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Mario Ferrero

The Political Economy of Indo-European Polytheism

How to Deal with Too Many Gods

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Mario Ferrero
University of Eastern Piedmont
Vercelli, Italy

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The conduct of events (….) is so full of variety and uncertainty, that, if we suppose it immediately ordered by any intelligent beings, we must acknowledge a contrariety in their designs and intentions, a constant combat of opposite powers, and a repentance or change of intention in the same power, from impotence or levity.

David Hume, The Natural History of Religion (1757), Chap. 2

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Contents

Chapter 1
Introduction: Polytheism and Economics

Abstract This chapter outlines the central question and the economic approach to it, and provides a road map through the book. The problem is the divergent fate of the historical religions stemming from a common origin, the prehistoric Proto-Indo-European religion: some (the Greek, Roman, Celtic, and Germanic religions) became extinct, while others (the Indian and Iranian religions) were reformed and managed to survive and thrive. Why these different outcomes? The book employs the key economic concepts of exchange and competition to describe the transactions between gods and men and the role of the priests in them. The basic hypothesis combines theology and priestly institutions to produce a possible way out of the trap of divine jealousy, where polytheism is stuck in an inefficient equilibrium.

1.1 The Subject and the Problem

Polytheism is a religious system that involves belief in and worship of many gods. Semantically, it is the opposite of monotheism, which involves belief in only one god; chronologically, it appears to be the oldest type of religion on earth, emerging fully-fledged in the dawning of history and harking back into prehistory as far as archeology can reach. There are of course very many religious traditions in human history, and the Indo-European tradition is only one among them, albeit an important one and one which, unlike others, can be traced back to some of the earliest documented civilizations. The study of polytheistic religions has generally been the preserve of historians and mythologists, including both specialists who possess each the linguistic, literary, and archeological tools to address one specific religion by working on its primary sources, and comparatists who try to bridge the gaps between particular religions and work out a broad picture of an entire religious tradition—not to mention the entire religious picture of humankind. This book—the first of its kind—is an economist's attempt to revisit the Indo-European religious tradition armed with the tools of economics and, more specifically, of political economy. These tools will of necessity be applied to secondary materials, i.e. the works of those specialists and comparatists who have the skills to tackle the primary sources directly. It is hoped that the methods and results of this study will help shed some

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new light on the matter that may be of interest to economists and social scientists in general, on the one hand, and to religious historians and mythologists on the other.

Why the Indo-Europeans, why economics, and what questions are we trying to answer with the help of economics? Such are the questions that will most likely arise in the reader's mind at this point, and they may be best addressed in reverse order. A casual look at the big picture of religious history immediately reveals that ancient polytheistic religions were in for very different fates: some, like the ancient Greek, Roman, Celtic, and Germanic religions, just became extinct; others, like the ancient religion of India, survived and are thriving today, although after undergoing a mutation into what we now call Hinduism; still others, like the ancient Iranian religion, underwent a fundamental reform and turned into Zoroastrianism—in fact, the first monotheism in the world. Yet they all stemmed from the same root—they are all branches of the Indo-European religious tradition. What explains such divergent outcomes? How can we account for the resilience of Indian polytheism vis-à-vis the transience of Roman polytheism? Despite the enormous amount of work that scholars have devoted to each and all of these religions, to my knowledge this straightforward question has never been asked—perhaps because the problem seems so difficult to crack. And it is here that economics may be of assistance.

At its most basic, economics is the science of human choice, and political economy is the large and growing subset of it that brings interest groups, organizations, and social and political institutions to center stage in the choice process. Now, to an economist's mind, the belief in multiple gods/goddesses and the consequent need of multiple cults immediately raise the issue of choice. Is one free to rest one's hopes for blessings on the deity of one's choice, or is allegiance and worship due to all of them? In the latter case, the costs to the supplicants—both material and psychological—become salient, and they would stand to benefit from religious reform or innovation of some kind. This is where the political economy comes in: significant changes in religious systems are never the work of ordinary individuals, at least in a large society; they require religious professionals or trained priests, and these must have both the means and the incentives to undertake the reform. Hence, to make headway in this analysis we will need both a model of the theology and a model of the priestly class tailored on the case of interest. We will want these models to be able to discriminate among the different cases accurately enough to suggest why these religions, though stemming from a common root, eventually parted company.

There lies the reason for limiting our inquiry to "only" the Indo-European group—beyond the obvious fact that this group is itself large and deep enough to tax any nonspecialist scholar's resources to the limit. Historical linguistics defines the group: the Indo-Europeans are speakers of attested languages that can be shown to derive from a common ancestor language, called Proto-Indo-European (PIE for short), which is not attested but can be reconstructed starting from the daughter languages. If there was a proto-language, its speakers must have existed as a people living together in some place for a sufficiently long time to have evolved a common language; then this people must have broken up into successive migration flows sufficiently long ago to have made possible the degree of differentiation among the daughter languages that is attested historically. If they were once a single people, they had a common

material culture, institutions, and beliefs, which can be gleaned again from linguistics and from whatever mythology or folk lore was bequeathed to the successor cultures. So for example they rode or harnessed the horse and used the plow, because there are words for these in the proto-language. In the same way they knew a god of the bright sky and a goddess of the dawn, again because there are words for them—but as we will see, these two deities evolved in very different directions in the daughter religions. There may be similar or equivalent gods in other religious traditions, but here we have a priori reasons to think that the divergent trajectories from the common origin must be ascribed to the different conditions, needs, and peoples that the daughter cultures encountered after the original unity broke apart. Put differently, excluding non-Indo-European religions from the analysis is a device to identify an original benchmark against which the historically observed religions can be compared, which amounts to building a "natural experiment" in religious evolution.

Each of these points is worth a more extended discussion in the remainder of this chapter.

1.2 Polytheism, Rational Choice, and Political Economy

Two fundamental features of ancient polytheistic religions readily invite application of economic analysis: the transactional character of the cult and the multiplicity of gods involved in any such transaction. As to the first, the interaction between men and gods in those religions may be described as a gift-exchange relationship whereby supplicants (be they individuals, groups, or corporate entities) demanded blessings for a wide range of activities and situations in their life, and believed that the gods could and would provide such blessings if enticed by prayers or vows backed by offerings and sacrifices of proper quality and sufficient amount. The deities were thus effectively perceived as "selfish" beings who benefit (or, using economic terminology, derive utility) from recognition and offerings in their areas of jurisdiction and supply the requested blessings in return. As to the second feature, supplicants believed that several gods and goddesses were simultaneously able to influence events that had a direct bearing on individual welfare; as a result, to the extent that they were free to choose, supplicants had to choose which offerings to make to placate or entreat each deity. This multiplicity of agents involved on each side of the transactions naturally suggests the operation, at least potentially, of a "religious market", i.e. a market in which the transactions described above take place; and then, as with any market, it is appropriate to ask whether competition prevails in it and, if so, what kind of competition it is and what are its effects. Of course, the agents who would, or would not, compete in this market were not the gods themselves but their human agents—first of all the priests and then the associations of devotees, when and where these existed. The agency of priests and other religious officials was often, though not always, required to ensure that the transactions followed proper ritual forms so

as to maximize the likelihood of the deity's responding in the desired way—even as they would often take a cut of the sacrificial offerings or request a fee in the process.

As the foregoing description suggests, we are thus viewing the gods as "rational", utility-maximizing beings, while the budget set that limits their effective satisfaction, or achieved utility level, is the supplicant's available resources of time, attention, and goods and/or money. We are viewing the priests too as selfish, rational individuals who maximize their utility; their success in this effort, however, crucially hinges on whether and to what extent they form a corporate professional class whose status, income, and power depend on their priestly functions. As we will see, there are huge differences in this regard across priests in the different Indo-European religions. The assumption of rational agents, i.e. of agents who, given the existing beliefs and within the constraints set by the available resources and information, strive to achieve their goals as best they can is simply the economist's device to give bite to the notions of exchange and competition just discussed.

These two concepts—exchange and competition—are basically all the economics we will need in this book. Among the specialist scholars that will provide our sources for the various religions, the assumption of self-interested exchange, of *do ut des* and contract, in the relationship between men and gods is taken for granted to the point that it is rarely felt to call for explicit discussion or justification, so there is no need to belabor the point. It is of course understood that uncertainty was pervasive in these dealings—the gods would not always listen to the prayers accompanying the offerings and grant the requested blessings or favors. As we will see in due course, though, there were ways to explain away the failures of this exchange and carry on with the transactions—from improper ritual form to unwitting neglect of a relevant deity to evil spells; and anyway there was a random factor beyond control since the gods were not thought to be unconditionally loving—only selectively so perhaps. Use of the concept of competition is more unusual among historians, but we believe that, if used carefully, it will not unduly strain the facts of the case but, rather, help to clarify matters. However, we will see as we proceed, and discuss in the Conclusions, how unusual and counterintuitive the functioning of competition and monopoly turns out to be in this field.

Before we proceed, it is necessary to say something at the outset about the old, vexed issue of belief versus rituals. Since the beginning of modern scholarship on religious history, an influential, heavily Christianized reading of the ancient texts has long maintained that since ancient religions were not based on revelation or holy books, they were "merely" ritualistic—all that mattered was not belief but proper ritual form; faith in the gods was neither required nor policed (we follow the discussion in Parker 2011, Chap. 1, which focuses on Greek religion but is of general interest). We will come back to evaluate this view at the end of our journey, in the Conclusions. Taken to extremes, the contrast becomes absurd, as even a ritual is performed in the belief that there is some purpose in doing so: the cult must be grounded in a belief in its own efficacy; without acknowledging this we could not make sense of the countless inscriptions, dedications, and vows in which individuals thankfully addressed the gods. Even so, the important question for us is, what was the foundation of that belief: how did the ancients "know" that the gods were there, that

they listened, that they often (though not always) responded? Or, to put it in a way that may spring naturally in the mind of skeptical readers, how can we, as modern scholars, take seriously the belief that a safe sea passage was "really" assisted by Poseidon, that the smooth and healthy delivery of the first baby of a newly-wed woman was "really" a gift from Artemis, that this summer's plentiful harvest "really" happened thanks to Demeter? The plain answer may be stated in the form of a paradox, as some ancient philosophers came very close to saying: "the gods exist because we worship them" or "because there are altars". That is, tradition was the foundation of belief, assisted by oracular "revelations" and sundry pronouncements by seers and diviners (which, however, were answers to specific questions about ritual propriety and cult policy or about omens, not about the nature and attributes of gods); tradition means that we worship the gods and sacrifice to them in certain ways because we have always done so, and there is no good reason to change it. Mythology often provided the context or stories that "explained" the rituals and gave reason to believe in their effectiveness. In the same way, epiphanies—deities appearing to or consorting with men—and miracles were believed to have occurred, and to be still occurring from time to time, and this was another support for the veracity of tradition. Asking whether the god "really" appeared to someone is like asking whether Mother Theresa "really" performed the miraculous healing in India for which she was raised to sainthood in the Catholic Church. In all these cases, an institutionalized, routine system grounded in antiquity, and protected by a fear that any change in a system hallowed by antiquity can only be dangerous, sustains the belief. So the adverb "really" should really be taken out of all the questions asked above. As mentioned above, the beliefs were impervious to empirical disconfirmation; we will see in Chap. 7 that a psychological mechanism—a confirmation bias—can be readily mustered to support such beliefs. For this book, then, the antiquity of tradition, the reality of the supernatural among us, and the mythology that surrounds and provides the "origin" of the cult will be the workhorses that support the belief in the exchange relationship between men and gods.

Modeling god's preferences as a rational agent is not new to economics. Brams (2002, 2007) and Rasmusen (2015) model God as playing games with man, Oslington (2009) models him as writing an optimal salvation contract with man, and Salmon (2009) models divine preferences over the division of God-serving tasks between church and king in medieval Europe. These works, however, focus on the one and only God of Jewish and Christian tradition, who is assumed to be all-knowing, all-powerful, and radically beyond human comprehension. By contrast, we will undertake the—perhaps simpler—task of modeling multiple gods who are not supposed to posses any of these mind-boggling attributes. One contribution of this book is a way of formally modeling the rivalry or competition among rational gods in a polytheistic system. There exists no prior economic literature on this except the three articles that form the groundwork at the origin of this book and which will be extensively used throughout (Ferrero and Tridimas 2018; Basuchoudhary, Ferrero and Lubin 2020;

Ferrero 2021).[1] The very few economics articles that may be useful on specific points will be cited in due course. On the other hand, modeling priestly behavior will be a simpler, more straightforward job of applying the well-tested economist's tools of the analysis of interest groups, competition, and monopoly—as already sketched in the background articles just mentioned. As mentioned above, a crucial distinction here will be whether or not, in the various religious contexts to be studied, the priests are able and willing to act as a monopolistic group in the promotion and protection of their collective interest.

The rational choice approach to ancient religions is not, however, necessarily limited to economists. In one of the most ambitious of his books on the historical sociology of religions, sociologist Rodney Stark has taken a broad sweep across all polytheistic systems of the world (Stark 2007). The book is driven by an agenda, seeking to prove the theory that there was a High God religion—in effect, an original monotheism—at the dawn of mankind, which was too remote from the common people and therefore gave way to the "nearer" gods of polytheism, finally to be displaced by a rebirth of monotheism. While we have no such agenda here, Stark's book tries for the first time to apply the market model of the religious economy, developed for contemporary societies, to the ancient world, yielding many insightful discussions and stimulating ideas. What makes his book difficult to use and evaluate for us, however, is that it apparently has no notion of an Indo-European religious family—or any other religious family, for that matter—which has a common origin and whose successive differentiation can then be assessed against that benchmark; so it jumps from the temple cities of the Near East to the Mayas, from early Hebrew polytheism to the cult of Isis, while ignoring other Indo-European religious branches like the Germans and the Celts. Given the enormous compass of its coverage, it is hardly surprising that many inaccuracies and oversights crop up in the parts that overlap with the treatment in this book. More important than these details, however, are some major differences in outlook, of which three must be mentioned. First, Stark misses the fundamental convergence of Greek and Roman religion: in Chap. 2, he lumps the Greeks with the temple religions of the Near East and the Mayas, even as he notes that the Greek priests were not a professional class, whereas, in Chap. 3, he claims ancient Rome as a competitive religious economy—thus missing the fundamental fact that the gods there, as in Greece, were not "competitive" with one another in the sense of vying for clients like the modern American religious denominations. Second, dealing with ancient and modern Hinduism (in Chap. 5), Stark emphasizes the competition between the Vedic Brahmins and the ascetic sects but overlooks the fundamental unity of the Brahmins, who tended to act as a monopolistic professional class throughout their history—which leads him to claim India as the paragon of the market model of religious supply. Third, and most fundamentally, the concept of

[1] As many readers will know, there is a lively and rapidly growing economic literature known as the new economics of religion (see the reviews by Iannaccone 1998 and Iyer 2016). Perhaps surprisingly, this literature strictly avoids modeling theology, whether under polytheism or otherwise, so it can be of no assistance to us.

competition that underpins the market model of the religious economy is inapplicable to ancient polytheism because, as this book will argue, it ignores the basic assumption of divine jealousy. Later chapters of this book should provide readers with sufficient material to evaluate these claims.

1.3 The Proto-Indo-Europeans, Their Religion, and Dumézil's Tri-Functional Hypothesis

For perspective, the most widely accepted theory, combining linguistic and archeological evidence, argues that a proto-Indo-European ancestor society existed between c. 4500–2500 BCE in the Pontic-Caspian steppe and forest steppe of southern Russia and Ukraine; from this homeland, the various Indo-European peoples branched out in different directions and at different times (Mallory 1989, Chaps. 6, 8; Mallory and Adams 2006, Chap. 26). This so-called Indo-European hypothesis concerning the origins is to be set against the historical evidence we possess concerning the daughter societies and their cultures.

A key difficulty here is the time depth at which we are able to observe the religions of interest—those that are best documented and which will be the object of our study. For the Indo-Iranians, our earliest texts (the earliest stratum of the Vedas and the earliest portion of the Avesta, i.e. Zoroaster's own hymns, the Gathas) can be dated to the second half of the second millennium BCE. The Linear B tablets inscribed in Mycenaean Greek date to the thirteenth century BCE while the earliest fully Greek literature (Homer and Hesiod) date to the eight century. Our sources for the archaic Roman religion (spanning conventionally the monarchic period, c. 750–500 BCE, and the early republican period) are writers of the late second and first centuries BCE. Of the two branches of Celts, the continental Gauls are documented only in Roman times, from c. 50 BCE (Julius Caesar) onwards, while the Irish sagas and myths were written down by Christian Irish monks in the Middle Ages, c. 1200–1500 CE. Finally, of the two branches of Germans, the continental Germans are documented only by classical writers, mainly Tacitus c. 100 CE, while the Scandinavian religion is contained in mythological poetry, prose sagas, and learned treatises mostly written down or edited by Christian scholars in the thirteenth century CE. In addition, a fair amount of inscriptional and archaeological evidence is available for the Greeks, Romans, Gauls, and Scandinavians, though not for the other groups. Thus our religions emerge into history at vastly different times from one another and from their common ancestor, and when they emerge they will have traveled enormous, though unequal, distances from their point of origin. This implies that they will have come into contact with, or overlaid, a variety of autochthonous pre-Indo-European cultures, mostly unknown to us, which were a source of influence and borrowing.

Turning to the linguistic evidence for a Proto-Indo-European pantheon, a common rule of thumb followed by historical linguists is that a natural feature, artifact, concept, or institution has a claim to be PIE if cognate words for it are attested in at least one European and one Asian daughter language; short of that, there may be a common

heritage attested by cognate words in regionally closer branches, for example between Scandinavians and Romans, or between Iranians and Indians. A similar rule is often followed by comparative mythologists. On the strength of this rule, most secure is a PIE basic word for "god", **deiwos*, attested as Sanskrit *deva*, Avestan *daeva*, Latin *deus*, Old Irish *dia* and others, which derives from **dyeu* "bright sky, day" (cf. Latin *dies*, "day"). It also survives as the name of the Germanic god Tîwaz/Tyr. Hence the specific god **dyeus pəter*, "sky father", attested as Sanskrit *Dyaus pita*, Greek *Zeus pater*, Latin *Jupiter*. There are other words for "god" or a group of gods: one is behind Greek *theos* and Latin *feriae* (festival day); another is behind Old Norse *Aesir*, Avestan *Ahura*, Sanskrit *Asura*. A dawn goddess is reconstructed from Latin *Aurora*, Greek *Eos*, Sanskrit *Ushas*. A sun god and a moon god can also be reconstructed. The common noun **nepots* "grandson or nephew" stands behind Sanskrit and Avestan *Apam Napat* "grandson of waters" and Latin *Neptunus*. There may be a "thunder god" behind gods attested in Old Norse, Old Russian, Lithuanian, and perhaps Sanskrit. More dubious is a PIE "smith god" behind Latin *Volcanus*. Some vocabulary of the sacred can also be reconstructed, including at least one word for "priest" that stands behind Latin *flamen* and Sanskrit *brahman* (Mallory 1989, 128–130; Mallory and Adams 2006, Chap. 23).

So the crop of deities produced by linguistic reconstruction is neither numerous nor particularly telling. Very few deities are secure, more are dubious. Most appear as personifications of elements of nature, not specifically Indo-European. Hence the need to turn to comparative mythology and ritual, sometimes supported by regional common roots (isoglosses). Here we must face the impressive achievements and difficult problems raised by the lifelong work of Georges Dumézil and that of his colleagues and followers.[2]

Dumézil' approach identifies a common core in the traditions of different Indo-European peoples that is claimed to originate in the time and place in which they lived as an undifferentiated group. It had long been noted that the similarities and parallels between stories about gods and heroes preserved in the traditions of peoples thousands of miles and thousands of years apart are too extensive, and at the same time too specific, to be coincidental, while sheer distance mostly rules out diffusion or direct borrowing. Therefore, just as a common PIE language can be reconstructed by historical linguistics starting from the similarities among the attested Indo-European languages, which reveals certain commonalities of social structure, environmental features, and technology, so by analogy it must be possible to reconstruct a common system of belief that is reflected in the various mythological traditions and which should have characterized this ancestral society. This system is called by Dumézil a tripartite or tri-functional "ideology", which mirrors a society made up of priests, warriors, and commoners in charge of the three essential "functions" of such a society: religion and law, war, and production and reproduction (of crops,

[2] A general summary of his method and findings is Dumézil (1958), which must be supplemented by several specialized works that will be used throughout this book; see also the detailed intellectual biography and discussion in Littleton (1973) and more recent assessments in Mallory (1989, Chap. 5) and Mallory and Adams (2006, Chap. 25).

animals, and humans). This ideology is detected on three levels: the description of a social hierarchy consisting of three classes; a worldview that sees meaningful triads everywhere (calamities, sins, capital punishments, colors, healing practices, cosmic regions, epic legends, and more)[3]; and a pantheon of divine beings who preside over the three functions. We are solely interested in this last level—the theology and the associated cult.

No sooner had Dumézil detected a tripartition in the Indo-European pantheons than complications arose even from within his line of research, not to mention his critics. Dumézil himself struggled with the key question of sovereignty; the first function was seen to double into a magical-religious and a legal-contractual aspects of sovereignty, embodied in a pair of sovereign gods (on the model of Mitra and Varuna in the Vedas). The third function involved from the start a multiplicity of meanings from herding-cultivation to fertility, both animal and human, and hence to pleasure and desire; so the deities presiding over it ranged from a pair of twins to a tribe. The second function itself often was represented by several warrior gods. Then some (Allen 1987, 1999) argued for a fourth function representing servants or outcasts (like the Shudras in the Vedic myth of the origins of social order), while others (Lyle 1982) for a "generalist" female deity encompassing all of the functions.

Moreover, the evidence for a tripartite structure soon became controversial in several of the specialist historical fields. Davidson (1988, 200–201), while recognizing the great usefulness of his comparative approach, remarked that both the Norse and the Celtic deities refuse to fit satisfactorily into the niches provided by Dumézil. Similarly, Momigliano (1987, Chap. 19) among others argued that the Roman pantheon is a poor fit for the functional tripartition. Regarding the ancient Iranians, Boyce (1982, 1) objected that the society described in the Gathas was bifunctional, with priests and herders who might at times take up arms but not yet a separate warrior class. Similarly, everything we know about early Roman society specifically excludes a division of the military and agricultural functions into two separate classes: the warriors were the peasants in the summer season, and (in republican times) the voters were "warrior-peasants" (Beard, North and Price 1998, 15), as Dumézil (1970, 163–164, 210, 260) himself recognized. And Greece has always proved a particularly unrewarding field for the Dumézilians as its pantheon as a whole, when it emerges into history, is hopelessly distant from any Indo-European prototype, preserving only traces of it.

Finally, a separate, indeed opposite strand of criticism has taken up the alleged uniqueness of this tripartite ideology, suggesting that there is nothing especially Indo-European to it and that any archaic society, at a certain level of development, would "naturally" think of itself as providing for the essential functions of religion, violence, and sustenance, and entrust them to the occupations of priests, warriors,

[3] An example (Dumézil 1958, 28) is the famous judgment of Paris, which in Greek mythology was one of the events that led up to the Trojan War. Paris, a Trojan prince and shepherd, was asked to judge which of three great goddesses was the fairest, and the goddesses tried to bribe him with gifts: Hera offered kingship, Athena promised victory in war, and Aphrodite offered the love of the most beautiful woman in the world—who was Helen, the wife of a Greek king. Paris chose the latter. The three gifts symbolize the three functions.

and food producers. For example, Brough (1959) argued that quite a few examples of a tripartite ideology could be found in the Hebrew Bible, where of course the mythology is stymied by the monotheism, but nevertheless the three functions can be detected in the various aspects of God, and then the functions are brought down to earth, as with the Romans, and embodied in key groups and figures of early Jewish history (the twelve tribes of Israel, the list of Judges, the first kings). To this Dumézil countered (see Littleton 1973, 199–201) that in none of Brough's examples is the tri-functional distinction spelled out in the biblical text itself, that is, it is not a consciously held worldview such as one finds in key Indo-European texts; and to him and others in his line of research this was the essential point (cf. Dumézil 1958, 22–23; Littleton 1973, 221–225).

This is because Dumézil recognized, at least from some point in his career (e.g. Dumézil 1970, 162–163), that in most settled Indo-European societies, once the prehistoric migrations were over, the tripartite framework had ceased to function as an actual division of society into three classes, the only exception being India where, through an inverse evolution, this archaic division was hardened into the system of the three Aryan *varnas* (*brahmans*, *kshatriyas*, *vaishyas*) dominating over the non-Aryan *shudras*. What was left, then, was exactly an ideology or Weltanschauung—a way of understanding the world, an ideal pattern of social organization, and perhaps a mythical view of the beginnings; and that was preserved in the theology, which almost by definition is singularly conservative. Some historians (e.g. Beard, North and Price 1998, 15; Momigliano 1987, Chap. 19) find such a continuing divorce between the actual social organization and that encoded in religion and myth unconvincing, but then, the question ultimately boils down to one of how long an ideology can outlive the social reality that it purports to capture. We will see that in several cases the theology did evolve to keep track of society. In any event, unlike for other scholars, the problem for us is not the tripartite structure per se, still less the number three, but rather, whether it can adequately account for a given pantheon. Hence, for us, the accuracy of the tripartite sociology (questioned by Allen, Boyce, and Beard, North and Price) does not matter while the crossing-over or overlap of deities (pointed out by Lyle, Momigliano, and Davidson) does.

Specifically, we will focus on three questions regarding the theology of early Indo-European peoples. One is whether the postulated structure, tripartite or otherwise, accounts for the *number* of gods in a given pantheon; here we find problems of unaccountable gods, duplications, old versus new gods, possible evidence of historical increase in numbers, foreign influences or substrates. The second is whether the gods of a pantheon are *specialized* to a particular social or material function as the functional hypothesis would predict, as opposed to "generalist" gods with broad, even universal powers and fields of activity. And the third is whether the gods of a pantheon are *jealous* of one another and all demand allegiance on pain of dire consequences for the worshiper. As we will see, if all the important deities could be neatly sorted out into three (or any number of) functions, with a well-defined, differentiated task assigned to each, or alternatively, if worshipers could pick and choose a deity of their liking as a Jack- or Jane-of-all-trades, writing this book would be very easy, and arguably the historical outcomes of Indo-European polytheism might have been

very different from what they turned out to be. Unfortunately this is not the case, and the overlap and potential conflict of jurisdictions was a very real possibility from the beginning; so we will have to inquire into how this problem evolved over time in the different religions.

1.4 Preview of the Book

Among the peoples located on the various branches of the Indo-European ethnolinguistic tree, some important groups left no written record of their own religion, nor were they observed by foreign witnesses whose testimony has survived: these include the Slavs, the Balts, the Armenians, and the Albanians (plus some now extinct groups such as the Anatolians, the Illyrians, and the Thracians—but see a brief reference to these last below). Scholars have had to rely on folk tales and legends, often ancient but recorded in Christian times, to glean patterns of deities and cults, which may have been underlying the stories. These groups will therefore be left out of this book.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part, "The Beginnings", comprises three chapters which deal with the development of the religions of interest from the earliest beginning that can be reconstructed: they address the Greeks and the Romans (Chap. 2), the Celts and the Germans (Chap. 3), and the Indians and the Iranians (Chap. 4), in that order. The second part, "The Endings", describes the outcomes of these religions' histories, which are of two types: the first (Chap. 5) is extinction, which covers the unified Greco-Roman religion (whose evolution under the Roman Empire will be surveyed), the Celts, and the Germans; the second (Chap. 6) is survival through death and rebirth, which covers the genesis of Hinduism from the ashes of Vedic religion and the birth of Zoroastrianism—the first monotheism in the world—from a reform of Iranian polytheism. Each of the historical chapters of Parts I and II is concluded by a "Main Takeaways" section to help the reader navigate the material. The third and last part, "The Economics"—where the novel contribution of the book lies—is devoted to analysis: it proposes an interpretation of the history outlined in the preceding chapters, trying to explain how and why the various beginnings of Part I translated into the various endings of Part II. The argument is given first by means of a verbal discussion (Chap. 7) and then by resort to formal economic models (Chap. 8). These two chapters are designed in such a way that readers uninterested or untrained to modeling technicalities can safely skip Chap. 8, which contains all the technical machinery, and find in Chap. 7 all the main results of the analysis. Finally, Chap. 9 draws some conclusions and looks ahead to future research.

A religion is an immense subject, involving a complex of doctrines, beliefs, practices, institutions, and stories, and polytheistic religion is no exception. To keep this book within manageable proportions, and at the same time to keep readers' attention focused on the guiding ideas and avoid distraction by inessential side issues, some drastic reduction in the range of topics had to be made. The rites of passage in a person's life, which everywhere come under the purview of religion, such as birth,

entry into adulthood, marriage, and death (including burial rituals and customs), will be left out. Also ignored, except by implication, will be the vast, pervasive domain of private and domestic cult, including land spirits, special protectors of the home and the family, and the ancestors' cult. Divination and magic, with all the trappings of charms, arcane techniques, and professional seers and soothsayers that accompany it, will also be left out, important as they are in every ancient religion. Beside tractability, the basic reason for ignoring these three topics—rites of passage, private cults, and magic—is precisely that they are near-universal features of religions the world over, and so they are unhelpful in either characterizing the Indo-European religions of interest or in discriminating between them to understand their divergent developments, which is the goal of this study.

On the other hand, mythology, which is so huge a part of the sources for all our groups except the Romans, will be ignored except when it is an essential, or indeed the only source for the theology (as with the Greeks and the Scandinavians), and even then it will be used only as a kind of textbook summary, thus unfortunately missing all the inspiring, poetic flavor of these ancient texts; and a fortiori we have no room for demigods, divinized heroes, and the cult of heroes. Adequately accounting for the mythology would require another book, and in any case it would be a distraction from our main line, which is to explain the historical outcomes. Finally, we will skirt the vast body of doctrines of the beginnings: cosmogony and theogony, the creation of the world and the origin of man and of society, the wars in heaven and the "history" of divine generations. The reason for the omission is that these doctrines are the province of learned speculation by priests and scholars but have no bearing on cult practices, rituals, and the implied beliefs—that is, on lived religion. We are well aware that origin myths and mythical "history", in the Indo-European religions as elsewhere, often have had a political function of justifying the existing social order and providing legitimacy to the ruling classes; but the sociology of religion—the non-religious functions of religion—is only tangential to our line of inquiry, and when necessary it will be addressed directly rather than through the roundabout way of its mythical justification.

Turning from what was left out to what was brought in, we focus first and foremost on the pantheon: the company of the most important gods and goddesses and their attributes and domains of operation. For in every case we are indeed faced with a company, not a collection of independent entities: a system where each component is defined by its relations to and interactions with the others and which features a division of labor of sorts—however much this may be blurred or messy. After the pantheon, the doctrines concerning the fate of the person beyond death and, when appropriate, the fate awaiting the whole of humankind and the world itself—the hereafter and the end of days. Unlike doctrines of the beginnings, doctrines of the end highlight critically important benefits that people may come to expect from their religion and which critically differentiate one religion from another. Then the cult: the set of rituals and worship practices that are devoted to each deity or to all deities together, including not just individual offerings and sacrifices but also the communal festivals. Finally the institutions supporting the religion: holy places and temples,

decision-making concerning religious policy when there is such a thing, and above all, the priesthood: their role, recruitment, training, and organization.

Writing a book like this one is subject to two symmetric errors: too little technical detail and too much of it. Erring on the side of a generic, broad-stroke picture, unsubstantiated by the hard data of the case, may suit the more undemanding readers but would make the specialist historian or mythologist scream and, more to the point, would make it impossible for them (or for anyone, for that matter) to check if and how the claim being advanced is solidly grounded in the existing research. Erring on the side of too technical a presentation would drown the reader into a mass of detail on arcane figures and practices named in obscure languages, to the detriment of the main line of argument that we are trying to pursue. We tried to walk the fine line between these opposite errors, which sometimes required stretching the exposition somewhat. As one point of simplification, for names of gods and the like we used the common English spelling or translation, whenever available, instead of the original writing in the mother language (e.g. the Scandinavian god Odin instead of Old Norse Oðinn), and we dropped all the diacritics in transliterations from the Greek, the Sanskrit, and the Old Avestan. Also, words in the original language were given only when necessary, and then always joined to an English translation or, if one does not exist, retained in the original after an extensive explanation. Such an exercise can hardly be flawless, so the reader's indulgence is hoped for.[4]

1.5 An Appetizer: Some of the Earliest Indo-European Pantheons

Our earliest source for the western Indo-Europeans, the Greek historian Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BCE, provided concise descriptions of the pantheons of two early peoples who left no written records of their own, the Thracians and the Scythians.

Regarding the Thracians, who inhabited a vast area in the eastern Balkans, Herodotus' (1920, V, 7) two-sentence description reads:

> They worship no gods but Ares, Dionysus, and Artemis. Their princes, however, unlike the rest of their countrymen, worship Hermes above all gods and swear only by him, claiming him for their ancestor.

By a procedure typical of ancient authors, here Herodotus gives the names of the Greek gods whom he thought were most closely approximating the original Thracian gods. In a short essay on the Thracian theology, Dumézil (1994, 231–236) recognizes in the list a clear example of his tri-functional pattern, in a form—also found in ancient

[4] For the Latin and Greek authors cited in this book, for the reader's convenience I listed in the References the most recent and seemingly reliable English translations that are freely available online. However, these are often old, using antiquated language and not necessarily accurate enough to my taste. So when those authors are quoted, I occasionally amended the Greek quotations and substantially edited, and often retranslated, the Latin quotations.

Rome and in Tacitus' Germans (see Sects. 2.2.1, 2.2.2, 3.2.1 below)—which entrusts the third function to a great goddess.[5] Here the first function is split into its two halves, the legal-political half represented by Hermes (said to be a preserve of the royal cult) and the magical-religious half represented by Dionysus with his ecstatic cult and oracular powers; the warlike function is represented by Ares, the Greek war god; and the third function, covering material plenty and fertility, is entrusted to the Greek goddess of the wild, Artemis (whose original Thracian counterpart, called Bendis, was officially imported to Athens in the fifth century BCE and granted a great annual festival). This divine triad/tetrad seems tailored to the features of Thracian society as described in a previous chapter (V, 6) by Herodotus himself, who says that they despised agriculture and held warfare and raiding in greatest honor. The point for us to take home is that this structure has very few members with clearly defined specializations. It is difficult to resist speculating that this simple, clear-cut pantheon is the perfect match for a simple society of raiders, but that points exactly to where we are going: as we will see in the coming chapters, with migration and evolution of a sedentary society the society becomes more complex, requiring an expanded divine company, and the pristine transparency of the Dumézilian pantheon fades away.

It is otherwise with the Scythians, who inhabited a vast area in Ukraine and southern Russia north of the Black Sea and further east. Herodotus (IV, 59) writes:

> The only gods whom they propitiate are these: Hestia in particular, and secondly Zeus and Gaia, whom they believe to be the wife of Zeus; after these, Apollo, and the Heavenly Aphrodite, and Heracles, and Ares. All the Scythians worship these as gods; the Scythians called Royal sacrifice to Poseidon also. [Here Herodotus gives the Scythian names of most of these gods.] It is their practice to make images and altars and shrines for Ares, but for no other god.

Here we have a septet, augmented to an octet for the Royal Scythians. Some of these are obviously related to widespread Indo-European deities—such as a primordial goddess of fire (called Hestia), a Sky Father (called Zeus) and his wife the Mother Earth (Gaia), and a war god called Ares—but specializations are blurred and a tri-functional pattern is no more evident. Note also the special cult of Ares, which sets him apart from the other deities.

Some four centuries after Herodotus, Caesar (1917, VI, 17) describes a pantheon of five gods or goddesses for the Gauls of the first century BCE. Some 150 years after Caesar, Tacitus (undated, 9) gives a triad of gods for the German tribes of the Rhineland of the first century CE, adding two more goddesses worshiped by the more remote Suebi tribes near the North Sea. These two pantheons too have been interpreted as reasonably conforming to the tri-functional specialization system—however, the later-documented Scandinavian pantheon, a close cousin of the Germanic one, shows a remarkably changed assignment of jurisdiction to the corresponding deities. By contrast, even the earliest strata of the Roman and Greek

[5] Dumézil (ibid.) states, without providing any evidence or references, that this list must be a partial, selective one since the Thracians "certainly" worshiped other deities as well—a claim one suspects is derived in a circular way from the observation that other neighboring peoples did also worship other gods.

pantheons—the royal period of Rome and the Mycenaean religion—for which we have historical records and at least indirect written testimonies, are incomparably more complex and difficult to neatly classify into functions or jurisdictions.

So it seems there is something to the tri-functional classification, but nothing like a general answer to our queries. This gives a foretaste of what is to come in the following chapters, where we will take a plunge into the deep waters.

Part I
The Beginnings

Chapter 2
Greeks and Romans: The Religions Without Professional Priests

Abstract This chapter first examines Greek religion from Mycenaean to Hellenistic times. A vast and growing pantheon features gods with overlapping jurisdictions who are jealous of one another and are placated with offerings. Priests are non-professional, part-time, temporary officials of the civic cults, specialized to a particular temple and subordinated to the polis. Then the Roman religion from the earliest times to the end of the republic is addressed. Here too the pantheon is vast and growing in size, only partly converging with the Greek one; jurisdictional overlap abounds and is controlled by a cult regulated by the state. Priests are usually for life but again part-time and non-professional. In both religions, no one makes a living from priestly service.

2.1 Greek Religion

People speaking a proto-Greek dialect are thought to have entered the Aegean Sea at the beginning of the second millennium BCE. There, among many autochthonous peoples, they encountered an advanced non-Indo-European, Bronze-Age civilization, the Minoan culture, centered on the island of Crete and projecting its influence onto the surrounding islands and the Greek mainland. The Minoans built grandiose palaces and evolved an apparently sophisticated religion, which, however, we know only from iconography since their writing, inscribed in the so-called Linear A script, has not been deciphered—although it has been shown not to be Greek. In the fifteenth century most Minoan palaces were destroyed and their capital, Knossos, was taken over by the Greeks, who concurrently had evolved an advanced civilization based on a number of fortified cities on the mainland, exemplified by Thebes, Pylos, Tiryns, and Mycenae; from the famous palace of the latter city, this civilization is called Mycenaean.

The Mycenaean princely states quickly rose to the status of dominant powers in the region and reached their zenith in the fourteenth century; toward the end of the thirteenth, however, they were wiped out in another cycle of invasion, this time by the otherwise unknown Sea People. All the palaces, including Knossos', were destroyed and never rebuilt, while the whole eastern Mediterranean, including

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Anatolia, collapsed. Thereupon Greece entered a long period of decline, known as the Dark Ages, when all monumental construction and art ceased and writing disappeared, to then resurface again at the beginning of the eighth century and flourish in the early stage of the fully Greek culture, with an alphabetic script and a language that we know as classical Greek. But unlike Minoan religion, Mycenaean religion can now be accessed beyond archeology because the Mycenaeans inscribed their writing on tablets using a syllabic script, known as Linear B, that has been deciphered, and which shows that their language was definitely an early form of Greek.

2.1.1 The Mycenaeans

The Mycenaean tablets do not contain hymns, poetry, or mythology: they are exclusively scribal compilations of accounts and inventories used for courtly record-keeping.[1] They do, however, report names of divinities and/or sanctuaries as beneficiaries of offerings or property allocations; joined with the lush iconography on wall frescoes and gold rings, this allows us a glimpse of the mature stage of the Mycenaean religion, from ca. 1400–1200 BCE.

While the relationship and difference between Minoan and Mycenaean religions must remain conjectural until and unless the Linear A script is deciphered, the Mycenaean tablets indicate an impressive range of deities that foreshadow, in name and/or epithet, the later Greek deities—although we cannot be sure that the attributes and specializations remained the same. Prominent are Zeus and Hera (already a couple), Poseidon, and a whole series of goddesses called *Potnia* (Lady or Mistress), both generic and differentiated by sphere of activity, such as Lady of the Horses or Lady of the Wheat. These all have dedicated sanctuaries, usually within the palace compound, with offerings and sacrifices specified. In Pylos, Poseidon seems much more prominent even than Zeus; he has his own named sanctuary, the Posidaion, receives regular tribute, and is granted a special ceremony called "spreading of the bed". Unlike in classical Greece, both Zeus and Poseidon had a female double (*Diwya* and *Posidaeia* respectively), who were worshiped with their own cult and cult place.

Furthermore, a number of other important Greek deities can be identified: Ares and Enyalios (the latter a double or epithet of the war god Ares in later Greece), Hermes, Artemis, Hephaestus, Athena, probably Demeter (as one of the *Potnias*), and remarkably Dionysus (already associated with wine). As well, some minor later Greek figures such as Eleuthia (a goddess of childbirth), Erinys (in the singular, later an epithet of Demeter), Iphimedeia (in Homer, a heroin who bore two sons to Poseidon), and Paean (for the Greeks, a dance and hymn with healing power which was understood as an epiphany of the god Apollo) here seem to enjoy a cult as gods or goddesses. Then, often there are offerings to "all the gods". A number of totally unknown divine names are also mentioned, including one "son of Zeus". So of the twelve Olympians of the classical Greek pantheon (see the next section), only

[1] This subsection is based on Burkert (1985, 34–39, 43–46, 50–52) and Chadwick (1976, Chaps. 1, 6, 11).

Aphrodite and Apollo are not found in the Mycenaean tablets; they both came from the Near East via Cyprus in the Dark Age.

The presence of these classical deities, in addition to the minor or unknown deities just mentioned, implies that Mycenaean polytheism was no less rich and complex than the classical Greek one, and that the heritage of a common Indo-European pantheon, tri-functional or otherwise, was no more in evidence in it than it was to be in the classical age. The major difference with classical theology seems to be the prominence, in various forms, of a great goddess, hidden beneath the *Potnias* and continuing the cult of the Mother Earth that had been an outstanding feature of religion all over the Aegean world and Anatolia from pre-Hellenic times. It seems likely that *Potnia* (s), who receive a major share of the dedications of offerings on the tablets, far more frequently than any other female deity, was the Mycenaean name of this ancient figure.

