

Chapter 12: The Law of Religion

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind • Yuval Noah Harari

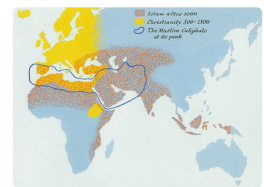
Part 3: Superhuman Order

1 Defining Religion: Superhuman Order and Binding Norms

- ✓ Religion is a system of human norms and values founded on the belief in a superhuman order that is not subject to human whims or political votes.
- ✓ By anchoring laws and social hierarchies to divine commands, religion gives fragile human institutions absolute legitimacy and social stability.
- ✓ Hammurabi's Code was presented not as the king's personal opinion, but as eternal laws decreed by the god Shamash, making disobedience a sin against the cosmos.

2 The Evolution of Faith: Animism to Monotheism

- ✓ Animist foragers viewed humans as equal partners with animals and spirits, but agricultural farmers required gods who could control rain, pests, and livestock fertility.
- ✓ Polytheism recognized many gods and was inherently tolerant, whereas universal monotheism insisted that one supreme god ruled all humanity and demanded total obedience.
- ✓ When the Roman Empire was polytheistic, it integrated foreign gods into its pantheon, whereas Christian emperors outlawed pagan shrines to enforce a single creed.



The historical territorial spread of universal monotheistic religions.

3 The Problem of Evil and Dualism

- ✓ Monotheism struggles with the paradox of evil: if God is all-powerful and all-good, why does horrific suffering exist?
- ✓ Dualism solved this by postulating two equal opposing forces (Good versus Evil, Light versus Darkness), an idea that deeply infiltrated both Christianity and Islam.
- ✓ The Christian belief in the Devil and cosmic battles between Satan and God is an unacknowledged import from Persian Zoroastrian dualism, blending with strict monotheism.

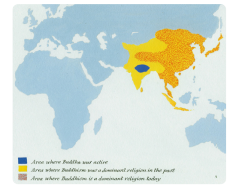
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Part 3: Secular Creeds & Summary

Part 3: Secular Faiths

4 Non-Theistic Religions: The Law of Nature

- ✓ Not all religions worship gods; some of the most influential faiths in history are based on impersonal natural laws discovered through observation and introspection.
- ✓ Buddhism teaches that suffering does not come from angry gods, but from the human mind's attachment to craving and aversion.
- ✓ Siddhartha Gautama discovered that accepting reality as it is—without craving pleasure or resisting pain—extinguishes psychological suffering.



Historical spread of Buddhism across Asia without mandatory theistic conversion.

5 Secular Religions: The Rise of Humanism

- ✓ Modern ideologies like liberalism, communism, and nationalism function psychologically as secular religions, worshipping humanity rather than supernatural deities.
- ✓ Liberal humanism worships individual human rights, socialist humanism worships the collective working class, and evolutionary humanism worshipped racial hierarchy.
- ✓ Human Rights charters are modern sacred texts: rights have no biological reality in the genome, yet billions of people revere them as sacred, inviolable truths.



Arno Breker's sculpture: evolutionary humanism idolizing physical supremacy.

Chapter Summary

- ✓ Religion provided historical societies with vital stability by anchoring human laws, moral codes, and political institutions to an unquestionable superhuman order.
- ✓ The shift from animism to polytheism and monotheism mirrored humanity's increasing scale, transitioning from local nature spirits to universal deities demanding global conversion.
- ✓ Eastern religions like Buddhism proved that profound spiritual and moral systems can emerge from natural psychological laws rather than belief in divine creator gods.
- ✓ Modern political and economic ideologies (such as Liberalism, Communism, and Nationalism) function as secular religions, replacing supernatural gods with the worship of humanity.