a central most powerful god at the top, such as *Zeus* or *Jupiter*, and many lesser spirits and deities with limited areas of power and influence below. Both Christianity and Hinduism have spiritual hierarchies.

The historical “tug of war” between monotheism and polytheism can be likened to the continued conflict within cultural and political human history of unification versus diversification, or as Empedocles would describe it, love and strife. Bloom describes the saga of history in terms of forces toward conformity and integration versus competing forces toward diversity and independence. As Armstrong notes, polytheism, which allows for the many, has been generally more tolerant and open, whereas, monotheism which elevates a singular one above everything, has been less tolerant and more militant. Speaking metaphorically, the “One” desires to assimilate the many, whereas the many wishes to break free of any constraints and express its diversity. Monotheism is motivated by the drive in the human mind toward unity and integration, whereas polytheism embraces the diversity of forces within the world. This interplay of unity and diversity – this *Yin-yang* - is a fundamental reciprocity within religious history.

Just as the Dionysian and the Apollonian, and the image and the word, are often contrasted and juxtaposed as distinct modes of consciousness, so are faith and reason. In his book *The Emergence of Everything*, Harold Morowitz highlights and distinguishes three forms of knowing God: through history, faith, and reason.²¹⁵

Knowing God through history, Morowitz argues, clearly developed in ancient Judaism. The nature of God and His relationship with humankind was revealed through the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Moses, Noah, Abraham, and David. Yet much of human myth, even prior to Judaism, is a form of history, even if it is fanciful history. Knowledge of God through history is

narrative and personified knowledge. This mode of understanding would correspond to Donald's notion of "mythic consciousness." And as it pertains to future consciousness, the future is understood as part of a great narrative that stretches back to the beginnings of time.

Next, Morowitz sees faith as a mode of knowing arising in Christianity, especially within the *Gospels* and the writings of Paul. (Faith though is also an integral part of Islam, in its acceptance of the divine origin and eternal truth of the *Qur'an*.) History presumably grounds human knowledge in fact, real or imagined; faith requires something more and something different. There are many different definitions of faith, but at its core, faith is belief and action without absolute proof. For Christians there is the expectation to trust in faith – it is a test of character and true belief. Yet, we have also seen that faith is an essential part of Judaism as well – the belief that God will honor His promises.

The significance of faith in understanding future consciousness is that the future is ultimately an uncertain reality. Although reason and science attempt to provide a sense of order and security regarding reality, as ancient myths had also tried to provide in earlier times, there is always an element of faith (belief without definitive proof) in all thinking about the future. Faith highlights commitment and determination in spite of the fact that human knowledge and action is contingent. Faith is an essential element in all human adventure.

Thirdly, according to Morowitz, there is reason as a mode of knowing God. Aristotle, for one, developed rational arguments for the existence of a "Prime Mover" – a first cause of the universe. The history of religion is filled with rational arguments for the existence of God and other metaphysical and moral principles. St. Thomas Aquinas believed that God could be known either through faith or reason, and believed that faith and reason supported each other. His *Summa Theologica* written in the thirteenth century is a paradigm example of rationalistic argument, and he presents a variety of logical arguments for the existence of God that in some cases are derived from Aristotle. As we have just seen, Islamic philosophers, who in fact inspired Aquinas, also attempted to understand God through reason, as well as revelation. Although Morowitz identifies science as the paradigm case of knowing through reason, the rational approach to reality goes back to ancient Greek philosophy and according to Shlain, to Moses and Judaism. Donald, to recall, sees the abstract and rational approach to life (clearly seen in the ancient Greeks) as the "theoretic" mode of consciousness and, in fact, the most evolved form of cognition so far realized in the human mind.

Another basic contrast that is frequently drawn in describing religious traditions is East versus West. In the East (for example, Hinduism and Buddhism) the future is a personal ascension to a higher realm of reality. In the West, deriving from the influence of Zoroastrianism, the future is generally seen as a cosmic and earthly conflict of good and evil forces, with good eventually triumphing. Individuals participate in this cosmic struggle of good and evil within their earthly lives. If the good within them triumphs – they ascend into a higher level of reality. The East does not have a vision of a great final conflict of good and evil in the future. The world may come to an end, as in the story of the Hindu

god *Shiva* (the destroyer) bringing everything to an end in a great conflagration, but there is no sense of good or evil triumphing in a final universal destruction.

Shlain explains this fundamental difference of East and West in terms of the relative emphasis on alphabetic versus pictographic systems of symbolization. The West is generally more war-like than the East because the East retained more elements of pictographic representation in its written languages. (Consequently the Western vision of the ultimate future entails a great war.) Shlain also connects the extreme monotheism of the West with its heightened militancy and aggressiveness.

As a point of agreement, though, between the East and West, the future is seen as promising ascension to a higher level of reality. Yet even here there is a difference. In the West this vision of the future may be motivated by a fear of personal death. In the West, given our emphasis on individuality, we fear our personal death and hope for a continuation of our self (our soul) in Heaven. The promise in the East, for example within Buddhism, is an escape from the personal struggles of life by ascension to *Nirvana*, a breaking free of the “Wheel of Time” or the “Karmic Wheel,” but there is no personal immortality – in fact, there is a transcendence of individuality and personhood. Fraser would argue, however, that in both East and West the motive behind their visions of the future is to somehow contend with and transcend the transience of time.

All told, we find the concrete and the abstract, the narrative and personified, the rational and the passionate, and prophecy and faith, all woven together in different combinations and versions throughout the development of mythology and religion. All of these modes of consciousness and ways of knowing not only influenced and structured beliefs about gods and goddesses and the origin of things, but also influenced ideas, secular and religious, about the future and the ultimate destiny of humankind.

What we find in examining ancient mythologies and early religions is that they unequivocally had many diverse and grand visions of the future – even the far distant future, as for example in Hinduism and the vast extended dreams of *Vishnu* – and these visions, often embodied in stories with archetypal characters and themes, foretold of great coming battles, challenges, and eventual triumph, as well as a spiritual journey to some higher level of reality. These stories gave people hope for the future, as they continue to do today.

The futurist dimension to religious and mythological thinking is quite understandable. Myths and religions served the function of explaining reality and the scope of the cosmos. They provided visions, stories, and theories of the whole, including the nature of time, past, present, and future. Following Fraser, they provided a stable and meaningful structure for interpreting the passage and future direction of time.

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