Turning to the cult, the iconography emphasizes processions and dancing. Libations (the ritual pouring out of oil, honey, or wine in honor of a deity) were prominent and animal sacrifice was central, especially that of bulls, which is associated with two symbols: the horns and the double axe. Both symbols, however, are inherited from the Minoan religion and are in turn of ancient Near Eastern origin: the horns were known in Anatolia since the Stone Age while the double axe arrived in Crete from Mesopotamia via Anatolia. A tablet from Pylos details a list of gifts for Poseidon, which not only in composition but in the order of their listing exactly agree with later Greek cult practice: first a preparatory offering of wheat or cakes, then a libation, then the animal sacrifice, then additional bloodless offerings, and finally a ram's fleece, probably for purification. Unlike in later Greece, however, the altars were not used to burn the animal, only to deposit votive offerings, and it is impossible to say whether the sacrificial meat was shared by the worshipers in a meal like in later Greece. Nowhere in Mycenaean (or Minoan) archeological sites does one find the classic Greek triad of altar—temple—cult image; temples are separate, many-room houses devoted to the cult but not the house of a cult image, idols exist but are found in groups, and altars are generally a table of offerings. In the Near East the triad had long been customary. The burnt offering on an altar is a Semitic specialty, arrived probably via Cyprus. The sequence of whole animal offering and sacral meal, as well as the combination of food offering, libation, and burning of parts of the slaughtered animal, connect the Old Testament with Greek sacrificial practice.

The religious organization was interwoven with the royal palace and with the sanctuaries linked to it, and priests were apparently in charge of the sanctuaries. The pre-eminence of the female element in the Mycenaean religion, stressed above as regards the deities, is further evidenced by the fact that in Knossos, with one exception, only priestesses are mentioned as beneficiaries of the allocations, while in Pylos a male priest appears more frequently. Priesthood probably was an official lifelong position, not a temporary function like in classical Greece. An institution completely alien to later Greece, but comparable to Near Eastern practice, was sacred slavery: male and female slaves of the gods and/or of the sanctuaries, and hence of the priests and priestesses in charge of them. These were no ordinary bondsmen: they are always mentioned by name, they have their own land, and so are treated more like free people.

2.1.2 Classical Greek Theology

As mentioned in the Introduction, the highest of the Greek (and Roman) gods, the Sky Father, *Zeus pater* (*Jupiter*), is the only major Olympian god whose name can be traced with certainty to an Indo-European god (though some of the other Olympians' names do have Indo-European roots).[2] Other deities either—like *Helios* (the Sun) and *Eos* (the Dawn)—are impeccably Indo-European in both etymology and divine status, or—like the *Dioskouroi* (the youthful divine twins, masters of horses and rescuers from danger)—have close, unmistakable analogs in Indo-European mythology, but they are overshadowed by the Olympians. So the world of the Greek gods, already foreshadowed by the Mycenaeans discussed in the previous section, surfaces to history in a form that must presuppose a prehistory of transformations, adoptions, and borrowings that mostly escapes us. For example, among the twelve Olympians listed below, we have seen that Apollo and Aphrodite were unknown to the Mycenaeans and of Near Eastern origin; then Hephaestus is clearly non-Greek in name and modeled on the smith gods of Asia Minor, while Artemis's name is obscure and she is obviously a very old goddess also connected with Asia Minor and its Great Goddess (in the *Iliad* she is called *Potnia Theron*, "Mistress of the Wild Animals").

The earliest surviving documents of Greek literature, the Homeric poems (dated to the early eighth century BCE in their written form), give us a lively picture of a true "society of the gods" (Sissa and Detienne 2000), who dwell on the inaccessible heights of Mount Olympus and intervene in human affairs on earth as a matter of course; in particular, they are active and take sides in the great Trojan War and its aftermath. The relations among the gods are intricate to say the least, and the poet Hesiod (end of the eighth century BCE) tried to sort it out and produce a genealogy, or mythical "history", of the gods in his poem *Theogony*, which may be regarded as the closest thing to a theological treatise that the Greeks ever produced.

Regardless of divine origins and kinship, a general understanding seems to have developed among Greeks that some gods were more important than others and hence more deserving of cult. This crystallized into a group of twelve major deities that may be regarded as the top layer of the Olympian pantheon, and which found their classical representation in the famous frieze of the Parthenon temple in Athens (fifth century BC). As depicted in the Homeric poems, the twelve Olympians convened in a kind of parliament of the gods, presided over by Zeus as "first among equals", to settle disputes arising between them or their human clients. Below these, there was a vast array of lesser deities, some of which still Olympian or "heavenly", others associated with the countryside and the wilderness, and still others with the underworld—the latter called "chthonian" deities. In particular, Hades and Persephone (later called Pluto and Proserpina by the Romans) were the rulers of the underworld. All these might also have to be propitiated on given circumstances or locations.

[2] This and the next subsections draw extensively on Ferrero and Tridimas (2018) and the references cited therein.

The twelve major Olympians, with the associated jurisdictions (and with their Roman counterparts in parentheses for later use), are the following (Burkert 1985, part III Chap. 2):

- Zeus (Jupiter), king of the gods, god of the sky, law, order, and justice
- Hera (Juno), wife of Zeus, goddess of marriage, women, childbirth, and the family
- Poseidon (Neptune), god of the seas, earthquakes, and horses, and protector of seafarers
- Athena (Minerva), goddess of wisdom and knowledge, handicraft and technique, and war
- Apollo (Apollo), god of light, healing, oracles, poetry, music and arts
- Artemis (Diana), goddess of the hunt, the wilderness, wild animals, virginity, and protector of young women
- Aphrodite (Venus), goddess of love, beauty, and sexuality
- Hermes (Mercury), the messenger of the gods, god of trade, travelers, thieves, borders, diplomacy, eloquence, athletic games, and guide to the underworld
- Demeter (Ceres), goddess of fertility, the harvest, and sacred law
- Dionysus[3] (Bacchus or Liber), god of wine, ecstasy, and theater
- Hephaestus (Vulcan), god of fire, blacksmiths, craftsmen, sculpture, and volcanoes
- Ares (Mars), god of war and violence.

Even a cursory reading of this list suggests two things: most of the gods are complex characters, overseeing matters that span different, even apparently distant walks of life; and as a consequence, jurisdictional overlap abounds. The reasons for this complexity must be traced back to the way the pantheon and its cult complex came into being, dating back to prehistoric, and partly pre-Indo-European cults that were in time incorporated into the classic pantheon; it is because of this gradual accretion of disparate elements that this polytheism cannot properly be called a religious "system". However that pre-history may be, the result is that in historic times each god bore a collection of epithets (which etymologically means "additions"), each indicating a particular function or capacity that specialized that god's cult in each locality and temple. For example, Athena protects the city as *polias*, patronizes handicraft as *ergane*, leads soldiers into battle as *promachos*, and grants victory as *nike*. This gave rise to a huge diversity across the Greek world, which is why, as we will see in the next section, the cults and their priesthoods were specialized and localized as well, each highlighting a specific property of what was ostensibly still the same god.

For examples of overlap, Athena presided over the strategic side of war while Ares mastered its strictly military side; so a general starting on a military campaign would do well to make offerings and sacrifices to both gods. In the *Iliad* (II, 400 ff.) the Greek warriors sacrifice each to a different god before joining battle. For

[3] Dionysus is included among the twelve in the Parthenon relief. In other Greek cosmological and mythological writings, on the principle that this top layer should be balanced between six male and six female deities, Dionysus is replaced by Hestia, goddess of the hearth, who was, however, never prominent in Greek cult outside the household. A parallel goddess was central to the Roman pantheon under the name of Vesta (see Sect. 2.2.2 below).

marriage, the wedding couple would do well to make offerings to Aphrodite for the sex part, to Hera for the marriage bond itself, and to Artemis for childbirth. Often, one was not sure which gods should be propitiated on a given matter, so a wise counsel (and one consistent with portfolio diversification practice) was to spread offerings widely lest any one god be forgotten and thereby angered. For, due to the overlap of jurisdictions, the Greek gods are thought to be jealous of their rightful cult, wrathful, and revengeful when they feel slighted or ignored by mortals, even if only by accident or omission. "However much a god is intent on his honor, he never disputes the existence of any other god. (….) What is fatal is if a god is overlooked" (Burkert 1985, 216). In a famous Homeric story (*Iliad* IX, 534–549), the hero Oineus ("wine-man") forgot the goddess Artemis when holding thanksgiving sacrifices to the gods for a bountiful harvest; the goddess took her revenge by unleashing a wild boar, which destroyed the harvest. Nor could a god undo the punishment administered to a human by another god; instead, a god or goddess whose protégé is punished by another deity may enact countermeasures to alleviate the suffering of his/her protégé. In Euripides' *Hippolytus* (1328–30) Aphrodite, outraged by Hippolytus' scorn for her, has caused his dreadful downfall, but Artemis refuses to intercede on behalf of her beloved hunter: "the rule among us gods is this: None of us will go against the will of another. Instead, we will stand aside". Furthermore, humans could and would try to appease hostile deities by making offerings to them too. In the *Iliad*, Hera, Poseidon, Hermes, and Athena support the Greeks while Aphrodite, Artemis, Apollo, and Ares support the Trojans in the war. This rivalry fostered offsetting sacrifices by which the heroes sought to pacify the enemy's gods.

This fundamental conception that the power of the gods was unpredictable and men could do no more than try and channel its force in advance, and that the gods' own anger at their neglect could only be averted through propitiation, or "giving to the givers", remained central throughout the life of ancient paganism—even as men were well aware that propitiation does not always work. "Any account of pagan worship which minimizes the gods' uncertain anger and mortals' fear of it is an empty account" (Lane Fox 1988, 38). In general, animal sacrifice, usually joined with libations, was the chief form of offering to the heavenly gods, who were thought to be eager for the odors of burned meats rising up from the altars and willing to be so placated and forgive an erring supplicant, as famously declared in the *Iliad* (IX, 499–501); in effect, the gods were carnivorous (see the discussion in Sissa and Detienne 2000, Chap. 5).

Gods began to travel early, in classical times (Parker 2011, Appendix 2; Anderson 2015; Kearns 2015). As a rule, a city's permission was required for introducing worship of a foreign god—be it non-Greek or simply from other parts of the Greek world—and especially for granting him a public, official cult. This was based on pragmatic cost–benefit considerations, as a new cult would require an endowment to cover the costs of sanctuary building and maintenance, sacrifices, and presiding officials, and this in turn would compete for resources with existing cults and irk influential families that held prestigious priesthoods of traditional gods. Thus democratic Athens decided on accepting new cults upon taking an assembly vote. In the fifth century BCE, the citizens decided to grant a cult and festival to the Thracian goddess

of the moon and the hunt, Bendis (whom the Athenians equated with Artemis) as well as to the Greek gods Pan (a goat-god of uncivilized nature and sexuality, from Arcadia) and Asclepius (a god of medicine, son of Apollo, from Epidaurus), among others. At the opposite end of the political spectrum, oligarchic Sparta was ruled by two kings, in whose hands lay authority over cultic innovation. However, as an alternative to seeking state approval, a cult could also take hold as a private matter. The Phrygian mother goddess Cybele, often called *Meter* (Mother) by the Greeks, spread mainly as a private cult. She did not sit easily with Greek divine genealogy in that she was "the mother of all gods and men" and of all life; the Greeks, however, tended to equate her with Demeter as goddess of the harvest. Her cult was distinctly non-Greek, featuring wild, ecstatic music and dancing and presided over by eunuch priests. Similarly, worship of the Semitic god Adonis, the "dying god", spread as a private cult reserved for women (Burkert 1985, 176–179).

Looking beyond the boundaries of the *polis* (the city-state), when alliances formed among cities, each city's gods were solemnly acknowledged by its partners. Then with Alexander's conquest and the establishment of its successor states, which brought unity to the eastern Mediterranean and beyond, the diffusion process accelerated. In the third century BCE the Egyptian goddess of the dead and of motherhood, Isis, began a long, successful career in Greek, and later Roman, lands; Serapis—a syncretistic deity derived from the worship of two pre-existing Egyptians gods (Osiris and Apis) as a means to unify Greeks and Egyptians in Ptolemaic Egypt—likewise became a major success story first in the Greek and then the Roman world. Isis and Serapis were often worshiped in a joint sanctuary.

Underlying and supporting this free circulation and diffusion of foreign gods was the fundamental fact that the ancient Greeks did not see their gods as incompatible with the gods of other nations. Rather, they typically assumed that the other nations worshiped the same gods with different names, as exemplified by Herodotus' reports about the Thracian and the Scythians (Sect. 1.5), as well as his similar reports about the Egyptians and other peoples. As we will see, the Romans too had a similar attitude and tended to identify the gods of other nations—beginning with the Greek ones—with their own. As a result, in the Roman Empire the migration of the gods, joined with the Roman and the Greek "interpretations" of other national deities, swelled the numbers of the gods worshiped in any one place and increased the complexity and confusion of the whole system, making the task of hedging against insecurity an increasingly difficult task.

The Greeks had a conception of the immortality of the soul, *psyche* ("breath"), which after death would be led by Hermes to an underworld usually called Hades, like its tutelary god, but there was no conception of reward or punishment associated with behavior or morality in life (Burkert 1985, 194–199). All the souls there were treated equally, living a shadowy, colorless existence, except for precious few heroes or special persons who earned themselves an eternal life in a place of bliss at the edge of the earth (called the Elysian Fields or the Islands of the Blessed) and some primordial deities and mythological figures that were confined to eternal torment in a deep abyss (Tartarus). There they would stay forever as there was no conception of either cyclical time or end of times. However, we will see in the next section that

some mystery cults promoted hopes of a happy afterlife or of reincarnation of the soul for their initiates.

Since there was no connection between behavior in this life and condition in the hereafter, religion did not concern itself with ethics or rules of behavior, and there was no logical requirement that the gods themselves be moral exemplars. The Greek gods were like humans with the same vices and virtues, only more so. Morality was not part of their description; they were often portrayed as mean, cruel, lustful, deceitful, and envious. Hence there was not, nor could there have been, a moral code written in religious law or patterned after the example of the deities; the ancients' moral code was purely secular. As a consequence, through offerings and sacrifices to the gods, the people sought not spiritual blessings but exclusively worldly benefits, from successful childbearing to good harvest, from good health to happy marriage, from military victory to security in office, from safe travel to profitable business. We can anticipate here that the Romans (surveyed in Sect. 2.2 below) were even less interested in anything to do with the hereafter than the Greeks, and therefore had the same amoral conception of the gods, the same secular view of ethics, and the same worldliness of sacrifices.

2.1.3 The Cult and the Priests

Since the Archaic Age (ca. 750–500 BCE), places of worship were fixed in location and consisted of a demarcated precinct set apart from the profane (*temenos*). The precinct usually featured a triad, unknown to the Mycenaeans: a stone temple which was not meant to be visited by the public, a statue of the god housed in the temple together with the worshipers' dedications, and an altar in front of the temple's entrance on which the sacrifices were performed. The sacrificial ritual involved the burning of the animal on the altar, of which only the inedible parts and the bones were offered to the gods while the rest was shared in a meal among the sacrificers, the priest(s), and the community.[4] The most noble (and expensive) among the sacrificial beasts was the ox or bull, followed by sheep, goats, and pigs (a ranking which reflected the cost of raising the animal). The sacrificial ritual was understood and lived as a festive occasion that built bonds of community among the participants.

Prominent among the occasions when sacrifice was practiced were the festivals, which marked the yearly cycle of time and structured the cities' calendars (Burkert 1985, 225–246). They were what the word implies: festive, entertaining communal occasions, when people were allowed or encouraged not to work and which featured processions, banqueting, and musical or athletic performances and contests, all in honor of one or several gods or goddesses. We have the most complete evidence for Athens in the fifth century (Mikalson 1975, 24, 186–187, 201–203). Based on a

[4] The holocaust, where the entire animal was burnt and nothing was consumed, was a form of sacrifice characteristic of the Jews and the Phoenicians; it was used sparingly by the Greeks to appease the gods and spirits of the underworld.

reconstruction of the sacred and civil calendar of the city, there were seven festival days each month dedicated to the major deities and at least 35 annual festivals, many of which lasted several days, yielding a total of some 150 festival days in the year; this is likely to be an undercount as there were other festivals about which too little is known to allow dating. Athens prided herself and was internationally renowned for her numerous festival days, but was not exceptional among Greek cities. The Assembly would not meet on either monthly or annual festival days, and the Council would not meet on annual festival days; it must not be assumed, however, that all festival days were enjoyed as non-working days by all the population, especially by the lower social strata. Even so, the total is staggering: the rituals and surrounding festivities were there and had a budget cost.

Classical Greek religion has been defined "a religion without priests" (Burkert 1985, 95) because, in sharp contrast with the Celtic and Indo-Iranian religions, it has no professional priestly class with a corporate identity. "There was no 'mother church', no national priesthood, no central authority on ritual, let alone doctrine" (Finley 1964, 50).

In summary outline (Burkert 1985, part II Chap. 6; Garland 1990; Flower 2015; Parker 2011, 48–57), a priest (*hiereus*) or priestess (*hiereia*) was a public official in charge of a specific sanctuary and its belongings as well as the rites connected with the cult that was housed therein, chief of which was the sacrifice; hence the general fact, mentioned in the previous section, that priests were specialists in the service of a particular god at a particular shrine, where the god himself was often "specialized" by a particular functional or local epithet. So there was no such thing as a priest of Apollo or a priest of Athena in general, but only priests of Apollo's temple at Delos or of the temple of Athena Parthenos in Athens. As a general rule, male deities were attended by male priests and female deities by female priests; the only requirements for office were full citizenship and absence of physical blemishes. In democratic Athens, a number of traditional priesthoods remained the hereditary preserve of certain aristocratic families, probably a legacy from the Mycenaean kingdoms; but starting in the fifth century BCE, many important priestly offices were assigned by lot or by voting in the citizens' assembly among the eligible free population of the appropriate gender, and generally were for one year terms. This implies that specialized learning or skills were neither required nor expected—in Greek no fixed ritual formulas or prayers like the Vedic hymns have survived, so liturgical forms were quite free. At the opposite end of the political spectrum, aristocratic Sparta had two kings reigning concurrently who also took care of the religion. Most other Greek cities stood somewhere in between. The pattern of non-professional priesthoods, rotation in priestly office, and near-absence of life tenure seems to have been the general rule, to continue much in the same form down through the Hellenistic and then Roman periods.[5] In these later periods, priesthoods were often auctioned off by the city to the highest bidder among the city elite (Burkert 1985, 96; Lane Fox

[5] There were a few isolated exceptions featuring lifelong, consecrated priesthoods; these included the priestess of the pan-Hellenic oracle of Apollo at Delphi, known as the Pythia, and the priests or priestesses of the non-Greek gods Cybele and Isis, mentioned above.

1988, 77–78). The latter thus considered priestly service as a normal duty to be taken up alongside civic duties, and one that was onerous but brought prestige. In general, priests and priestesses received a share of the meat and other foods offered for sacrifice, but nobody earned their living from religious service.

It would be interesting to speculate on the reasons why, in stark contrast with neighboring Mesopotamian and Egyptian religions, a priestly class never developed in Greece. A promising line of argument, developed by Tridimas (2021), focuses on the joint effects of the diffusion of political power and the non-doctrinal character of the religion. Greek city-states were based on broadly equal political rights of all adult male citizens, who controlled power and decided policy, and knew no absolute ruler endowed with divine rights or powers. In such an egalitarian environment, it is difficult to imagine how a priestly class could ever acquire a monopoly of religious practice. At the same time, the absence of codified texts or of a sacred science requiring expert know-how and interpretation as a condition for successful ritual performance undermined any claim to primacy that an educated priestly elite could possibly advance. Furthermore, another key feature, which endured throughout the life of ancient paganism, also militated against the entrenchment of a professional priestly class: a priest was generally not necessary to make offerings and sacrifices to the gods or to hold public festivals and processions (Burkert 1985, 95; Parker 2011, 48–57). These rituals could also be performed by a household head, a village head, a city magistrate, or an army commander at different locations, including homes and occasionally temples, without a supervising priest. So priests were not required as mediators between gods and men; in the public cult, they shared that role with magistrates.

Outside the priest of the civic cults, there was another widespread figure of religious specialist: the seer or diviner (*mantis*), a private professional that provided his services for a fee to anyone who was willing to pay and whose business success depended on his/her technical knowledge and personal charisma; to enhance their credibility in the eyes of clients, often they claimed to belong to ancient clans of seers. Female seers served at pan-Hellenic oracular sites such as Delphi and Dodona. As far as we can gauge, this profession in Greece was very competitive and not organized as a pressure group (Burkert 1985, 111–114; Flower 2015).

Finally, while Greek religion, tied to the *polis*, was emphatically public religion, there always existed secret cults to which participation was reserved to the initiate (*mystes*), the mysteries; the most famous were those of Eleusis, near Athens, and those of Samothrace, each tied to a famous local sanctuary, and both probably pre-Greek (Burkert 1985, 276–278, 281–295). The particulars of initiation and the rituals there were kept secret, although we know that they were open to both men and women and involved intoxication by drinking and sexual, possibly orgiastic practices; Demeter and Dionysus were the most important deities thought to be in attendance. The Eleusinian mysteries in particular drew people from far and wide in the Greek and then Roman world and are attested for a period of a thousand years, from ca. 600 BCE to their prohibition by Emperor Theodosius at the end of the fourth century CE; they were presided over by dedicated priests and priestesses whose offices were apparently inherited within the same ancient family throughout. The Eleusinian mysteries, which

were held in great esteem by the best minds of the age, held out to the initiate hopes for a happy afterlife, thus going beyond the confines of the Greek conception of death (discussed in the last section). Blessedness in the afterlife was similarly promised by the Bacchic or Dionysian mysteries, a movement not tied to a local sanctuary that from the fifth century BCE onward spread widely around the Mediterranean and which involved initiation through ecstasy to the cult of Dionysus.

Whereas in the mystery cults an exceptional state of the body and the mind was part of the proceedings of festivals and initiation, it became a permanent mark of membership and a lifelong commitment for the Orphics and the Pythagoreans—two groups named after the mythical poet-singer Orpheus and the historical philosopher Pythagoras, respectively (Burkert 1985, 296–304). These groups, known from the sixth century BCE, might be called religious sects in the modern sense, and radical ones at that: they had members admitted through initiation to esoteric knowledge, including a belief in the reincarnation of the soul; they scorned animal sacrifice and practiced an ascetic lifestyle including vegetarianism and a host of purity rules for everyday life. By thus rejecting the central ritual of traditional religion, the sacrificial meal with the implied table fellowship, they set themselves squarely at odds with the life and culture of the *polis*, and remained on the fringe of society throughout antiquity.

2.2 Roman Religion

The historical difference between Roman and Greek religion is that the former began as the religion of a city, which then, step by step, rose to become the dominant power of the Mediterranean world and beyond; hence, the original Roman religion spread to ever newer territories and nations and, in the process, absorbed or accommodated many of the cults of the conquered peoples. By contrast, Greek religion remained the religion of a network of city-states, none of which ever gained lasting supremacy over the others; if anything, it was first Alexander's conquests and then the Roman Empire that allowed the original Greek religion to travel far and wide. Its unity was provided by the pan-Hellenic pantheon, in turn laid down in the epics and poetry, and the pan-Hellenic sanctuaries and games; even in Hellenistic times there was little if any state centralization.

The critical encounter was the so-called "Greek interpretation" (*interpretatio graeca*) by which, starting in the third century BCE, when not earlier, the Roman literate classes found in the Greek deities the "twins" of their own, often with some significant strain, which in turn permitted the borrowing of myths, imagery, and a number of rituals (recognized as such—*graecus ritus*) from the supposedly superior culture of their elder Greek brethrens. This is because, aside from the divine nomenclature, two differences stand out between the earliest religions of the two peoples: the Romans, unlike the Greeks, originally did not have—or had forgotten by the time of our sources in the late republican period—a mythology recounting the deeds and adventures of the gods and their dealings (sexual, confrontational, or otherwise) with

one another and with humans[6]; and they had no genealogy or "history" of the gods, arranging them in a sort of chronological order or hierarchy. They acquired both when they paired their gods with the Greek ones, thereby creating a fertile ground for the poetry that bloomed around the end of the Republic (first century BCE). While doing this, however, the Romans retained their own ancestral institutions and priesthoods, even as these slowly evolved with time. In time, this merger yielded a fusion product that became "universal" to the Roman Empire but left much room for local varieties (local personifications of a deity).

The earliest Roman religion spans the monarchic period (ca. 750–500 BCE) and the early republican period, when it gradually evolved and took a definite shape by the third century BCE. The earliest religion is surrounded by obscurity because of the lack of contemporary written sources, while our surviving sources are Roman and Greek writers of the last two centuries BCE, who give us a largely legendary tradition for the earlier centuries. So our information must be gleaned from this annalistic tradition and from inferences about the antiquity of institutions and rites that survived into the latter and better-known centuries, with the help of a fair amount of data from archaeology and epigraphy. For, a general principle is that the Romans were conservative and inclined to add new deities, rituals, and sacred laws but not to delete old ones; so some earliest strata were allowed to survive in a fossilized form. The fact of being fossils, however, speaks for their being very ancient.

As mentioned, through the Greek interpretation the Romans paired the twelve Olympian gods and goddesses that constituted the summit of the Greek pantheon—as well as a few minor deities—with some of their own deities (see the double names of the twelve Olympians listed in Sect. 2.1.2 above). A Greek influence on Roman deities, however, had begun much earlier through contact with the Greek cities of southern Italy and with the Etruscans, a powerful non-Indo-European people of central Italy whose religion had in turn also been influenced by the Greeks (according to the semi-legendary "history" of Rome, the last three kings of the monarchic period were Etruscans). But the Romans' original pantheon was considerably different from that fusion product.

2.2.1 The Earliest Theology

Dumézil (1970, 141–147) argued that the earliest theology was dominated by an "archaic triad" of gods, Jupiter, Mars, and Quirinus (in this order). The evidence for it is that these three gods were served by three of the highest priests of Rome, the major flamens (*flamines majores*), who in the most ancient ranking order of the highest priests (still fully in force by the end of the Republic) were preceded only by the "king of rites" (*rex sacrorum*) and followed by the chief pontiff (*pontifex*

[6] This was much to the admiring astonishment of informed Greek observers like Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who (in the Augustan age) thought that Roman religion was more elevated and pure than his own Greek religion on this account (Dumézil 1970, 47–50).

maximus). This triad of gods is also invoked in some sacred formulas dating from the earliest times, and their three priests went together once a year (October 1) to jointly offer a sacrifice at the temple of the goddess of Good Faith (Fides). This triad shows the unmistakable, tri-functional structure stemming from the original Indo-European religion and common to its descendants (the Iranian, Vedic, Celtic, and Scandinavian religions among them): a ruler of the heavens who at the same time embodies political sovereignty and priestly power (Jupiter), a god of war (Mars), and a god of the common people in their capacity as producers (Quirinus). In the course of time the figure of Quirinus became blurred and finally drifted into obscurity, while the archaic triad was replaced by the classic Capitoline triad (Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva), enshrined in the temple of Jupiter the Best and Greatest (*Jupiter Optimus Maximus*) on Rome's Capitoline Hill. This classic triad and its temple, supposedly built by the last king and inaugurated by the very first republican magistrates at the beginning of the fifth century, were to become the symbol of Rome throughout its history.

Following Dumézil's (1970, 148–175) discussion, Jupiter's priest (*flamen Dialis*) was constrained by a range of prohibitions that made him almost unique: he was *quotidie feriatus*, meaning that for him no day was secular; he was forbidden to leave the city, to see the army arrayed and ready for campaign, to mount a horse; he presided over the most sacred and rare form of marriage and shunned contact with anything that may defile such as corpses, funeral pyres, or raw meat. His wife was similarly bound. Behind these behavioral rules we may read the traits ascribed to his god, the original Jupiter. We know little about Mars' priest (*flamen Martialis*) except that he carried out the special sacrifice of a war horse to Mars every October 15 (*equus October*)—a unique ritual (since the Romans typically sacrificed animals that were a normal part of their diet) and one which has striking parallels to the Vedic ritual of *ashvamedha*. Finally, Quirinus' priest (*flamen Quirinalis*) is reported to be officiating in a number of ancient calendar festivals, all concerned with the harvesting and processing of grain and in which Quirinus is associated with other ancient, specialized deities of the crops. Here Dumézil (ibid, 168–170) stresses that by its very nature the third function, encompassing as it does a wide variety of economic activities as well as health and fertility, can only imperfectly be represented by any one deity, so that in other lists and structures Quirinus is often accompanied or replaced by other deities similarly concerned—he speaks of a "parceling out of the third function".

The *rex sacrorum*, mentioned above, was nominally the highest-ranking figure of the Roman priestly hierarchy, although he was a largely powerless figurehead. He was apparently created at the overthrow of the monarchy to take over some of the religious functions that had previously been discharged by the real kings. Naturally, given the origin of his office, alone among the Roman priests, he was absolutely barred from political office, and he was made a member of the pontifical college on a par with the pontiffs and the flamens, which reduced his authority in religious decision-making (Beard, North and Price 1998, 56). His duties—on which we are poorly informed—were limited to the performance of a few sacrifices on given calendar days and the announcement of the dates of the festivals of each month; his wife, the "queen of rites" (*regina sacrorum*) likewise offered a sacrifice to Juno on the first day of each

month (calends). They resided in the "royal house" (*Regia*), which in the republican era was the center of religious affairs (Dumézil 1970, 172–174). The chief pontiff also resided there, and there the college of pontiffs carried out its activities. Besides the pontiffs', the religious activities in the *Regia* were of three different types. First, the regal couple and the wife of the *flamen Dialis* offered sacrifices to Jupiter, Juno, and Janus—the last two being the regulators of time and the beginnings; so these cults pertain to the administration of the state. Second, there was a shrine to Mars, where the warlike talismans of Rome were housed and where generals first came for a propitiation ritual when war was declared. Third, there was a shrine to the goddess of the abundance of the harvest (Ops Consiva). So, to Dumézil, the structure of the *Regia* itself symbolizes a variant of the archaic triad, where Quirinus is replaced by Ops as representative of the third function.

This "parceling out of the third function", which we have seen with regard to the duties of Quirinus' priest and to the operational structure of the *Regia*, is to Dumézil of the essence. The third function is inherently more complex than the other two because it encompasses the manifold, changing facets of material existence, each of which is provided for by a specialized divine personage; thus there will be deities of abundance, of the soil, of the stored grains, of flowering, of fertility, of childbirth, and many more. "While Mars stands alone, and Jupiter stands in the foreground, the pale entities on his level being far behind him, Quirinus is truly only *unus inter pares* [one among equals], and may under particular circumstances be called upon to efface himself (….) behind one of his numerous, better adapted peers" (ibid, 247). Neat as this theological statement is, with hindsight it did not save the Romans from ever-growing cultic intricacies. This is because of two reasons: first, starting in prehistoric times, new deities were constantly being naturalized as Roman as time passed; and second, to avoid displeasing some unknown powers and incurring their wrath, the Romans considered it prudent always to add to, and never delete from, the pantheon. So when some ancient deities lost their practical importance or were superseded by new acquisitions, they let them slide into oblivion but kept them on the roster. Such a roster, however, was not spelled out in scripture or theological works (which did not exist except as late erudite speculations) but enshrined in a body of dedicated priesthoods, calendar festivals, and temples, none of which, to our knowledge, was ever discontinued or disestablished. The next section surveys the main developments of the pantheon and its associated cult.

2.2.2 Inflation of the Pantheon

The high priests of the archaic triad—the major flamens discussed above—were not alone: beside them were 12 "minor" flamens, each devoted to one deity. Unique among the Roman priesthoods, the major and minor flamens did not constitute a college: they did not officiate together (with the sole exception of the three major flamens' joint sacrifice to Fides on October 1, mentioned above), had no common premise for their rituals, could not innovate or respond to questions of religious

policy (that was the pontiffs' job), could not interpret the signs from heaven (that was the augurs' job). Each in isolation carried out ritual prescriptions fixed from time immemorial—which made many of them living fossils of a bygone stage of the religion. They were also (with the Vestals to be discussed below) the only Roman priests differentiated by deities—all the others were differentiated by function. Among the 12 minor flamens, we do not even know the names of two, and of two more we know only the names but not the significance or ritual duties. Of the remaining eight, at least one was unintelligible to the Romans of the first century BCE, and only two (Ceres and Vulcan) ended up in the Hellenized group of twelve Olympians—the top of the hierarchy, in a sense—by the third century BCE; but all of them had a festival in the religious calendar, and five had one or more temples in Rome. The deities of the minor flamens about whom we know anything at all are indeed deities of the third function (Dumézil 1970, 108). So the fossilized flamen system was like archeological evidence of a deity's great antiquity, but it was also cumbersome and costly.

The deities of the third function did not stop at these flamens', and several deities crossed functional boundaries. We mentioned above the classic triad of the Capitoline temple, Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, which at the inception of the Republic replaced the archaic triad. This grouping of a male god and two goddesses was highly unusual in ancient Indo-European religions, unknown to the Greeks, and is probably explained by an Etruscan origin whose details escape us. Anyway, Juno here joins the two aspects, well know from neighboring Latin cities, of *Lucina* and *Regina*—goddess of women's fertility and childbirth and of sacred sovereignty ("Queen"). For Dumézil (1970, 300–303) this is a logical consequence of his tri-functional interpretation of the archaic triad (Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus): a range of Indo-Iranian and Germanic parallels show that the group of male gods embodying the three functions was often counterbalanced by a multi-functional goddess who crosses the boundaries of specialization and reconciles them. Such a start explains how Juno could later be identified with the Greek Hera, thus assuring herself of a brilliant future. As to Minerva, at this early stage she was no more than the goddess of arts and crafts—hence she was due for great multi-functional magnification through her later identification with the Greek Athena, with her extensions into knowledge and into the art of war.

The Capitoline triad started as an aristocratic cult, and since the early centuries of the republic were marked by a class conflict between the aristocracy (patricians) and the commoners (plebeians), the latter achieved a signal success by having a temple to the "plebeian triad" (Ceres, Liber, Libera) established on the Aventine Hill and served by plebeian priests (one of whom was Ceres' flamen). These were clearly third-function deities—Ceres, entitled to a flamen and closely associated in cult with Tellus (Earth), was the goddess of grain crops, weddings and motherhood, sacred law and field boundaries, and the guardian of the access to the underworld, and was soon equated with Greek Demeter; Liber, the ancient god of wine, virility and freedom, was soon equated with Dionysus/Bacchus, while Libera was his wife. Important annual festivals were celebrated in their honor.

In addition, the religious calendar lists at least eleven other gods or goddesses unmistakably belonging to the third function, with jurisdictions ranging from shepherds to stored grain, from commerce to wells and springs, from women's fertility to wildlife, from human health to the seasons. All of them were honored with one or more festivals, and seven of them had a temple or an altar in the city. The third function was indeed "parceled out".

Furthermore, the deities clustered around Jupiter in the sovereign function may have been "pale entities", as Dumézil claimed, but they did receive cult, and may have been remnants of ancient Indo-European cognates of the sovereign god. Terminus was the protector of boundary markers, and a festival was dedicated to him, while Juventas (Youth) was the goddess of the young men coming of age. Both Terminus and Juventas had a shrine inside Jupiter's Capitoline temple, and Dumézil (1970, 200–203) suggests that this triad parallels one in the Rig Veda whereby the sovereign god, Mitra, is associated with two minor deities, Aryaman and Bhaga, one the patron of the society of the "Arya", the other concerned with the fair division of property. Moreover, Jupiter was closely associated with a god of oaths, a goddess of trust or good faith (Fides, already mentioned), and a god of nocturnal thunder—possibly embodying the violent, awe-inspiring aspect of sovereignty; all of them had a temple in the city. Similarly, Mars did not really "stand alone": an ancient goddess of war, Bellona, and a goddess of victory, Victoria, both had a temple in the city.

Finally, there are some important Roman deities who are either unique to Rome or completely out of joint with the Greek interpretations later forced on them. First is Janus, the god of all beginnings, gates, and transitions, who had no Greek equivalent and whom the Romans themselves claimed as distinctively their own. Given his definition, Janus' presence was ubiquitous in rituals: the gates of his temple were opened in wartime and kept closed during peacetime—a rare event; he presided over the rites which marked the beginning and closing of the military season, in March and October respectively; in his name were solemnized the beginning of the year (hence the name of the first month, January)—he had a festival shortly after new year day—and the beginnings of every month; every act of worship or sacrifice addressed to more than one deity opened with the invocation of Janus and ended with the invocation of Vesta, as the guardian of the innermost things—the hearth. Dumézil (ibid, 332–333) suggests that Janus—defined by the Roman scholar Varro as the god of the beginnings (*prima*) as opposed to Jupiter the god of the heights (*summa*)—is of good Indo-European stock: he finds a close counterpart in the Scandinavian god Heimdall, residing at the limits of the earth, protector of the gods, born at the beginning of time, the forefather of mankind and the founder of the social order, who is nevertheless inferior to the sovereign god Odin as the firstborn is inferior to the greatest.

Vesta, the goddess of the perpetual fire and the hearth, was hardly comparable with the corresponding Greek goddess Hestia, whose cult was confined in the home or by the hearth of a public building and who had no temples or dedicated priesthood.[7] On

[7] Dumézil (1970, 311–326) finds extensive and significant parallels between the Roman institutions and rituals of public fires and the *shrauta* sacrificial ritual of the three fires described in the Vedas

the contrary, Vesta's cult was a mainstay of the Roman state, centered on her circular sanctuary in the Forum where the sacred fire of Rome was housed. The sanctuary and the fire were served by a college of virgin priestesses, the Vestals, who were never to allow it to go out. Unlike all other Roman deities, Vesta was never depicted in human form—she was the fire itself. As mentioned above, she had a key part in many public rituals, and her festival, the Vestalia (June 7–15), was among the most important holidays. The Vestals were chosen by the chief pontiff from a list of candidate girls before puberty, took a vow of chastity for a 30-year-long service, and the pontiff himself watched over them. Besides tending the sacred fire, they attended numerous public ceremonies and prepared a special kind of flour which was sprinkled on the victims of all public sacrifices. In case of dereliction of their duties or breach of their chastity vow, they were subjected to draconian punishments. They lived in their own House of the Vestals next to the temple. In stark contrast with Greece, where female priesthood was widespread, they represented the only traditional, self-standing female priesthood in Rome—the wives of the *rex sacrorum* and of the *flamen Dialis* also had religious duties but only in their capacity as the priests' wives.

Saturn was yet another indigenous Roman god of agricultural plenty, generation, dissolution, and renewal. He had a temple in the Forum at least since the beginning of the republic, and his week-long festival, the Saturnalia (December 17–23) marked the closing of the year and the associated renewal; it was famous for the revelry and the reversal of social roles. He was later conflated with the Greek Titan Cronus, the leader of the second generation of gods, who was finally overthrown by his son Zeus inaugurating the reign of the Olympians; Cronus, however, never enjoyed a cult in Greece except in Athens.

We have so far paid scant attention to the chronology of the adoption of new deities into the Roman cult, but we have information about the procedures and about some specific cases of adoption. In republican Rome, the senate time and again decided to welcome foreign gods into the city and grant them a temple, a cult, and often a festival on the official ritual calendar. This could be the result of alliances or trade with other Italian cities whereby the partner cities would acknowledge and "import" each other's gods, in a pattern similar to that established among Greek cities long before. Since such Italian cities were often Greek colonies, many of these imported gods were Greek, but not all. Another process by which local gods found a new home, especially in republican Rome and occasionally in later periods, was the importation of the patron deity of a conquered city into the conquering city in fulfillment of a vow taken by the Roman general ahead of battle. The vow promised that the deity would be honored if he/she "switched sides" at the time of battle and ensured the Romans' victory; whereupon in Rome the new deity would be not just acknowledged but "equated" to a pre-existing Roman deity—a procedure known as *evocatio* (Dumézil 1970, 424–431; Beard, North and Price 1998, 34–35).

(Flood 1996, ch. 2), despite the fact that by the time our information surfaces, Roman society had not only long since been sedentary but urbanized.

Some really alien deities were imported with solemnity. The physician god Aesculapius was formally imported from Epidaurus, home of his Greek model Asclepius, and given a temple and a festival in Rome on the occasion of a severe plague in 291 BCE. Cybele—a non-Greek goddess, as we have seen—was officially and solemnly introduced from Phrygia to Rome, as Magna Mater (the Great Mother), around 204 BCE on the advice of the Sibylline oracle, which said that the second war against Carthage might be won by the goddess' help—which indeed happened; she too gained a temple and a festival. With her came from Asia her eunuch priests, dedicated to her service for life; characteristically, Roman citizens were prohibited from ever joining this priesthood. Isis—another non-Greek goddess—arrived in Rome in the first century BCE and gained a temple and a large following, and later also the personal endorsement of some emperors. Occasionally, a foreign cult could be repressed or suppressed for reasons to do with law and order or propriety of behavior; in 186 BCE, for example, a mystery cult of Bacchus (of Greek origin, as mentioned in Sect. 2.1.3 above) was banned by the senate on the grounds that it was unruly and morally corrupt (Beard, North and Price 1998, 96–98).

The upshot of this tour of early Roman deities is twofold: their number was from an early date very large, and any attempt to pin down each god or goddess to a particular, specialized function in a one-to-one correspondence seems hopeless; their spheres of interest, or jurisdictions, inevitably overlapped. Thus, "it is hard to find any of the main deities at Rome that does not cross some or all of Dumézil's most important boundaries" (Beard, North and Price 1998, 16). In a similar vein, in his extensive review of Dumézil's work on Roman religion, Momigliano (1987, Chap. 19) concurs with this crossing of boundaries and concludes that the tri-functional partition, even though it can be detected in several instances, cannot even begin to account for the complexity of both the pantheon and the institutions. Dumézil (1970, 175, 236) cogently argues that, contrary to frequent suggestions, Mars is not really "agrarian" but fights, as a warrior, to protect the farmer and the shepherd against raiding enemies, wolves, and other scourges; and that, similarly, Jupiter is not "warlike" but acts as a sovereign who presides over the legal and ritual preparations for war and all that is expected to ensure victory. This is fine theology, but the fact remains that the farmer sacrificed to both Ceres and Mars, and that the general sacrificed to Mars on his departure on a campaign and offered the spoils of war and the thanksgiving sacrifice to Jupiter on his return. More generally, the combination of number and complexity of the divine host implied heavy consequences for the cult and its cost (in terms of both time and resources).

We may wrap up our survey by putting some numbers to these results. As to the number of deities we have: 11 known deities provided with a flamen (dropping the unknown ones), which include 4 of the 12 Olympians, to whom we must add Juno, Minerva, and Vesta discussed above. The other 5 Olympians (Mercury, Neptune, Venus, Apollo, Diana) all had a festival and at least one ancient temple in the city. Then we can count 23 deities, outside the Olympians and without a flamen, who had a dedicated festival (sometimes, two) in the calendar, and very often a temple too. Finally, there are 7 further deities without a festival but with a temple. The total is $7 + 12 + 23 + 7 = 49$. This total includes the official imports from Greece and

excludes the different functional epithets of each deity (e.g. Juno Regina, Pronuba, Lucina) and the later political personifications of abstractions (such as Concordia or Virtus).

Another gauge of the weight of the pantheon on actual cultic activity is the list of religious festivals. In Roman pontifical science, *feriae* (holy days) were simply days marked off for the gods in which people were supposed to abstain from work and most government business, but in practice they almost always involved religious rituals and festivals. While some were private, involving individuals, families, or professional groups, most festivals were public and funded by the state; if they had a fixed date they were listed in the annual calendar, while some others—almost all linked with agrarian life—were movable feasts, whose date was set each year by the priests. Working on the earliest available calendar Dumézil (1970, 562) gives a total of 61 fixed public festivals, of which 16 were fixed days of the month (such as the Ides, i.e. the 13 or 15 of the month, sacred to Jupiter) and 45 designated by individual names; those not named for deities are thought to be among the oldest. However, if we add the movable festivals, other days of religious ceremonies that technically were not *feriae*, the festivals of foreign gods imported to Rome, and the fact that some festivals extended over several days, for the late republican period (first century BCE) we arrive at the staggering figure of 87 days off work which were devoted to cultic activities for the whole of the Roman people (excluding some cults that involved only local or sectional groups).[8]

2.2.3 The Priests

Unlike with all the other Indo-European peoples surveyed in this book, the very structure of early Roman religion has made it necessary to introduce priests and religious officials interwoven with the description of the pantheon. We now need to round out the topic by adding some details and discussion.

The priesthood of republican Rome was different from that of Greece in three ways (Dumézil 1970, part IV, Chap. 2; Beard 1990; Beard, North and Price 1998, 18–30, 99–108). First, priestly offices, even when assigned by election (see below), were normally for life rather than temporary (although sometimes one could resign). Second, with the exception of the *rex sacrorum* (a stand-alone priest) and the flamens (who were each assigned to the cult of a particular god), discussed at length above, priestly offices, rather than being individual assignments as in Greece, were organized in colleges. The main colleges were the *pontifices*, the *augures*, the *decemviri/quindecemviri*, and the *fetiales*. The pontifical college, headed by the

[8] Author's calculation based on Wikipedia (2021a), which in turn draws on H.H. Scullard, Festivals and ceremonies of the Roman Republic, Cornell University Press, 1981. With the help of Dumézil's detailed treatment, I dropped all the items listed in the calendar as anniversaries of the foundation or rededication of temples, *dies religiosi* or unlucky, days of public games beyond the cult day, private or group festivals, and some poorly attested ceremonies. A given ferial day in my calculation may cover several cultic ceremonies for different deities.

pontifex maximus or chief priest (a title later assumed by the head of the Christian church), included not only the pontiffs but also the *rex sacrorum* and the *flamines* and supervised the Vestal college, discussed above. The pontiffs themselves had a specialized knowledge of sacred laws and rituals, which extended to matters of family law like the supervision of burials, wills, and adoptions and to the keeping of the calendar, and they both regulated individual behavior and advised the senate on such matters. The augurs (*augures*) "took the auspices", i.e. divined the will of the gods from the observation of birds, thunder and lightning, and on this basis advised the senate and the magistrates on the wisdom of any intended political or military action. They also ritually "inaugurated" new temples. The ten men/ fifteen men (*decemviri/quindecemviri*—their number changed with time) were the guardians of the Sibylline Books, from which they produced oracles on the senate's request. Finally the *fetiales* presided over the ancient rituals that ensured the proper starting and ending of wars.

Third, with the exception of the flamens and the Vestals, Roman priests were not assigned or specialized to particular deities or sanctuaries like their Greek colleagues but were differentiated by ritual or technical functions—so much so that only hesitatingly did the Romans themselves use the general term *sacerdos* (equivalent to the Greek *hiereus*) to embrace the whole range of their religious officials (Beard 1990, 43–47). This exceptional status, together with the generally archaic nature of the deities to which they were dedicated, of the rituals they performed, and of the personal restrictions to which some of them were bound, make it likely that the flamens and the Vestals represent a very early pattern of priestly office-holding, later superseded and marginalized by the functional colleges. Most importantly, unlike the Greek priests, the Roman priests were not in charge of temples and of the rites conducted therein—not even the flamens. In general, Roman temples had no priestly personnel attached to them, and priests, magistrates, and other citizens went to temples to offer sacrifices or perform other rituals when desired or required. So the temples could never become a power base for the priests vis-à-vis the rest of society.

As the foregoing description implies, there was an elaborate division of labor that differentiated priesthoods by specialized, non-overlapping tasks, a division strictly defined by tradition and custom. Exactly for this reason, there was, and there could be, no overall hierarchy; the chief pontiff had some limited disciplinary power only over members of his college. The collegiality principle (extending to all groups but the flamens) ensured that the priests of each college were interchangeable and could take turns at the job, so that they all (except the Vestals) were part-time priests. The result was the figure of the "priest-politician": with the very few exceptions mentioned above (Jupiter's flamen and the *rex sacrorum*), a man could and normally did join any of these priesthoods with a political or military career, and a given person could hold more than one office at the same time or in successive periods of his life. So despite the difference in organization, and with the exception of the Vestals (the only full-time professionals, aside from the non-Roman priests of the Magna Mater), Roman priesthoods were not a profession and priests were not a social class, exactly like in Greece. Unlike their Greek colleagues, Roman priests drew no stipend for their services nor did they take a share of the ritual offerings; on the contrary, they

normally had to provide for the expenses of their rituals from their own means. Thus priestly office conferred status and prestige but was often financially burdensome for the priest.

As to the social base, originally all priesthoods were patrician, i.e. reserved for the aristocracy; since around 300 BCE access to the office of augurs, pontiffs, *fetiales*, and *quindecemviri* was opened to the plebeians, i.e. the commoners. As to the method of selection, the *flamines* and the Vestals were chosen by the chief pontiff, while the *fetiales* always by cooption. The augurs, pontiffs, and *quindecemviri* were also originally chosen by cooption; then a method of partial popular election was introduced in the last century BCE—a belated "democratization" in the Athenian style.

2.3 Main Takeaways

Already in Mycenaean times, the Greeks had an impressive range of deities that foreshadowed those of later Greece, in which the heritage of a common Indo-European pantheon was hardly visible, but which featured a prominent Great Goddess continuing from previous cultures. The sacrificial ritual too foreshadowed the classical one, but sanctuaries were linked to the royal palaces; priesthoods were official lifelong positions in charge of the sanctuaries. In the classical age, the Greek pantheon kept growing and became dominated by the twelve major Olympians, each of whom had an interest in a broad, diverse range of fields, so that jurisdictions overlapped with one another and several gods had to be propitiated for any one request or concern. The gods were perceived as jealous of their rightful cult and ready to take revenge of mortals who neglected them; so the fear of gods' unpredictable anger was pervasive and the cult, centered on animal sacrifice, served to keep it at bay. Expensive religious festivals permeated city calendars. Gods, including non-Greek ones, could and did migrate throughout the Greek world, subject to a city' permission (typically voted by the citizens' assembly) to introduce a new public cult, and this diffusion of deities accelerated in the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

At death, all souls were thought to go to a bleak underworld without distinction and without connection with behavior or morality in life. As a consequence, morality was not regulated by religion but was purely secular, and the gods were not conceived of as moral figures that could be loved. Hence, through offerings and sacrifices to the gods, the people sought not spiritual blessings but exclusively worldly benefits. The same conception prevailed among the Romans.

Priests and priestesses were public officials in charge of a specific sanctuary as well as the rites conducted therein, chief of which was the sacrifice; they were specialists in the service of a particular god at a particular shrine, where the god himself was often "specialized" by a particular functional or local epithet. With the exception of some ancient priesthoods, which remained the hereditary preserve of certain aristocratic families, most priestly offices were assigned by lot or by voting in the citizens' assembly, usually for one year. So the priests were part-time, nonprofessional officials and, although they took a share of the sacrificial offerings, did not earn their living

from their office. Moreover, they were generally not necessary to hold sacrifices and festivals, as city magistrates and private individuals could do it as well.

The earliest Roman theology was dominated by an archaic triad of gods embodying the tri-functional structure that supposedly characterized the original Indo-European religion: a god of the sky who was also king and priest (Jupiter), a god of war (Mars), and a god of producers (Quirinus), supported by dedicated priests and by a web of archaic rituals. Around the beginning of the republican period, this triad was replaced by the classic Capitoline triad (Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva) and the long process began by which the Romans paired the Greek Olympian gods with some of their own deities (e.g. Zeus = Jupiter), borrowing Greek mythology and rituals in the process. However, a number of important original Roman deities had no Greek counterpart, and other deities still were imported from other cities and nations, including Oriental goddesses, as Roman power grew. The Romans were prudent and inclined to add new deities and rituals but not to delete old ones; so as the pantheon expanded, the earliest deities survived as fossils but still commanded a structure of priesthoods, calendar festivals, and temples, none of which was ever discontinued. As a result, the number of gods was from an early date very large and growing with time, and any functional specialization was soon lost and jurisdictional overlap prevailed. This required a complex cultic system, enshrined in a large number of religious festivals, involving heavy costs.

With the exception of some fossilized priesthoods dedicated to the most archaic gods, Roman priests were not specialized to particular deities or sanctuaries like their Greek colleagues; instead, they were generally organized in colleges entrusted with different ritual or technical functions and whose members were interchangeable, so they all could be, and were, part-time officials. This traditional division of labor by specialized tasks had no hierarchy. The priests were not in charge of temples, which had no priestly personnel attached to them but were used by whoever wanted to perform a sacrifice there. Priestly office was usually for life, and it drew no income but imposed on its holder the burden to provide for ritual expenses from his own means; hence, a man normally joined one or more priesthoods with a political or military career. So, despite the differences, Roman priesthoods were not a profession and priests were not a social class, exactly like in Greece. These offices were originally reserved for the aristocracy and assigned by cooption, but then most of them were opened to the commoners and their holders became chosen by popular election.

Chapter 3
Celts and Germans: The Elusive Religions

Abstract This chapter first examines the little we know about Celtic religion in Gaul and Ireland. The pantheon described by Roman writers was relatively small but then the gods' attributes tended to shift and expand and their jurisdictions to overlap. The druids were a learned, centrally organized priestly class overseeing all sacrifices, reminiscent of the Vedic Brahmans. Turning to the Germans, the pantheon described by Roman writers was small and well-defined; in the Viking period it did not grow but evolved toward a freedom for men to choose a god as personal protector for all purposes. Professional priesthood was little developed; most ritual functions were carried out by chieftains and aristocrats alongside their secular functions.

3.1 Celtic Religion

Our sources for Celtic religion are sharply divided between ancient Greek and Roman authors, whose testimony is contemporaneous (starting from the first century BCE) but indirect and concerning only Gaul and Britain, and medieval Irish writings, whose material is the original mythology but heavily euhemerized by its Christian monkish authors. So in the Irish sources what were originally gods and goddesses must be detected behind stories of heroes and demons, and the priests are presented as sorcerers, whereas in the Latin sources the gods are given Roman names, assimilating them to the nearest Roman counterpart—an early instance of *interpretatio romana*, which was later extended to the Germanic pantheon by Tacitus and others. Hence a challenge that has faced modern scholars is to match these Roman names to the characters of the Irish myths. Help has been sought in the iconographic and inscriptional evidence unearthed by archaeologists, which is completely absent in Ireland (which was never conquered by the Romans) but plentiful in Gaul; here, however, it is heavily Romanized and so of uncertain reliability, compounding the problem. In any case, the principal reason of interest for us is that the Celts possessed a highly developed priestly class, the druids, even though we know precious little about their operations. In what follows, we focus on the continental Gauls and the Irish, because the British Celts are only occasionally mentioned by the Roman sources,

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left no archaeological traces, and after the Romans' withdrawal were swamped by the Germanic Anglo-Saxon tribes which only left a record.

3.1.1 Theology

The clearest concise description of the classic continental Celts' pantheon was written around 50 BCE by Julius Caesar in his *Gallic War* (VI, 17). It is worth reproducing in full:

> Among the gods, they most worship Mercury. There are numerous images of him; they declare him the inventor of all arts, the guide for every road and journey, and they deem him to have the greatest influence on money-making and commerce. After him they set Apollo, Mars, Jupiter, and Minerva. Of these deities they have almost the same idea as all other nations: Apollo drives away diseases, Minerva teaches the first principles of arts and crafts, Jupiter holds the empire of heaven, Mars directs wars. To Mars, when they have determined to engage battle, they vow as a rule whatever spoils they may take: if then they win, they sacrifice such living things as they have taken and all the other effects they gather into one place.

The main problem of interpretation here concerns not so much the deciphering of the Gauls' deities underlying these Roman names as the correspondence between Gaulish and Irish deities in the structure of a pantheon. In what follows we will essentially follow Le Roux (1970) as our guide, adding citations to other scholars when necessary to add to or depart from it; at the end of the section we will try to assess the results of our survey against alternative interpretations.

The plethora of votive inscriptions and figures found in Gaul, which is much more abundant than for any other native deity, confirm Caesar's leading role of Mercury in the pantheon. The native Gaulish god that lies beneath the Roman Mercury can be identified as Lugus, which provided the names of many towns throughout Celtic Europe (including today's Lyon). In turn, Lugus is the counterpart of Irish Lug, the king of the Irish pantheon, a god of the bright sky (the etymology is "shining, luminous"), at the same time a priest, a universal sovereign, a warrior who fights with his magic, and the inspirer and protector of arts, thus encompassing in himself all the three functions. This is a range of jurisdiction that goes well beyond the competencies of the Roman Mercury or of his Greek counterpart, Hermes, and is more comparable to the Germanic Odin/Wodan, who was also identified with Mercury in the Roman period—see Sect. 3.2.1 below (De Vries 1963, 62; Davidson 1988, 89–92). To him was consecrated one of the four major Celtic festivals, *Lughnasad* or "Lug's assembly" (August 1), marking the beginning of harvest (see Davidson 1988, 38–39, for the Celtic festivals).

The king of the Roman gods, Jupiter, comes only in fourth place in Caesar's list. His main Gaulish name is Taranis, or "the thundering one" (cf. the Romans' Jupiter *Tonans*). A god of the heavens, of all the natural elements, as Caesar suggests, he is often portrayed with a wheel or with the thunderbolt in Gallo-Roman iconography—both cosmic symbols. His Irish counterpart is the Dagda, the "Good God", "which

means potent and gifted rather than benevolent" (Davidson 1988, 204). He wields a mighty club, corresponding to Jupiter's thunderbolt, which can equally give death or life. He holds a huge cauldron to which crowds are always welcome to come and eat and whose contents never give out; he is himself a big eater and drinker, a great lover, a druid, and a musician. He is the patron of boundaries, oaths, contracts, law, and friendship, and overall is comparable to Thor (Davidson 1988, 204–207). One of his cognomina corresponds to the Dis Pater (a Roman god of the underworld, later identified with the Greek Hades) which, according to Caesar (1917, VI, 18), all Gauls claim as their common ancestor. Another aspect of Jupiter appears in Ireland as Manannan, whose relation to the Dagda is the same as that of Neptune to Jupiter: in the mythology, the lord of the *sid*, the Other World, and hence euhemerized as a lord of the sea because only from the sea can the *sid* be accessed.

Mars comes third in Caesar's list. The god of war, obviously important to a people that was engaged in internecine warfare all the time, as Caesar points out elsewhere (VI, 15), he receives the spoils of battle as offerings, as Caesar's passage above explains in detail. His counterpart in Irish epic and legend is twofold: on the one hand the "king" Nuadu and on the other hand the "champion" Ogma, lord of sacred writing (*ogam*) and also of brute force and warlike furor. The latter's continental correspondent, Ogmios, leads the souls to the Other World. So Ogma-Ogmios represents the dark side of sovereignty of which the Dagda represents the luminous side. The Gallo-Roman Mars is described in the inscriptions by epithets that are both warlike and regal. So the Nuadu-Ogma pair is outside the classic Roman framework and points to a more archaic Indo-European structure, a dual conception of sovereignty: as Caesar says, Mars *directs* the war but does not actually fight it, while the warrior/hero does the fighting, since among the Celts (like the Germans) war was a collection of individual contests. This also explains the confusion of epithets and attributes between Mars and Mercury in Gaul.

Apollo, second in Caesar's list, is presented only as a healer, to which the Irish correspondent is Dian Cecht. But other Irish legends and Gallo-Roman inscriptions indicate that the Celtic Apollo was seen more broadly as a solar, youthful, elevated god, in keeping with his classic eponym. One of his most widespread epithets, or hypostases, was Belenus, "shining", whence the name of one of the four great Irish festivals, *Beltene* (May 1), marking the beginning of summer. Another epithet was Borvo or Bormo, "boiling", which gave many thermal centers their name to many thermal centers. So this god does not belong to the third function; medicine is practiced by the druids and so falls within the first (priestly) function.

Patroness of arts and crafts, Minerva, the last in Caesar's list, is an exalted female deity called by name-epithets like Belisama ("the shining one") and Brigantia ("the most high"). Her Irish cognate is Brigit, daughter of the Dagda (like Minerva is daughter of Jupiter), worshiped by poets, smiths, and physicians. In the legend, under her other name of Dana, she is the mother of the gods, whose company is called Tuatha Dé Danann or "the tribe of Dana". Seen sometimes as a single deity, sometimes as a triple one, she is reflected or personified by countless specific female deities, which together comprise a Great Goddess, encompassing the three functions. Unfortunately she was effaced from the written texts because Christianization turned

her into an enormously powerful saint, St Brigit, patroness of Ireland together with St Patrick. She presided over one of the four great Irish festivals, *Imbolg* or "purification" (February 1). A technical homologue of Brigit is the smith god Goibniu, close to the Roman Vulcan, of whose worship there is ample epigraphic record in Gaul. De Vries (1963, 122–149) lays great stress on the Celtic goddesses, from the Matres or Matronae and Epona worshiped in Gaul to the Irish personifications of Mother Earth.

Summarizing her survey, Le Roux (1970) thinks that the "rules of polytheism" that preside over the classic pantheon do not fit the Celtic system. Caesar did his best but could not understand a flexible, fluid system in place of the rigorous classification of Roman religion. Here the main god, Lug, presides over the dyad Dagda-Ogma, joining spiritual and legal authority with warlike force and magic; then over the triad Dagda-Ogma-Nuadu, druid-warrior-king; then there are some artisans (a healer, a smith); and finally the primeval goddess. The greatest difference from other Indo-European religions is the total absence among the Celts of a great third-function deity of fertility like Venus or Freyja. On the other hand Davidson (1988, 214–215) sees parallel pairs of ruling gods, Lug and the Dagda, Odin and Thor, comprising the first and second functions and with identities shifting in the course of time, and opposed to a third function group comprised mainly of goddesses. De Vries (1963, 62, 154–164) also stresses the similarity between Lug and Odin but then, when he tries to extract a well-defined tri-functional pantheon of a few great gods, corresponding to Caesar's Romanized structure, from the mythical story of two great battles between tribes of gods and demons preserved in Irish texts (the Two Battles of Mag Tuired), his findings are hard to square with Le Roux's account given above.

In De Vries' reconstruction (ibid., 162–163), the Dagda is the supreme god, then there is a triad Nuadu, Lug, Ogma (notice the difference with Le Roux's), whereby the first, sovereign function bifurcates into "two aspects, one priestly and juridical, the other magical and kingly", represented here by Nuadu and Lug, corresponding to the Germanic Tyr and Odin respectively—which leaves one to wonder in what sense the Dagda is supreme. The second, warlike function is represented by Ogma, corresponding to the Germanic Thor (whom, however, we introduced above as corresponding to the Dagda). Finally there are seemingly technical, third-function gods, like the smith Goibniu and the physician Dian Cecht, already mentioned; these, however, really belong in the priestly aspect of the first function because the smith was believed to possess magical powers while medicine was in the hands of the druids. So it is not clear who truly represents the third function in this pantheon. The purpose of walking the reader through this slog is only to show that, perhaps due to the cryptic, confusing state of the euhemerized Irish material, even between sworn Dumézilians like De Vries and Le Roux there are contradictions and shifts of interpretation, which—Littleton's (1973, 167–174) ecumenical review notwithstanding—make a clean summary of Celtic theology anything but straightforward.

3.1.2 The Cult and the Priests

All the ancient authors were impressed by the learning and authority of the Celtic priestly class, which included the druids, the bards or poets, and the seers/diviners. In the Irish texts, probably because the monks who wrote down the ancient legends were converted bards, the last two groups are conflated into the single figure of the *file* (poet-seer). The druids were properly the priests: they conducted the sacrifices, held the courts of justice, advised the kings, were teachers and seekers of high learning. They were men; the so-called Celtic "priestesses", important as they were, belonged in the third group, as seeresses, prophetesses, and fortune-tellers, since apparently they never practiced sacrifice or teaching.

Caesar, partly relying on earlier Greek writers, devotes two full chapters to the druids (VI, 13–14).

> 13. (The druids) take part in the cult, take care of public and private sacrifices, and regulate the religious observances. (….) they decide almost all disputes, public and private, and if any crime has occurred, or murder has been committed, or there is any dispute about succession or boundaries, they also decide it, determining rewards and penalties; if any person or group does not abide by their decision, they ban them from the sacrifices, which is their heaviest penalty. (….) But the one who has the highest authority among them rules over all the druids. At his death, either the one who is outstanding succeeds, or, if there are several of equal standing, they contend for the primacy by the vote of the druids, or sometimes even by the force of arms. At a certain time of the year, the druids meet within the borders of the Carnutes, whose territory is reckoned as the center of all Gaul, and sit in council in a consecrated spot. All those who have disputes convene here from everywhere, and they obey the decisions and judgments of the druids. (….)
>
> 14. The druids usually hold aloof from war and do not pay taxes like everyone else; they are excused from military service and exempt from all liabilities. Tempted by these great rewards, many young men assemble of their own motion to receive their instruction (*disciplina*), or are sent by parents and relatives. It is reported that there they learn by heart a great number of verses, and therefore some remain twenty years under instruction. And they do not think it proper (*fas*) to commit these utterances to writing, although in almost all other matters (….) they make use of Greek letters. (….) The first principle which they seek to teach is that souls do not die, but after death pass from one to another; and this belief, as the fear of death is thereby cast aside, they hold to be the greatest incentive to valor. Besides this, they ponder many questions regarding the stars and their movement, the size of the universe and of the earth, the order of nature, the authority and powers of the immortal gods, and hand down their lore to the young men.

This passage is largely self-explanatory, and the Irish legends confirm its main points, including the druids' key role in educating the warrior nobility (those whom Caesar calls the knights—*equites*—i.e. warriors who could supply and mount a horse), in pursuing and transmitting higher learning, in practicing the magic arts, and in adjudicating disputes among tribes and kings at their annual gatherings. The kings issued from the warrior class but the druids, while keeping separate, controlled the choice of kings and their performance. One of their fundamental tasks was the blood sacrifice, about which we know very little because the Irish Christian records obliterated all traces of it. Like with the Germans, these rituals probably took place in a forest clearing or grove (Gaulish *nemeton*) or other consecrated open space, since

no temples have been found in Ireland and those in Gaul are so obviously a Roman influence.

Elsewhere (VI, 16) Caesar says that the Gauls practice human sacrifices in the event of serious illness or great danger, and vow to sacrifice their own life in a pitched battle (parallel to the Roman *devotio*), and that the druids minister such practices. Human sacrifice among the Celts was widely known in antiquity and divided the ancient writers, some of whom, near the end of the first century CE, including Pliny the Elder, Tacitus and Suetonius, stigmatized it as savage and cruel and on this basis endorsed the decrees of Emperors Tiberius and Claudius which proscribed druidic practices and specifically suppressed their schools.[1] It is not clear how frequent or widespread such sacrifices were, as archeology has found hardly any unambiguous evidence of it (as opposed to the execution of criminals or of prisoners of war, both of whom the ancient sources claim were offered as sacrifice to the gods)—an ambiguity that extends to the analogous problem with Germans and Vikings. In particular, one is not sure what to make of the horrific description by Caesar (VI, 16; confirmed by Strabo IV, 4, 5) of huge, upright wickerwork figures that were filled with living men and set on fire—something practically not easy to do, as remarked by Davidson (1988, 60). In any case, the druids are clearly stated to be essential participants in these sacrifices, as could hardly be otherwise.

Based on both the Irish and the classical sources, Le Roux (1970) and Le Roux and Guyonvarc'h (1986, Chap. 5, III) claim that the immortality of the soul was believed for all men, who are revived in a distant Other World (*sid*) of bliss, known by various names, located in some islands beyond the sea to the far north and west of the known world. But one may doubt this. It seems more likely that such life beyond death was the preserve of the aristocracy, as in the Germanic, Vedic, and Iranian religions, since Caesar (VI, 13) states that the commoners (*plebs*) were held in the same regard as slaves, and in the passage quoted above (VI, 14) he reports that the druids believed that the doctrine of another life after death worked as "the greatest incentive to valor", so it was something for warriors. On the other hand, in contrast with the Norse, in either Celtic mythology as we have it or in ancient reports on their beliefs there are only faint traces of eschatology or a conception of the end of the world, possibly hidden in the Irish account of the Second Battle of Mag Tuired, mentioned above (Davidson 1988, 188–189, 193–94).

Caesar's description of the druids sets the Celts apart from their contemporary German neighbors, whose priestly class, as we will see in the next section, was in an infant stage of development and did not grow to maturity with their Norse descendants. It is the best evidence against the claim, often made by scholars on the basis of late Gallo-Roman archeological evidence, that the Celts' religion was all made of local deities and tribal cults: such an organized and unified priesthood must have insured a unified theology (De Vries 1963, 154–157, 212–222; Le Roux and

[1] However, Chadwick (1997) argues that this was essentially imperial propaganda to justify a political decision, i.e. the repression of this priestly class because it was nationalistic and fueled opposition to Roman rule. Momigliano (1987, 124–126) doubts that the latter was the case.

Guyonvarc'h 1986). The only apt comparison is the Vedic Brahmans, with their long-lasting instruction within hearing distance from the teachers and rote memorization of verses, their providing a high priest to support and advise the king (*purohita*), and their doubling as scholars and masters of religious ceremonies. Even the Brahmans, however, did not have any regular meetings nor a chief priest overseeing the whole class. Like the Brahmans, the druids may have been specialized by cultic function (although this is not attested) but there is no mention of specialization to the service of particular gods.

3.2 Germanic Religion

Like with Celtic religion, our access to Germanic religion too is characterized by a great chasm in time, space, and nature of the sources. Our earliest sources are Greek and Roman authors of the classical era, prominent among them the Roman historian Tacitus who wrote *Germania*, a detailed account of the continental Germans at the end of the first century CE. To the Romans, the Germans were the tribes living east of the Rhine to the Vistula and including Denmark, Frisia and the southern tip of the Scandinavian peninsula. These continental Germans moved west in the so-called Age of Migration (fourth-sixth centuries CE) and overrun the Western Roman Empire, where they finally settled and were soon Christianized. They left no written records of their own, so our evidence for the postclassical period is limited to some archaeological and inscriptional evidence.

By contrast, the Scandinavian branch expanded vigorously in the northern seas and lands in the Viking Age (eighth-eleventh centuries) and converted to Christianity much later than their continental cousins, between the tenth and the eleventh century. The Vikings bequeathed to us a rich literature that has a bearing on mythology and religion, including a collection of poems, known as the *Elder Edda* or *Poetic Edda*, some of which composed in pre-Christian times; a rich body of heroic sagas and family sagas composed in Iceland in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries but containing some earlier material; a history of Denmark written in Latin in the early thirteenth century by the Danish scholar Saxo Grammaticus; and above all the *Prose Edda*, an invaluable account of Norse mythology derived from early poetry, sagas and oral tradition and written in Old Norse by the gifted Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson in the early thirteenth century (see Turville-Petre 1964, Chap. 1, for an extended description of these sources). For the period prior to the Viking Age, the only evidence is some inscriptions in the runic characters, archaeological finds, and place names. Thus the Norse religion is documented from inside sources dated more than 1,000 years after the outside sources that provide us with an account of the continental Germans' religion. Any suggestion that the two sets of accounts capture different stages of evolution of the same religion must, however, take into account the vast differences in environmental and historical conditions between the two societies.

3.2.1 Theology

For the early continental Germans, the classic place to start is Tacitus' (undated, 9) account:

> Among the gods, they most worship Mercury, to whom on certain days they deem lawful to sacrifice even human victims. Hercules and Mars they appease with the animals usually allotted for sacrifice. Some of the Suebi also sacrifice to Isis; what was the cause and origin of this foreign rite I could not discover, except that her representation in the image of a galley suggests an imported worship. Otherwise, the Germans consider it unworthy of the greatness of celestial beings to confine the gods within walls or to portray them in any form of human likeness: they consecrate woods and groves, and apply names of gods to the hidden powers that they only see with the eye of reverence.

In another chapter (40) Tacitus describes a ritual practiced by a group of Suebi tribes, near Denmark, who worship a goddess called Nerthus, whom he identifies with Mother Earth. She dwells in a sacred grove on an island in the Ocean, where there is a consecrated chariot, draped with cloth, which none but a priest may handle. He escorts the goddess in her chariot, drawn by cows, on a tour around the country, and the people rejoice and welcome her. They lay down their weapons, and then and only then do they enjoy peace, until she is satisfied of human company and the priest brings her back to her sanctuary. Then the chariot, the cloth, and the deity herself are washed in a hidden lake by slaves, who are then immediately swallowed up by the lake itself.

So these Germans worshiped their deities in sacred groves, had no built temples, scorned anthropomorphic images, had priests at least for some rituals, knew public festivals, and occasionally practiced human sacrifice. Tacitus' description of the goddess Nerthus' cult is paralleled by stories of deities parading in wagons in Icelandic sagas and by archaeological finds of ceremonial wagons found in peat bogs in Denmark around Tacitus' time and in ship burials of the Viking period (Davidson 1964, 92–96).

The names of the days of the week provide a clue to the identity of the Germanic gods underlying the Roman gods chosen by Tacitus as their closest approximation. Mars seems to have been Germanic Tîwaz, Scandinavian Tyr, hence Tuesday (*dies Martis*) (Davidson 1988, 208). Mercury was identified by the Romans with Odin's Germanic predecessor Wodan, hence Wednesday, (*dies Mercurii*) (ibid, 90). The Germans in the Roman armies equated their god Donar, the Scandinavian Thor, hence Thursday, with Hercules (Davidson 1964, 82, based on Tacitus' chap. 3), but this came to replace the Roman *dies Jovis*, Jupiter's day, which points to a shift of divine identities that we will find in Viking times (below). The equation of Wodan/Odin to Mercury may at first seems surprising, until we recall that the latter was the god of trade, the patron of wisdom and learning, the god who was carried by his winged sandals over land and sea, and the guide of souls to the underworld—which points to the original character of Odin as a god of the dead (Davidson 1964, 140–141; De Vries 1970).

Dumézil (1959, 40) interprets Tacitus' list as foreshadowing, in the expected hierarchical order, the later Scandinavian, tri-functional structure: Mercury as Odin,

Hercules and Mars as Thor and Tyr respectively, and "Isis" as a goddess of fertility—replaced or joined, in some other place in northern Germany, by Nerthus, described above as a goddess of peace and prosperity. This structure shows permanence. The so-called Old Saxon Baptismal Vow—a formula that the Saxons converted by Charlemagne were asked to recite, dated to the ninth century—asks the convert to specifically forsake a triad of gods: Thunar (i.e. Donar), Woden (i.e. Wodan), and Saxnot. The latter (also attested in Saxon England as Seaxneat) probably simply means "companion of the Saxons", and is thus equivalent to the Roman Quirinus and to the Scandinavian Freyr (see below) as a representative of the common people in their totality (ibid., 41).

For the terminal stage of the Scandinavian religion, we have a description of the proceedings at a great temple at Uppsala in the eleventh century, when apparently the traditional religion was still holding sway in Sweden. The description is due to Adam of Bremen, a German cleric contemporary with the events who wrote a history in Latin of the diocese of Hamburg and of the Christian missions to the Nordic lands. It reads (Adam of Bremen 1876, IV, 26–27):

> In that temple, all coated with gold, the people worship the statues of three gods; Thor, the most powerful, has a seat in the middle with Wodan and Fricco to his sides. These gods have the following meaning: Thor, they say, rules the atmosphere which controls thunder and lightning, winds and rains, the fair weather and the crops. Then Wodan, which means fury (*furor*), conducts war and grants men valor against their enemies. The third is Fricco, who bestows peace and pleasure on mortals, and whose idol is provided with a big phallus. They actually portray Wodan in arms, as [our pagans] do with Mars, while Thor with a scepter seems to represent Jupiter. (….) They have priests appointed to all their gods, who offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. If disease or famine is looming, they make offerings to Thor's idol; if war threatens, to Wodan; and if a wedding is to be celebrated, to Fricco.

So unlike the West Germans of Tacitus' time, these Swedes do represent their gods in human image and have a temple served by priests. Fricco, that is, Freyr here takes the place of Isis, Nerthus, or Saxnot of the previous examples as patron of the third function. The triad (or tetrad) does indeed appear remarkably stable over time, but note that the functional attributes shift: in Adam's account Donar/Thor is a sky and thunder god who benefits agriculture and health and who at the same time is likened to Jupiter (no longer to Hercules), while Wodan/Odin is the god of war and is assimilated to Mars (no longer to Mercury).

To account for this shift, which makes the Germanic triad Odin, Thor, Freyr at variance with the parallel triads embodying the tripartite theology—such as the Romans' pre-Capitoline triad Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus and the Vedic triad Mitra/Varuna, Indra, Ashvins – Dumézil (1958, 57–58; 1959, Chap. 2) argues that in the ideology and practice of the Germans warfare "colored" everything, including their theology, as already noted by Caesar (1917, VI, 21) in an early sketch. The consequence of this ubiquitous, hypertrophic preoccupation with war is twofold. On the one hand Tyr—the counterpart of Mitra/Mithra, the juridical side of sovereignty—has almost lost his original place in the first function and, identified with Mars, is already in Roman times (by Tacitus, Chap. 9 above) associated with Hercules/Thor al the level of the second function. On the other hand Odin/Wodan becomes the god of war in the

Viking age (for Adam of Bremen, above), even though in the Norse mythology he does not fight with arms but with spells and binding, as a magician would. And, as a consequence of this last shift, Thor in the Viking age is, as it were, displaced from the second function and becomes a fertility god, which tends to move him to the level of the third function. On this level we find a divine company called the Vanir (Davidson 1964, Chap. 4; De Vries 1970) who, in Norse mythology, were once separated and hostile to the great gods, called Aesir, but then happily joined them in one great pantheon. The principal Vanir deities include Njord and his son Freyr and daughter Freyja (whose names—meaning "Lord" and "Lady" respectively—are really titles, not proper names); scholars have recognized that Njord is the same deity as Tacitus' goddess Nerthus, discussed above, except that for some reason he is now a male god. This group together, in various ways, takes care of economic production, health, reproduction, love, and pleasures.

Dumézil (1959, Chap. 4) is at pain to stress that it is only through the happy outcome of the atmospheric battle, the rain, achieved by wielding his great hammer—the counterpart of Jupiter's and Indra's thunderbolt—that Thor benefits agriculture, and not through any inherent power over the fertility of land and livestock, in the same way as by wielding his hammer he protects the gods from the giants and other cosmic enemies; so he does not really belong in the third function and cannot be confused with the Vanir. This, however, is more of a fine point of comparative theology, which changes nothing in the facts of actual cult. In the Viking age, there is no doubt that Thor (Davidson 1964, Chap. 3; De Vries 1970) was widely invoked and worshiped as the protector and "friend" of the common people, despite—or rather, owing to—his defining mythological feature: an overwhelming, colossal display of physical force, taken to almost comical effect in the myths. He was seen as a beneficent power, close at hand, who could be counted on to right wrongs; this makes it difficult to see Thor linked with the warrior class, while his upholding of rights moves him closer to the sovereign function (Davidson 1988, 200–201).

In the Viking age, the god of the warriors was Odin (Davidson 1964, Chaps. 2, 6; De Vries 1970) who, helped by the battle-goddesses, the Valkiries, chose the cream of the fallen warriors and heroes and welcomed them into his heavenly abode, the Valhalla, where they would forever enjoy a life of dueling and feasting while awaiting the end of days, the Ragnarok (discussed below); the other people were consigned to a murky realm of the dead. This warlike function expands the Varuna-type sovereign function of Odin, father and king of the gods and god of chiefs and kings, inspirer and patron of poetry and letters, great magician (with shamanistic features) and god of (some of) the dead, and knower of hidden things past, present and future—in myth, he sacrificed one of his eyes to gain access to the source of all knowledge. Being a god of the royalty and the elite, and a disquieting one—he sometimes claims human sacrifices, in the Icelandic sagas already in Tacitus (above)—it is not surprising that patronymics containing Odin's name are virtually nonexistent and that place names containing his name are rare in continental Scandinavia and completely absent in Iceland (an egalitarian republic of free emigrant farmers). The common people, farmers and sailors, would more naturally name their children and their sites for deities closer to their concerns: the beneficent storm god (Thor), the god of winds

and sailing (Njord), the god and the goddess of earth, animal, and human fertility and procreation (Freyr and Freyja) (see Turville-Petre 1964, Chaps. 2, 3, 7, for the evidence of personal names and place names). In the same way, Indo-Iranian peoples have personal names containing the names of Mitra and Indra but not that of Varuna (Dumézil 1959, 64–66).

Tacitus' tetrad had shrunk to a triad by the time of Adam of Bremen: Tîwaz/Tyr, assimilated to Mars in Roman times, seems to have lost importance in Viking times. His identification with Mars seems strange as he represented the juridical, contractual, peaceful side of sovereignty, as attested by inscriptions dedicated to Mars Thingsus—that is, a Mars presiding over the *thing*, the political assembly of free men. The rationale seems to be that for the Germans warfare was not an exhibit of brutal violence and unrestrained slaughter, but was ruled by legal norms and proceedings, to the point that a battle between two armies could be replaced by a judicial duel—just like with the Romans (De Vries 1970). Tyr had certainly been an ancient Indo-European god, as attested by the etymology of his name, which is cognate to Vedic Dyaus, Greek Zeus, Roman Jupiter: a god of the bright sky. But he then receded into the background, and in Snorri's *Edda* he is only a shadowy figure, although one which men prayed to for victory; the only surviving myth about him was the binding of the monster wolf Fenrir, the deadly enemy of the gods, a feat for which he sacrificed his hand. He seems to have ceded his role as battle god to Odin and his role as patron of the law to Thor (Davidson 1988, 208; 1964, 56–61).

These seem to have been the deities who received a lively cult. There are some other members of the Aesir group or associated with them: one is Heimdall, the guardian and watcher of Asgard, the heavenly abode of the gods, residing at the border between the worlds, who will sound his horn to arouse the gods to the final battle—perhaps a god of beginnings like Janus in Dumézil's view (Davidson 1988, 211); another is Balder, the dying god, son of Odin. But there is no evidence of cult associated with either, and it is not even clear if Balder was a god or a deified hero (Davidson 1964, 176, 183). Still less could there be a cult of Loki the trickster, the deceiver, a malign being that will take the lead of the forces of evil at the end of days. All three will have a role to play at Ragnarok. Some other gods and goddesses are little more than names. So in the final period of the traditional religion we have a small company of gods, parallel to the Celtic one—Odin, Thor, the Vanir—which shows no sign of having swollen since our earliest testimonies; if anything, it had somewhat shrunk, with ancient gods like Tyr and perhaps Heimdall having receded into the background. Furthermore, the shifting of functions and consequent allegiances between gods, discussed above, seems to have implied the idea that people could "choose" their personal patron god or goddess (typically Thor or some of the Vanir) as an almost all-purpose protector—an important point to which we will return (Davidson 1988, 214–215, 220–222).

Ragnarok ("Twilight of the gods") is the Old Norse name for doomsday, the time of the cataclysmic destruction of the gods and the world, described in the great poem *Voluspá* and recounted by Snorri with some variation (Davidson 1964, 35–38, 202–210; 1988, 188–195). As the story goes, hatred, disloyalty, and warfare will spread among men, followed by a terrible winter of three years of bitter cold with no more warming up as the wolf Fenrir swallows the sun and the stars fall from the sky. Then

all the bound monsters break loose and, together with the giants of frost, mount an assault on Asgard. Heimdall, the watcher, arouses the gods to fighting, and Odin, his company of heroic warriors (who had been chosen to live a glorious afterlife in the Valhalla for this purpose), and the other gods come out to face the evil host in a final battle. There all the gods go down fighting in single combat, and the monsters and giants are destroyed with them. In the process, the sea rises to engulf the land and fire spreads over it to destroy the human race. Yet this is not the end. Earth will rise again from the waves, green as never before, cleansed of all suffering and evil and lighted by a new sun; it will be peopled by a new race of men begotten by a surviving couple. The sons of the old gods survive the great battle to reign peacefully on this new earth.

Despite some possible echoes of Christian apocalyptic teaching in some of the Norse authors, this eschatology seems authentic: it has especially close parallels with the Zoroastrian prophecy of the world's end (see Sect. 6.2.1 below) and some similarity with what survives of an Irish Celtic myth of a great battle between gods and demons (see Sect. 3.1.2 above). Indeed, scholars of comparative mythology have brought out from the eschatological myths of various Indo-European peoples the contours of a proto-myth of cosmic catastrophe and renewal, centered on an epic final battle, even though its remnants have lost their place in practiced religion and found a niche in legendary history or epic literature in the Indian, Greek and Roman cases (the battle of Kurukshetra in the *Mahabharata*, the Titanomachy in Hesiod's *Theogony*, and the battle of Lake Regillus in Livy's history of Rome) (see the summary in Bray 2000 and the discussion of cosmic death and resurrection in Lincoln 1986, Chap. 6).

3.2.2 The Cult and the Priests

The Germans "have no druids to preside over things divine"—such was Caesar's (1917, VI, 21) terse remark, emphasizing the great difference with the Gauls. As we have seen above, though, in the following century Tacitus knew of a priest presiding over a festival of the goddess Nerthus. In another chapter, Tacitus (undated, 43) briefly mentions an ancient cult paid by a remote German tribe to a pair of young divine brothers, called Alcis, whom he equates with the Roman twins Castor and Pollux (the counterparts of the Greek *Dioskouroi*, "Zeus' boys"); the cult was performed in a consecrated grove and was presided over by a priest, "dressed in woman's attire". Thus the evidence is mixed for Roman times.

Both Caesar and Tacitus, as well as the Greek geographer Strabo, emphasize the importance of divination among the Germans, as among the Celts of Gaul and of Britain, and the role of highly respected professional seeresses, especially as regards decisions about going to war or engaging battle. Foreknowledge and omens could be obtained in various ways, from sacrificed animals and humans, to observation of natural phenomena and wild animals or birds, to interpretation of dreams, and this continued to be the case later among the Scandinavians and the Irish (Davidson 1988, Chap. 5). In the Viking age the seeress (*volva*) practiced a special kind of

witchcraft called *seidh*, where she fell into a state of trance and then answered questions about hidden things; these women often traveled about the land in groups and were especially associated with the cult of Freyja (Davidson 1964, 117–120).

To get a sense of the cult practiced in the Viking age, it is best to start with a report. In his *Saga of Hakon the Good*, a king of Norway in the tenth century, Snorri (2016, Chap. 14) gives the following description of a sacrificial feast:

> Jarl Sigurd maintained all the ritual banquets on behalf of the king there in Trondheim country. It was an ancient custom, when a ritual feast was to take place, that all the farmers should attend where the temple was and bring there their own supplies for them to use while the banquet lasted. At this banquet everyone had to take part in the ale-drinking. All kinds of domestic animals were slaughtered there, including horses, and all the blood that came from them was then called *hlaut* ('lot') (….); with [it] the altars were to be reddened all over, and also the walls of the temple outside and inside and the people also were sprinkled, while the meat was to be cooked for a feast. There would be fires down the middle of the floor in the temple with cauldrons over them. The toasts were handed across the fire, and the one who was holding the banquet and who was the chief person there, he had then to dedicate the toast and all the ritual food; first would be Odin's toast—that was drunk to victory and to the power of the king—and then Njord's toast and Freyr's toast for prosperity and peace. Then after that it was common for many people to drink the *bragafull* ('chieftain's toast'). People also drank toasts to their kinsmen, those who had been buried in mounds, and these were called *minni* ('memorial toasts'). Jarl Sigurd was the most liberal of men. He did something that was very celebrated: he held a great ritual feast at Lade and stood all the expenses.

So here we have a temple, a feast requiring universal attendance, a local nobleman sponsoring it and acting as a priest, a group of gods honored which is at variance with the tri-functional triad (Odin the god of war and royalty, two Vanir gods as fertility powers, but not Thor unlike in the Uppsala triad), the slaughter of cattle, horses, and more, a full sharing of the sacrificial meat among the participants, and an emphasis on drinking.

Unlike the Germans of Roman times, the Scandinavians of Viking times did have built temples, even though worship in open spaces or sacred woods or groves continued to be important (Turville-Petre 1964, Chap. 12; Davidson 1988, 31–35). The temples (usually called *hof*) were typically wooden structures, hence subject to decay, but nevertheless archeologists have found remains spread all over continental Scandinavia as well as Iceland. Often—in Iceland particularly—these structures played the double role of sites of religious rituals and of secular gatherings or community festivals. Often, too, the smallest structures were probably family shrines devoted to private cult—which was also very common and did not require the presence of a priest.

Sacrifice (Davidson 1988, 41–45, 49–58; Turville-Petre 1964, Chap. 13) does not seem to have involved a burnt offering to the gods, in contrast to Greek and Roman practice. The spilling and sprinkling of the blood was seen as well-wishing and participants ate all the meat, accompanied by generous helpings of beer or mead hallowed to the gods—Odin was said to have an unlimited supply of mead to welcome his heroes in the Valhalla. The chief sacrificial animals were the boar, the bull or ox, and the horse—the first especially dedicated to Freyr and the Vanir, the second to both the Vanir and Thor, the last to Odin. The horse sacrifice also figured prominently

in the ship burials of chiefs and kings or queens. A sacrificial feast (*blot*) could be held communally in the hall of chieftain's farm or in a temple, like Jarl Sigurd's above, or in private homes.

There were three seasonal festivals, lasting several days each, communally enjoyed: one at the beginning of summer (April) when men sacrificed to Odin for good luck and victory in the upcoming season of raids and warfare; another at the beginning of winter (October) when they sacrificed to Freyr for plenty; and a mid-winter festival for the growth of crops, also given to Freyr, which later was made to coincide with Christmas (Davidson 1988, 39–40). Other feasts were held at longer intervals or on special occasions such as times of danger or as thanksgiving for victory or at the funeral of a king, when human victims as well as animals were sacrificed (Davidson 1988, 58–68). This was already widely reported by Greek and Roman writers for the ancient Germans, and Adam of Bremen (1876, IV, 27) gives a gruesome description of a festival held at the Uppsala temple every nine years, in which for nine days men, horses, dogs, and other animals were slaughtered daily and left hanging and putrefying on trees nearby, while the gods were satisfied with their blood—so no communal meal as in the usual *blot*.

In the Viking age there is hardly any evidence of professional priests (Turville-Petre 1964, Chap. 13; Davidson 1988, 157–158). In continental Scandinavia, priestly functions, including conducting public rituals and sacrifices and presiding over religious festivals, were part of the responsibilities and privileges of chieftains, aristocrats, and kings, alongside political leadership and judicial functions. In Snorri's account above, a *jarl* ("earl") maintained all the ritual banquets "on behalf of the king", dedicated the toasts and the sacrificial meat to the gods, and paid for one great feast, and this seems to be the general pattern. In newly colonized Iceland—a republic of free farmers—each district was ruled by a *godhi*, a title that originally must have meant priest (it derives from *godh* = god) but which then came to designate a chieftain with a retinue of followers; alongside his political and judicial powers, he was in charge of maintaining the building (*hof*) which was used for both religious and profane meetings and of presiding over the ritual feasts there.

It is possible that with the strengthening of royal power, near the end of the pagan period, priestly institutions began developing around the court, after the pattern of other religions. The Uppsala temple described by Adam of Bremen (above) had priests appointed to the gods and conducting the sacrifices, and this was not just for an occasional or periodic festival but apparently a permanent institution. In the seventh century, when King Edwin of Northumbria called an assembly to decide on whether the kingdom should convert to Christianity, a "high priest", named Coifi, was in attendance and supported the assembly's decision, proceeding thereupon to destroy the temple. He is likely to have been a priest of Odin—which is in character with his being a royal chaplain, as Odin was the god of royalty—since he destroyed the temple by first hurling a spear to it and then setting it on fire (both practices in accordance with the sacrificial rites associated with Odin) (Davidson 1964, 50–51; 1988, 31, 157–158). But these signs of institutionalization of priestly office were soon undercut by Christianization. So overall, despite the huge differences in social structure, the prevailing Scandinavian pattern, where priestly functions were not the

preserve of an independent profession but were joined to secular office, leadership status, and/or property ownership, reveals an unexpected analogy with the Greek and Roman patterns.

3.3 Main Takeaways

It is hard to provide a clear picture of Celtic theology because for the Gauls we have an early Romanized description of the pantheon while for the Irish we have late Christianized accounts, hidden under legends, by medieval monks. Caesar gives a neat picture of five deities under Roman names, each with a specialized function, but from the inscriptions in Gaul and the myths in Ireland these deities appear to correspond to multiple Celtic counterparts, so that the roster grows and the specialization becomes blurred. Understandably, scholars are divided about the structure of the pantheon. One attractive, though not unanimous, interpretation sees a broad correspondence between the two major Irish gods, Lug and the Dagda, and the Scandinavian Odin and Thor, though with attributes shifting and expanding in the course of time, producing overlap; these are followed by a group of goddesses of the third function. All the scholars agree on the central role of an exalted Great Goddess (called Brigit in Ireland), encompassing all the functions and personified by many female deities. The Celts had an aristocratic conception of the afterlife, in which the souls of the warriors were revived in another world of bliss.

According to Caesar's description, confirmed by the Irish legends, the druids were a priestly class that oversaw all sacrifices, regulated the religious observances, held courts of justice, and adjudicated disputes between tribes; they were seekers of high religious and secular learning and educated the children of the warrior nobility through rote memorization of verses for many years, without any reliance on writing. Kings or chiefs issued from the warrior class but the druids, while keeping separate, controlled their choice and advised them. This picture is strikingly similar to that of the Vedic Brahmans but goes beyond it in that the druids elected a chief druid to oversee the whole class and met in council every year—a centralized organization that the Brahmans never had.

The continental Germans of Roman times, as described by Tacitus, had a small pantheon of three gods and one goddess, reasonably fitting a tri-functional structure; they had no built temples but worshiped their gods in sacred groves, only occasionally assisted by priests, and scorned anthropomorphic images. The Scandinavians of the Viking age did have wooden temples housing gods' images. By then, Tacitus' tetrad of deities had not swollen but shrunk to a triad, in which, however, attributes and functions had shifted away from the original structure. Odin was the god of warriors and kings, patron of poetry and knowledge, and great magician; Thor was the beneficent storm god, the upholder of law and rights, and the friend of the common people; and a group of deities called Vanir (principally Freyr and Freyja) were in charge of production, fertility, and love. In the terminal period, the idea seems to

have developed that people could "choose" their personal patron god or goddess as an almost all-purpose protector.

In the Viking age there is scant evidence of professional priests, who were just beginning to develop around the strengthening royal courts. Priestly functions, including conducting public rituals and sacrifices and presiding over religious festivals, were usually discharged by chiefs and noblemen alongside their political and judicial functions. Divination, entrusted to seeresses, was held in high regard. Sacrifice of cattle and horses was central to worship; the animal was not burnt but fully shared among participants in a meal, accompanied by plentiful drinking. Upon death, a choice of warriors fallen on the battlefield was welcomed by Odin in the Valhalla to enjoy a life of delights while awaiting the end of days, while the rest of the people went to a dark underworld. The Norse had an eschatology predicting the end of the world in a cataclysmic battle between the gods and the forces of evil, where all will die on both sides, after which a new, perfected earth and a new human race will rise again and the sons of the old god will reign peacefully on it.

Chapter 4
Indians and Iranians: The Priestly Religions

Abstract This chapter first examines the Vedic religion, whose rich archaic pantheon tended to inflate and blur the division of roles, making it unfit for the upcoming expansion in the subcontinent with its indigenous cults. The Brahmins were the paragon of a professional priestly class promoting unified rituals like an incipient monopolist. Their Iranian cousins started out with a similar pantheon and a similar priestly class but did not have to confront an alien religious substrate in their migration; rather, a conflict was brewing between the gods of law and right and the gods of raid and might, which would come to a head with Zoroaster's reform.

4.1 Vedic Religion

4.1.1 Indo-Aryan and Vedic Theology

The first firm evidence on the theology of the Indo-Aryans actually occurs outside the Indian subcontinent. In the second millennium BCE there existed a kingdom of Mitanni in northern Syria and southeast Anatolia, where an elite speaking an Indo-Aryan language ruled over a population speaking Hurrian, a non-Indo-European language. The elite's language, attested in a number of theonyms, proper names of the aristocracy and the kings, and other terminology, is very close to the earliest layer of Vedic Sanskrit. Apparently a group of warriors from the ancestral Indo-Iranian homeland, instead of migrating to the Punjab with the majority of the Indo-Aryans, had turned west and established themselves in the Middle East.

In the early fourteenth century BCE a treaty was signed between the Mitanni king and the king of the neighboring Hittites, and as usual, each king swore on his greatest gods to uphold it. Among the divinities invoked by the Mitanni king, besides a number of unknown or local deities, a group appears which is well known from the Vedas: Mitra-Varuna (as a pair), Indra, and the Nasatyas. Dumézil (1958, 36–38; 1977, 5–22) finds this list, in this order, a perfect example—possibly the earliest extant—of his tripartite structure: Mitra and Varuna (characteristically joined together in the Vedas too) representing the legal-contractual and the magical-religious sides of sovereignty respectively; Indra embodying the war function; and the Nasatyas (also

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called Ashvins, the Horsemen, in the Vedas), the youthful twins probably cognates (in mythology, not in etymology) of the Greek twins, the *Dioskouroi*, who ride around to rescue people and maintain both livestock and people in good health, standing in for the third function. As Dumézil is careful to point out, however, the Mitanni structure must reflect a very archaic substrate that was soon to change, as shown by the fact that it has no room for Agni and Soma (the gods of fire and of sacred drink, respectively), who already in the *Rig Veda* overshadow both Mitra and Varuna in importance.

The next earliest source we have is the *Rig Veda*, a collection of hymns to be recited by a particular class of priests in a fire-offering ritual described below.[1] It is the earliest of the group of four foundational compositions called the Vedas, the others being two further collections of verses and formulas (the *Sama Veda* and *Yajur Veda*) to be used by two other specialized groups of priests in the same ritual, and a collection of texts intended for a separate group of ritual specialists dealing with domestic ceremonies, magical and healing spells, and rites for rulers, which was eventually reclassified as a fourth Veda (the *Atharva Veda*). Despite being outside the ritual system of the other three Vedas, however, the *Atharva Veda* is of particular interest for the study of the earliest religion because it is the second-oldest and linguistically the closest to the *Rig Veda*. Besides the four Vedas proper, the Vedic corpus includes many other Sanskrit works classified as *Brahmanas* and (the early) *Upanishads*, containing exegesis of the rituals and meditations on their meaning, composed ca. 1000–300 BCE. The texts of this Vedic corpus were considered to be *shruti* ("what is heard"), infallible divine revelation, in contrast with the later body of literature classified as *smriti* ("what is remembered"), which is of human authorship and therefore fallible and which includes in particular the works on religious and social law called *sutras* and *shastras*. The "hearing" connotation of the Vedas points to a system of oral transmission whereby the student would sit within hearing distance of the teacher, as we will elaborate below. (The word *Upanishad* also translates as "sitting down near", referring to the student sitting within hearing distance of the teacher.)

The hymns of the *Rig Veda* were composed at different times within the second half of the second millennium BCE and given canonical form by perhaps 1000 BCE. But these dates encompass the hymns as we have them; the poetic conventions on which they were built are much older, extending back to the Indo-Iranian past—indeed, the language (an archaic form of Sanskrit), the rituals, and the theology of the *Rig Veda* are all close to those of the oldest layer of the Iranian Avesta, i.e. Zoroaster's *Gathas* (see Sect. 4.2 below). Even after this fixation of the text, transmission of it continued to be exclusively oral at least until around 1000 CE, yielding a gap of considerably over two millennia between the fixation of the text and its earliest manuscripts.

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the remainder of this subsection and the next one are generally based on Jamison and Brereton (2014, "Introduction"), Flood (1996, Chap. 2), and for a general picture of early India, including its religion, Thapar (2002). The next subsection draws extensively on Basuchoudhary, Ferrero and Lubin (2020).

The rivers mentioned in the hymns help establish the geographic area in which they were composed. Composition began in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent, starting from the Kabul River in present-day Afghanistan, whence it moved east to the Greater Punjab and then further east to the Ganges Valley, following the movement of the people. This information must be gleaned solely from the hymns because of the absence of material remains associated to the Vedic people, which is what we would expect since there is no mention in the hymns of any permanent religious structures or enduring settlements. The Aryas, as they called themselves (an ethno-linguistic and religious characterization, not a racial one), formed a semi-nomadic pastoralist society where seasons of settlement (with some practice of agriculture) alternated with seasons of migration (associated with occupation of new land and cattle raiding). Cattle were the primary source of wealth, followed by sheep, goats, buffaloes, and camels, while the horse was essential for mobility and warfare. Metal of some kind was known, but not iron. There were kings or—probably a better translation at this time—chiefs, but the division of society into four hierarchically ordered classes (*varnas*), so prominent in later times, is only mentioned in one of the latest hymns, and then as a social ideal rather than a social reality.

The great majority of the *Rig Veda* hymns have a liturgical form that obviously is meant to be recited with some ritual, in most cases the *soma* rituals; they have as their major aim to praise the god(s) to whom the hymn is dedicated, in the expectation that this will entice the gods to reciprocate the praise with the requested favors. But, in the late portions of the book, there are also hymns that take the form of a dialogue between two or more figures, usually on mythological subjects or providing the mythological underpinning of some ritual, as well as some "philosophical" hymns that explain the meaning of various rituals (thus being forerunners of the *Brahmanas*). From the dedications of the hymns, as well as from their content and the mythology, we can derive a picture of the early Vedic pantheon. Judging by the number of dedications, Indra is the most prominent deity, followed (in this order) by Agni, Soma, the Ashvins, Varuna, Mitra (or Mitra-Varuna as a pair), the Maruts (alone or in conjunction with Indra), and then a long list of minor deities, usually of natural elements or of technical functions (Wikipedia 2021b).

To put this ranking in perspective, it must be borne in mind that the *Rig Veda* revolves around the *soma* ritual, and the *soma* ritual belongs to Indra. Moreover, as emphasized by Jamison and Brereton (2014, 6–7, 57), the *Rig Veda* reflects the religious practice only of the upper strata of Arya society, and only a section of that practice, to say nothing of the other social classes whose religious beliefs and practices are almost completely ignored; so the Vedic religion as portrayed in this and the other Vedas is likely to be a partial and unbalanced description of even the religion of the Aryas of that age. Among other things, this may account for the strikingly minor role of the goddesses, who in this pantheon are mostly confined to personifications of natural elements or wives or daughters of male gods. This is in stark contrast with the situation of the Greeks, the Romans, and the Scandinavians, whose pantheons and religious practice, as they first emerge to light, are not nearly so selective and biased toward the male elite. In turn, this contrast reflects the difference between a type of evidence made only of hymns and related commentaries, on the one

hand, and another made of mythology and observed cultic institutions and practices, on the other.

Be that as it may, let us briefly survey the pantheon, following the ranking by number of dedications given above. Indra, the preeminent god of the *Rig Veda*, is the warrior god, who armed with a mighty club protects the people and the gods themselves. A great *soma* drinker, he slays a dragon that had captured the waters, thus causing the rain and the rivers to flow, and performs other beneficial deeds. He often goes around with a troop of storm gods, called the Maruts, who help him and who also receive worship, alone or with him, in the hymns. The Maruts have been compared to a Männerbund, a company of unruly, unattached young men who band together to raid and fight, selected through an initiation ritual, which seems to have existed in several early Indo-European societies and religions; well-known examples are the berserks, the frenzied, frightening Scandinavian warriors dedicated to Odin that existed not only in myth but in real-life Viking societies and in earlier Germanic societies of the classical age, as well as similar groups attested among the Irish (Davidson 1964, 66–69; 1988, 78–82). A Männerbund may well have actually existed in Vedic society too, and the divine Maruts provide the charter for such an association.

Agni and Soma are preeminent as they personify the two central elements of the *Rig Veda*'s sacrificial rituals, the fire and the sacred drink. Agni represents any fire, including the sun, the domestic hearth, and the dreadful forest fire, but especially the sacrificial fire; so he is always present at the rituals and the immediate recipient of the offerings. He is the middleman between gods and men in the cult, bringing the gods down to the sacrificial meal in their honor and/or conveying the offerings up to the heavenly gods in its smoke; in this sense, he is the model of the sacrificial priest. Soma is the personification of the inebriating drink, the juice of a special plant that is subject to elaborate preparation during the ritual and then offered to the gods and shared among participants, and so he too is an interface between gods and men. The ritual and its presiding deities are clearly from an Indo-Iranian background, since the Iranians had a similar sacrifice centered on fire and the juice of a plant called *haoma*, both also divinized (see Sect. 4.2.1 below).

The Ashvins or Nasatyas, the youthful horsemen twins, are an ancient divine pair of secure Indo-European ancestry, already mentioned for the Mitanni and the Greeks and with other cognates as well. Even if originally independent, they were secondarily but strongly brought into the *soma* rite, and became big receivers of the *soma* offerings. They drive a swift chariot across earth and sky, as is necessary for them to rescue people from a variety of dangers and difficulties, which is their main job.

The Adityas are a group of gods who represent the powers that order human society, and the principal ones are Varuna, Mitra, and Aryaman. Varuna, the most prominent of these, is a distant, all-seeing sky god who presides over the cosmic and social order (*rita*), and hence the god of the kings and himself a universal king. Like earthly kings, this divine sovereign cares about the welfare of his subjects, so he brings rain and controls the waters; like earthly kings, who punish wrongdoers, he "binds" those who violate his commands. Varuna is closely connected to Mitra, with whom

he shares many hymns and invocations as Mitra-Varuna. If Varuna governs hierarchical obligations of authority, Mitra governs relations of mutual obligations such as contracts and alliances (his name comes directly from an Indo-Iranian common noun meaning something that binds, hence "covenant", "contract"—whence also the Iranian Mithra that will be discussed in Sect. 4.2.1 below). So, as already mentioned, Varuna and Mitra embody the two sides of Dumézil's sovereign function, the religious side and the juridical side respectively. The third major Aditya, Aryaman, is the god of the customs of the Aryas, including especially marriage.

Finally, it is worth noting three figures with a great future ahead but who have a very minor role in the *Rig Veda*. Vishnu appears mostly as a companion and ally of Indra; before becoming one of the great gods of classical Hinduism, he would become important in the later Vedic literature as the embodiment of the sacrifice itself. Rudra, already often called by his epithet Shiva ("the kindly one"), appears as a fearful deity whose anger must be appeased, but also as a healer. Sarasvati, who would become a great goddess patronizing learning and the arts in classical Hinduism, is here celebrated only as the physical river which she originally was.

The reverse evolution is also worth mentioning. In post-Vedic times, Agni remains a fire god with a minor position in Hindu temples and festivals, Indra is reduced to a storm god and his club becomes a thunderbolt, Varuna is reduced to a god of the oceans, and Mitra becomes the patron of friendship but practically disappears in Hinduism.

Dumézil (1958, 34–36) is satisfied that his paradigmatic tri-functional list appears repeatedly in the hymns and in several invocations during the *soma* pressing and other rituals, featuring first Mitra-Varuna, then Indra (alone or paired with Agni, Vishnu, Vayu—the Wind—or others), and finally the Ashvins.[2] However, even discounting the fact that the preeminence of Agni and Soma was due to the focus on the fire sacrifice which, as mentioned, biases the theology of the hymns, and even avoiding

[2] One of his examples is the famous hymn RV 10.125, where an all-powerful goddess Vac ("Speech") says she supports all the great gods in the first verse, and then (in verses 4, 5, 6) specifies what benefits she brings at each of the three levels (respectively, food and life itself, the protection of seers and sages, and bow and arrow in defense of the good). It reads:

1. I roam with the Rudras and the Vasus, I with the Adityas and the All Gods.
I bear both Mitra and Varuna, I Indra and Agni, I both the Ashvins.
4. Through me he eats food—whoever sees, whoever breathes, whoever hears what is spoken.
Without thinking about it, they live on me. Listen, oh you who are listened to: it's a trustworthy thing I tell you.
5. Just I myself say this, savored by gods and men:
'Whom I love, just him I make formidable, him a formulator, him a seer, him of good wisdom.'.
6. I stretch the bow for Rudra, for his arrow to smash the hater of the sacred formulation.
I make combat for the people. I have entered Heaven and Earth.

In their comment, however, Jamison and Brereton (2014, 1602–1603) ignore any tri-functional meaning and interpret the subject addressed by verses 4 and 5 as the poet, the one who is "listened to" in the world and makes his livelihood ("eats his food") by producing poems inspired by the goddess Speech, who then (verse 5) details her gifts to him. This contrast of interpretation highlights the difficulty inherent in reading theological structures into arcane ancient poetry, as opposed to cultic institutions.

asking why Indra's companion should be any one of several deities apparently unrelated to warlike concerns, the fact remains that there is a long list of "minor" deities worshiped in the hymns, some of which would become not so minor in the late Vedic period and even more so in classical Hinduism, while most of the major gods here would recede into the background or altogether disappear. That is, such a long tail attached to the head of the Rigvedic pantheon could, and in fact did, become a source of instability and change when, for a variety of reasons, the objects and forms of the rituals would have to change or new rituals would come to be absorbed into the Brahmanical tradition. Moreover, female deities are noted for their near-absence. So the tripartite structure, at least in the Vedic case, does not seem to guarantee a well-delineated, self-supporting, long-lasting division of divine labor. We will pick up the threads of theological evolution from here in Sect. 6.1.1 below.

On the other hand, the late-Vedic philosophical texts called *Upanishads* and the classical *Brahmasutras* which summarizes them began to devalue the forms of the traditional ritual and look for its deeper, hidden symbolic meaning. By so doing they proposed the idea of the formless Brahman, the ultimate reality of the universe, the absolute, which does not change yet is the cause of all change. This idea was already hinted at in the *Rig Veda* (10.121) and is explicit by the earliest *Upanishads*. By a process of abstraction, the meaning of Brahman evolved from expressing the power of the ritual and of its sacred words to signifying the essence of the universe (Flood 1996, 84–85). The Brahman is seen as the common essence that underlies all the Vedic gods, thus potentially making their differences irrelevant and pointing the way to a monistic conception that would come to fruition in classical Hinduism.

As is well known, a conception of the afterlife which delivers rewards and punishments associated with behavior or morality in life has been central to Indian religions. This was not so in the earlier Vedas, which posited an afterlife with the ancestors, and the possibility of a heavenly abode (*svarga*) for a pious life, reserved to the elite. Starting from the *Upanishads*, however, the central Hindu conception developed that the soul (*atman*) would undergo reincarnation in ways determined by the moral merit (*karman*) accumulated in the current life, and that a way out of this cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) was available by pursuing final liberation or release (*moksha*) through renunciation (*sannyasa*)—a conception first promoted by Buddhism and Jainism (see the discussion in Sect. 6.1.2 below). This conception has two consequences. First, it dictates an overarching set of prescriptions and prohibitions for worldly behavior, centered on purity rules, life cycle rituals, diet, and non-harm (*ahimsa*), and differentiated by caste stratification. This complex underwent substantial change over time; in particular, the vegetarian diet required of the "twice-born" social classes (i.e. the three highest-ranking *varnas*, which alone were allowed to study the Vedas) and especially of Brahmins took centuries to establish itself (and even then, not uniformly across the subcontinent). Secondly, unlike the Vedic gods, the new gods of classical Hinduism (to be discussed in Sect. 6.1.1 below) became intertwined with this ethical code as either helpers in the attainment of a "good" rebirth and/or *moksha*, and even saviors, or as themselves exemplars of upright moral behavior held up for imitation. We will see that these developments had far-reaching effects.

4.1.2 The Cult and the Priests

In both the *Rig Veda* and the later Vedic texts treating the classical *shrauta* system (i.e. the ritual system based on the *shruti* scriptures—the Vedas), the prevailing model of the sacrifice is the same as that which will characterize the much later *puja* of classical Hinduism: a ceremony of hospitality and a festive meal offered to the visiting gods, where the gods are entertained while they eat by recitation of the hymns of praise that make up the *Rig Veda*. To entice the gods to come to a given sacrifice, rather than choosing another simultaneous party, the host seeks to provide the best entertainment in the form of the most exquisite hymns. There is also another model, closer to the conception of the Homeric sacrifice, whereby the offerings ascend to the gods in heaven on the smoke of the offering fire. In both models, as mentioned above, Agni, the fire deified, is the essential intermediary between gods and men. In any case, the guests are expected to reciprocate with favors as requested by the host. There is also some tangential treatment of domestic (*griha*) rituals, those performed by the householder with or without the agency of a priest, which probably were already important in Rigvedic times but take second place in the hymns to the public *shrauta* rituals; they would later come to the fore as one of the foundations of classical Hinduism (see Sect. 6.1.2 below).

There is no mention of buildings or permanent spaces dedicated to the rituals; the ritual ground where the sacrifice (*yajña*) takes place is demarcated and consecrated for each performance by setting up three ritual fires. The person who commissions and pays for the sacrifice (*yajamana*), and who is the expected beneficiary of it, is otherwise passive throughout and devolves all the action to the priests, variously specified in the tradition as ranging from two to seven according to the complexity of the rituals and the liturgical specializations involved. The offerings were made into the sacred fire and might include milk, ghee, cereal cakes, the *soma* plant, and domestic animals including cattle. The *soma* sacrifice required four priests, each of them specialized in one of the ritual skills recorded in the four Vedas; the plant's stems were pressed during the ritual itself to produce a drink which was then offered into the fire to the gods and drunk by the sacrificer and the priests.[3] Animal sacrifice was prominent in the Vedic period and might be a part of the *soma* sacrifice or an independent rite. Among the latter, it is worth mentioning the great, dramatic horse sacrifice (*ashvamedha*), performed by a king to consolidate or display his power, in which a horse was let roam freely for a year, escorted by royal troops, and then slaughtered along with a great number of other animals, with the accompaniment of outlandish actions and speech, while its different portions were offered to different deities.[4]

[3] Scholars have long argued about the identity of this plant; the most likely candidate seems to be the ephedra, a stimulant which yields an exhilarating drink and which is also used in the parallel Zoroastrian ritual—under the cognate name *haoma*—to this day.

[4] This ritual seems grounded in a proto-Indo-European royal ritual of horse sacrifice, which is documented in other cultures and particularly, with striking parallels to the Indian case, in the Roman ritual of the October Horse (see Dumézil 1970, 216–227, for a detailed comparison).

Who were the priests? Jamison and Brereton (2014, 30) suggest that the Rigvedic priesthood may not have been made of professional ritual specialists, but of warriors and other elite people who acted as priests in the ritual. Even if so, however, soon the proliferation of the texts, the crushing burden of memorization of ever-lengthening materials, and the consequent rise of the priestly schools made professionalization inevitable.

In the vast majority of cases, the priests mentioned in normative and literary texts or alluded to in inscriptions were identifiable as Brahmins of some sort, subdivided by particular tradition or priestly order and/or a particular type of function. Fast-forwarding to the age of classical Hinduism (discussed in Chap. 6), among Brahmin priests, the further essential distinctions are between Vaidika (Shrauta Vedic, i.e., those practicing the archaic multi-fire sacrificial cult for which the four Vedas provide the liturgy, described above), Smarta (priests adhering to the late- and post-Vedic domestic ritual codes and Dharmashastras), Tantric priests (exponents of the rituals taught in works called *Tantra*s, whether oriented to Shiva, Vishnu, or the Goddess as supreme deity), temple priests (those responsible for performing *puja*, i.e. public worship of deities embodied in images in temples, subdivided further by deity and sectarian tradition), funeral priests, and those who provide various fee-based ritual services for visitors at temple and pilgrimage sites.

Such identification of Brahmin and priest is somewhat blurred by the distinction between married priests and celibate ascetics, who often double as priests at certain public temples as well as in monastic institutions. Some ascetic orders accept initiates of non-Brahmin and even low-status birth, which creates one sort of non-Brahmin priest. Some Tantric traditions also initiate priests of various castes, and some devotionalist (*bhakti*) traditions have non-Brahmin ritualists in specific roles. Such diversity notwithstanding, it cannot be denied that the views of male Brahmin authorities have largely dominated Hindu priestly functions, and even many of the traditions that have non-Brahmin priests have been influenced in significant ways by the model of Brahmin priesthood.

Who were the Brahmins? The criteria of Brahmin status and identity were defined in the Sanskrit works classed as Veda and Dharmashastra ("teaching on *dharma* [rule of right conduct]," post-Vedic body of normative, doctrinal works, ca. 250 BCE onward). As mentioned above, the Vedas and related texts were oral compositions transmitted mnemonically from teacher to pupil. They were called *brahman*, and the process for learning them by rote and thus embodying them was called *brahmacarya*, literally "pursuit or practice of *brahman*" (Lubin 2018). The training began with an initiation by the teacher, symbolizing a rebirth, and called for the student to adhere to a strict discipline including sexual chastity, begging for food, limits on sleep, a particular dress code, and study of the texts, and concluded with a ceremonial bath. The Veda student (*brahmacharin*) served his preceptor as an apprentice, residing in his home and tending his fire. There are indications that, at first, it was this training itself that constituted a person as a Brahmin, that is, a specialist in *brahman*. Even so, it is also clear that the profession soon came to be passed down in families as a birthright and became, in social terms, an ascriptive caste status—the highest-ranking *varna*. At the same time, Brahmins diversified into the range of specializations of

roles and traditions described above, so that in time the original *varna* branched out into many Brahmin castes (*jatis*).

4.2 Iranian Religion

Iranian polytheism was a close cousin of Indian polytheism as they both took shape in very ancient times when the Indo-Iranians were still semi-nomadic cattle herders on the Central Asian steppes; subsequently the two peoples parted ways and their religions evolved in different directions.[5] At some point after the separation, when the Iranians were on their way southward to eventually settle on the northeastern Iranian plateau, the prophet Zoroaster[6] introduced a deep change in the traditional religion that created the first monotheistic religion in history. While founders of other religions set out to overthrow the preexisting polytheism and replace it with an entirely different product, Zoroaster carried out a reform of Iranian polytheism which left many beliefs and practices standing, though restructured and reinterpreted. For this reason, Zoroaster's work can be used as an indirect, and unwitting, source for the reconstruction of ancient Iranian polytheism, and this implies that the dating of such a reconstructed system depends on the dating of Zoroaster.

The only source for the study of the earliest Iranian religion is the Avesta, the corpus of Zoroastrian holy scriptures; archeological and inscriptional data begin only in the sixth century BCE, with the Achaemenian empire, and reports by Greek writers begin in the fifth century—a time when the Zoroastrian reform had firmly taken hold in both the royal family and the general population. The Avesta was transmitted orally by rote memorization in the priesthood for millennia before it was committed to writing in the Sasanian period (probably as late as the sixth century CE). It is for the most part a liturgical work, containing hymns and invocations to be used in the rituals, as well as some discussion of moral and purity laws. Its oldest part, the *Gathas*, is a collection of 17 hymns attributed to Zoroaster himself and composed in an archaic form of the language, known as Old Avestan, which is close to that of the *Rig Veda*—the earliest text of Indian religion. Presumably because of its special holiness, this part seems to have been memorized exactly and handed down in a fixed form down the centuries. The rest, written in a later form of the language known as Younger Avestan, appears to have been handed down in a more fluid oral tradition, with each successive generation of priests updating the language, making changes, and adding new material. Nevertheless, it contains some very ancient material. Precisely because some substantial part of the pagan beliefs, rituals and observances survived into Zoroastrianism, and because the earliest extant Avestan texts seem to be remarkably faithful to the original compositions, scholars

[5] This entire section draws extensively on Ferrero (2021) and the references cited therein.

[6] Zoroaster is the form of the prophet's name given by the ancient Greeks, who first introduced knowledge of him into western culture, and still current; many modern scholars, however, use the original Avestan form Zarathustra. The religion he founded, here called Zoroastrianism, is also known in English as Mazdaism, from the name of the creator god Ahura Mazda.

can use parts of the Avesta to reconstruct ancient Iranian polytheism, with the help of comparisons with the earliest strata of the Vedic texts.

The dating of Zoroaster's life has been a difficult task for scholars. In the absence of any external evidence, the language of the *Gathas* and the world-picture they convey suggest that he flourished in what for the Iranians was the transition from the Stone Age to the Bronze Age, which may mean around the middle or in the latter half of the second millennium BCE.[7] He may thus have been a contemporary of the authors of the earliest hymns of the *Rig Veda*, and the pagan religion that can be evinced from his hymns, and from another group of Avestan hymns (*Yashts*) to individual deities that bear clear marks of pagan origin, may have been roughly contemporary of the religion pictured in the *Rig Veda*.

4.2.1 Theology

As in all the earliest forms of religion, ancient Iranians worshiped "nature" gods who personified some physical phenomena, as well as "cult" gods who personified some specialized cultic functions; some of each group will be considered below.[8] It is, however, useful to begin with "abstract" gods or personified abstractions, usually conceived of in anthropomorphic form, that were the core of the pantheon.

The ancient Iranians believed that there was a cosmic law, known as *asha* (cognate to the Vedic *rita*), that ensured order in the physical universe and also in the human world as an ethical principle of truth and righteousness; its opposite was the cosmic principle of disorder and falsehood, known as *drug*. Men's worship and sacrifices were felt to help maintain this cosmic order by strengthening both the gods themselves and the natural world. One matter that was central to this opposition of truth and lie was the sacredness of man's given word—keeping one's pledge so that *asha* was upheld. Two types of pledges were recognized: the individual oath and the contract between two parties. These were hypostatized as divinities who would support the upright man who kept his word but smite the liar who broke it, and who were called Varuna and Mithra respectively—well known from the Vedas. The judicial procedure used to test the veracity of a man accused of breaking his word was the ordeal: an ordeal by water for an oath, an ordeal by fire for a covenant. Accordingly, Varuna (known in the Avesta only by its byname Apam Napat, "Son of the Waters") and

[7] Our authority throughout this study, Mary Boyce, wavered somewhat over a narrower dating, from "between, say, 1400 and 1000 BC" (Boyce 1975, 190) to "between 1700 and 1500 BC" (Boyce 1979, 18) to "probably…. before 1200 BC" (Boyce 1982, 3).

[8] Most of the information on Iranian religion, both before and after Zoroaster, in this book is drawn from the work of Mary Boyce, which seems to have set a plumb line for modern Zoroastrian scholarship as well as providing a thorough coverage of the subject. See her seminal history of Zoroastrianism in several volumes (Boyce 1975, 1982; Boyce and Grenet 1991) and her very informative, nontechnical summary which covers all the ground from antiquity to the present day (Boyce 1979). This and the next subsection rely on Boyce 1975 (Chaps. 2, 4, 6) and Boyce 1979 (Chap. 1).

Mithra became associated with these elements and became gods of the waters and of fire (and of the greatest of all fires, the sun) respectively, and received the exalted title of *ahura* (lord). By logical extension, Mithra became further worshiped as a war god, fighting on behalf of the righteous, and as god of justice itself; and since it was believed that a just moral order brought prosperity to a realm, he was also invoked as bringer of rain and good crops and protector of rich pastures, i.e. a god of material plenty. Similarly, Apam Napat, the god of the waters, became a god of rain and the harvest.

Above these divinities there was a third and greatest lord, probably inspired by the figure of the wise ruler in ultimate control of the law: Ahura Mazda, the Lord Wisdom, who was unconnected with any physical phenomenon but personified the power of wisdom which should control men and gods alike. The three *ahuras* are all ethical beings, who uphold *asha* and rule by it. Ahura Mazda too seems to have had a Vedic counterpart in a nameless Lord (Asura, corresponding to Avestan *ahura*) who in a few Rigvedic passages is described as "our Father" and appears raised above both Mitra and Varuna as enabling them to make the sky rain, enforce their ordinances and rule the universe through truth (*rita*) (RV 5.63). Already in the *Rig Veda*, this ancient high god had become so remote from the cult as to have lost his proper name, being alluded to only by his title "Lord", and would be in the course of time forgotten. It seems likely that this god was once the highest god of the ethical triad of the Indo-Iranians, together with Mitra and Varuna, and then underwent divergent developments in the two daughter religions, yielding his prominence to Varuna with the Vedic Indians while remaining foremost with the Iranians with his proper name, Mazda, until Zoroaster moved him to the position of supreme god. This last reform also affected the relative positions of Mithra and Apam Napat (i.e. Varuna). There is evidence to suggest that the latter had an exalted place in the ancient Iranian pantheon, not unlike that held by Varuna in India, and like him fulfilled many acts of creation, while the pagan Ahura Mazda was probably more remote, like the Vedic Asura. But when Zoroaster elevated Ahura Mazda to the position of *the* creator god, Apam Napat became bereft of much of his greatness and survived in Zoroastrianism only with the limited activity of god of the waters, whereas Mithra's roles of judge and fighter for *asha* were little affected by the new doctrines and so his position remained virtually unaltered.

Around Mithra, or both Mithra and Apam Napat, were grouped a number of lesser "abstract" divinities, all of them beneficent, including among others a god of hospitality (a counterpart of the Vedic Aryaman), a god of prayer, a goddess of fortune, and a goddess of glory for kings and heroes. An interesting figure in this group is Verethraghna, the god of victory, a martial helper of the *ahuras*, a warrior who fights alongside, and grants victory only to the righteous, who enjoyed great popularity of old and continued to be greatly revered in Zoroastrianism (Boyce 1975, 53–55, 62–65). He is an ancient divinity, probably belonging with the *ahuras* to Indo-Iranian times, when he shared his warlike function with Indra, whom we have already met in Sect. 4.1.1 above as the chief god of the *Rig Veda*—a divinity who was the prototype of the Indo-Iranian warrior of the heroic age, fearless, reckless, hard-drinking, generous to his worshipers whom he would reward with material gains.

Indra is thus an essentially amoral being, the opposite of the great *ahuras*, as shown by a Rigvedic hymn (RV 4.42) which contrasts Indra's and Varuna's different claims to greatness: both are universal kings, but Varuna rules by right, Indra by might. However, no divinity corresponding to Verethraghna is known from the Vedas, where his place had been usurped by Indra, who joined his own qualities of "bad" warrior to Verethraghna's qualities of "good" warrior, smiting the demons. The evidence of the Mitanni pantheon (discussed in Sect. 4.1.1 above), in which Indra follows Mitra and Varuna in the place where one might expect Verethraghna to appear, suggests that this shift was not original with the Vedic Brahmins but had already taken place with the Indo-Aryans of the fourteenth century BCE. In an opposite development, Zoroaster instead retained the god of Victory and rejected Indra, who sank with the Nasatyas (who followed Indra in the Mitanni list) and another Vedic deity equivalent to Rudra, who were all evidently worshiped also in pagan Iran, to the rank of demons, collectively designated as *daevas* and abjured in Zoroastrianism. We will see in Sect. 6.2.1 how important this contrast was for Zoroaster's reforms.

This pantheon had a key feature in common with the Vedic and Greek pantheons: through processes of logical association, personification of abstractions, and myth-making, most gods came to be seen as wielding broad powers affecting multiple, apparently distant areas, so each god could and would be petitioned for very diverse benefits. Inevitably, then, each of these boons belonged to an area that was also the responsibility and competence of other divinities; as a consequence, the gods' jurisdictions overlapped, so that the same or similar benefits could—or indeed should—be sought of diverse divinities at the same time. For example, consider what is perhaps the chief nature deity, the goddess Aredvi Sura Anahita ("the moist, the strong, the undefiled"), originally a river-goddess and the source of all the waters of the world, the counterpart of the Vedic river-goddess Sarasvati (Boyce 1975, 71–73, 151–152). As a goddess of the waters, she was interpreted as a goddess of fertility—of humans, herds, and earth alike; not only, however, would maidens pray to her for a good husband and women giving birth for an easy delivery, but warriors would ask the goddess for swift horses and victory in battle, and priests would ask her for wisdom. As we have seen, however, war was already presided over by both Mithra and Indra, even though with different nuances, and then there was the ancient god of victory, Verethraghna; on the other hand, both Mithra and Apam Napat brought prosperity to land and cattle, as did a specialized god of material prosperity, Baga; and women' fertility was especially cared for by Ashi, the goddess of fortune and abundance. The cult god Haoma (discussed in the next section) likewise was a protector of health, cattle, crops, and warriors. So overlap abounded. Dumézil did not even try to squeeze this divine complex into the straitjacket of his tripartite ideology (although he did see the goddess Aredvi Sura Anahita as an example of tri-functional deity encompassing and synthesizing all the functions; see Dumézil 1958, 59–60).

The gods created the world and the world was regarded as unending, if men also did their part and sustained the gods' creation by means of the priests' daily sacrifices. As to the individual, there was a belief in life after death, the earliest form of which was probably that after death the human soul went to an underground kingdom of the dead; there all the souls alike lived a shadowy, joyless existence and still relied

on their living descendants to feed and clothe them. Then a belief developed that some great men—chieftains, warriors, and priests—if worthy enough, might ascend to a heaven of delight in the company of the gods, while commoners and women were still doomed to the underworld—a dual conception of the afterlife shared by the Vedic Indians; probably on account of uncertainty about each individual's fate, however, the descendants' offerings remained for all the departed. With the hope of paradise a belief arose in the resurrection of the body for the individual to be able to experience the full joys of heaven, and this seemed incompatible with burial in the ground. Hence the Indians began to shift from burial to cremation, while the Iranians, out of utmost respect for fire, moved to the rite of exposure that would take center stage with Zoroastrianism.

4.2.2 The Cult and the Priests

The ancient Iranians devoted much time and resources to pleasing the gods with offerings and praises, with the double purpose of securing material and spiritual benefits for the supplicant and of strengthening the gods themselves, on whose work the maintenance of the "world of *asha*" depended. Among the various offerings, the blood sacrifice (Boyce 1975, 149–151, 152–153) was always the rarest and most highly regarded, partly because it was the most costly to the supplicant, and partly because the taking of life—itself a dangerous act of destruction—had to be hedged about with strict rituals, so that the consecrated animal's soul could safely depart for the other world. Even though a sacrifice could be offered by any laymen, a priest's presence was always necessary as he alone was sufficiently pure to perform this high ritual act. The most prized of sacrificial animals was the cow or bull—a reminiscence of the remote pastoral period of the people—followed by the horse—clearly an aristocratic offering—and then more commonly goats, sheep, and fowl. Each sacrifice was dedicated to a particular deity, called down by name with proper ritual words.

In addition to sacrificing to the gods on high, the ancient Iranians had a particular cult around the two elements that played a vital part in the life of the steppe-dwelling pastoralists, and which have remained central to the Zoroastrian cult to this day: water and fire (Boyce 1975, 153–156). Offerings to the waters were threefold: milk and the sap or leaves of two plants, representing the animal and vegetable kingdoms. The waters were deified as Apas, whose "son" was Apam Napat, i.e. Varuna. As lighting a fire then was a laborious process, it was convenient to keep a hearth fire always burning, so a cult of ever-burning fire developed among the Indo-Europeans. As the Vedic Indians deified fire as Agni, so the Iranians deified it as Atar, although he never developed anything like the rich personality and mythology that surrounded Agni. Among the Iranians, the offerings to fire were again threefold: clean dry wood, incense, and a small amount of animal fat—again two from the vegetable kingdom and one from the animal one. The offerings to both water and fire were thought to strengthen that element by returning to it the vital force it had given out.

As the food offerings to the gods could be performed by the laity, so the offerings to both water and fire were made regularly by each household; but these three things (food offerings to a particular god, offering to fire, and offering to water) also formed the basis of the rite known in later times as the *yasna* (cf. the Vedic *yajña*), the major daily act of worship officiated by priests; although known directly only in its Zoroastrian form, substantial pre-Zoroastrian features can be detected in it (Boyce 1975, 156–165). While the basic ritual was always the same, each *yasna* service was dedicated to an individual god through particular mantras, although it always included the offerings to fire and water. While the domestic offering of fat to fire was presumably made whenever the family had meat to cook, at the priestly rite the fat was obtained from animal sacrifice—which implies that such sacrifice was a regular part of the service. Like the ancient Greeks and the Vedic Indians, the Iranians believed that the gods were content with a symbolic portion of the meat, offered into the fire, and otherwise enjoyed the odor rising from the sacrifice, so the consecrated meat (like all the other food and drink offerings) was shared between priests and worshipers. Unlike the Vedic three-fire rites, the Iranians, including the Zoroastrians to this day, have always used only a single fire.

One of the plant offerings to the waters was the juice obtained from pounding the stems of a plant called *haoma* (the Indian *soma*), which was believed to confer untold powers when drunk by warriors, poets, and priests. While in ancient times the preparation, consecration and drinking of *haoma* must have begun life as a separate rite, it then was absorbed and became the center of the *yasna*, to the point that the juice was personified as a god Haoma (parallel to the Indian god Soma), the divine priest who presided over the entire ritual and who too received a stipulated portion of the sacrificial meat. Like many other gods, Haoma became endowed with vast and diverse powers, all ultimately related to the plant which he represented: he was invoked as a healer, and one who could protect cattle, give strength to warriors, and ensure good harvests. While the *haoma* cult has close parallels in the Vedas (see Sect. 4.1.1 above), in stark contrast with the Indians (to whom the dog, being omnivorous, is a symbol of uncleanness) the Iranians to this day give a fraction of the consecrated meat to a dog, which is always present at the service and receives the food on behalf of the gods—a striking legacy of the pastoral days, as is its regular attendance at funeral rites.

In keeping with the needs of nomadic peoples, these major rituals were performed in a sacred precinct that consisted simply of a piece of level ground marked off by a furrow and consecrated by prayers, with no fixed structure. Purity was thought essential in the presence of the gods, so the ground and the vessels used in the rituals were carefully washed with water, and the priests and all participants had to be in a state of ritual purity, which was achieved by preliminary bodily washing with water or cow or bull urine. (As in India, cattle urine was used also for purification in cases of serious pollution such as contact with a corpse.) However, the pagan gods were selective in granting access to worshipers and accepting offerings from them: various gods forbade participation in the rituals devoted to themselves to various groups of people including prostitutes, liars, lepers, the physically impaired or deformed, the insane, or the sterile—old men and women, young girls and boys (Boyce 1975,166).

On the other hand, as in Brahmanism, propitiatory offerings were also made to the powers of evil and darkness—Zoroaster's wicked *daevas* (ibid., 170–171).

Regarding the priests, what we can know of their profession and organization comes from the commonalities between Zoroastrianism and Brahmanism, which must go back to their common Indo-Iranian past (Boyce 1975, 8–11, 168–169). There was a common basic training in which young boys, probably from the age of 7 to 15, were apprenticed to a master, and there learned the mastering of rituals, the sacred words to accompany them, and the hymns to the gods. While these were learned by heart, thus preserving a sacred literature down the generations, the priests also learned the techniques for composing new additions to the literature, such as mantras and the "wisdom" poetry with instructive content (exemplified by Zoroaster's own *Gathas*). As in the early times there were no established cult centers to be served by priests, the latter, like their Indian colleagues of old, were attached to individual families, at whose behest they performed the rituals for a fee. Thus, payment for service by families to "their" priests was the latter's source of livelihood—a livelihood which would of course be humble or handsome depending on whether their employer was lowly or highborn. In contrast, Greek sources from the fifth century BCE mention a priestly "tribe", the Magi, among the Medes of western Iran—the first hint at an exclusive hereditary priesthood, whereas among the Avestan people of eastern Iran the priestly class seems to have had less rigid barriers (Zoroaster himself, a priest, married into a warrior family).

4.3 Main Takeaways

The earliest attestation of the religion of the Indo-Aryans—a semi-nomadic, pastoralist people that eventually settled in northern India—is found in the hymns of the *Rig Veda*. Indra is the war god and the king of the gods, followed by Agni and Soma who personify the two central elements of the cult—the multi-fire sacrificial ritual and the preparation and drinking of an inebriating drink. Next come the Ashvins, youthful twins and horsemen, Varuna, the sovereign and priestly god, and Mitra, the protector of contracts and alliances. This group may reflect an early tri-functional structure, but it is followed by a long list of minor deities that blur the picture and which threaten to become, in time, a source of instability of the pantheon. Female deities play a very minor role.

The original conception of the afterlife posited the possibility of heaven reserved to a pious, aristocratic elite. Then the late-Vedic texts developed the central Hindu conception that the soul would undergo reincarnation in ways determined by the moral merit accumulated in the current life, and that a way out of this cycle of rebirth was available by pursuing final liberation through renunciation. This entailed a complex of prescriptions and prohibitions for worldly behavior, differentiated by caste, which would evolve over time, and implied that the gods would have to become intertwined with this ethical code as "moral" gods—which would happen with the new gods of Hinduism. At the same time, the late-Vedic literature advanced the idea

of the formless Brahman, the ultimate reality of the universe, seen as the common essence that underlies all the Vedic gods.

The public sacrifice for which the Vedas provide the ritual was commissioned and paid for by a private person but conducted by a number of priests, and included vegetable and dairy offerings as well as cattle and other domestic animals. There was also a separate royal ceremony of horse sacrifice. These rituals took place on a shifting piece of ground demarcated and consecrated for the purpose by the fires. The priests could be identified as Brahmins, who underwent many years of training that involved ascetic discipline, sitting within auditory distance from their teacher, and memorizing the Vedas and related texts by rote. The profession soon became hereditary and came to regard itself as the highest-ranking social class (*varna*), even as the Brahmins diversified into a range of specialized roles and traditions that in time crystallized into many castes.

Iranian polytheism was a close cousin of Indian polytheism. The pantheon included Varuna and Mithra, "moral" gods who upheld the keeping of individual pledges and the keeping of contracts respectively, well-known from the Vedas. Around them were grouped a number of lesser beneficent divinities, and above them was a greater lord, Ahura Mazda (Lord Wisdom), guardian of the cosmic order. On the other hand there was Indra, the chief god of the *Rig Veda*, who was seen in Iran as an essentially amoral being, the prototype of the Indo-Iranian warrior of the heroic age, fearless, reckless, hard-drinking, generous to his worshipers; a few other gods clustered with Indra. Goddesses were marginal. Most gods came to be seen as wielding broad powers affecting multiple, apparently distant areas, hence they could and would be petitioned for very diverse benefits; inevitably, then, each of these areas was also the responsibility of several other divinities, so the gods' jurisdictions overlapped.

Upon death, some great men—chieftains, warriors, and priests—if worthy enough, might ascend to heaven in the company of the gods, whereas commoners and women were doomed to a shadowy underground kingdom of the dead—a dual conception of the afterlife shared by the Vedic Indians. Animal sacrifice was the highest form of offerings to the gods, above all cattle, then horses, and then other domestic animals; and a priest's presence was required as he alone was sufficiently pure. The cult of water and fire was particularly developed. The three types of offerings (to the gods, water, and fire) formed the basis of the *yasna*, the major daily rite officiated by priests, at the end of which the sacrificial meat and other foods were shared between priests and worshipers. This rite was centered on the pressing and drinking of the juice of a sacred plant, which was considered inebriating. The major rituals were performed on a piece of ground consecrated by prayers, with no fixed structures.

The similarities with the Vedic cult are obvious, as are the similarities between the priesthoods. Young boys were apprenticed to a teacher for many years to learn by heart prayers, hymns, and ritual practices. The Iranian priests, like their Vedic colleagues, were attached to individual families for which they performed the rituals for a fee, which was their source of livelihood.

Part II
The Endings

Chapter 5
Extinction: Polytheism Unreformed

Abstract This chapter surveys the religions that became extinct. While we have no reliable information about the Celts, the Germanic religions had scanty professional priesthood, so they offered little organize resistance to conversion; in Iceland the assembly voted for the adoption of Christianity. In Greco-Roman religion both the pantheon and the priesthood continued unchanged in the empire. The elective cults multiplied but never challenged the civic religion, while the non-professional priests of the latter had no incentive to address the growing overlapping of divine jurisdictions and the consequent inefficiency of the cult. So nobody in the system had an incentive to resist Christianization of the empire.

5.1 Celtic Religion

Our account of the demise of Celtic religion can be very brief. As we have seen in Sect. 3.1, the religion of the continental Celts had been overlaid by Roman religion in the long centuries of Roman rule over Gaul and Iberia, giving rise to a fusion product where names and attributes of the gods mingled and their cult was similar to that of the Roman gods with local characteristics, usually captured by epithets. So the history of its extinction is part and parcel of the Christianization of the Roman Empire (discussed in Sect. 5.3.3 below). The druids, whose prominence in Celtic religion was so obvious to the classical writers, were already targeted by repressive imperial decrees in the first century CE as, presumably, focal points of native resistance to Roman rule; so, by the time the Christian conversion campaigns swept Gaul, they must already have been a pale shadow of what they had once been and went down in silence.

As to Ireland, the information at our disposal is no better (Fletcher 1997, Chap. 3). As we know, we have no independent sources on the pagan religion itself and scholars have had to decipher divine figures and beliefs lying underneath epic tales of heroes and demons written down by Christian monks many centuries later. So it is hardly surprising that the monastic accounts of Christianization depict a seamless, triumphal process of defeating ignorance and superstition, smiting the demons, and putting the evil sorcerers and witches of yore—that is, the druids—to shame. The mission to the

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Irish started with St Patrick in the fifth century, and all sorts of miracles and wonderful achievements were retrospectively put down to him in the sources. He must have in fact started the process of conversion, ordained priests, initiated (Latin) literacy for his clergy in a pre-literate society, and laid the foundation of what would become the central institution of medieval Irish Christianity—monasticism. But what we have here is not a "history" of conversion. As another example, it is likely that the other great patron saint of Ireland alongside Patrick, St Brigid, never existed but was the Christianization of the great pagan goddess Brigid, from whom she took over many attributes, supernatural deeds, and legends, as well as her feast day.

5.2 Germanic Religions

Many Germanic tribes crossed the imperial frontier in the twilight of the Western Roman Empire and in the fifth century CE founded successor states in its western provinces, from Gaul to Spain to North Africa (Fletcher 1997, Chap. 4). Making a virtue of necessity, since the frontiers were becoming impossible to defend, the emperors consented to their settlement as barriers to further barbarian invasions, but on condition that they converted to Christianity. This they did, but for some reason they chose the Arian creed, a version of Christianity that had been declared heretical at the council of Nicaea in 325 CE but whose missionaries had been able to make a dent in the tribes when they were still outside, but close to the imperial frontiers. These tribes finally came around to orthodox Nicene Christianity in the sixth century. Anyway, since we have no information whatsoever about their traditional religion—except the assumption that they must have shared a good deal with the Germanic peoples we already met in Chap. 3—their conversion does not concern us.

Another Germanic people with a great future—they established a kingdom in Gaul that lasted for three centuries—were the Franks, who unlike the tribes mentioned above entered the empire as pagans. Then, around the year 500, again unlike the other tribes, King Clovis converted to orthodox Christianity prompted by his queen, who was a Nicene Christian princess from another tribe. Although we again don't know anything about the Franks' pagan religion, this story is solidly documented and is interesting for us because it establishes a pattern. Clovis was initially reluctant to do his wife's bidding because he feared that his men would not follow him along. Then he faced a decisive battle with another Germanic tribe, and being under great stress he invoked the help of the Christian god, promising to convert if he won—exactly a replica of Emperor Constantine's famous conversion. He did win, took some religious instruction from the local bishop, and finally was baptized with other family members and "thousands" of his warriors. We may discount such magical thinking and belief in miracles and surmise strategic behavior behind Clovis' actions, but this is how many conversion stories were circulated and, presumably, believed; as pointed out in Sect. 1.2, in the ancient world belief in preternatural events, miracles, gods' epiphanies, and the efficacy of spells was widespread and considered part of "normal" human experience. Be that as it may, we will find this pattern again: the

role of the Christian queen, the preoccupation to bring along the aristocracy, and the paramount importance of an expectation of victory in war or expansion of royal power as an incentive to switch religious allegiance. It also established a model for missionary activity that would be followed everywhere outside the territories of the Roman Empire of old: a top-down process, where the mission aims to convert the king, his family, and his nobility, and then the rest of the people will be carried along by hook or crook—the opposite of the bottom-up process that had marked the rise of Christianity in the empire.

For this pattern to function, however, there must exist a king to be converted first, so it cannot easily be applied to peoples that are organized in multiple local chiefdoms and which jealously defend their independence (Fletcher 1997, Chap. 7). Such were the Saxons of northern Germany, who stubbornly resisted the missionaries and were finally conquered by the Frankish king Charlemagne in a series of wars spanning more than 30 years toward the end of the eighth century. The Saxons' motives to resist the Franks were a mixture of political independence from foreign rule and attachment to their traditional religion and way of life. Charlemagne crushed them with a savagery unprecedented in the history of Christian conversion, executing thousands of prisoners and deporting many more, and finally imposing universal baptism and capital punishment for any backsliding or any showing of heathen practices.

Unlike their continental cousins, the Anglo-Saxons of Britain present a history of conversion that conforms to the top-down pattern exemplified by King Clovis of the Franks (Fletcher 1997, Chaps. 1, 4). King Aethelbert of Kent converted around 600 CE under the influence of his Frankish Christian wife and a missionary sent by the Pope; some of his nobility converted with him but not all, and so did some, but not all, of his vassals ruling adjacent kingdoms. Next came King Edwin of Northumbria, who took baptism with his chief men in 627 CE again with the assistance of his Christian wife and a Roman priest. His decision, after a long hesitation, was triggered by a vow to convert if he should win a war with a nearby kingdom, which resulted in a great victory, and after his baptism the king strongly promoted missionary activities within his kingdom; the impact of the whole operation, however, seems not to have been deep as Edwin's successors reverted to paganism.

Edwin's story, as recounted in the eighth century by the great English church historian, Bede, provides some interesting details of the procedure and motives of the decision. Edwin convened a council of his advisors and noblemen where the Roman priest explained the tenets of Christianity. Then the high priest Coifi, who was in charge of the gods' shrines and cult (and whom we met in Sect. 3.2.2 above), declared that being devoted to the gods all his life had brought him no tangible benefits, so turning to the new god might indeed be worthwhile. After this, a councilor declared that unlike the old religion, the new doctrine gives men some valuable knowledge and assurance about what is to come in the next life—suggesting a longing for something that would endure beyond man's often unavailing struggles in a cold and hostile world. Here we see that the new faith was strong just where the old one had been weak (Davidson 1964, 221–222). So the king agreed to embrace Christianity and Coifi himself proceeded to destroy the idols and the temple forthwith.

As the chief priest at a royal court, Coifi must have been first of all a priest of Odin, the god of the kings and of battle. So, underneath his words can perhaps be sensed the bitterness toward the fickleness and treachery of this god that is often expressed in Norse poetry and sagas (Davidson 1964, 50–51, 70–72). Odin cannot be trusted, as he often assigns victory capriciously, regardless of his warriors' loyalty; he is renowned for wisdom and cunning but is not concerned with justice among men. In this he differs from the ancient Germanic war god Tyr, who was associated with law and justice and who seems to have been displaced by Odin in the Viking age (see Sect. 3.2.1 above). "It would not seem as though Odin was a god whom men could love or respect, although they feared him, and gloried at times in his heady power" (ibid, 72). So, as mentioned in Sect. 3.2.1, allegiance outside the aristocracy seems to have shifted from Odin to Thor, a god of nearness, who was seen as a friend of the common but independent man when engaged in war, at sea, or on his farmstead, and a protector (as a sky god) of the community at large, on which fell a good part of the mantle of old Tyr. The frequency of personal names and place names called after him all over Scandinavia testify to his popularity. At the close of the pagan age he was hailed as the god who had challenged Christ to meet him in single combat, and who came down to earth to personally fight with a Norwegian king who was championing Christianity (ibid, 73–75).

Thus, in the course of time, we have clear signs of evolution of beliefs and change of allegiance occurring within the traditional Norse pantheon, not toward outsiders to the pantheon like in the Roman Empire (see the next section). In turn, this suggests a disposition to "choose" one god or goddess—usually Thor or Freyr and Freyja—for one's special friend and protector, although this did not prevent him from acknowledging the existence of the others or from taking part in communal festivals in which all the gods were honored. "The worship of the old gods was a very individual affair, suiting the independent people who practiced it" (Davidson 1964, 219). Consequently, since everything in that world was seen as hanging on being true to one's word and mutual trust, the question whether to forsake the old religion for the Christian faith was seen as one of keeping or breaking one's pledge to gods who had always been one's loyal supporters. Hence, many tried to carry on with mixed allegiances, worshiping Christ but also turning to Thor on certain occasions, or erecting altars to both Christ and the old gods in a single temple as did King Redwald of East Anglia in the seventh century. Of course this could not go on for long in a Christian milieu, but it testifies to the difficulty for these men to swallow the new idea of exclusive worship of one god.

Beyond the promise of a life after death that was open to all, and not just to a warrior aristocracy, the expectations of the common people from the new religion were the same as those of the kings discussed above: the ability of Christianity to satisfy the quest for material security and welfare. This was a natural attitude for people accustomed to think of "their" god as a protector from the vagaries and threats of life. This is candidly spelled out in a letter that a bishop wrote to the apostle of the (continental) Saxons, St Boniface, in the eighth century (Fletcher 1997, 251–252). He argued that the pagans must be brought around by persuasion, not by force (an advice blatantly ignored by Charlemagne a generation later, as we have seen). If the

pagan gods, he went on, were really as mighty, beneficent, and just as claimed, they would not only reward their worshipers but also smite their foes; but then, why have they spared the Christians who are wiping them out of the world and smashing their idols? Likewise, while the Christians own fertile lands awash with wine, oil, and all kinds of riches, the pagans with their gods are being pushed back and left to rule over cold and miserable lands. To show the truth of this approach, the missionaries resorted widely to miracles—miracles of the weather, on which the supply of food depended, and miracles of healing and exorcism, as well as predicting the future through visions and dreams (ibid, Chap. 8). As pointed out above, the possibility of miracles was widely believed. The same battery of arguments and devices, it must be noted, had earlier been tried and found working in the Christian conversion of the Roman Empire (MacMullen 1984, Chaps. 3 and 4).

So the passing of the old gods was largely a practical matter: in those peoples' eyes, they had found a newcomer—Christ—who bested them on their own ground. There was much in the old religion to be sentimentally attached to but nothing to die for. Moreover, as we have seen, there was little professional priesthood to offer organized resistance to conversion, and what little there was depended on the patronage of the kings; once these had converted, the main prop of the old religion disappeared and its days were numbered. So, according to Bede's detailed records of conversion, which are generally considered reliable by historians, in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms there was little popular opposition to the advent of Christianity.

In the main Scandinavian countries, conversion occurred later and was more of a messy affair (Fletcher 1997, Chap. 11; Parker 2015, 87–89, 98–104, 159–162, 182 ff, 263–264). There were sustained missionary efforts, conducted by English monks or directed by the German bishopric of Hamburg-Bremen, which met with mixed success, with a king converting and missionizing and the successive one switching back to paganism, and with rival factions of local pagan and Christian chiefs vying for supremacy. Also, many warriors and chiefs converted through contact with local Christians in the Viking settlements in the British Isles, and then brought the faith back to their relatives in the countries or origins. Denmark finally accepted Christianity when King Harald "Bluetooth" converted around 960 CE; he and his court came around when the missionary was challenged to submit to an ordeal of fire—a relatively common means of settling disputes at the time—and survived it. Norway saw more strife and occasional violence for about a century, with missionary kings disrupting sacrifices, smashing temples and pagan icons; finally, permanent conversion of the country is considered to have been established by King Olaf Haraldsson (reigned 1016–1030), soon to be canonized as St Olaf. Lastly, the mission to Sweden began in the ninth century but did not make much progress until it gained the first conversion of a king in the early years of the second millennium; even after that, resistance was strong and focused on the great temple at Uppsala (described in Sect. 3.2.1 above) for most of the eleventh century. Finally the last pagan king was killed and the sanctuary destroyed in around 1090, securing the final victory of Christianity in the country.

In Iceland, a colony of free farmers led by local priest-chiefs (*godhar*), there was no king to convert, so the decision to adopt Christianity was made by democratic

procedure—with a twist (Byock 2001, 297–301; Parker 2015, 161–162). All chiefs with their followers convened annually at a general assembly called *Althing* to decide about the law and the settlement of disputes. Some settlers arriving in the tenth century were Christians from the Viking colonies of the North Atlantic islands, and some missionaries arrived from Norway at the urging of a Norwegian king who, however, had no formal authority over Iceland. So by the end of the century the population had a mixed allegiance, with some people honoring both the Christian and the pagan gods. Matters came to a head at the *Althing* of the year 1000, where the two factions argued their respective cases and were, understandably, unable to reach a consensus decision, raising the specter of secession and violence. Then the Christian leader asked the Speaker of the assembly—himself a pagan—to arbitrate the dispute. The Speaker retired to consider matters for an entire night sheltering "under his cloak"—possibly consulting his gods for an answer. The following morning, to the disappointment of his pagan faction, he pronounced that henceforth everyone would be Christian and must take baptism. To help people swallow his decisions, he made some concessions, including that the exposure of unwanted babies continued to be permitted, and that sacrifice to the pagan gods was still allowed as long as it was done in private. But it was then only a matter of time before paganism, deprived of its public face, would wither away to a set of heroic memories in the sagas.

5.3 Greco-Roman Religion

In Chap. 2 we have surveyed Greek and Roman religion from the beginnings to roughly the latter half of the first century BCE, when Rome achieved the definitive submission of the Greek world and at the same time the Roman Republic gave way to the Roman Empire.[1] The Roman conquest of Hellenistic Egypt (31 BCE) conventionally marks the end of the Hellenistic period and opens the Roman period of Greek history. Building on the extensive influence of Greek on Roman religion that we have surveyed for the late republican period, the Greco-Roman religion was the product of the convergence, coexistence, and spread of the two original religions in the unitary imperial system, and it lasted until the Christianization of the empire in the fourth century CE. We now briefly survey religious developments until the end of paganism.

5.3.1 Traveling Gods and Institutions

With the Roman Empire and the establishment of lasting peace across the Mediterranean and beyond, more divine traveling than before could and did take place; *pax romana* included *pax deorum* (the peace of the gods). Some travelling was entirely private and unsanctioned. Merchants settled in faraway places to establish trading

[1] This entire section draws extensively on Ferrero and Tridimas (2018) and the references cited therein.

posts; soldiers were stationed far and wide across the empire and often changed stations of assignment in successive years; slaves—typically war prisoners—were shifted around, then often freed and their free offspring put down roots in the new place. All these groups brought along their favored gods and built them shrines, thus widening the range of cults on offer in any one place; these upstarts occasionally attracted worshipers in their new lands through marriage or other ways.

At the level of civic religion, the changes wrought by Roman rule, especially in the western provinces of the empire, must be differentiated according to the citizenship status of the towns and their residents (Beard, North and Price 1998, Chap. 7). This is because, for most of the pagan period of the empire, Roman citizenship was a privilege differentially granted to individuals, groups, and whole towns, and one much prized and actively sought for—until in 212 CE Emperor Caracalla extended citizenship to most of the free population of the empire. Since citizenship was a precondition for military service, the army camps had an official religious life that was predominantly Roman, from the deities worshiped to the ritual calendar to the forms of ritual—though this did not prevent both officers and troops from worshiping other gods in a private capacity. Next came the *coloniae*, i.e. communities of Roman citizens, often discharged soldiers, settled outside Italy and designed to be replicas of Rome in all respects, including the religious institutions from the pantheon to the principal priesthoods. Then there were the *municipia*, i.e. towns that had been granted the so-called "Latin rights", a subset of the full citizenship rights; these shared some of the Roman features of the previous type, especially the priestly organization. Finally there was the vast number of towns without Roman status, even though they might have included individual Roman citizens among their residents. Here the Romans occasionally resorted to some degree of repression, notably trying to suppress the druids—the native priestly class of the Gauls—who were seen as posing a threat to Roman order (see Sect. 3.1.2), but otherwise left the subject nations completely free to practice their own religions. Understandably, those peoples often sought accommodation with their new masters by "reinterpreting" their traditional gods as variations of, or another name for, Roman deities, so that e.g. Mercury in Gaul and Saturn in North Africa (often hyphenated with a local epithet) came to cover old Celtic and Punic deities respectively.

Besides the spreading of old, localized gods to new places, the imperial age witnessed the birth and growth of new "Oriental" cults (Beard, North and Price 1998, 278–309). As we have seen in Sect. 2.1.2, "Oriental" gods and goddesses, foreign to both the classic Greek and the early Roman pantheons, had begun to travel west and make Rome or Athens their home long before the imperial age. Importantly, several of these (especially Cybele, Isis, and Serapis) crisscrossed the lines of jurisdiction of the traditional pantheon, promising blessings and protection for a wide array of issues. These old acquaintances were now joined by Jupiter Dolichenus—one of many variants of the Syrian god Ba'al—and Mithras—supposedly a "Persian" sun religion, whatever that may have meant to contemporaries. Despite the "Oriental" label, these cults were virtually unknown in the east but spread widely in the western provinces and were particularly associated with the army. Like Isis and Cybele, and even more than them, these gods were less specialized than the traditional gods and tended toward a kind of encompassing jurisdiction—a feature that had the potential

to unsettle the traditional "division of labor" among gods, although the details escape us. We will see in the next section that some of these cults were organized as elective, sectarian groups. Of course, the Oriental religions included such oddities—in Roman eyes—as Judaism and Christianity, including the many Gnostic and other fringe groups and sects that were close to them.

The cumulative result of these processes is captured by the stock of Latin inscriptions (i.e. from the western part of the empire) for the second and third centuries CE (MacMullen 1981, 5–8, 113). Among the deities mentioned in those inscriptions, Jupiter is by far the leader. The 14 gods that come next have different weights in the different provinces; they include half of the twelve Olympians listed in Sect. 2.1.2 (i.e. Apollo, Diana, Venus, Mercury, Liber-Bacchus, Mars) but not the others, a few other traditional Roman deities, and four Oriental gods: Isis-Serapis, Cybele, Dolichenus, and Mithras-Sol. The last two are especially prominent in frontier regions such as the Rhine and the Danube where the settlements were heavily militarized. The corresponding Greek epigraphic record (i.e. from the eastern part of the empire) is fragmentary, but a standard collection of inscriptions from Asia Minor shows a large overlap with the western record: Zeus again ranks first by a wide margin, and the 10 deities that come next include seven of the traditional Greco-Roman deities already included in the Latin inscriptions, plus the good old Greek goddesses Athena and Hera that failed to make it into the western record, and last of all Cybele, the only one of the Oriental gods.

So in the Greek-speaking east nothing of substance had changed from Hellenistic times, despite the Roman domination. In the western provinces, by far the most important change had been the broad establishment of the worship of Jupiter and, after that, of a fairly representative mix of traditional, if heavily Hellenized, Roman deities (including Isis and Cybele, which had been thoroughly domesticated centuries before); only Dolichenus and Mithras were the real newcomers. So even in the late third century CE the old, traditional Greek and Roman gods were alive and well, though joined by a few newcomers. This finding belies once-popular arguments about the dying out of traditional gods under the onslaught of the new cults in the late pagan empire (MacMullen 1981, 126–127). In A.D. Nock's words (quoted in Lane Fox 1988, 83), "there was, if anything, less chance of the Roman Empire turning Mithraic than of seventeenth-century England turning Quaker".

Regarding religious policy, the empire saw the rise of a formal priestly hierarchy: by claiming the title of *pontifex maximus* for himself the emperor, beginning with Augustus, became in a sense the head of the religion. However, this power was never used to dictate religious belief or behavior to his subjects. The emperors often did show a preference for particular gods, lavishing patronage on their cult—especially in the third century CE, when emperors such as Elagabalus and Aurelian endorsed an Oriental, non-Roman deity of universal power (*Sol Invictus*—Unconquered Sun). But this was never meant to imply, let alone impose, a claim to exclusive worship or a disestablishment of the other gods; in short, it was an assertion of relative superiority, not monotheism—Number One, not The Only One. So despite the intertwining of priests and politics from the beginnings of Rome, the widespread notion of "state cult" to describe the Roman system is basically a misconception (MacMullen 1981,

83–95, 102–107). Little else changed with the empire except the rise of a cult to the genius of the current emperor—to wish him fortune and glory—as well as to some previous emperors who had been "deified"; these special cults had specially dedicated priests appointed by the provincial towns as well as in Rome. Other than that, as discussed above, the Roman priestly organization was exported to, or borrowed by, the settlements with Roman status across the empire.

5.3.2 The Elective Cults

As we have seen (Sect. 2.1.3), in the classic Greek world there arose the first hints of what we would today call sectarian groups, separate from, and potentially at odds with, the official civic religion. These were the Orphic and the Pythagorean groups, but they remained marginal throughout antiquity.

In the imperial age, the "elective" cults, i.e. those who drew from a self-selected pool of believers outside the official system of civic cults, did spread far and wide. In particular, the cult of Isis—an old acquaintance from pre-imperial times—was attended to by a specialized, dedicated priesthood that might have had a vested interest in active missionizing. Yet, contrary to earlier claims, her cult does not seem to have attracted many new recruits, but rather to have diffused mainly through travel and resettlement of slaves or ex-slaves and their descendants (MacMullen 1981, 114–117). Conscious, organized evangelizing of any sort was basically unknown in the empire; if a cult acquired new adherents, ordinarily initiative lay with the unconverted, often influenced by the endorsement of people in high positions (ibid., 97–99, 111–112).

By contrast, the cults of Jupiter Dolichenus and Mithras started from scratch at the beginning of the second century CE and, as we have seen in the last section, achieved a remarkable increase in membership over the following two centuries, especially in the army camps and frontier towns in the west; so their growth must have occurred through conversion, even if of the "passive" kind. Their membership seems to have consisted mainly of soldiers and officers, as well as slaves and ex-slaves—so definitely not the social elite—and to have been restricted to men. The cult of Mithras in particular, on which we have substantially more information from archeology and epigraphy, was a remarkable success story given that it had no launching pad, no ancestral home to lend it authority and prestige. It was organized as an elaborate hierarchy of seven grades of initiation, and hence of leadership, through which members ascended, supposedly gaining access to some esoteric knowledge such as that concerning the immortality of the soul. This mirrored the hierarchy that soldiers and freedmen were experiencing in their secular lives. Members gathered in elaborately designed subterranean chapels, or Mithraea, where they enjoyed communal meals and worship. So Mithraism seems to be the closest thing in the ancient world to the modern sense of a congregational religion—one that can properly be said to have members, not customers, and where members derive satisfaction from participation in (material and spiritual) collective activities, solidarity and mutual support. So this

may be the first example of a group to which the economic model of the religious sect as a club (Iannaccone 1992) might apply. Yet it was not a religious "movement" in the sense that individual Mithraic groups and temples seem not to have been part of any organized network or coordinating structure.

Even more important, the elective cults, including Mithras', were not exclusive (Beard, North and Price 1998, 278–309; MacMullen 1981, 92–93; Lane Fox 1988, 34–36): they did not promote or demand exclusive allegiance to their god and disownment of all other deities. Their temples housed statues, paintings, and inscriptions that acknowledged a variety of other gods, both traditional and Oriental, which were evidently accommodated as "friends" or guests or thought to be "the same" as the cult's chief deity. In short, even if their *theology* was monotheistic inasmuch as their gods claimed universal jurisdiction over human concerns, their cult *practices* and behavioral requirements were not monotheistic. Furthermore, not only the gods worshiped in these cults, but also their priests were not exclusive: they (or their followers) could concurrently hold priesthoods of another cult or of a traditional god (MacMullen 1981, 92–93; Lane Fox 1988, 34–36). So the elective cults were no solution to the problem of the inflation of the pantheon. The true monotheists, Jews and Christians, were in a class apart, even though the Christians had to wage a protracted struggle up until the fourth century, redefining and sharpening their theology in the process, to differentiate themselves from this seemingly monotheistic competition (Ferrero 2008).

5.3.3 The End

Our discussion so far has highlighted the great, unique strength of Greco-Roman paganism, often noted by scholars: its seemingly unlimited capacity to accommodate new and foreign cults of every description, which would be lined up alongside the others for the believers to worship as they pleased. Unlimited religious tolerance was the hallmark of the system. (We will see in Sect. 6.1 a similar capacity for accommodation of diversity and assimilation of newcomers in the formation and evolution of Hinduism, one, however, taken to very different effect.) Some cults might in time decline and die out while others might rise and spread, following worshippers' demand and/or the elite's patronage, but if one turned to a new cult there was no requirement that one should forsake or forswear previous allegiances. So as Nock (1933) put it long ago, the very notion of "conversion", i.e., subscribing to a new cult to the exclusion of all others, had no meaning in this world—until the advent of Christianity, which changed everything.

The downside to unlimited accommodation was, however, that in the course of time the divine mix available to supplicants in any one place widened. We should be wary of inferring from this that the decision problem of the average person or city grew in direct proportion to the number of names of gods that were being marketed: first, because many "new" names were epithets, or personifications, of the same god, and secondly, because of the practice of "polyonymy", i.e. the fastening of many

divine names onto one and the same deity in inscriptions, like Zeus-Helios-Serapis or Isis-Aphrodite-Persephone, as if to signify that the deity under three different names was really one (MacMullen 1981, 90–91). Even so, the long-term increase in divine variety undoubtedly increased the areas of jurisdictional overlap and the range of deities that would overlap on the same issue space. As a consequence, hedging against risk by making offerings to multiple gods on each issue (in the economist's language, portfolio diversification) was more than ever a ubiquitous problem, and one steadily worsening with the multiplication of available gods and cults. This suggests that any process that would shrink the number and range of competing claimants for offerings would have benefited supplicants. In theory, this situation should have heightened the competitive pressure and hence the incentive for some of the cults to aggressively displace or take over their competitors, thereby shrinking the available range and moving the system toward increasing concentration, if not unification.

Yet, that did not happen. Paganism continued to evolve and change and accommodate variety and mixture to its very end, without showing signs of decline, crisis, or concentration and reduction of its diversity. Importantly, some philosophers' criticisms notwithstanding, animal sacrifice remained central to pagan cult to its very end (Lane Fox 1988, 70–72). This has been taken as testimony to the vitality of paganism; yet at the same time "[t]he sum was confusion. No counterforce for order existed" (MacMullen 1981, 102). But when the empire got past the crisis of the third century, the Tetrarchy, and the Great Persecution of Christians, what emerged triumphant was Christianity, not the traditional civic religion nor Isis nor Mithras—that is, the one religion that had been unswervingly exclusive in its monotheism (unlike the elective cults), had a proselytizing disposition toward the whole world (unlike post-Destruction Judaism, i.e. the Judaism that took shape after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 CE), and was run by a professional, full-time, exclusive clergy (unlike traditional Greco-Roman paganism).

The story of the rise and triumph of Christianity, and the reasons for its success, are topics that fall outside the scope of this book. But its consequences are clear (Beard, North and Price 1998, Chap. 8; MacMullen 1984). After Emperor Constantine's endorsement of Christianity in 313 CE, and even after Emperor Theodosius' proclamation of Christianity as the state religion in the 390 s and his disestablishment of the traditional cults, most of the elite across the empire unobtrusively continued their pagan observances well into the fifth century, slowly converting to the new faith as the prospect of taking up the new priestly offices to replace the old ones became attractive. The masses of non-elite, and especially non-urban people were slowly brought into line by a varying mixture of persecution and accommodation of their pagan practices, in a struggle that dragged on well into the eight century and beyond (MacMullen 1997). The elective cults too went under, and that must have been a harder blow to their devotees; but there is no evidence that the cult of Mithras survived beyond the fourth century or outside the empire. So there were frictions and protests and occasionally bloodshed at different points in time and space, but nothing like an organized resistance to the Christian takeover. And despite Emperor Julian's (reigned 361–363 CE) short-lived, top-down attempt to restore the traditional religion, there was nothing like a last redoubt where the diehard of paganism would hold

out forever and faithfully await for the time to be ripe for a comeback. Slowly and unevenly, paganism died out and that was the end of it.

Why did the religious suppliers of the empire, traditional or otherwise, not organize a response to the problems and confusion of the pagan system, and instead laid themselves open to the Christian onslaught? Our description of the priestly organization suggests the answer. With few, scattered exceptions, priests were not full-time, dedicated professionals; hence they had no corporate identity as a priestly class and did not function as an interest group. They did not make a living out of it, often took up different priestly offices in the course of their life and even at the same time, and normally priesthood was joined with propertied class status and with political or military office to make up a lifetime career in the Roman senatorial class or in the provincial elite. The priests, or the highest initiation grades, of the elective cults were more dedicated and invested in their roles, but they too were not exclusive. The only full-time, exclusive, professional priestly class was the Christian clergy—and indeed they showed they could be a very effective pressure group in the Christian empire. In a nutshell, no one in late paganism seems to have had the material incentives—in the traditional religion—or the foresight and entrepreneurial ability—in the elective cults—that would have been required to try and turn around the confusion and disorder of the polytheistic system. Therefore the Christians' rise was unopposed—it was met with bouts of persecution from the state but not with a constructive response, private or public, to their challenge.

So when the official Christianization of the empire began, everyone sought to adjust as best they could, offering various degrees of resistance; but there was no group that could even think of standing up to the new masters—admittedly, a formidable combination of imperial power and church authority—*in their capacity as a priestly class or a grassroots religious association.* The organization of Greek and Roman polytheism had so effectively disempowered religion and subordinated it to political power and class status that any capacity of religious agents to take on a life of their own was stymied at the roots. They would and could only swim or sink with the political system in which they were embedded; when the old order collapsed, they were doomed. Despite signs of economic stress among the upper classes that had always borne the brunt of the expensive public structure of temples and ceremonies (MacMullen 1981, 128–130), ancient paganism as a religious system was alive and well when Constantine made the great turnaround, and were it not for that, it could well have continued indefinitely; but once it started to wither, it was soon beyond recovery. In a sense, there was no one in charge of the "system"—no one that could or would heal its wounds when it was still possible, then provide for a proper burial, and finally, if need be, work toward a future resurrection. So it was that the elite made a relatively smooth transfer from a priest of Jupiter to a bishop of Christ when the state required it.

5.4 Main Takeaways

While we have no reliable information about the passing of Celtic religion, the Germanic tribes that settled in the lands of the Western Roman Empire soon converted to Christianity following a top-down model: the missionaries converted the king and his court, and then the rest of the people would follow—the opposite of the bottom-up process that had marked the rise of Christianity in the empire. The Franks and the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Britain followed this model and conversion entailed little popular resistance. In the Scandinavian countries the process entailed more conflict and occasional violence, until all of them had come around by the end of the eleventh century when Christian kings managed to impose their will. In Iceland, a colony of free farmers without a king, the conversion decision was taken by the general assembly.

The kings' chief incentive to convert was the expectation of victory in war or expansion of royal power, as seen earlier with Constantine. For the rest of the people, two factors played a key role. One was the prospect of an afterlife available to everyone, and not just to a warrior aristocracy. Another was the shift of belief that led men outside the aristocracy to think of "their" god of choice (usually Thor or Freyr and Freyja) as a personal friend and protector in their quest for security and material welfare; so they found a new god—Christ—who bested the old gods on their own ground. This transition was facilitated by the near-absence of a professional priesthood interested in defending the old religion and able to offer an organized resistance to the new one.

In the Roman Empire, Greco-Roman religion continued unchanged to the end, with ever-growing multiplicity of gods as they traveled freely within the empire and often overlaid and assimilated old local gods, as in Gaul. Some so-called Oriental or elective cults enjoyed remarkable success. They were based on a self-selected membership, served by a dedicated priesthood, and often devoted to a god with universal jurisdiction (especially Mithras); however, neither their gods nor their priesthoods were exclusive, so they never mounted a challenge to the civic religion nor did they offer a solution to the inflation of the pantheon.

Paganism went to its death without showing signs of crisis or of concentration of its pantheon, despite the growing confusion and inefficiency. Reform did not take place because the traditional non-professional, part-time priests had no corporate identity as a priestly class and did not function as an interest group, so they had neither the incentive nor the means to prevent or resist the Christian takeover. In due time, the elite switched assignment from a priest of Jupiter to a bishop of Christ.

Chapter 6
Death and Rebirth: Polytheism Reformed

Abstract This chapter examines the religions that underwent a reform and managed to survive and thrive. Brahmanism reacted to the challenge of ascetic sects and to the withering of its old base of royal support by replacing the Vedic pantheon and rituals with the new theology of sectarian Hinduism, centered on new supreme deities (Vishnu, Shiva, the Goddess) who had a universal jurisdiction and eliminated divine jealousy. The Brahmins diversified their services and confirmed their monopoly. Zoroastrianism established a divine hierarchy subordinating all deities to Ahura Mazda, promoting a universal struggle between good and evil, and inaugurating monotheism, while the priests expanded their role as guardians of purity and ethics. Both religions were thus able to expand their territorial spread.

6.1 Hinduism

6.1.1 The New Theology

We address here the formative period of Hinduism, from about 600 BCE to 700 CE.[1] In this period, the primacy of Vedic Brahmanism was challenged by deep social and political changes as well as by the concurrent rise of ascetic (*shramana*) movements, Jains and Buddhists prominent among them. In a long process, the Brahmins reacted by changing their theology and practices and finally succeeded in claiming the leadership of the new sects centered on the devotion to particular deities. The new theology and rituals are enshrined in the great epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana (both composed over many centuries and finalized in their present form perhaps in the third century CE), and in a group of works called *Puranas* (mostly composed in the period of the Gupta Empire, ca. 300–500 CE), each of which is devoted to a particular deity.

[1] The entire Hinduism section draws extensively on Basuchoudhari, Ferrero and Lubin (2020); see also the references cited therein. For general background see Thapar (2002).

M. Ferrero, *The Political Economy of Indo-European Polytheism*,
Contributions to Economics, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97943-0_6

As mentioned in Sect. 4.1.1, Vishnu and Rudra-Shiva were only marginal figures in the Vedas, representing only a small aspect of their later divine personae, but later—in the first millennium CE—they replaced the great Vedic gods or displaced them to secondary status. Interestingly, and similarly to the oldest indigenous Roman gods, most Vedic gods were not removed for the pantheon but left there as minor figures (Sect. 4.1.1). The new centrality of Shiva and Vishnu was signaled by depicting them as complementary in their primary functions in the conception of the Trimurti, the "three forms" of god: Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the sustainer), and Shiva (the destroyer at the end of each eon), with Brahma personifying the old Vedic notion of divinity and hardly receiving any worship in the developing Hinduism. This ecumenical conception, however, did not reflect the emerging reality of the new religions. From the beginning of the Common Era, there arose a group of new traditions—Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Shakta—enshrined in the *Puranas*, each named after its eponymous deity (Shiva, Vishnu, and Shakti, i.e., the Devi, respectively), which constituted the core theology of classical Hinduism and in time crystallized into sects. Below this top layer of pan-Indian deities, there were hundreds of gods and goddesses and a plethora of specializations of a given deity to particular roles or concerns, usually captured by an epithet. These often represented local varieties or earlier local deities subsumed into the main theological framework of Hinduism through affiliation.

Beginning with the first two traditions, despite the appearance of cosmological complementarity in the Trimurti, and although the characters depicted by the mythology were different, both Shiva and Vishnu were claimed by their devotees (the members of the various sects comprising the Shaiva and the Vaishnava traditions, respectively) as supreme gods, referred to by titles such as Bhagavan ("holy one") or Ishvara ("lord"). The sects promised to their members, whether ascetics or householders, the achievement of liberation (*moksha*) through the grace of the Lord, and in contrast to Vedic practice, they introduced the worship of anthropomorphic images of the gods, which were later to receive their permanent home in the temples.[2]

Vishnu is the Lord residing in the highest heaven, who creates the universe, then preserves it, and then destroys it at the end of each eon, thus taking on in turn the three successive forms of god and their names; and he manifests himself to the world by means of his avatars or incarnations. These avatars constituted one mechanism for affiliating other figures to a central divine person. The figure of Vishnu himself appears to have taken over those of several previously independent tribal deities, among them Krishna, who was elevated to the status of avatar but then was identified with Vishnu himself in the Bhagavad Gita (the "Song of the Lord", itself a section of the Mahabharata), which is claimed as scripture by the Vaishnavas.

Shiva too is considered by his devotees as the supreme Lord who creates, sustains, and destroys the universe. He is an ambiguous god, described as a wild ascetic and at the same time as the ideal householder, although the ascetic component looms larger in the Shaiva than in the Vaishnava tradition. He is the Lord of *yoga* (roughly, "discipline of the mind") who meditates on Mount Kailash in the Himalayas; he has

[2] The following three paragraphs on the Hindu deities are based on Flood (1996, Chaps. 5, 7, 8).

a wife, Parvati, and two children; he is the Lord of dance, through which he brings forward an infinite energy; and he is embodied in the *linga*, the phallic image that became a fixture of Shiva's temples, symbolizing the cosmic power of generation. A foundational myth, told in different versions, tells how all the gods once celebrated a great Vedic horse sacrifice but Shiva, who was meditating on the mountain, was not invited; overtaken by fearsome wrath, he then descended on the ritual and destroyed everything, whereupon he was begged by the gods to desist and was offered a share in the sacrificial offerings forever after. This suggests that Shiva, originally an outsider to the Vedic divine club, was excluded from the sacrifice until he forced himself in, and analogously, the Shaiva tradition, originally not part of Brahmanism, was later assimilated into it.

Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva were each juxtaposed with a goddess—Sarasvati, Lakshmi, and Parvati respectively—personified as a divine consort and representing the god's creative energy (*shakti*). This was a sharp turn from the Vedic pantheon, where the goddesses played a minor role and were generally pale personifications of natural phenomena or of abstractions. The *Puranas* then established a separate Shakta tradition centered on the cult of the Shakti, i.e., the goddess (*devi*), alongside the Vaishnava and Shaiva traditions, with a theology and a mythology of its own, where the different goddesses were seen as embodiments of a single feminine principle, the Great Goddess (Maha-Devi). Somewhat like Shiva, the Devi is an ambiguous figure, the generous mother and source of all life and at the same time a force of destruction that must be appeased, or, the ideal wife and at the same time the woman free from social control. Her cult seems to have resulted from the accretion of local goddesses, some of which of non-Arya origin or worshiped by low-caste and tribal groups, originally alien to the Brahmanical framework and then assimilated into it. In her theology, the Devi is the ultimate reality and origin of the universe; she is more powerful than Vishnu and the other gods, who are nevertheless acknowledged, and can grant believers liberation from rebirth. Her most prominent manifestation is Durga, the beautiful warrior goddess who would countenance no husband and who kills the buffalo-demon that all the gods could not conquer—though not before drinking her cup of wine. Other manifestations are Kali, the fierce goddess personifying Durga's wrath, who smites the demons and dances over the body of his consort, Shiva; then the various canonical consorts of the chief gods, mentioned above, who are benevolent powers presiding over poetry and music (Sarasvati) or wealth and royal power (Lakshmi); and finally scores of local goddesses, variations on the same themes. The Devi requests blood sacrifice, which is practiced to this day in many local cults associated with the lower castes.

This evolution from the Vedic to the Hindu pantheon was thus no mere change of names and attributes. The Vedic pantheon, as we have seen in Sect. 4.1.1, exhibited substantial overlap of jurisdictions, not unlike the Greek and Roman pantheons. Apart from Agni and Soma, who had specialized ritual roles, divine functions were not tightly defined, and multiple deities were honored for presiding over the same phenomena and were appealed to for similar motives. By contrast, each eponymous deity of the three Puranic traditions, together with his or her earthly embodiments, takes care of all the material and spiritual needs of the worshiper, making recourse to

alternative deities unnecessary (even though many Hindus do cross over and honor all of them). In a given sect, the presiding deity was perceived as having an all-encompassing jurisdiction; other deities, great and small, received worship as ancillary powers or partial manifestations of the supreme deity. Thus, even as there was competition among *sects* for *members and patronage*, there was no competition for *allegiance or offerings* among *gods* within a given sect. That is, within each of these sects, the overlap of functions and attributes between the gods (each being described as "the god/goddess of this and that") was effectively neutralized. Across the sects, on the other hand, divine jealousy was tamed through a kind of junior partnership: the "other" major god (e.g., Shiva) was honored as a secondary figure with his own limited jurisdiction—inferior and thus not really a rival to the presiding deity (e.g., Vishnu), with the inferiority reflecting the inter-sect rivalry and the jurisdiction reflecting the major gods' reciprocal accommodation in the new sectarian theology. In the service of such non-jealous conception of divinity, the narratives contained in the epics and the *Puranas* that depict the high gods in interaction and competition were tailored to affirm the theological or sectarian commitments of the compilers. Underlying this accommodation was the fact that Brahmins filled most of the priestly roles in all the sects. As a result, either within or between sects, the gods were no longer "jealous" of one another. This noncompetitive conception of the deity was in turn founded on the classical Hindu theology of the Bhagavan (or Bhagavati, if conceived as female), already mentioned—the one supreme godhead of which all the multiple divine persons are mere reflexes or partial manifestations or local and temporal incarnations. At the end of the eon, all of the latter "perish" like all other embodied beings, which means that they are reabsorbed into the primal divine essence, which is timeless and immortal. This is really a polytheism embedded in a monotheistic framework.

Alongside the three major theistic traditions, there arose a fourth denomination, Smarta, which explicitly affirms the equivalence of five major deities—Vishnu, Shiva, the Devi, Ganesha, and Surya—and leaves the worshiper free to choose a preferred one while honoring all five of them; the deities are considered equivalent interim steps toward realizing the formless Brahman—the ultimate reality of the universe, proposed in the *Upanishads* and discussed in Sect. 4.1.1. This provides a means of overcoming even theistic sectarianism by rendering any jurisdictional overlap between gods illusory or irrelevant.

The Vedic sacrificial rituals never disappeared but gradually lost ground to the new, sectarian worship ritual (*puja*), which focuses on devotion (*bhakti*) to a single personal deity, usually represented by an image, and basically consists in an exchange of offerings for blessings. The *puja* can be private or public; in the latter case it is conducted in a temple or through a festival and is typically presided over by priests to ensure that the rituals and offerings be properly performed, so that the deity is enticed to grant the requested or expected benefits. While the temples, the festivals, and the presiding priests naturally tend to be differentiated along sectarian lines, the *puja* generally follows the same pattern everywhere. Animal sacrifice, which was prominent in the Vedic cult, continued for a long time afterward but then, in the first millennium CE, based on the ascetic ideal of non-harm (*ahimsa*), opposition to it

grew and culminated in its systematic replacement by vegetable offerings (together with the increasing practice of vegetarianism in personal diet) in cults conforming to Brahmanical norms. Animal offerings, however, have persisted in less Brahmanized Hindu settings, especially in offerings to Shiva or to a goddess; sacrificial offerings of goats and chickens are still common in many parts of South Asia.

6.1.2 The Priests and Their Competition

We have seen that a key factor in the theological shift away from the Vedic pantheon was the need for the Brahmins to assimilate or subsume a variety of local, indigenous, often non-Aryan deities that the Vedic Aryans encountered in the long centuries of their expansion eastward and southward.[3] Apparently these deities and their cult did not sit easily with the Vedic gods and their rituals, so through a process that spanned many centuries the latter were eventually replaced by the gods and rituals of the Puranic sects. Another key factor, however, was that from the fifth century BCE the Brahmins encountered a stiff competition in the form of self-consciously non-Brahmanical *shramana* (ascetic) religions, founded by renunciate teachers such as the Jina Mahavira and the Buddha and spread by their Jain and Buddhist monastic disciples (as well as by a long since extinct group, the Ajivikas).

These groups originated in the territory of the later kingdom of Magadha, in the lower Ganges plains, whereas the established Brahmins' territory was to the west of it, in the upper Ganges valley. Magadha was the site of the urbanization process that took place before and after the middle of the first millennium BCE, a process which displaced the Brahmins who were a mainly rural institution servicing the small kingdoms or chiefdoms of the previous age. The new cities were cradles of social diversification and places of circulation and exchange of ideas and goods, and the Brahmins were ill-suited to this environment and tried to ignore it. In contrast, the ascetic groups found their audience and source of recruitment there. They were the carriers of the belief in karmic retribution, reincarnation, and release, which had originated outside Brahmanism, probably in Magadha, and they spread through the promotion of a route of escape from this cycle of rebirth: renunciation, which included nonviolence, vegetarianism, and general rejection of bodily pleasures in the pursuit of ascetical discipline and/or meditation and spiritual elevation. These ascetic orders were at first wandering mendicants; over time, they established monastic communities. As we have seen, with the late-Vedic *Upanishads* the Brahmins began to answer these concerns with their own theology of renunciation, but the question remained of how renunciation and married life in the world could coexist. The *shramanas* had clear, antagonistic answers: they targeted caste exclusions, scorned the Vedic gods, abhorred animal sacrifice, rejected the Vedas and Brahmanical authority, focused on the quest for liberation from *samsara*, and embraced monastic celibacy. If they wanted to survive as a priestly class, the Brahmins needed a response to that.

[3] This section is based on Bronkhorst (2011, 2016) and Lubin (2005, 2013, 2015, 2018).

Yet another source of disadvantage for the Brahmins was the rise of the first pan-Indian state, the Maurya Empire (ca. 320–180 BCE), which wiped out and absorbed the petty kingdoms that used to be the customers of the *shrauta* rituals. The Mauryas were generally supporters of the *shramana* orders, and in particular the third ruler of the dynasty, the emperor Ashoka, was a devout Buddhist, even though he and his predecessors and successors paid respect to the Brahmins too. At about the same time, the invasion of Alexander the Macedon and the succeeding Indo-Greek kingdoms in the northwest of the subcontinent—the ancient region called Gandhara—undermined an ancestral homeland of Brahmanism, which became a center of Buddhism for many centuries afterwards. So the Brahmins found themselves largely unemployed and had to reinvent themselves.

They responded to the *shramana* challenge by devising a Brahmanical path of asceticism and renunciation, and responded to the shrinking demand for Vedic ritual services by broadening and diversifying the range of services they offered. Underlying this range of responses, as well as underlying their (partial) endorsement and promotion of the theistic sects, was the ubiquitous emphasis on the Brahmins' claim to the highest position in society, justified by birth and enshrined in the elaborate ideology of the hierarchically ordered four social classes (*varnas*), i.e. the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas (warriors and kings), the Vaishyas (farmers and traders), and finally the Shudras (laborers). This vision of society was already proposed in late-Vedic works and finally codified in a classical Dharmashastra text, the *Law Code of Manu* (ca. second century CE). Brahmanism thus survived the period with little or no political support by turning inward and establishing a core vision whose central concern was to separate Brahmins from everyone else, contained in the manuals for proper social and domestic behavior. Ironically, in due time this inward-looking emphasis allowed Brahmins to start exerting influence on others.

The ascetic challenge was taken on through the figure of the *grihastha* (householder). A term first attested in some inscriptions of the Maurya emperor Ashoka (mid-third century BCE), it was later to become a central concept of the Dharmashastra, defining the pious married life as a form of home-based quasi-ascetic piety that became the hallmark of Brahmin identity. In these works, the *grihastha* designates the ritually observant married householder as a sort of religious professional on a par with other recognized kinds of "holy men" who were celibate mendicants; unlike the latter, he follows a system of specialized mildly ascetic regimens, consecrations, and purity rules as, in effect, an ascetic-in-the-world. The fact that a period of celibacy and mendicancy as a Veda student (*brahmacharin*) was made part of the training for all Brahmins (and, in theory, also for other classes who wished to be granted Arya status in the eyes of the Brahmins, and hence were called twice-born) helped to show how Brahmins partook of the same sorts of virtues as the mendicant orders. Moreover, the feeding of worthy Brahmins in the guest ceremonies and at the conclusion of ritual sacrifices, which goes back at least to Ashoka and was promoted in the Brahmanical texts, also gave credit to the idea that *grihastha* Brahmins were as deserving of patronage as the *shramanas*.

The *grihastha* status was constituted as an *ashrama* (vocation) in the earliest Dharmashastra (the *Dharmasutras*, composed in the last few centuries BCE), alongside some permanent modes of virtuosic asceticism accepted as a viable alternative: the vocations of Brahmanical lifelong celibate, forest hermit, and wandering mendicant ascetic (*sannyasin*). Later, the Book of Manu was the first to arrange the four *ashramas* sequentially as successive stages of life: the chaste Veda student, the householder, the forest hermit, and the wandering mendicant, thus to better validate the last two options, at least in theory, since the ascetic had already fulfilled his householder's duties. Later on, the ascetic path, whether of the old-age or the lifelong type, came to accommodate both solitary life and monastic communities (*mathas*). In this way, Brahmins competed with the *shramana* orders and the *dharma*s (rules of right conduct) that they taught by developing one of their own. Brahmanical *dharma* differed from these *dharma*s by prescribing norms for the disciplined, consecrated householder as a religious professional comparable to an ascetic. Although the householder-ascetic vocation (*grihastha-ashrama*) remained at the core of Brahmanical *dharma*, the *ashrama* system also accommodated models of celibate asceticism as life stages. "The rule of the *ashramas* (*ashrama-dharma*) became, along with the rule of caste-classes (*varna*), almost as good as a definition of Hinduism: *varṇashrama-dharma*" (Bronkhorst 2016, 246).

Turning to the diversification of services, we have seen in the previous section that the Brahmins were able take the scholarly leadership of the new sectarian theology and near-monopolize the priestly roles in the new sects. Concurrent with this transformation, however, even after its dark period royal courts appear to have played a central role in the spread of Brahmanism. There were good reasons for kings to welcome and honor Brahmins: whatever useful services could be had from them, it did not require "conversion", as one does not "convert" to Brahmanism, so the king could also keep patronizing *shramana* ascetics if he wanted to; and Brahmins were safe since, at least in theory, they did not aspire to kingship but, by the *varna* system, they were superior to kings and kept aloof from them. Many kings continued to patronize Vedic sacrifices for their well-being; others might not care about Vedic rites but adopt the vision of society that Brahmins offered; and since Brahmins were adept at dealing with the supernatural, they could provide services such as interpreting signs and predicting the future, or performing blessings and curses upon request. Furthermore, as ascetics-in-the-world, Brahmins could claim that their expertise extended to social, political, and legal matters, in a way that their rivals, the celibate monastic orders, could not match; hence they became royal advisors, drafters of documents, jurists, and teachers at court. So they produced a vast literature targeted to these functions, as exemplified by the sections of the Dharmashastras prescribing the "*dharma* of kings" as well as by the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, an early-CE free-standing treatise on statecraft. These assorted qualities of the Brahmin class allowed its expansion into new territories.

The theorists of Dharmashastra had identified its primary jurisdiction as the "land of the Aryas", essentially the Ganges plain and its fringes. Within those bounds were to be found the Brahmins who observe the "best practices" of holy people; beyond lay what were deemed "uncivilized" lands. From at least the first centuries of the

Common Era, however, Brahmins were settled by distant rulers on endowed lands, where they constituted spatially and administratively distinct, tax-free estates called *agrahara* ("prime share"). Such Brahmin settlements, whose spread can be tracked in the vast inscriptional record, were presented as disciplinary spaces analogous to monastic communities and were patronized by kings and other elites in analogous ways.

These religious endowments stipulated an expanding set of exemptions from tax payments and other obligations to the king, and created hereditary Brahmin enclaves administered by councils that were granted authority over villagers and farm laborers attached to the granted lands. This helped to cement Brahmin authority in the countryside despite the paucity, before the medieval period, of large-scale institutions such as royal temples and monasteries to which Brahmins would subsequently be attached. In this way, Brahmanical ritual norms and intellectual tradition were transmitted into the peripheries beyond its heartland (including Nepal, Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Indonesia) by ambitious local rulers keen to emulate the famous emperors of India. And with the Brahmins' norms and traditions, also their liturgical language, Sanskrit, spread to become the preferred medium of high discourse (for a time) in royal inscriptions, courtly literature, and learned discourse, even for Jains and Buddhists, and even in Southeast Asia. At the same time, the spread of endowed Brahmin settlements produced a supply of literate, well-networked professionals claiming expertise in secular, kingly matters, even in kingdoms that otherwise favored Buddhists or Jains in religious matters.

Summing up, despite the specialization and diversification of the religious and non-religious services provided over the centuries, the Brahmin class was successful in consolidating and retaining a near-monopoly of priestly prerogatives in the market for major Hindu deities – at least those possessing or aspiring to elite patronage. In addition to the characteristics that defined them as a class—birth, training, ascetical discipline, learning—the Brahmins were aided in their endeavor by some of the factors previously discussed, all of which can be read as barriers to competition. First, they produced book upon book in an endless, cumulative chain of commentary; this by itself endowed them with a cloak of expert knowledge ever more difficult to challenge. Second, they had a priestly language —Sanskrit—different from the Prakrits spoken (and then read) by the common people, which protected this knowledge. Third, and importantly, they were theoretically in charge of the myriad behavioral prescriptions, purity rules, and ethical norms for all social classes; provided their authority was acknowledged in the first place, this gave them a pervasive grip on individual lives. And fourth, unlike in other ancient societies such as Greece and Rome, in India states and elites were willing to outsource religious functions to priestly or monastic organizations, which managed all aspects of their cultic enterprises (as well as often serving as advisers, teachers, and high-level bureaucrats at court) in exchange for material support and substantial internal autonomy. Political patronage was thus essential—it was, however, itself the object of competition from the *shramana* sects, which, as we have seen, were often favored by the ruling elites.

Thus the long-term success of the Brahmins happened despite the competition from Buddhism and Jainism—or rather, thanks to it. This competition drove Vedic

Brahmanism to develop its own mode of household-asceticism, to diversify the services it offered to its royal and other elite patrons, and to endorse and lead the rise and establishment of Puranic Hinduism, which accommodated many of the Shramanic challenges with the turn to Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and the other Hindu sects. It is under the pressure of this competition that among the Hindus the practice of animal sacrifice gradually shrank, a vegetarian diet for the upper castes (first the prohibition of eating beef, and then of eating meat in general) slowly gained ground, and the path of renunciation and pursuit of *moksha* was exalted alongside the traditional path of the virtuous householder. This transformation was in time able to meet the Shramanic religions on their ground and to undercut and finally wither their base of popular and elite support. By the beginning of the second millennium CE, Hinduism had been able to contain the Jains and to drive the Buddhists to near-extinction in the subcontinent, and was thus well tested and set to meet the onslaught of Islam and finally emerge in the colonial era as the modern, "inclusivistic" Hinduism. The competition offered by sects from outside the orthodox establishment was fundamental to the evolution and long-term success of Hinduism.

6.2 Zoroastrianism

6.2.1 Zoroaster's Reforms

As we have seen in Sect. 4.2, even though a precise dating of Zoroaster's life is a moot question, the religion he founded was already between a millennium and half a millennium old when it entered recorded history in the sixth century BCE.[4] We now review its birth and development with a focus on highlighting both the similarities and the differences with traditional Iranian polytheism.

Zoroaster refers to himself as a fully qualified priest (*zaotar*), hence probably the scion of a priestly family. As such he must have begun training at the age of seven and been made a priest at fifteen. Like with the Vedic Indians, the training was carried out orally within hearing distance of a teacher, and consisted of learning rituals and doctrines and memorizing invocations and prayers. Thereafter he must have spent years wandering in a quest for higher knowledge from various teachers. He was thirty, according to the tradition, when revelation came to him, in the form of a series of visions in which he saw and talked to Ahura Mazda and six other shining divine figures. From that moment he felt empowered and called to a mission of spreading the newly gained truth for the rest of his life.

Zoroaster introduced three radical innovations into the framework of the old religion: he established a hierarchy in the pantheon, thus producing a supreme god; he created an antagonist to the supreme god and enjoined his people to shrink from worship of some of the previous "gods"; and he greatly expanded the purity ordinances and the ethical requirements for everyone, and therefore both the role of the

[4] The entire Zorastrianism section draws extensively on Ferrero (2021) and the references cited therein.

priests and the demands made of them. In contrast to our treatment of all the other religions in this book, we will have to address Zoroaster's doctrine of creation and cosmogony because it is intertwined with both his conception of the divine and his vision of the end of the world.

Beginning with the pantheon, Zoroaster proclaimed Ahura Mazda—who previously was already worshiped as the greatest of the three *ahuras*, the guardians of *asha*—to be the one and only eternal, uncreated God and Creator of everything that is good, including all other beneficent divinities. According to the new doctrine, the first act Ahura Mazda performed was the evocation of six lesser divinities of Zoroaster's own devising, the Amesha Spentas (Holy Immortals)—the six divine beings of Zoroaster's visions, forming a heptad with the Lord Wisdom himself; tellingly, a deified Asha was one of them. This evocation is described in Zoroastrian works in ways that suggest the essential unity of beneficent deity; in one text Ahura Mazda's creation of them is likened to the lighting of torches from a torch (Boyce 1979, 21). In turn, these six proceeded to evoke other divinities that are nothing but the beneficent gods of the old pantheon, including in particular the other two *ahuras*, Mithra and Apam Napat. All the divinities subordinate to Ahura Mazda, old and new, are collectively known as *yazatas* (beings worthy of worship). Then the six Amesha Spentas proceeded with their creator to shape the seven creations that make up the world, with each of them appointed as the maker and guardian of one creation—man belonging to Ahura Mazda himself. Thus the new theology was cast in the mold of the old cosmogony, which had envisioned the world as created by the gods in seven stages.

Zoroaster's theological reform did not stop at the reordering of the old pantheon. Opposite to, and coexisting with, Ahura Mazda he conceived a Hostile Spirit, Angra Mainyu, who was also uncreated and wholly malign. At their original encounter, these "two primal spirits, twins, renowned to be in conflict…. the good and the bad" (in the words of an ancient hymn; Boyce 1979, 20) made a deliberate choice, one choosing righteousness (*asha*) and the other falsehood (*drug*). This is the doctrine of dualism, which has often been thought to sit awkwardly with monotheism (as further discussed in Sect. 6.2.3 below). This primordial choice between good and evil prefigures the choice that all human beings are to make for themselves in this life, and it unfolded in the cosmological drama, for when Ahura Mazda and the other Immortals created the world, the Hostile Spirit set out to blight it precisely because it was good. So, according to the myth, he defiled the water, turning much of it salty, and the earth, creating deserts; next he withered the first plant, slew the first animal and the first man, and finally sullied the fire with smoke. The Amesha Spentas, however, reacted and turned his malicious acts to benefit: the plant was pounded and its juice scattered over the world to raise more plants; the seeds of the animal and the man were purified and more animals and men sprang from them.

Furthermore, a section of the old pantheon was disowned. Zoroaster singled out Indra and his associates, whom he called *daevas*, as amoral beings, destructive and warlike, and enjoined his followers not to worship but to shun them. These he saw as allies of Angra Mainyu in his evil works—wicked beings who, following him, chose *drug* instead of *asha*, or, in another rendering, who were begotten by him just as the Amesha Spentas were begotten by Ahura Mazda. So he put a part of the

traditional priestly functions beyond the pale. One might wonder how the mighty, fearsome, but also helpful, beneficent warrior-god Indra of the *Rig Veda* came to be perceived in Iran as the chief of the *daeva* band, the personification of *drug*, second only to Angra Mainyu himself (Boyce 1975, 201, 211, 251–252; Cohn 2001, 92–95). One answer may be that it reflected a developing cleavage in Zoroaster's own society between traditional, righteous cattle-rearing tribes and newly emerging cattle-raiding tribes headed by warrior chiefs (the "non-herders among the herders", in the words of an Avestan hymn); he identified with the former and abominated the latter, thus choosing right instead of might. But, beyond these historical specifics, the founding of a new religion cannot rely only on fine theological rethinking, which matters only to a priestly elite, but must be able to show some conspicuous, dramatic sign of discontinuity in the pantheon that makes a difference in the ordinary believers' life. Indra and the *daevas* naturally lent themselves to the role of bad characters, so they were henceforth branded as supreme embodiments of the forces of chaos, and therefore as archenemies of the restoration of the world to its original perfection that the prophet preached—the eschatology to which we now turn.

In the new doctrine, cosmic history was divided into three times, Creation, which was wholly good, being the first. Angra Mainyu's attack inaugurated the second time, that of Mixture, during which the world is a battleground between good and evil where the forces of darkness continue to inflict material ills and spiritual sufferings on mankind. To counter this, men must worship all beneficent divinities, seek their help, and in turn provide them with their help in the struggle to protect the good creation from evil. Thus it is incumbent upon every human being to make and uphold the same fundamental choice between *asha* and *drug* that started the cosmic drama, and to ally with the forces of good to overcome evil. Eventually the victory of righteousness will indeed happen in a great final event called Frasho-kereti (Making Wonderful), where Angra Mainyu and his minions will be utterly destroyed in a cataclysmic battle and the world restored to its original perfection. In this final battle, mankind will be led by the Saoshyant (Savior), a man born of the prophet's own seed miraculously preserved in a lake—in effect, a messiah. This conflagration will bring the end of history and usher in the third time, that of Separation, when goodness will again be utterly separated from evil, the latter will disappear, and men and women and all the *yazatas* will live together forever on earth in perfect goodness and peace. This was a radical departure from earlier ideas: the old idea that cooperation between men and gods was necessary to maintain *asha* was retained, but it was no longer directed to preserving the world as it is but to achieving its ultimate perfection. Thus by imputing men's sorrows not to the will of the creator but to the actions of the Hostile Spirit, Zoroaster gave humankind an explanation for the evils they have to endure in this life, as well as a moral purpose to strive for by submitting to the demands of the new doctrine.

The dualistic doctrine had far-reaching consequences for the conception of the hereafter. For Zoroaster, paradise was no more a preserve of high social rank as in the traditional religion but was attainable by everyone, women and men, master and servant, noble and commoner, on the basis of moral merit. At death, all souls undergo a judgment presided over by Mithra, who holds the scales of justice. Here the soul's

thoughts, words, and deeds are weighted, the good ones on one side, the bad ones on the other. If the good side weighs more heavily, the soul ascends to paradise; if the bad side is heavier, the soul sinks to hell, a place of torment presided over by Angra Mainyu —Zoroaster's own, wholly new concept. In case the two sides just balance out, the soul goes to an intermediate place of shadowy existence without suffering or joy, like the old underworld kingdom of the dead. Divine justice is unwavering and inflexible, and no capricious or merciful divine intervention, nor any intercession by the living, can change the balance of an individual's moral account. But this is not the end of it, as bliss is not perfect in paradise because the soul is disembodied. Complete happiness will have to wait until the end of time, at Frasho-kereti, when the soul will be reunited with its body in a general resurrection of the dead. Thereafter a Last Judgment will occur and divide for the last time the righteous from the wicked, both alive and dead. Then the wicked will be utterly destroyed body and soul, while the righteous' bodies will become immortal and unaging and lead an everlasting life of joy in the kingdom of God on earth.

Thus Zoroaster introduced to the world, in one stroke, the doctrines of individual judgment at death, heaven and hell, the future resurrection of the body, the final battle of good and evil, the messiah, the Last Judgment, and life everlasting on a perfected earth—that is, the apocalypse and the millennium. These doctrines were to have a long life in subsequent historical religions.

To entrench his theological and ethical doctrines, Zoroaster maintained but at the same time reformed the traditional observances. First, the great daily ritual, the *yasna*, was confirmed as fundamental but, while still centered on the offerings to water and fire, it was now dedicated to Ahura Mazda and the six Amesha Spentas. In later times the priests evolved a set liturgy for this ritual, incorporating in it Zoroaster's own *Gathas* and other ancient liturgical texts, which thus acquired a fixed, immutable form, and finally enclosing them within more recent texts. Second, the individual obligation of daily prayer, which used to be three times a day in pagan times, was now expanded to five times a day, and involved the believer first washing face, hands and feet and then praying while standing upright to face his Creator, his eyes fixed on the home fire, the symbol of righteousness. The final obligation was to celebrate seven annual high feasts, dedicated to Ahura Mazda and the six Amesha Spentas and to their seven creations – thus again fixing the essential doctrines in the minds of everyone. Each feast was celebrated communally, sharing the consecrated food with rich and poor alike. These high feasts were originally seasonal and pastoral festivals in pagan days, which Zoroaster re-dedicated to the divinities of his doctrine – thus making the transition easier for the people.

6.2.2 Spread and Development of Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism outlived its prophet and slowly developed for many centuries before entering recorded history, so knowledge of its infancy has to be gleaned from meager

indications in the Avesta and the tradition.[5] After his enlightening vision, Zoroaster preached his new doctrine to his fellow tribesmen for many years but met only rejection, after which he traveled to a new tribe where he managed to convert the prince and his court. The prince apparently went to war with neighboring chieftains in defense of the new religion and won, thus giving the prophet and his teaching an established home and shelter for the rest of his life. Thereafter, it seems, the faith slowly spread by mission and grassroots conversion among the eastern Iranian peoples, before it finally reached the Medes and Persians of western Iran centuries later. This missionary expansion was no doubt led by the priests.

Several aspects of the new religion required a break with the pagan community on the part of the convert. First, Zoroaster preached to women as well as men, to the poor and uneducated as well as to the wealthy and learned, offering to all who would follow his teaching and seek righteousness the hope of salvation in heaven while threatening with hell and ultimate annihilation all, however mighty, who would choose evil. This involved a sharp break with the old aristocratic and priestly tradition which, as we have seen, promised heaven to the elite and consigned the common people and the women to the shadows of an underground kingdom of the dead. Second, most difficult and divisive for all the people must have been the utter rejection of *daeva* worship, a rejection which was feared to bring down the wrath of those beings on the whole community. Traditionally, Iranians used to propitiate both the evil powers, to turn aside their malice, and the good powers, to secure their protection – a "kind of double insurance" which was "an entirely normal religious instinct", also found with the Vedic Indians (Zaehner 1961, 123). As a consequence, this rejection was likely the most conspicuous mark of one's break with the old beliefs and adherence to the new ones; it is significant that abjuration of the *daevas* figures prominently in the ancient confession of faith, which is still routinely recited today but seems to incorporate the original avowal made by converts in the early days. Relatedly, Zoroastrian believers, men and women alike, are required to this day to wear an outward badge of membership in the faith, the sacred girdle (*kusti*), which is first put on when reaching maturity and then untied and retied every day of their life. Third, and crucial, there was the code of purity laws, which became so characteristic of Zoroastrianism as to set it in a class apart from most other religions.

The purity laws are rooted both in Zoroastrianism's dualistic doctrine and in its linking of spiritual and material. The seven creations had been brought into being by Ahura Mazda in a state of perfection and were then marred by Angra Mainyu; hence, preventing or reducing any of these blemishes—dirt, disease, stench, decay, etc.—contributes to the defense of the good creation and the fight against evil, and so ultimately to the achievement of Frasho-kereti. Every member of the community is thus permanently enlisted to fight evil through the ordinary tasks of daily life. Some of the rules probably go back to Indo-Iranian times, since Brahmanism has similar prescriptions regarding cultic purity; but Zoroastrian rules regarding daily living proliferated down the centuries, even though it is impossible exactly to determine

[5] This section is based on the detailed treatment in Boyce (1975, Chaps. 10, 12) and the summary in Boyce (1979, Chap. 4).

which observances were original with Zoroaster and which were later extensions at the hands of generations of priests. Moreover, to this day high-caste Hindus are bound by similar rules against defilement when practicing a domestic ritual or visiting a temple, but these rules are differentiated by caste and come to the point of excluding from rituals certain groups which, owing to their occupations, are thought to be too inherently impure to be cleansed (Flood 1996, 298–300). By contrast, Zoroastrian rules know of no caste distinctions and are incumbent upon every member of the community, reaching into the normal run of daily life, even though, like in India, they naturally weigh more heavily on priests, as we will see. Furthermore, the divide between good and evil was all-encompassing and knew no middle ground: as an ancient text says, "all actions and ways of behaving are either meritorious or sinful", no neutral areas are recognized (cited in Boyce 1975, 294), unlike in Islam.

The purity code must have been an important reason for the failure of Zoroastrianism to spread beyond Iranian peoples: the demands are too irksome and the self-discipline needed too strict for anyone who was not accustomed to it from birth, while since Iranian paganism knew some of the same rules, the difficulty would have been less severe for Iranian converts. Moreover, the stringency of the rules explains why, even though historically the religion was fully open to conversion, no unbeliever is allowed to be present at a religious service, since no unbeliever will ever keep all the Zoroastrian purity laws. This self-segregation is in contrast with the liberality with which sympathetic Gentiles ("God-fearers") were admitted to the synagogues in the Diaspora of late-Second Temple Judaism, which apparently was a key engine of soft proselytizing (Ferrero 2014b). While this contrast must stem from the different workings of the respective purity codes, it too functioned as a disincentive to conversion.

Turning to the content of the purity rules, first of all people should keep themselves scrupulously clean in person, clothing, and abode, and keep the other six creations likewise healthy and unsullied. But it is the rules concerning water and fire—the central elements of the Zoroastrian cult—that set its believers apart from all other peoples. In most cultures, water and fire are regarded as the chief cleansing agents, used to restore an unclean or defiled object, person or place to purity. In stark contrast, in Zoroastrianism it is water and fire which, being among the seven good creations, must be kept clean. Nothing impure should be allowed in direct contact with a natural source of water; if anything ritually unclean is to be washed, water should be drawn off for this purpose, and the impure object should first be cleansed with cattle urine (because cattle was the paragon of the "good" creation – and of course because of its high ammonia content, hence a disinfectant), then dried with sand or in sunlight, and only then washed in water. Similarly with fire, only clean, dry wood and pure offerings may be laid upon the flames, special care must be taken lest cooking pots spill over and sully the hearth fire, and burning rubbish is unthinkable. Dry and clean waste might be buried, but the rest was thrown into a small windowless building and then periodically destroyed with acid.

As regards plants and animals, in striking contrast with other religions loaded with purity rules such as Judaism and Islam, Zoroastrianism in general has no food prohibitions. However, for plant and animal, as for man, perfection is seen in healthy

maturity; hence it is sinful to cut down a sapling tree and kill a lamb or a calf. Furthermore, all creatures harmful or repulsive to man, from insects to reptiles to beasts of prey—collectively called *khrafstra*—are regarded as the work of Angra Mainyu, so killing them is highly meritorious. Down to modern times communities have engaged in ritual killing expeditions around the village—not the champions of biodiversity!

Death is regarded as the chief single cause of pollution, and the greatest pollution is from a human corpse. This explains the practice of exposure of the body, as it secures the swift destruction of the polluting flesh. Since medieval times the place of exposure has been a funerary tower (*dakhma*); in ancient times it was simply a bare mountain side or stretch of stony ground, so that the body would not come into contact with the good earth or water or plants, after which the dried bones were buried to await Judgment Day. In the same vein, dead bodies were handled only by professional corpse-bearers, who submitted to an ordeal of ritual precautions and cleansing procedures.

Apart from putrefying flesh, the other chief source of pollution is anything that issues from the living body, whether in sickness or in health: not only excrement, but also blood, saliva, semen, dead skin, cut nails and hair. As a consequence, daily life becomes hedged about with regulations of all sorts. Thus detailed prescriptions surround the disposal of nail and hair trimmings; you should not spit, sneeze, drink from a common vessel or eat from a common dish. Above all, the doctrine of the impurity of blood has pressed hard on women. Every woman during her monthly menses was ritually unclean and had to withdraw from her family, keeping away even from her tiny children, and not even saying her private prayers—since one must be pure to approach the divine. Childbirth was likewise regarded as a heavy pollution, requiring similar isolation of the new mother for 40 days.

Since it was impossible for a woman, and very difficult for a man, to avoid all ritual uncleanness, purification rites were necessary, as in all societies that have purity laws. The simplest ones, involving washing from head to foot, were performed by people at home, but the rituals prescribed for more serious contaminations were administered by priests with recitation of mantras. The most elaborate of these, prescribed for the heaviest contaminations—such as touching a dead body or mingling with impure strangers while traveling—was called *barashnom* and was a nine-day affair, in which the person retired to a secluded precinct and there underwent successive triple cleansings with consecrated cattle urine, sand, and water.

The purity laws weighed particularly heavily on the priests, who had to be "the cleanest of the clean" for their intermediation with divinity to be effective. In addition to the restrictions incumbent on the laity, a priest would not eat food prepared by a lay person, not to mention an unbeliever, nor make a physical link with anyone else such as a common cloth while eating. As just mentioned, the priests attended to the purification rituals for the laity, and themselves underwent *barashnom* many times in their lives in preparation for the highest ceremonies.

At some point, a practice established itself of undergoing *barashnom* vicariously, either for the living or the dead. A devout person might go through it for a relative who committed suicide, or who was drowned or burnt to death (both of which acts are

sinful as they contaminate the water or the fire with death). Among the living, people who have both means and a high opportunity cost of time, such as wealthy merchants or farmers, may hire someone to take the purification in their stead when they incur pollution; and since the purer and better trained the performer, the more effective the ritual will be, it is priests who are naturally chosen as substitutes and paid for it. One can see the doctrinal logic of this development—some harrowing deaths are involuntary, so it seems only fair to afford these people a chance of salvation; and then if the dead can be cleansed by proxy, why not the living too? Regardless, the whole idea of interceding for the dead seems alien to Zoroaster's teaching of everyone's personal responsibility for their own fate (Boyce 1975, 319). It is, however, an element of continuity with the ancient Indo-Iranian tradition of caring for the souls of the departed, and it could therefore be seen as a tempering of the stern original doctrine to accommodate the new converts as the religion expanded.

As we have seen in Sect. 4.2.2, priests were important in the traditional Iranian religion, as were their cousins among the Vedic Indians, and formed a specialized profession, entry to which was passed down along the male line. But no doubt Zoroaster's reforms and their subsequent elaboration greatly increased the demands on them, and hence their social role, even in the long centuries before Zoroastrianism surfaced to history in the sixth century BCE. This was in part a self-reinforcing process as it was the priestly scholastics themselves who, in the course of time, extended and codified the liturgy, the purity rules, and the purification rituals, which in turn gave them an ever more prominent and ubiquitous role. To summarize, Zoroastrian priests performed the daily *yasna* ceremony, which in its developed form takes about two hours; performed services for the laity at initiation, marriage, and death, as well as on special family occasions; performed the ritual services for the community at the seven annual high feasts; administered the *barashnom* and other purification rites to the laity upon request; frequently underwent the *barashnom* themselves to ensure their fitness to their tasks; and underwent it as proxies for lay people when hired to do so.

Thus, since the prehistoric period, the laity depended on the priests for their religious life, and the priests depended on the laity for their livelihood as they lived off the fees for their services. A close, usually hereditary bond formed between lay and priestly families to support and stabilize this exchange. This close relationship has continued into modern times, during and after the age of state religion.

From the sixth century BCE, Zoroastrianism became for some twelve centuries an imperial religion, endowed with court chaplains, fixed ceremonial places, and the newly invented, signature Zoroastrian shrines—the fire temples (Boyce 1982, 221–225, 228–230; 1979, 63–66). The priests also became teachers in elite schools and at court, as in any state religion. All of this further enhanced the social role of the priesthood and multiplied its numbers, bringing in its wake high incomes and political influence. As a consequence, at least in the Sasanian period, if not before, the profession acquired a hierarchical structure headed by a chief priest who oversaw orthodox doctrine and practice, which makes it possible for historians to speak of a Zoroastrian "church".

The imperial era waned with the fall of the Sasanian Empire to the Muslim conquest in the seventh century CE. Thereafter, in the long age of repression and decline to this day, the priesthood basically returned to what it was in its earlier pre-state days, with the addition of the specialized service of fire temples which became a fixture of Zoroastrian communities—as well as an added demand on their resources.

6.2.3 Discussion: Zoroastrianism's Endurance

As we have seen, Zoroaster did not overthrow but reformed the theology and practices of Iranian polytheism, which made his doctrines easier for both the people and the priests to accept. This selective continuity was facilitated by the fact that, alone among the known historical founders of great religions, Zoroaster was a trained, working priest of the traditional religion. Such a start helps explain the new religion's early success, but it is its capacity to survive the ebb and flow of fortune through the millennia basically unreformed in its essentials that poses a challenge to rational analysis. For, despite the unrelenting pressure from Islam since the Muslim conquest of Iran, Zoroastrianism still survives today in tiny communities in Iran and India (there called the Parsis), who have remained unswervingly loyal to the traditional beliefs and practices of the faith, remote as they are. This extraordinary endurance calls for explanation. Furthermore, unlike Jesus of Nazareth and many early Christians, Zoroaster was not martyred and martyrdom has no place in the religion's tradition; and unlike Moses, other Jewish prophets, Jesus, many Christian saints and martyrs, and the prophet Muhammad, neither he nor his followers are reported as performing miracles. Thus, two of the most powerful engines of historical conversion to monotheism and loyalty to it (as modeled in Ferrero 2016) are missing in Zoroastrianism, which makes its success and persistence all the more remarkable. We will argue that a key to the explanation can be found in the peculiar Zoroastrian wedding of eschatology and purity laws, but for this it is necessary to first assess its monotheistic claims.

Two issues have long made it problematic to identify Zoroastrianism as true monotheism: the presence of lesser deities and dualism. Before hastening to conclude that the Amesha Spentas and the other *yazatas* compromise the purity of monotheism (as did many modern European Christian scholars—see Boyce 1975, IX–XI), it is well to consider that the other historical monotheisms too made room for other figures endowed with supernatural powers to bridge the gulf between the exalted, remote Creator God and the human world: the angels in all of them (whose conception in post-exilic Judaism was apparently developed after the pattern of the Amesha Spentas; Boyce and Grenet 1991, 404–405), the saints and the Virgin Mary in several Christian churches, the other persons of the Trinity in all of Christianity. Despite the vast differences with Zoroastrian theology, the common thread is that all these beings are subordinate to the Godhead as helpers or (in the case of the persons of the Trinity) co-equals, hence they do not pursue different interests and are worshiped jointly with the Godhead, not separately; therefore, to introduce a key concept of our comparative

analysis (Chap. 7), the supplicant's dilemma does not arise here. Also, while the three divine persons, Mary, and the angels are not seen as specialized entities appointed to different realms of creation or fields of human life, the Roman Catholic saints to some extent are worshiped as special patrons of things, people, or activities, somewhat like the *yazatas*. Rather, the lesser Zoroastrian divinities are distinctive in two ways: most of them have their origin in the pagan pantheon, and still they are worthy of worship in their own right as specialized protectors of the various realms and functions of creation under the lordship of their creator, Ahura Mazda. This makes them more than angels—but on the other hand it is significant that they are usually not called "gods" in the Avesta. So they represent a concept unique to Zoroastrianism and their Avestan appellation, *yazatas*, is best left untranslated (Boyce 1975, 195–196). The pagan origin of the *yazatas* is important because it must have made conversion relatively easy for the Iranian peoples, as it did not involve a complete turnaround of beliefs.

Dualism is one way for a religion to address the problem of evil which is inherent in monotheism—how can a God who is thought to be all-powerful, all-knowing, and wholly good tolerate evil? Zoroaster's answer is a radical, unbridgeable separation between the two principles: God did not create evil, nor does he tolerate it; rather, evil has always existed from before time, uncreated and personified as the Hostile Spirit, but will meet its end at Frasho-kereti someday; and it is God's purpose and unceasing work to fight it to its extinction with the help of all his divine and worldly creatures. So one could say that while God is not quite the One and Only so long as the present time of Mixture lasts, he will indeed "become" such at the End, as the final victory of the good over evil is not to be doubted; and with the disappearance of Angra Mainyu and his cohorts, dualism will leave the field to unqualified monotheism. Other monotheistic religions which, like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, posit that God is the creator of everything, including evil, were driven to explain evil by resort to fallen angels (like Satan) or inferior supernatural beings who vie with God for man's soul, thus replacing a philosophical conundrum with another (Boyce 1982, 195; Cohn 2001, 182 ff.; Pagels 1996).[6]

The strength of the Zoroastrian solution to the riddle of evil is that it lays the foundation of a militant faith[7]: it involves the faithful in a struggle that will continue

[6] That the dualistic belief was problematic even within the religion is indicated by the fact that it sparked a monistic heresy, known as Zurvanism (Boyce 1979, 67–70; 1982, 231–242). It seems to have originated in late Achaemenian times from speculation in some priestly circles, who imagined that a personification of Time, Zurvan, pre-existed to, and was the "father" of, both Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu. He remained a remote First Cause, was never the object of worship, and changed nothing in the traditional observances. Nevertheless, it was indeed a heresy as it betrayed Zoroaster's fundamental doctrine of the utter separation of good and evil. Zurvanism became the official state religion of the Sasanians but, when state support waned after the Muslim conquest, the orthodox doctrine came back into its own and Zurvanism disappeared without a trace.

[7] Hint of a militant faith immediately brings Islam to mind, but the contrast between the two religions is sharp. Islam makes it incumbent upon every competent Muslim to join the struggle to bring the whole world into submission to Islam—that is, *jihad*; in contrast, for a Zoroastrian the struggle to perfect the world and defeat evil is primarily a struggle within one's daily life and immediate surroundings. Conversion of infidels to Zoroastrianism is indeed desirable but must occur through

unabated till the end of days, and which, in the meantime, thoroughly pervades their daily life through the prescribed rituals and the observance of the purity laws, allowing no temporary leave or excuse. Such a stern system of moral and behavioral demands makes acceptance difficult to begin with, but exit or lapsing just as difficult for the same reasons. The difficulty of entry, as discussed in the last section, largely accounts for the fact that Zoroastrianism—in principle a universal religion for the whole world—in fact historically became a national religion of the Iranian peoples.[8] The difficulty of exit, on the other hand, goes a long way toward explaining the extraordinary permanence of the religion against all odds—something that deserves some more discussion.

Zoroastrian doctrines had a profound influence on Second-Temple Judaism (conventionally 515 BCE—70 CE) and, through it, on early Christianity.[9] It began with the prophet called Second Isaiah during the Jews' Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE and continued through the following centuries via the sustained contact between Iranian and Jewish neighbors in the Near East. Among these doctrines, the most important were the notion of a Creator God, which helped turn the religion of Yahweh from a tribal religion to true monotheism; a purity code centered on individuals' daily lives rather than just regulation of cultic matters, which in time enabled Judaism to survive the destruction of the Temple; and, most important for our purposes, the expectation of an end of time that was to bring the utter defeat of evil, a Last Judgment, and a kingdom of God on earth, which became the centerpiece of Jewish, and then Christian, apocalyptic. As is well known, infant Christianity, dismayed at the non-event of the Second Coming of Christ, waged a long-drawn-out struggle to shelve its millenarian eschatology and turn into an established church, thus coming to terms with the need to survive for an indefinite time in the Roman Empire of this world. In stark contrast, Zoroastrianism down the centuries never bracketed out its apocalyptic expectation, and yet its belief in this respect must have been as hardly tested as Christianity's (Cohn 2001, 99–101). The *Gathas* do convey a sense of urgency, suggesting that the "Making Wonderful" was expected to happen in the very near future, so the first generations of Zoroastrians must have been as bitterly disappointed as the early Christians were to be, more than a thousand years later. They must have rested their further hopes on the coming of the future world savior, the Saoshyant, in whom Zoroaster would be, as it were, reincarnated, and who would fulfill his prophecy; Zoroaster himself seems to have foreshadowed it. Still, in what seems a striking rehearsal for the future Christian drama, even the Saoshyant failed to arrive. How could the Zoroastrian millenarian belief survive such a disconfirmation?

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their recognition of the believers' moral superiority—witness the remarkable tolerance of other religions which (with some exceptions in late Sasanian times) was a distinctive mark of all three Iranian empires.

[8] However, after coming under Parthian rule in the first century BCE, Armenia became a predominantly Zoroastrian land until it converted to Christianity (Boyce 1979, 84–85).

[9] For a detailed comparison of texts and analysis of historical developments see Boyce (1982, 43–47, 188–195), Boyce and Grenet (1991, 401–436, 440–446), Smith (1971), Cohn (2001, Chaps. 4, 5, 8–13).

Part of the answer must be sought in the fact that, unlike Christianity, Zoroastrianism for more than two thousand years did not have to live under heathen rule: in prehistoric times it grew and spread through a network of petty chieftainships, and then it became the official religion of a great empire. More fundamentally, however, a key factor to account for the difference was the purity laws. Early Christianity shed the Jewish purity code and rested its alienation from the surrounding pagan society entirely on the prohibition of idolatry and its moral implications, not on behavioral rules; hence, any sustained apocalyptic expectation would have had to rely purely on faith. By contrast, Zoroastrianism translated the apocalyptic belief into a struggle between good and evil in which everyone was involved at all times and to which he or she was to contribute in every smallest way, and embedded this struggle in a strenuous system of observances shot through with purity regulations. This essentially turned eschatology into daily behavior for all believers, and correspondingly gave priests an enormous, indispensable role as overseers of daily life. This personal, all-embracing twist to apocalypticism was made even more compelling by the fact that Zoroastrianism, unlike Christianity, had no room for asceticism, monasticism, or self-chosen heightened piety: all men and women, led by their priests, were equally enlisted full-time.

This rooting of eschatology into daily behavior for normal times, without any set deadline, seems unique to Zoroastrianism, as other millenarian movements either fizzled out or normalized when the millennium failed to materialize (Ferrero 2014a).[10] Indeed, this religion seems to have maintained not just orthodoxy but orthopraxis more or less unabridged and unreformed through its periods of rise and decline, down to modern times. This highlights a problem that underlies the now standard approach of the new economics of religion (Iyer 2016), and at the same time suggests a solution to it. Building on Iannaccone's (1992) seminal paper, this approach models a religious sect as a club whose members collectively produce a local, excludable public good, or club good. As all collective groups, religious clubs are plagued by free riding. To reduce free riding, sects impose costly sacrifices on members in the form of restrictions or prohibitions on behavior (diet, drink, dress, sex, social intercourse, deviant beliefs). The economic rationale for this is that of an efficient tax on externalities: instead of subsidizing participation, which is not easily observable, sects resort to taxation of secular consumption, reducing the value of outside activities. As a result, fewer people join but those who do supply more intense participation to everyone's benefit; hence the sacrifice is efficient, not irrational. This explains why today strict churches in a competitive religious market are strong and grow.

The effectiveness of these prohibitions, however, crucially depends on interaction with outsiders and so cannot be independent of the existence and strength of the

[10] Manichaeism—perhaps the most important dualistic religion of later times, and itself an offshoot of Zoroastrianism mixed with Gnosticism—never normalized and became a very successful competitor of Christianity for a few centuries after its foundation in the third century CE, but eventually died out under heavy persecution. Opposite to Zoroastrianism, however, it sought man's salvation in the rejection and ultimate destruction of the material world, not in its redemption, which must go some way toward explaining its demise.

competition. When the religion has expanded so much that it includes most of the relevant population and the competition is in disarray, alternative activities have little value and hence their sacrifice has little effect; that is, behavioral prohibitions are subject to diminishing returns to size. For example, drinking alcohol is typically a social activity, so a prohibition on drinking reduces the attractiveness of social intercourse with outsiders and enhances the value of activities inside the group. This makes sense in the USA, where for example the Mormons—who are forbidden from drinking—are a minority and secular activities compete for the members' time and effort; but in a society where nearly everybody is a Mormon the usefulness of prohibiting drinking sinks. This is a problem that the club model of the sect, as it stands, is not equipped to address. Zoroastrianism's unique wedding of apocalyptic belief and individual everyday behavior provides one way out of this problem: by tying one's prospect of salvation to one's own contribution to the daily battle of good and evil and not to everyone else's choice of behavior, it breaks out of the diminishing returns trap and enables this strenuous religion to survive enormous changes in its numbers unscathed.

6.3 Main Takeaways

Starting in the fifth century BCE, the primacy of Vedic Brahmanism was challenged by the rise of ascetic movements, including Jainism and Buddhism, by the need to come to terms with the local, non-Aryan gods worshiped by the indigenous peoples among whom the Vedic people settled, and by the withering of its traditional base of support and patronage—the petty chiefdoms which were being replaced by new, urbanized states and empires. To survive, the Brahmins switched to a new theology, taking the lead of the new Hindu sects, defined their own form of asceticism, and diversified the range of services they could offer to royal and other elite patrons.

The new theology replaced the great Vedic gods with figures that were only marginal in the Vedas but were now moved to center stage: Vishnu and Shiva, and with them the Devi (the Goddess). These three became the eponymous deities of the great sectarian traditions of Hinduism. Around each of them clustered a plethora of minor gods and goddesses and of incarnations and specializations of the chief deity to particular roles or concerns, which often allowed the affiliation of local varieties or indigenous deities into the main Hindu framework. Each of these eponymous deities was claimed as supreme god, all-powerful ruler of the universe, taking care of all the material and spiritual needs of their worshipers and promising them liberation from the cycle of rebirth; each major deity, however, recognized the "other" major deities as junior partners, honored as secondary figures with their own limited jurisdiction. In this way, jurisdictional overlap was made harmless and divine jealousy was effectively tamed. Underlying this noncompetitive conception of the deity was the burgeoning Hindu theology that views all the multiple divine persons as mere reflexes or partial manifestations of the ultimate divine essence, the formless Brahman; all of them are equivalent routes to liberation.

The Vedic sacrifice gradually lost ground to the sectarian ritual, focused on devotion to a single personal deity. This was increasingly conducted in a temple or through a festival and typically presided over by priests, who were still the Brahmins. Animal sacrifice was gradually replaced by vegetable offerings due to the ascetic ideal of non-harm, although it has persisted to this day in certain offerings to Shiva or to a goddess.

The Brahmins responded to the ascetic movements by inventing their own form of asceticism: the householder-ascetic, a ritually observant married householder who follows a system of mildly ascetic regimens and purity rules as, in effect, an ascetic-in-the-world. This vocation was then arranged in a sequence of successive stages of life: the chaste Veda student, the householder, the forest hermit, and the wandering mendicant, thus accommodating other models of celibate asceticism. As ascetics-in-the-world, Brahmins could then claim that their expertise extended to social, political, and legal matters, in a way that their rivals, the celibate monastic orders, could not match; hence they became royal advisors, drafters of documents, jurists, and teachers at court. These assorted qualities of the Brahmin class allowed its expansion into new territories, in the form of Brahmin settlements established by distant rulers on endowed lands; so Brahmanism was able to expand its norms, traditions, and secular expertise into much of South Asia. These transformations were in time able to meet the ascetic religions on their ground and to undercut their base of support. By the beginning of the second millennium CE, Hinduism had been able to contain the Jains and to drive the Buddhists to near-extinction in the subcontinent. The competition offered by sects from outside the orthodox establishment was thus fundamental to the evolution and long-term success of Hinduism.

The prophet Zoroaster, a priest of the old Iranian religion, introduced three radical theological innovations. First, he established a hierarchy in the pantheon, proclaiming Ahura Mazda to be the one and only eternal, uncreated God and Creator of everything that is good, including all other beneficent divinities subordinated to him. The latter included the beneficent gods of the old pantheon (like Varuna and Mithra) and six new entities, each appointed as maker and guardian of one of the realms of creation. Second, opposite to Ahura Mazda and co-eternal with him there was a Hostile Spirit, forever fighting for evil against good, and a section of the old pantheon – Indra and his associates—was cast off as demons and allied to the spirit of evil. The struggle between good and evil was to involve all humans in a daily commitment until the end of days. This was expected to be a great final battle in which the forces of evil will be utterly destroyed, whereupon men and beneficent divinities will live together forever on a perfected earth.

As a consequence of this dualistic doctrine, the conception of the afterlife changed radically. Paradise became attainable by everyone on the basis of moral merit; at death, souls undergo a judgment and then either ascend to heaven or sink to hell. At the end of days there will be a Last Judgment when the body of the righteous will be resurrected and made immortal. These innovations —heaven and hell, the apocalypse and the millennium—were bequeathed to subsequent monotheistic religions. The rituals (the great daily ritual, the prayers, and the seasonal festivals) were maintained but rededicated to the new divine beings.

Thus many elements of continuity made the transition to the new religion easier for the Iranians, but the rejection of some of the old gods tested their willingness to convert. Then, in the course of time, the purity laws for ordinary people—the third innovation—were extended in a way that is probably without comparison in other religions, thus enlisting every member of the community in the fight against evil through the ordinary tasks of daily life. This goes a long way toward explaining the endurance of Zoroastrianism despite the unrelenting pressure from Islam.

The purity laws weighed particularly heavily on the priests, who had to be "the cleanest of the clean". The priests' role was greatly enhanced, as they were in charge not only of all the ritual services but also of the purification rites made necessary by the stringency of the purity rules. They led the missionary expansion of Zoroastrianism to all the Iranian peoples. With the rise of the Persian empires, the priests were further elevated and given a new charge, the fire temples.

Part III
The Economics

Chapter 7
Economic Analysis: From Typology to Outcomes

Abstract This chapter engages in economic analysis. It provides a typology of the religions previously examined and explains the increase in the number of gods and in the overlap of their jurisdictions as a rational over-detection bias, providing insurance against unknowns. It then identifies divine jealousy—the result of rational overestimation of the risk entailed by neglect of some gods—as the root of the supplicant's dilemma, and examines possible escapes from this trap and its inefficiency. In these solutions, exemplified by Hinduism and Zoroastrianism, the priests played a pivotal role. We thus have two institutional equilibria: an inefficient Greco-Roman equilibrium with jealous gods and nonprofessional priests, and a Pareto-superior Hindu and Zoroastrian equilibrium with non-jealous gods and monopolistic priesthood.

The first step to make sense of the complex and diverse picture sketched out in the chapters of Part I is to extract some key features that capture both the similarities and the differences among our six main religions of the beginnings. The two chapters of Part II described the endings, and our task here is to find a path that leads from the beginnings to the endings, that is, that explains the different outcomes in terms of the characteristics at the starting point plus any relevant exogenous factor that may have intervened in the process. Table 7.1 classifies the six beginners, the one intermediate fusion product (the Greco-Roman religion), and the two survivors (the others became extinct) in terms of fourteen characteristics, ranging from the pantheon to some key beliefs and forms of worship, from the priesthood to the entry of outsiders and the spread of the religion over time. The Greco-Roman religion is added to the list because it is this that became extinct, not the original, separate Greek and Roman religions. Note that some key features are omitted because they are common to all beginners and so not a relevant explanatory factor—for example, animal sacrifice, which is prominent in all the beginners and only fading away (though not completely so) in Hinduism. From this tabulation of characteristics, we can extract a typology which reduces the beginners from six/seven to three. From this we will proceed to some pairwise comparisons, and then to some in-depth discussion of several issues. At that point, we will be ready to suggest some explanation for the observed outcomes. Our goal throughout is to answer the fundamental question that motivates this research, and which was laid out in the Introduction: to understand why some of the early

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Table 7.1 The religious systems in tabulated form

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Deities' number	Female deities	Overlap	Jealousy	Gods morality	Afterlife reward	Eschatology
Greek	High, rising	Very prominent	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Roman	High, rising	Very prominent	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Celtic	Medium?	A great goddess?	Yes, confused	Probably?	Some gods?	Aristocratic?	?
Germanic	Medium, shrinking	Specialized	Yes	almost no (Vikings)	Some gods	Aristocratic	Yes (Norse)
Vedic	Medium	Marginal	Some	Embryonic	Some gods	Aristocratic	No
Iranian	Medium	Marginal	Some	Embryonic	Some gods	Aristocratic	No
GR	High, rising	Very prominent	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Hindu	Effectively small	Prominent	Irrelevant	No	Yes	Yes	No
Zoroaster	Adds, drops	Specialized	Hierarchy	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
	Asceticism, renunciation	Purity code	Outsiders entry	Professional priests	Specialist priests	Schools, scripture	Spread
Greek	No	No	Yes, controlled	no	By local god	No, no	By colonization
Roman	No	Only few priests	Yes, controlled	Only few exceptions	By god and function	No, no	By conquest
Celtic	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes, no	No
Germanic	No	No	No	Embryonic	No	No, no	By conquest
Vedic	Late, incipient	Priests, patrons	Yes, competitive	Yes	By function	Yes, yes	By migration

(continued)

Table 7.1 (continued)

	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
	Asceticism, renunciation	Purity code	Outsiders entry	Professional priests	Specialist priests	Schools, scripture	Spread
Iranian	No	Priests, patrons	No	Yes	No?	Yes, yes	By migration
GR	No	No	Yes, non-competitive	No	By god and function	No, no	By conquest, travel
Hindu	Yes	For all by caste	Yes, competitive	Yes	Yes but non-rival	Yes, yes	By invitation, imitation
Zoroaster	No	For all	No	Yes	No	Yes, yes	By mission

Indo-European religions died out for good while others died but were reborn in a new form.

7.1 A Typology of Indo-European Religions

Even at the risk of over-simplification, three types of religion can be detected in Table 7.1. In retrospect, this typology is the rationale for the division of our material into Chaps. 2, 3, and 4, as each chapter corresponds to one type in succession. The numbers in parenthesis below denote the columns in the table.

Type 1: Greeks, Romans, and Greco-Romans. They had very many deities from the beginning, roughly balanced between male and female; their number kept increasing over time by adoption or immigration, with substantial and increasing overlap of jurisdictions; divine jealousy was acknowledged and provided for, as was the gods' amorality (1, 2, 3, 4, 5). There was no notion of reward and punishment in the afterlife, no eschatology, asceticism and renunciation were unknown or despised, and no purity rules existed except for the very few professional Roman priests (6, 7, 8, 9). Entry of foreign gods into the pantheon was regulated by the state, or in later times unregulated but not competitive with the civic religion, rather complementary to it (10). Priests were not professionals but part-time officials, in charge of a particular god/temple/cult or (in Rome) of a particular priestly function, whether temporarily or for life; their service was usually not necessary for a sacrifice to be validly performed; and they had no sacred scripture nor were they trained in priestly schools (11, 12, 13). Their gods and cult practices followed the people's movement: the Greeks founded colonies all over the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and beyond, the Roman armies carried their religion with them as they conquered the world, and finally all deities and cults from anywhere freely traveled to anywhere else in the empire (14). It should be recalled, however, that local deities and cults were never prohibited on religious grounds nor was the conquerors' religion ever forced on the local population; rather, juxtaposition, merger, and adoption was the norm.

Type 2: Germans and (possibly) Celts. They had a fair number of gods, though nothing comparable to even the earliest attestations of Greeks and Romans, with substantial overlap of jurisdictions; however, the Scandinavian pantheon seems to have shrunk over time and their gods to have "allowed" personal choice of allegiance, and so they were not jealous. Germanic goddesses were important but specialized, while the Celts may have had an encompassing Great Goddess. Some, but not all their gods were ethical beings and upheld truthfulness and justice (1, 2, 3, 4, 5). They had an aristocratic conception of a glorious afterlife only for kings and warriors, and they had a developed eschatology promising destruction and renewal of heaven and earth at the end of days; this, however, was thought to be a great battle fought by supernatural warriors, as fitted the worldview of a warrior society, so asceticism and renunciation had no place with them nor were they bound by purity codes (6, 7, 8, 9). There was no entry of foreign cults as far as we know (10). Like with the Romans, Scandinavian religion followed the Vikings along in their conquests and colonies, whereas in the historical period Celtic religion certainly did not spread—if anything, it contracted

following the Roman conquest of Britain and then some Viking settlements in Celtic territories (14). Because of the problematic state of the evidence, discussed in Chap. 3, on many of these aspects our classification of the Celts besides the Germanic peoples is tentative and uncertain, as indicated by the many question marks in the "Celtic" row of Table 7.1. The two traditions were markedly different regarding the priesthood, which was strongly professional, "generalist", and the custodian of teaching and high learning with the Celts, though without scriptures, whereas with the Germans priestly functions were often carried out by chiefs or kings, though possibly professional priests were becoming more established at the very end of the pagan age (11, 12, 13).

Type 3: Vedic Indians and Iranians. They had a fairly sizable pantheon, where the goddesses had a very minor role, with some jurisdictional overlap and at least embryonic jealousy, and some, though not all, ethical gods (1, 2, 3, 4, 5). They had an aristocratic conception of paradise, no eschatology, and purity rules only for participants to sacrifices; in late Vedic times a conception of renunciation and asceticism was beginning to take shape, whereas there is no trace of it in Iran (6, 7, 8, 9). There was no known entry of foreign gods in Iran, whereas the Vedic Indians had first to come to terms with local, alien cults and then to face the entry of ascetic sects (10). Their gods obviously spread by migration as their religion took shape when both peoples were still semi-nomadic pastoralists (14). Their priests were highly professional, trained in schools and the source of a faithfully transmitted sacred literature; they were generalists, not specialized by gods, and the Vedic ones were specialized by liturgical function, while we have very little detail about their Iranian colleagues (11, 12, 13).

Some pairwise comparisons between types may be instructive. First, consider types 2 and 3. There are a number of common traits—including gods' number (1), gods' morality (5), afterlife (6), and lack of asceticism (8) (if one brackets out the incipient theory of renunciation in the *Upanishads*)—and some differences of degree—like in overlap (3) and ritual purity (9). But four essential differences stand out: the role of the goddesses (2), gods' jealousy (4), eschatology (7), and outsiders' entry for the Indians (no evidence for the Iranians) (10). Note that the Vikings (we must remain agnostic regarding the earlier Germans and the Celts) are the only group among the beginners that came close to non-jealous gods, allowing believers to "choose" a patron deity, and which offered a developed eschatology; the former feature puts them close to the Hindus while the latter puts them close to the Zoroastrians. On the other hand, the Vedic Indians are the only group that had to face a withering challenge to their established tradition by non-theistic competitors. As to the role of the priests, which is where the Celts differ from the Germans, the Celts are the only group that had a priesthood comparable to the Indo-Iranians, with priestly schools and all—although, as noted in Sect. 3.1.2, it seems to have been centralized, and this may be consequential as will be discussed below.

Next, consider types 1 and 3. They could not be more different from each other, showing total or partial differences on most counts; the strict similarities are only two, namely, the absence of eschatology (7) and the attitude to asceticism (8). It is interesting (10) that the regulated, or free but non-competitive, entry into the Greek

and Roman world was an entry by new *gods*, whereas the competitive entry into Vedic India was one by *non-theistic* sects; we will come back to that. Of course the great difference in the priesthood stands out, but zooming in on this note that the Greeks and Romans are the only groups in which the priests were specialized by god, whether or not they were also specialized by function (12)—they were not generalist dealers in cultic matters or intermediaries between men and the whole divine community. This aspect of the Greek and Romans priesthoods is obviously connected with the non-professionalization of the priests, and as such it will play a significant role in our explanation.

Finally, consider types 1 and 2—those comprising the religions that vanished. Except for the overlap (3), their theology was different on all counts: a pantheon differently sized, differently evolving, and differently composed (1, 2), gods jealous and amoral versus tolerant and partially moral (4, 5), a belief in aristocratic life after death and in the end of the world versus none of it (6, 7). The Greeks and Romans were subject to cultic entry from the beginning to the end, whereas the Celts and Germans were not (10). The two types agreed only in their looking askance at asceticism and at purity rules (8, 9). As to the priests, note that the Germans (though not the Celts—see above) are similar to the Greeks and Romans in the fact that most priestly functions were performed by elite people as part of their social roles, not by separate professionals, and this despite the huge difference between the societies involved. This will be an important factor in our explanation.

7.2 The Economics of the Pantheon

We have seen in the Introduction that the hypothesis of a PIE mother language implies a PIE mother society, which in turn must have had a PIE mother religion. That common religious stock was reconstructed by Dumézil as a tri-functional system, and at many points in the previous chapters we have been at pains to note how far and how deeply the historical religions under examinations departed from that reconstructed prototype. With the evidence summarized and organized in the typology of the last section before our eyes, we can now ask some meaningful questions about the changes that occurred from the prototype to the daughter religions, and about the causes of those changes. We begin with the pantheon, and recall from the Introduction that it may be usefully described by three parameters: the number of gods, their specialized or overlapping jurisdictions, and their rivalry or lack of it (columns 1, 3, 4 in Table 7.1—we take up gender composition and morality, columns 2 and 5, below).

Why should the number and jurisdictions of gods change? An obvious mechanism is the direct importation or immigration of foreign gods, which was so important for the Greeks and the Romans separately and even more so for the unified Roman Empire. This at first looks like an exogenous factor—until we pause to ask why the foreign god was allowed in and why (s)he found customers in the receiving society. Leaving this factor aside for the moment, there are two often intertwined, clearly endogenous reasons for the change: the migration of the carriers of the pantheon to

new lands, and the change in social demands in the land of residence. We have seen in the Introduction that our Indo-European peoples traveled enormous, if unequal, distances from the common original homeland in the steppes north of the Black Sea to the historical locations where we first observe them thousands of years later. In their new locations they found a different climate, proximity to waters, topography, altitude, suitability to crops, and availability of livestock; they adapted their occupations, means of subsistence, patterns of settlement, and economic system to the new environment; and they found indigenous populations at varying levels of economic, social, and cultural development, often unknown to us, with which they merged or over which they imposed themselves (the exceptions being those Vikings who settled in uninhabited Iceland and Greenland). So, for example, the Indo-Aryans found themselves in a subtropical climate and switched from semi-nomadic cattle herders to settled farmers, ruled over by petty chiefdoms; the Greeks found a "friendly" sea, the Mediterranean, which invited trade and travel and whose shores where the home of more ancient civilizations, and founded cities everywhere; and the long-settled Scandinavian branch of the Germanic peoples, from the 8th century onward (the Viking age), found it rewarding to engage in a quest for booty, territorial conquest, and colonial settlement across the difficult, dangerous northern seas, which brought them into contact and clash with the more established European kingdoms.

Small wonder, then, that the new conditions, and the migrants' responses thereto, generated a pressure for changes to the "portable religion" that they carried with them.[1] The traditional pantheon was ill-suited to describe the manifold needs, problems, and activities of the new society, so either new gods were added to the roster, or the old gods broadened their concerns and occupations, or both. In turn, the new gods, or the change in the character of the old gods, could come from within the migrant society or from the autochthonous people of the new location, by adoption, assimilation, or syncretism. Focusing for now on the former source, the "invention" of a new god usually proceeds by personification of natural elements or of abstractions; alternatively, such personifications give rise not to a new god but to a new specialization or particularization of an old god, captured by an epithet. For example, an existing god or goddess is appointed as patron of a new city; an Indo-European god of the (fresh)waters, Neptune, cognate of Sanskrit and Avestan Apam Napat, becomes god of the sea when the Romans encounter the Mediterranean (and hence naturally identify him with Greek Poseidon); when some Indo-European groups arrive at the Mediterranean shore they discover wine and create a god of wine under various names (Dionysus, Bacchus, Liber); when for some reason the keeping of pledges becomes singularly important, perhaps because of migrations and encounters with other peoples, a specific god of the covenant arises (the Indo-Iranian Mithra/Mitra) as distinct from a general god of the law or justice (like Zeus or Jupiter).

[1] I'm borrowing a felicitous phrase from Stephanie Jamison, who wrote that Vedic religion is "the ideally portable religion" because it has no fixed cult places, no images, and no written texts to carry (quoted in Flood 1996, 52). It seems apt to describe the prehistoric religion that all the Indo-European migrant peoples carried with them.

To some extent, this description of the expansion of a pantheon begs the question. Granted that, if a people moves from a landlocked country to a maritime one, a concern for the dangers, unknowns, and opportunities of seafaring newly arises, why should such a preoccupation be divinized as a god of the sea? If truth-telling and keeping one's word are important in commercial and social interactions among individuals or groups, why have a god to preside over contracts? And if an ancient village grows into a city with a long life ahead, why should an existing goddess (Athena) be appointed as special protector of that city (Athens) with a specific epithet (Athena Polias)? In short, why personify abstractions and concerns? These question matter because a deity claims a share in the cult while a concern does not. The best of the ancient minds asked the question right and had an answer. Thus, in his dialogue *On the nature of the gods*, Cicero (1933, 2, 61) suggested the following rationale for the cult of divinized abstractions, all of which acquired one or more temples in Rome in republican times: "What about Ops [Plenty (of the harvest)]? What about Salus [Well-being (both personal and of the state)]? What about Concordia [Concord], Libertas [Liberty], Victoria [Victory]? Since the power of each of these things was so great that it could not be controlled without a god, the thing itself gained a god's name."

This idea can be given a more rigorous form, introducing some economics in the process. Cognitive psychologist Pascal Boyer, in the course of an ambitious attempt at explaining religious thought itself as an evolutionarily shaped product of the human mind, offers a useful suggestion built on the work of other psychologists and anthropologists (Boyer 2001, 144–146). To understand the world around us we need to make inferences from the objects of our perception, and so the human mind is equipped with specialized inference systems that were tailored by evolutionary selection in ancestral environments. Some of these inference systems are specialized in the detection of apparent animacy and intentional agency behind events and characteristics of our environment, and these systems tend to interpret them as the result of some agent's actions even in contexts where other interpretations are equally plausible. Gods are such intentional agents. In other words, agency-detection systems in our mind are biased toward over-detection. This bias is grounded in our evolutionary heritage as organisms whose intuitive psychology was developed in the ancestral context of predation. Hunters and foragers must deal with both predators and prey. In either situation, it is more advantageous to over-detect agency than to under-detect it. The cost of false positives (seeing agents where there are none) is minimal, if you can quickly discard the false positives; in contrast, the cost of false negatives (not detecting predator or prey when they are actually around) could be very high.

Economists would rephrase this by saying that, in a context where the actual existence of a god can never be conclusively proved or disproved, risk-averse people rationally prefer to "buy" protection from a god that may not exist (or not be active in the given situation) rather than risk the anger of a god that may exist by ignoring him or her. It is a kind of functional substitute of buying insurance against uncertainties. But, in the ancient societies that are the focus of our study, where beliefs were generally not aided by experimental evidence and natural sciences, false positives would hardly ever be discovered, so the new gods, once introduced, tended to become

a permanent fixture of the pantheon, and with them the costs of their cult.[2] By the same token, an "old" god that reflected needs or concerns of bygone days and was no longer perceived as useful in the new environment would never be purposely deleted from the pantheon but left there in a corner, as it were, just in case—"you never know if and when their power might come back to haunt us". So the olden gods were left to their own devices, still collecting the occasional tribute by the odd worshiper or the antiquated ceremony, and eventually dying a "natural" death by oblivion if ever it came to pass—an extremely slow process. So the working rule to run a pantheon was: *always add, never delete.* We have seen this in extreme form at Rome, where veritable institutionalized fossils survived until the end of paganism. We have also seen that the Vedic gods survived with a minor, often figurative role in the Hindu pantheon and rituals.

This idea that "creating" a new deity worthy of worship is a way of taking control of dangerous forces, or buying insurance against unknowns, can be extended from the multiplication of gods to the widening of the areas of influence or jurisdiction of existing gods. Here too, where fields of influence are at stake, the rule is: in case of doubt, always add, never subtract. The point of departure may be a logical process in the mind of supplicants, which derives possible implications of established specializations of a given god. A conjectural example of such a process may be helpful. Hera (Juno), the "queen" of the gods, is fundamentally the goddess of married women, the family, and childbirth. At the same time, Artemis (Diana) is the goddess of the wild, the hunt, and generally untamed nature; naturally, this was long since thought to include the protection of virginity. But then, when a girl is going to marry, it was thought to be wise and prudent for her to ask Artemis' permission, lest the goddess feel slighted, by means of offerings that "were regarded as an advance purchase of freedom from the power of the virgin goddess" (Burkert 1985, 151). Moreover, sex and love is such a basic factor of a happy marriage, and a near-guarantee of its fertility, that it must have its own powerful deity, Aphrodite (Venus). So it was that a bride would typically make offerings to all three goddesses, not to mention minor local deities that might also be wise to propitiate. This example could be replicated many times and shows a typical pattern: a particular action or situation in life is at the crossing of several dimensions; each dimension is under the power of a different god, his "specialty"; hence all the gods concerned must be propitiated to get through the problem.

This, then, was one fundamental mechanism by which ancient pantheons tended to grow in size with time, migration, and environmental and social change. As mentioned above, another mechanism, which was particularly important for some groups, was the need, or the wisdom, to come to grips with the deities of the

[2] Speaking in particular of the Greek world, Lane Fox (1988, 37) suggests another mechanism that helps prevent discovery of false positives in all of our systems: magic, which took the form of an organized type of sorcery where spells were used to advance one's material goals and harm one's rivals. These "types of spell did not undermine the place of the gods. They supported the gods, if anything, by helping to explain failures: people could blame adversity on the 'evil eye' or the malevolence of a rival, rather than on heedless, ungrateful divinities"—or their nonexistence.

autochthonous peoples of the new lands, whether by adoption, merger, or cohabitation, even if this produced duplications and overlaps. This process might result either in the addition of a new deity to the pantheon, or in the broadening of the jurisdiction of an old god to encompass the specialties of a local god, thus "absorbing" the latter into the former, often under a characteristic epithet.[3] In the historical period, this was clearly seen in the formal importation of "foreign" gods into the Greek and Roman world; but it must have occurred, sometimes on a massive scale, in the prehistoric period too, so that the pantheon as we first see it already incorporates these earlier encounters and exchanges. As we have seen, some such early borrowing and cooption can be gleaned for the Vedic Indians and more substantially for the early Romans, but it is strikingly obvious for the earliest Greeks, where it produced a pantheon that bears no recognizable relation to the original Indo-European core which is, on the contrary, still somewhat visible in the other groups. And, as we have also seen, a similar absorption of indigenous and foreign deities occurred on a massive scale in the formation of sectarian Hinduism. By contrast, this mechanism is not in evidence for the Celts and the Germans, both of which certainly found indigenous populations in northern and western Europe but ones which utterly vanished from the historical record, so that we cannot even guess whether any religious exchange occurred. Some mutual influence can, however, be detected between Celts and Germans through their contiguity in continental Europe and, later, through extended contact on the British Isles; and we have discussed in Chap. 3 the extensive mutual influence between Celts and Romans in Gaul.

7.3 A Market Analogy

So much for the increase in the number of gods and the widening of their jurisdictions. As we have seen throughout this book, both processes inevitably increased the intersections between the gods' jurisdictional sets—what we have called their overlap. But just why should the overlap itself be a problem? After all, in a world of universal transactional relationships between men and gods, the gods are "selling" their wares—their protection in particular fields—in exchange for praise and offerings, so an analogy with retail markets may be instructive. Imagine that once upon a time in a town there were only specialty shops, each being the sole seller of a particular item of merchandise. Demand has been stable for a long time, so the range of specialties covered by the shops is adjusted to fully satisfy the range of products

[3] In an insightful discussion of the structuralist model (including, but not limited to, the Dumézilian model) of the Greek pantheon, Parker (2011, 84–98) starts from the principle (followed throughout this book) that the Greeks had a conception of the divine world as structured by a division of functions, or "honors", between the gods, each of whom had "a portfolio of exclusive functions. But the texts do not state or imply that the functions within such a portfolio have any organizing center." This suggests "the snowball theory of the Greek gods, the idea that as a god rolls down through history it picks up new functions and powers that need not cohere with its original nature or with one another" (ibid., 86).

demanded. Now for some reason many or most of the shops begin to expand the range of products they offer and turn into department stores, each selling products that are also on sale in other stores, so overlaps proliferate. The reason for the move may simply be competitive profit-seeking—each store's attempt to expand its market share through product diversification at the expense of the other stores, which may be cost-saving if there are so-called economies of scope in supply (i.e. the total cost of producing/selling two products jointly is lower than the total cost of producing them separately). In a competitive market with free consumer choice and free entry and exit of firms, consumers will find it convenient to patronize only a few of the stores in each of which they find a range of items they desire, perhaps making their choices based on nuances of quality or service. The stores which cannot efficiently adjust to the new structure of supply, and especially those which doggedly insist on remaining specialty shops, will go out of business—or, if there are some old-timers among the customers who would not let them go, they may become small outlets serving a niche market and keeping barely afloat (like the "fossil" gods of the most ancient Roman pantheon). So the move from specialty shops to department stores produces industrial concentration.

The limit state of this process, which may be reached if the economies of scope are strong enough to support it, is one where a single seller remains: a shopping mall which caters to every possible consumer need in one place, where the consumer saves time and search effort and stays clear of the petty squabbles among vendors vying for his business. In this view, then, a single god is only a step further than two or three gods, and a monopoly in divine services is like one-stop shopping.

A single store, however, need not be the long-run equilibrium structure of this industry. It will be so if cost savings from product diversification, hence price reductions, continue to the very end for a homogeneous set of services supplied by all sellers. But the concentration process could stop short of that if, for whatever reason, there is a quality dimension valued by consumers that, in their view, differentiates an item sold by store A from the "same" item sold by store B; if so, some consumers will be willing to pay a price premium for the item sold in, say, store A than in store B's. Then the long-run equilibrium will feature a few great stores, each supplying a wide range of goods but not necessarily all of them, where similar products sold in different stores are not perfect substitutes of one another and therefore may command different prices, and each consumer will become a loyal patron of one of them, though occasionally paying a visit to the others—for example, on the occasion of the great calendar festivals when at least some token recognition is paid to every store. This is, of course, a model of monopolistic competition with product differentiation.

Is the above description, in either variant, an accurate analogy of the polytheistic market for divine services? Of course it is not. Readers will have already seen what is missing: sellers' jealousy, or more precisely, their ability to act upon it. In legal commercial markets, sellers cannot punish customers if they take their business elsewhere. The description becomes accurate only if we add the sellers' capacity to retaliate and harass customers who desert them—like when the stores are run by criminal rings. Further on this line, if there is a standoff in town and the gangsters are unwilling to engage in a turf war for the sake of their customers, patronizing one

store for all of one's purchases is no protection for the customer. For that, in effect, a protection racket would be needed, like if one gang credibly promised to their customers: if you are loyal to us, we'll keep you safe from any other gang's wrath. Absent that, it is not clear that industry concentration (unless it reaches the one-store stage, on which more below) brings any welfare improvement to consumers over the original structure of specialty shops, given that they still need to visit all the stores to keep out of harm's way. There may be savings in transaction costs, in terms of shopping time or walking distance between shops; but these may be negligible if all shops are located next to each other in a shopping district of town, or if, in a traditional society, trade takes place only on market days when everybody comes to town.

Moving back from the commercial analog to the religious market, we now have a first answer to the question asked above: jurisdictional overlap is a problem *only because* it tends to go hand in hand with divine jealousy or rivalry. We have seen how pervasive and devastating it was perceived to be in the Greco-Roman world, and how the manifold religious institutions of that world worked to keep it under control and avert the gods' anger, at substantial cost for both individuals and society. This highlights the fundamental difference between Greco-Roman religion and Hinduism, which, as we have seen, displayed a superficially similar capacity to assimilate indigenous and foreign deities by subsuming them within the superstructure of the pan-Indian, Sanskrit gods and goddesses. In both systems, the long-term increase in divine variety necessarily widened the areas of jurisdictional overlap and the range of deities that would overlap on the same issue space. However, in the Greco-Roman world of jealous gods, this increased the supplicant's cost to leaving, or neglecting, one of the relevant gods—a problem that the Indian world was able to skirt thanks to the evolution of its theology and to the special features of the Brahmin priesthood. Unlike the Greek and Roman priests, the Brahmins managed to neutralize the dangerous side of unlimited religious tolerance.

Furthermore, we have seen that while the gods were greedy about the honors due to them and revengeful against negligent mortals, they would not infringe on another deity's claims to protect their own supplicants (as would do a protection racket in the market analogy above). Recall from Sect. 2.1.2 Artemis' statement: "the rule among us gods is this: None of us will go against the will of another. Instead, we will stand aside"—so the gods offered no protection in that world. Such a world was stuck in what we might call the *supplicant's dilemma*. This summarizes the trade-off faced by the supplicant: in a world of scarcity, his resources are typically insufficient to simultaneously fully satisfy two gods who both claim jurisdiction over the same fields and therefore both expect a share of his offerings; hence, by increasing his offerings to placate one god, he will incur the displeasure and the possible retaliation of the other god. It is precisely in this offerings dimension that we see the divine jealousy at work: any change in the allocation of offerings that makes one god better off will make the other worse off.

One might ask why the gods were so widely perceived as jealous and wrathful in the first place. A simple answer may refer back to the religious mind's rational bias toward false positives, i.e. over-detection of gods and of a god's interest in certain

matters. It seems almost implicit in this frame of mind that it is safer to think of the god as revengeful and therefore dangerous and hence to buy protection against this by appropriate rituals—for, if he were not, why bother with the god at all? In other words, *the over-detection bias implies an overestimation of the risk entailed by neglect*. Once again, such false positives would hardly be corrected by subsequent experience: if something bad happened to me, it *might* be because I neglected a jealous god; I will never know for sure, but whatever the case, I'd better not repeat the mistake next time—after all, what else could I do? There is nothing in my own and my neighbors' experience that can conclusively disprove that. So, as economists know, risk insurance is costly, and all the more so when ex-post verification is distorted by such a confirmation bias. A belief that gods are not dangerous would seem to require special pleading—a conception of god as merciful, a god that *loves* you.

Given the assumption of jealousy, what kind of changes to the structure of supply would have benefited the public? Fear of gods' anger implies that there was thought to be a high cost to leaving, or neglecting, one of the relevant gods. It is for this reason that multiplicity was bad and unification good from the social welfare point of view. If so, the simplest form of competition that would have benefited the system (and which did not happen, as we will see) is one which would have displaced some of the gods and moved the system towards increasing concentration, rather than support their coexistence. For example, starting with gods A and B concerned with blessings in fields x and y and gods C and D concerned with blessings in fields z and w, this concentration would have involved god A displacing god B and becoming the sole provider of goods x and y, at the same time as god C displacing god D and becoming the sole provider of goods z and w. For a god of an elective cult in the Greco-Roman world, claiming universal jurisdiction over all fields (x, y, z, and w), it would have involved displacing all of A, B, C, and D and establishing himself as supreme—perhaps contending with another all-encompassing god for such supremacy. This last version of competition could be seen as rivalry among providers of different brands of universal religion—the monopolistically competitive market mentioned above—as long as they did not claim or enforce exclusivity (which, as we have seen, they in fact did not). Finally, but importantly, the assumption of jealousy makes it clear that a single store—full-fledged monotheism—is *not* like a two-store structure writ large, a further simplification: by definition, it eliminates jealousy and fear of it at its root since the One and Only God has no rivals.

So, on the supplicants' side, there definitely were welfare gains to be had from simplification of the divine landscape, cult concentration, and elimination or reduction of the wasteful overlap. This conclusion is supported by a well-established result in the theory of industrial organization (Economides and Salop 1992): when two goods are complements in consumption, joint provision of both goods is Pareto-superior to independent provision because the independent producers ignore the effect of their individual decisions on each other, while a single monopolist internalizes this externality. In our setting, two jealous gods' perceived authority on the same issue or field—the overlapping of their jurisdictions—creates an externality that is costly to the supplicant because he or she must please both gods, hence his/her offerings to each of the gods are complements. Merger or unitary provision internalizes

this external effect, reduces the required offerings, and improves the supplicant's welfare.

Summing up, the industrial organization of polytheistic religion was inefficient, even though offerings to the different gods might have been allocated efficiently. People were mired in the multiplicity of gods and jumble of cults. As if offering a counterpoint to this line of thinking, Lane Fox (1988, 34) remarks that despite the fact that pagans had never had a wider choice of gods than in the late Roman Empire, "these various cults show no sign of competing for people's sole adherences….. No pagan complained of it, and multiplicity had its strengths…. It helped people to explain their misfortune in external terms, by error, not by sin. Pagans might be neglecting one angry divinity among many, whose mood accounted for their hardships." However, this make sense only if one takes the unbounded multiplicity for granted—as the only possible religious landscape; if so, then more gods rather than fewer might indeed have its use, as suggested by our discussion of over-detection above. But this pagan's view might have changed if he had ever been faced with a drastic reduction of such multiplicity *or* a curb on the fierceness of divine jealousy. The first development, however, and perhaps also the second, should have been the work of a supplier, not of a consumer. This brings the priests into the picture, as we will now see.

7.4 Escapes from the Supplicant's Dilemma: The Pivotal Role of the Priesthood

How could a polytheistic system get out of the jealous god trap? Leaving full-fledged, imported monotheism aside, and short of returning to the complete-specialization, no-overlap system of an ancestral—perhaps mythical—past, three escape routes were tried out; all of them involved neutralizing the paralyzing effects of jealousy. The first was to enable a god to protect his followers from his peers' retaliation, thus permitting free choice of gods; the second was to make all the gods non-jealous because all were recognized as all-powerful and therefore as equals; and the third was to create one divine hierarchy, where every deity had their appointed place. In addition, there is a route that was theoretically feasible and effective but which was never actually tried out: to let the jealousy stand but substantially shrink the pantheon, thus reducing the overlap and with it the supplicant's risk; this is the concentration of supply discussed in the last section. Let us examine these routes in turn.

The first route was explored in the terminal stage of Germanic religion. For reasons that are largely lost to us, the Vikings began to "choose" a personal protector from among the gods and worship mostly, though not exclusively, him or her. Thor, or Freyr and Freyja, was the choice of most ordinary people, while Odin—notionally, the Father of All the Gods—was the choice of kings, chiefs, and elite warriors. This development had two implications, both contained in the very notion of "protection", which involves both the ability and the willingness to protect. First, it changed the

distribution of functions among the members of the pantheon, making each of the major deities a near-universal god with encompassing jurisdiction; this was made relatively easier by the fact that the Norse pantheon showed signs not of swelling but of shrinking over time. Second, it gave each of the major gods the power to shield his believers from the possible revenge of the other gods thus diminished, giving them an assurance that they were safe in their privileged relationship with their god of choice—although, as we have seen, the other gods were still honored in the community rituals. In effect, this did not so much remove the divine jealousy as it made it toothless by providing universal insurance coverage against it.

The second route was taken in India. With the turn to classical Hinduism, the Brahmins promoted a theology in which the eponymous deity of each of the new sectarian traditions—Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Shakta—was conceived of as the supreme Lord or Lady of the universe and possessed a universal jurisdiction, catering to all the material and spiritual needs of the worshiper. Within each sect, other deities received worship as subordinate powers or aspects of the supreme deity that helped the latter to fulfill their functions, thus effectively neutralizing the dangerous implications of the overlaps. The major gods of the other sects, on the other hand, were honored as junior partners of the sect's presiding god, with their own limited jurisdiction, thus effectively eliminating divine jealousy between sects too. This noncompetitive conception of the deity in turn opened the way to, and was reinforced by, the idea advanced by the *Upanishads* that all the gods are but manifestations of the Brahman, the ultimate reality of the universe, and equivalent paths to reach it, which makes their differences irrelevant. But even setting aside this high-minded monistic philosophy, which was certainly not for the ordinary believer, the described accommodation of the various deities within a sect's pantheon is sufficient to provide the believer insurance against the threat of divine wrath: he need fear no consequences from ignoring the other sects' doings. The Hindu way, inasmuch as it boils down to choosing a major god who can be trusted to grant the supplicant protection from the harmful effects of divine jealousy, is not so different from the Viking way summarized above, even though the Vikings' choice of god never went so far as organizing separate sects but remained at the personal level, and though the monistic seed that since the *Rig Veda* transpires through the multiplicity of gods is nowhere to be seen in Norse mythology. Note, however, that while the Vikings worked with their traditional gods, their cognate the Vedic gods evidently proved unsuited to the theological reform the Brahmins had in mind and had to give way to the Hindu deities; and even though the Brahmins probably did not create the sects from scratch but took them over, they were traditionally the priesthood of the Vedic gods, so they performed the remarkable feat of transitioning basically unscathed, and if anything enhanced, from one pantheon to the other. It is hard to imagine such a theological turnaround without an organized priestly class taking charge of it.

The third route was taken in Iran. The Zoroastrian reform consisted of three concomitant steps. First, it created a single hierarchy peaking at the supreme god Ahura Mazda, where every other deity down the pyramid, old or new (that is, taken from the old pantheon or invented by Zoroaster), was given a specialized place and function as helper of the Lord in some field, with a division of labor designed to

avoid any mutual encroachment. Second, it banned some important old gods from the pantheon, downgraded to demons and minions of the Hostile Spirit, to show believers that the new doctrine was a serious change, involving some cost to them, and not just a reshuffling of cultic epithets. And third, it engaged all believers in a permanent struggle for good against evil, to be fought not in heaven but on earth and in daily life until the end of days, and involving rewards and punishments in both this world and the next. Note that the second step by itself helps reducing the problem as it wipes out some important overlap at various levels, thus reducing the jealousy. Needless to say, this grand theological reform was the work of a priestly class, which stood to gain from it in terms of power and status.

Unlike the other routes, then, the Zoroastrian route produced a full-fledged monotheism, albeit one that, unlike the later Abrahamic monotheisms, rescued from demise or execration all the "good" deities of the old pantheon, thus making the transition—here, properly a conversion—easier for the people. In contrast, the Indian route produced a polytheism embedded in a monotheistic framework—in effect, a set of *parallel monotheisms*, each organized as a hierarchy of divinities within a sect, and each competing for believers with the others but not anathematizing the others (taking the liberty of anachronistic wording, one might speak of mutual orthodoxy). One way of looking at the difference between the Iranian route and the Indian (and, embryonically, the Viking) route is a contrast between a single shopping mall that brooks no competition and a small collection of shopping malls, all of them offering the full range of products and competing for customers but in a "friendly", peaceful way. In the first case there is one supreme god; in the second, several supreme gods, considered as equivalent paths to the absolute reality and, with it, to salvation (*moksha*). Both routes take the jealousy away and thus resolve the supplicant's dilemma, but the first offers the true faith as the only path to salvation, while the second leaves alternative paths open for the believer to choose from. Thus described, and leaving other important details aside, if the same ultimate reality lies at the end of all paths, the Indian route appears Pareto-superior to the Iranian route as it allows more options without imposing any restriction on choice. But in this world, before the end of the paths, the implications for supplicants are widely different, as is the role of priests and the class structure of society that it entails; so a fuller evaluation of this contrast is beyond the scope of this book.

Last but not least, there is another way out of the jealousy trap that might have been tried but never was, and which was discussed in the previous section with reference to the Greco-Roman setting. This was not single monotheism, not parallel monotheisms, and not choice of god, but just reducing the overlap and, with it, the jealousy. As we have seen, any process that would shrink the number and range of competing claimants for offerings would have benefited supplicants, both in terms of direct cost savings and in terms of reduced disutility from risk. If so, supplicants should have been willing to patronize and pay for theological innovations which promoted a god's takeover of another god's overlapping domains, thus translating supplicants' welfare gains into cultic entrepreneurs' profits. In other words, the inefficiency inherent in the polytheistic system should have provided incentives for religious suppliers to simplify the theology and ritual practice. At a minimum, such a competitive process

would have reduced the number of gods, hence the overlap and the jealousy, to everyone's benefit; at a maximum, if a "foreign" god claiming an all-encompassing jurisdiction was available to enter the competition, the process could have resulted in the displacement or takeover of all the old gods and de facto monotheism. We have seen that some such potentially universalistic cults existed in the Roman Empire, in particular Mithra's; but they did not demand or enforce exclusivity in either worship, membership, or priesthood, and so did not seek true converts rather than members or visitors; as a result, they were never a real competitive challenge to the traditional civic religion.[4] As to the latter, its priestly personnel never took up the latent opportunities for gain arising from the system's inefficiency and acted as religious entrepreneurs, either individually or corporately. Hence, this potential route of escape from the jealousy trap was never taken.

Mention of the priests brings the issue of the agents of change into the picture. We have paid special attention to priests in all the preceding chapters, so a brief recapitulation will suffice (columns 11, 12, 13 of Table 7.1). The Brahmans and the Iranian priests were very similarly organized, recruited, and trained as a corporate priestly class able to limit entry into the profession; they were generalist dealers in religious thinking and cultic functions, required as skilled intermediaries in all forms of public cult, and made a living out of it; they produced initial texts considered as scripture, written in a lofty priestly language, and piled up an ever-growing mass of literature upon it over the centuries; they considered themselves superior to, or at least co-equals with kings and chiefs but never mingled or identified with them; and they possessed a near-monopoly of secular skills as teachers, courtly advisors, legal experts, and more. The continental druids of pre-Roman and early Roman times were remarkably similar to the Indo-Iranian priests in their organization and functions, were it not that they had no sacred books of any kind, but they had a centralized organization, which may have been a drawback as suggested below; unfortunately, we have no useful information about their Irish colleagues. By contrast, the Greco-Roman priests were not a separate professional class, had no formal training nor priestly schools, produced no sacred literature, and if they had any expertise in secular callings it was unrelated to their priestly office; priestly offices were part-time assignments that complemented the political and military duties of the elite (or, in many Greek city-states, of the citizens) and were not a source of income but often a financial burden; and priests were specialized by local divinity and temple (in Greece) or by function or god (in Rome), and they were not necessary to perform

[4] The deeper question here is why the elective cults, unlike the Christians, never adopted exclusivity. That question must remain unanswered here as there exists no general economic theory of exclusive dealings as a rational strategy—itself a difficult problem given that exclusivity is almost unknown in commercial markets and known only in (some) religious markets. There are only two insightful but special models. Raskovich (1996) models the rise of exclusive worship of Yahweh in ancient Israel as the result of theological reforms and restrictions of inter-shrine competition enforced by the priests, but in a polytheistic setting very different from the Indo-European one. Pyne (2013) offers the only extant model that explains exclusivity as a dominant strategy in religious competition; however, its scope for application is limited by the fact that it focuses exclusively on investments in "afterlife capital", which prevents its application to a world dominated by the Greco-Roman brand of polytheism.

a sacrifice. Finally, Germanic and Scandinavian priests only occasionally existed as professionals, whereas in most cases cultic function were performed by kings, chiefs, and household heads in a manner not unlike the Greco-Roman one but without any formal appointment as priests.

7.5 Explaining the Outcomes

This capsule summary speaks for itself, highlighting the priests' crucial role in bringing about the different outcomes of the different Indo-European religions. Strictly speaking, a cohesive professional priesthood—a monopoly of religious services—was neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition to avoid the extinction outcome. The Celts originally had a strong priestly class but are not known to have taken preemptive action to resist Christianization (although we are so poorly informed about their last days that we must suspend judgment); conversely, the Vikings embarked on a course that could break out of the jealousy trap and allow the choice of a personal god without the agency of a developed professional priesthood. However, a unique feature of the druids (at least in Gaul, for which we have the ancient writers' testimony) may have worked against them: their centralized organization, with a chief druid and annual councils. In contrast to a diffuse, acephalous priesthood like the Brahmanical one, a head offers an easy target: once you cut it off, the whole organization is compromised; so what may be an asset in normal times can paradoxically turn into a liability when confronted with an existential threat. As to the Vikings, they were indeed on the right track but were weak. The Indian experience shows how hard tested a professional priestly class can be by the withering of demand for their traditional services coupled with the attack from the non-theistic sects, and followed in later times by the Muslim attack; it is then easy to see that the lack of a cohesive priesthood may well have been the decisive factor that doomed the Vikings' spontaneous reform to failure—it was too little, too late.

The Indian and Iranian stories, where the polytheistic religion managed to avoid extinction and find a new lease of life in a new form, show clearly the pivotal role of the priests. Theological reform and restructuring of the pantheon, if they are to be enduring and consequential, cannot be the product of atomistic choices by consumers or shifts in their beliefs; they can only come from the supply side. For this to happen, entrepreneurs must be forthcoming who are driven by the profit and/or power opportunities that the reform makes possible, and such entrepreneurs can only be the existing priests. As we have seen, such incentives to action were generated in India by the joint pressure of declining royal support and Shramanic competition, the likely alternative being for Brahmanism to collapse. In Iran, we may surmise, a great prophet had the foresight to see that taking advance action to reform a pantheon under stress and eliminate jealousy at its root could ensure a great future to the priestly class to which he belonged. Following the reforms, the two peoples parted company as the Iranians went for single monotheism while the Indians went for parallel monotheisms—a difference presumably to be put down to

the fact that the former was the work of one great, game-changing prophet while the latter was the decentralized and protracted work of a whole professional class. Nevertheless, in both cases, the ability of the priestly class to maintain its cohesion and unity of action through the stresses and strains of the changeover was critical to success; and indeed in both cases, despite frictions and occasional defections, the priesthoods successfully managed the transition precisely because they both started from a preexisting monopolistic organization. In both cases, in turn, the strength of this organization was built on the fact that the priests were not subordinate to the rulers-that-be but self-standing providers of cultic services and of legitimacy to them.

In contrast, the Greco-Roman world, plagued by supplicant's dilemmas and weighed down by the enormous costs to contain them, was rife with profit opportunities from radical reform even more than India or Iran, but no one was able and willing to exploit them. Priests were atomized by locality, god, temple, or function, never devoted to religious tasks more than a minor part of their time, never recognized themselves or acted as a class, and were completely subordinate to the power of the state which appointed them. So they were neither equipped for nor interested in taking the leadership of a religious reform, whether as individual competitive entrepreneurs or, even less, as a connected interest group. The welfare losses generated by the system did not find agents who would make improvements and translate them into personal gain. That being the case, it is small wonder that the priests never really tried to defend their offices against the rise of Christianity. In economic language, the Greco-Roman priests had a fundamental collective action problem in which each priest found it advantageous to free ride on the others, and they never found a way to solve it.

This, then, is our fundamental explanation for the endurance of the Indian and Iranian religions (despite the fact that the latter was eventually reduced to tiny numbers by Muslim pressure) as against the transience of the others: a combination of theological reform and priestly monopoly of it. To round out the picture, some features of the theology that we have left aside can now be usefully brought in. A first feature is divine gender (column 2 of Table 7.1). The Iranian and Vedic gods were almost exclusively males in all the important slots. This may have been a competitive disadvantage for their priests if they met local populations worshiping a mother goddess or some fertility deity, as certainly happened to the Indo-Aryans as they expanded into the subcontinent (to the Iranians it would happen only centuries later, when the Persian Empire came to rule over the Mesopotamian religions). Moreover, the competition from the non-theistic *shramana* sects may have further exposed this liability of the Vedic pantheon. So it seems significant that the Hindu pantheon makes ample room for the Devi as well as for female companions of the great male gods; for its part, three out of six Amesha Spentas of Zoroastrianism are females. By contrast, in the Greek and Roman pantheons the goddesses were very prominent from the earliest times to the end—half of the twelve Olympians (by one count) and many others besides, both domestic and foreign; the Celts too worshiped exalted divine figures, probably approaching a Great Goddess, whereas with the Germans the goddesses were also important but apparently specialized to the third function.

So, on this account, their theology was already "good enough" to withstand some upstart's challenge if need be, and hence the pressure for change was less.

A second important feature of theology is gods' morality, or lack of it (column 5 of Table 7.1). The Celtic, Germanic, Vedic, and Iranian pantheons featured some major gods who were upholders of morality and socially cooperative behavior, especially the keeping of contracts and oaths (Mitra/Mithra and Varuna/Apam Napat, Thor, the Dagda), while others were amoral, Indra and Odin among them. Related to this is a third feature of theology: the presence or absence of a connection between humans' behavior in this life and a reward or punishment in the next life (column 6 of Table 7.1). These four peoples had an aristocratic conception of the hereafter, as a kind of paradise reserved to chiefs, warriors, and priests, while the ordinary people were consigned to a dreadful kingdom of the dead. One may conjecture that both features were problematic, a potential source of frictions and division among the people, as well as a competitive weakness when, in India, the Shramanic sects promoted salvation for all. So it cannot be a coincidence that the amoral gods were cast out as demons in the Zoroastrian reform and that the supreme deities of the Hindu pantheon emerged as moral characters, held out as exemplary and helpful to man's quest for a good rebirth and/or *moksha*, while in both religions a blessed afterlife that in some form rewarded man's merit and effort was made accessible to all.

By contrast, the Greeks and the Romans had none of that. All of their traditional gods and goddesses were amoral figures, to be feared rather than loved—Zeus and Jupiter were the guardians of law and order, both on earth and in heaven, but not the upholders of goodness against evil, whatever that might mean; and correspondingly, a bleak kingdom of the dead awaited all without distinction. The "Oriental" cults did promote deities who were merciful and loving, and some of them (together with some mystery cults) promised some kind of blessed afterlife to their believers, but they never promoted themselves as alternative options to the exclusion of the civic religion. Hence, the idea that a god might be a moral guide was foreign to the ancients' mind, as was the idea that life after death could be something worth striving for; so there was no potential conflict brewing on this score and no pressure for change to the theology whether from within or without. In general, one should not assume that the pagan world was yearning for a new answer to the problem of death: it was some of the new cults, and then much more forcefully the Christian movement, that constructed death as a "problem" and at the same time offered a "solution" to it. In other words, a demand for an afterlife was created, rather than satisfied, by Christianity and other mystery cults; therefore, the traditional religion cannot be judged a "failure" because it did not promise this particular kind of life after death. And indeed, the doctrine of immortality of the soul, heavenly recompense for human sufferings, and bodily resurrection at the end of days, utterly foreign as it was to ancient thinking, seems to have played a great role in reinforcing cohesion and disciplining behavior within the nascent Christian community, but there is no evidence that it worked as an effective missionary tool in the conversion of the pagans (MacMullen 1981, 53–57; Beard,

North and Price 1998, 289–91).[5] Things were different, however, with the other Indo-European peoples who already had an aristocratic and unequal conception of life after death and were therefore alert to the problem—we have seen the afterlife promise at work in particular in the conversion of the Vikings (Sect. 5.2) and in the Hindu and Zoroastrian theological reforms (Chap. 6).

7.6 Institutional Equilibria

The interaction between the disabilities of the original Indo-European pantheon and the collective action problem of the priests gives rise to two institutional equilibria: jealous gods combine with atomized, non-cooperative priests to describe the Greco-Roman institutional equilibrium, while non-jealous gods combine with corporate, cooperative priests to describe the Hindu and Zoroastrian institutional equilibrium. From this perspective, it becomes clear why the Vikings and the Celts lost out: the priests were out of joint with the theology, with a theology in a process of reform from below but not supported by a professional priesthood in Scandinavia, and (so far as we can tell) an unreformed theology matched by a powerful priesthood in Gaul.

In the Greco-Roman institutional equilibrium, the jealous gods worshiped with separate rituals, and the consequent spreading of supplicants' resources to propitiate multiple gods for any one desired benefit, made it hard and unrewarding for the priests to see themselves as a corporate group and act to enforce a professional monopoly. Reciprocally, the nonprofessional, locally fragmented structure of the priestly class undermined any incentive to change the theology and reduce the gods' multiplicity to the benefit of the supplicants. Since priesthoods of the civic cults were typically an add-on to a civilian or military career, the elite would compete for public office, not for priestly office as such. In this way, religion was disempowered and subordinated to political power; hence, when the religious system collapsed in the Christian empire, the would-be priests withdrew to their elite class and, in time, substituted the new office of Christian bishops for the previous pagan offices. To an economist, the protection and promotion of the traditional civic religion was a collective good (for the priests) that, absent a professional corporate body, was not provided collectively but privately (each man on his particular task), hence the provision was less than optimal. Nevertheless, the system was stable for many centuries because it was never really challenged until the rise of Christianity.

In the Hindu institutional equilibrium, the non-jealous gods worshiped with broadly unified rituals, and the consequent concentration of supplicants' resources on their god of choice, rewarded the priests for cooperating to enforce their monopoly

[5] The assumption that such a doctrinal promise, dubbed the "afterlife difference", represented a key competitive advantage of Christianity as against paganism and Judaism is one of the main unwarranted assumptions of Ekelund and Tollison's (2011) economic analysis of the rise of Christianity. See also the critique by MacMullen (2012) which, even discounting his deep skepticism about the economic approach to religion and religious history, effectively underscores this and other misconceptions in their account of Roman paganism.

of ritual services through the generations and thereby to maintain their caste privileges; at the same time, the non-jealous gods rewarded the supplicants by reducing the demands on their limited resources while also reducing their risk from incomplete satisfaction of the gods' requests upon them, thus producing a Pareto-superior outcome. Reciprocally, the professionalism of the Brahmins, protected by strong entry barriers, made possible a relatively seamless transition from the Vedic pantheon to the sectarian Hindu pantheon with its non-rival gods, which was better able to address the theological challenge from the Shramanic sects. Furthermore, the Brahmins' near-monopoly of priestly office and derived non-religious services put them in a strong bargaining position vis-à-vis kings and princes and enabled them, in time, to displace the Shramanic sects in the competition for royal patronage. So unlike the Greco-Roman priests, the Hindu priests had everything to lose from the decline of the religion that was their livelihood and raison d'être—decline due to competition from Shramanic sects, to withdrawal of royal support in the Mauryan and then the Indo-Greek age, or to the pressures faced under Muslim rule. Hence, they were motivated to find ways to maintain their position, and were successful over the long run. The Zoroastrian equilibrium is a variant on the Hindu equilibrium, identical to it in every respect—if the Hindu pantheon is replaced by the monotheistic Zoroastrian hierarchy—except for the historical timing: there was no known competition from ascetic movements in Iran and no real kingdoms but only small chiefdoms for many centuries after Zoroaster, so that the rise of Zoroastrianism to top position in royal patronage came to full light only in the Persian empires.

These two types of institutional equilibria are different in an important respect. The Greco-Roman equilibrium is an example of *spontaneous order*, i.e. an order in a complex system that is the result of the atomistic behavior of self-interested individuals but is not designed, created, or controlled by any one agent—like language, the network of mountain paths, or the free market economy (according to the so-called Austrian school of economic thought). Its stability through time is due to inertia, not to purposive action: the equilibrium exists until and unless some sufficiently powerful exogenous factor overturns it (like the rise of Christianity to imperial religion). The fact that this particular equilibrium was beset by inefficiencies, fear, and excess costs is a sobering reminder of how bad a spontaneous order can be, despite its permanence. The Hindu-Zoroastrian equilibrium, by contrast, is an order that was purposely created and is, to an extent, controlled by an agent in accordance with some environmental conditions; it is stable as long as the controlling agent finds it in his interest to maintain it and the conditions continue to support its maintenance. Interestingly, the "agent" in our case was a collective agent made up of cooperating units (the priests, formed into a de facto monopoly), without any central direction (even in the Zoroastrian case, after Zoroaster himself, the priests got a chief priest overseeing the whole structure only in the Sasanian Empire).

Being built by design, such a purposive order may (though need not) be used to produce welfare improvements over the initial state of things; in our case, it worked to extricate these religions from the jealous gods trap and the associated supplicant's dilemma. One important feature that signals that in our case it was indeed welfare-improving is its ability to spread to new lands and peoples (column

14 of Table 7.1). The Zoroastrians engaged in a mission to the Iranian peoples that was spectacularly successful in the long run, culminating in the Zoroastrian empires. The Brahmins, for their part, were able to extend their presence and the enforcement of their religious monopoly outside their original homeland, reaching out to the whole Indian subcontinent, the Himalayas, and many countries in Southeast Asia. The traditional, pre-reform theology and organization would hardly have allowed the priests to achieve such an expansion without compromising their support in the homeland.

Despite all the differences between the two institutional equilibria, a common thread can be discerned nonetheless. In dramatically different, indeed opposite ways, the two systems inoculated themselves against theocracy as a political option—if we understand theocracy as a government system in which a priestly class directly exercises political power.[6] In Greco-Roman society the independent priestly agent for it was lacking. In Indian and Iranian society, on the other hand, the priestly agent's role was too important and well-demarcated to compromise it by overturning the caste hierarchy or the legitimizing relationship to the kings, respectively.

7.7 Invitation to the Models

The last section seemed like concluding the journey of this book, but we are not quite there yet. The economic analysis carried out in this chapter may be reasonably convincing as far as words go, but on several points the reader has been unknowingly asked to believe the writer's claims because nothing like a proof was offered. In particular, there are four topics that may benefit from formal economic analysis.

The first and most basic one is the whole issue of jealous versus non-jealous gods and its implications—the main theoretical workhorse in our explanations. How does the supplicant's dilemma exactly work? Why would it not have existed in a tri-functional pantheon? In what ways can the Hindu solution and the Zoroastrian solution overcome it, and how can they achieve a saving of religious resources? At various places throughout the book the language of preferences has been casually used—a god prefers or desires this or that, a god gets angry if he doesn't get sufficient offerings, a god can be appeased by giving him what he wants, and so on. This is suggestive, but one would wish more precision. Obviously, divine preferences are just a placeholder for the supplicant's beliefs about what the gods want of him, as enshrined in recorded cultic practices, religious institutions, holy books, myths about the gods, or any combination of these. Even so, divine preferences are a complex analytical tool, which can be rigorously shown to support the claims built upon it in this chapter only through a formal model.

A second topic in need of formal analysis is the issue of priestly monopoly versus competition, which was stitched together with the jealousy issue into a solution to the puzzle of divergent outcomes of the religions' histories. While competition and

[6] See Ferrero (2009, 2013) for a model of theocracy with applications to some historical evidence.

monopoly may be easy concepts to grasp in normal commercial markets, how do they exactly function with religion and priests? Since the whole problem here is about decentralized decisions by priests, not about one central decision by a church, it can be described and analyzed as a game among priests, in which one outcome is their cooperation for joint gain (monopoly) and another is their non-cooperation (competition). Choosing between these two outcomes may be called the *priestly dilemma*. A simple introduction to the game-theoretic approach to these situations can put our discussion above on firmer foundations.

A third issue that requires analysis is the institutional equilibria discussed in the last section. The idea brings together priestly institutions and divine jealousy (or lack of it) into a unified description of the main religious systems surveyed in this book, thus bridging the gap between the supplicant's dilemma and its resolutions, on the one hand, and the priestly agency on the other. But the idea of an equilibrium supporting the Hindu-Zoroastrian and the Greco-Roman systems, with the correlate lack of equilibrium undermining the Celtic and Viking systems, is intriguing but fuzzy. It can and should be more firmly grounded in a game between priests and gods, in which the former can have a corporate or atomized organization and the latter can be jealous or non-jealous. This will make clear in what sense some systems exhibit stability and permanence while others turn out to be brittle and transient.

A fourth, and last, issue that needs formal analysis is the expansion of the reformed religions through mission or invitation, mentioned at the end of the last section. Clearly, if the agents that expanded were organized interest groups holding a monopoly of religious services, the expansion must protect the original members of the group from welfare losses caused by the expansion itself, or else the group would break apart and its market power would founder. The fact that the old, unreformed religion did not expand in this way suggests that it was not equipped to solve this distributional problem; in general, polytheistic religions spread only on the shoulders of their believers when they move about through migration, colonization, or conquest—they do not "convert" new people. How could Brahmanism and Zoroastrianism solve the problem and protect their old members while leaving a benefit to the new converts (or else they would not have converted), at the same time as providing a rent to the expanded priestly class? This requires modeling.

To answer these queries, readers equipped with a minimal training in formal economics are invited to visit the models in the next chapter. Those not so equipped will have to do without it and skip to the concluding chapter.

Chapter 8
Economic Models: Gods, Supplicants, and Priests

Abstract This chapter provides four formal models to match the previous economic analysis. First, a model of divine preferences constructed as a sequence of Edgeworth boxes, which illustrates the supplicant's dilemma and the theological escapes from it. Second, a model of a Prisoner's Dilemma game among priests, illustrating the incentive to defect from cooperation and the ways to overcome it. Third, a model of an Assurance game between gods and priests which has two institutional equilibria, a risk-dominant (Greco-Roman) equilibrium and a payoff-dominant (Hindu and Zoroastrian) equilibrium. Fourth, a model of the missionary expansion of a cooperative religious organization that protects the old members' benefits as a condition for the expansion to be acceptable, illustrating the Hindu and Zoroastrian expansions.

8.1 A Model of Divine Preferences

8.1.1 The Supplicant's Dilemma

For ease of exposition, we start with the benchmark situation of overlap of divine jurisdictions, which describes the archetypal problem that all polytheistic systems had at least potentially to cope with.[1] Then we will depict the different ways in which the problem could be avoided, overcome, or otherwise kept under control.

Imagine that there are several gods who have overlapping, but non-coincident, jurisdictions over several matters. (If the jurisdictions were wholly coincident, the gods would be perceived as identical, which would raise questions about their rivalry—see below.) As so often in economics, a 2×2 model will suffice to illustrate the problem. Let A and B be two gods who are thought to be able to affect outcomes in two fields, x and y. For example, x might be a woman's health and y her giving birth, and A and B might be Hera and Artemis; or, x might be victory in war and y wealth, and A might be Iran's Mithra and B Indra—both war gods and both gods of material plenty, the first as the lord of covenant and justice and the second through

[1] This section is based on the models developed in Ferrero and Tridimas (2018), Basuchoudhary, Ferrero and Lubin (2020) and Ferrero (2021).

M. Ferrero, *The Political Economy of Indo-European Polytheism*,
Contributions to Economics, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97943-0_8

plunder and war booty. Let x_A and x_B (respectively, y_A and y_B) denote the amounts of sacrifices or offerings of an agent to gods A and B in pursuit of a favorable outcome in field x (respectively, y). Suppose for the moment that there are fixed amounts of resources, $\overline{x}$ and $\overline{y}$, that the agent can or will devote as offerings to each outcome, such that $x_A + x_B \leq \overline{x}$ and $y_A + y_B \leq \overline{y}$.

The agent maximizes utility on behalf of each god by choosing the offering basket with a view to satisfying the god as best he can. Analytically, gods are perceived to be pleased by the offerings dedicated to them, thankful for them, and willing to reward the supplicant by bestowing favors on him towards fulfillment of the supplicant's wishes. These wishes, and the corresponding benefits expected from the god, can be worldly and/or otherworldly. The happier the god, the fuller and more effective are his/her blessings—which makes ancient polytheism a kind of "fee for service" operation (Iannaccone 1995), although one founded on subjective beliefs and subject to random disturbances. However, the supplicant is well aware that each god is sensitive to his/her being recognized as influential in both fields and will not make the mistake of only trusting one god for x and the other for y—unless, that is, the gods are perceived as specializing in x or y (see below).

Furthermore, each god is supposed to have a satiation point which is, in principle, within the supplicant's reach and consists of a bundle of offerings that makes the god perfectly satisfied. This point is again a subjective belief of a typical supplicant, as determined by the prevailing culture of the ancient world which viewed the gods as eager for acknowledgment and offerings but amenable to be pacified with sufficient effort. The theology, mythology, and cult practices of ancient polytheistic religions strongly suggest that such satiation points were thought to be knowable by the supplicants and/or the priests—they "knew" what the gods wanted—and relatively immune to disconfirmation from perceived failures of past offerings to fulfill one's wishes—that is, they were thought to be stable. This is the confirmation bias (or asymmetric valuation of errors) discussed in the previous chapter. Hence, a dynamic model with updating of beliefs and endogenous satiation points does not seem necessary to handle the problem. People behaved as if they felt that sometimes their offerings were adequate, sometimes not, that is, sometimes their wishes were fulfilled, sometimes not; and they tried hard to minimize the danger of the gods' displeasure.

If the supplicant cannot or will not make offerings that match the satiation point, he believes he will face in return less satisfactory or more haphazard blessings from the god. Any offering in excess of this ideal bundle, however, does not turn the "good" into a "bad" but into a "neutral" good—i.e., the god is indifferent to the excess offerings which, therefore, would neither benefit nor harm the supplicant. Hence, the supplicant will not waste scarce resources in excess of satiation levels but will turn them over to the other god or, if the resources are sufficiently flexible in use, to the other outcome.

This suggests that the resources devoted to each outcome can be made variable subject to an overall resource constraint. Suppose that x and y are measured in the same units—such as money or time devoted to religious observance—so that they

are perfectly substitutable across outcomes, and denote with R the fixed amount[2] of total resources available for religious offerings, with $R = \overline{x} + \overline{y}$. Let S_A and S_B be the two gods' satiation bundles and the superscript S attached to the xs and ys denote the corresponding satiation levels. Avoiding waste of religious resources requires:

$$\overline{x} \leq x_A^S + x_B^S \; and \; \overline{y} \leq y_A^S + y_B^S \tag{8.1}$$

Scarcity of resources will prevail if at least one of the inequalities in (8.1) holds as a strict inequality ("<"), i.e. the supplicant cannot supply both gods with their satiation bundles. Under scarcity, to maximize utility, the available amounts of both religious resources will be fully used up, hence $x_A + x_B = \overline{x}$ and $y_A + y_B = \overline{y}$. Therefore under scarcity, using (8.1), the following inequality holds:

$$R = \overline{x} + \overline{y} = x_A + x_B + y_A + y_B < x_A^S + x_B^S + y_A^S + y_B^S \tag{8.2}$$

Scarcity of resources is, however, not sufficient to create a nontrivial choice problem for the supplicant. Two cases can be distinguished. The first is the case of *specialized gods*, where each god has exclusive jurisdiction over one field and cares only about offerings in that field, so there is no jurisdictional overlap. In this case two of the satiation levels in (8.1) and (8.2), one for each god, would be equal to zero. For example if god A cares only about y and god B cares only about x, then $x_A^S = 0$ and $y_B^S = 0$. Then there is no real choice to make: the supplicant will naturally devote the whole of offering y to god A and the whole of offering x to god B, although falling short of fully satiating them if he labors under scarcity. The second is the case of *rival gods*, where each god has jurisdiction over both issues and cares about both offerings, implying jurisdictional overlap—which is where we started above. Joined with scarcity, this creates a meaningful choice problem for the supplicant.

With these assumptions, the situation can be simply modeled by an unusual application of a straightforward tool: an Edgeworth box, which depicts the indifference maps over the perceived preferences of gods A and B with respect to offerings x and y. The sides of the box are measured by any pair $(\overline{x}, \overline{y})$ that satisfies (8.1), and which also satisfies (8.2) if there is scarcity. All the Edgeworth boxes introduced below, each corresponding to a different theology, are rectangles with exactly the same sides, allowing us to compare the allocations of resources and to see the savings or Pareto-improvements that certain theological reforms make possible. Scarcity in both dimensions implies that the inequalities in (8.1) both hold as strict inequalities, i.e. the two satiation points cannot both be reached with the existing resources; on the other hand, our assumption that each god's satiation is within the supplicant's reach implies that both satiation points lie within the box (including its edges). Hence it must be $\overline{x} = max\left(x_A^S, x_B^S\right)$ and $\overline{y} = max\left(y_A^S, y_B^S\right)$, i.e. the length of each side of

[2] A full model would determine, in the usual way, the supplicant's optimal R by maximizing his utility over religious and secular consumption subject to a budget constraint. At an interior solution, one would expect this R to fall short of the gods' satiation bundles, i.e. scarcity would prevail. Giving priority to satiation of both gods regardless of opportunity cost in terms of forgone consumption would seem to require some kind of lexicographic preferences.

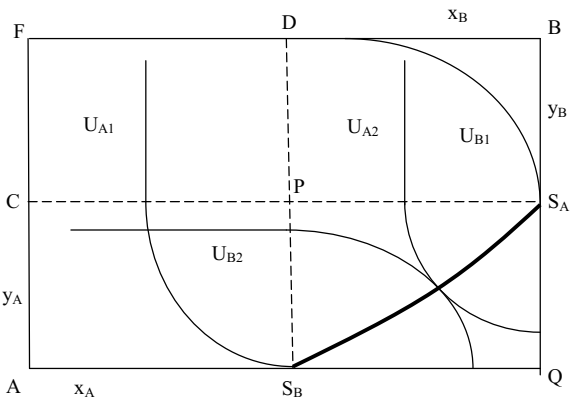

Fig. 8.1 Rival gods: both A and B care about both x and y

the rectangle must be exactly equal to the highest of the two satiation levels that are measured on that side, no more (or there would be offerings exceeding the satiation levels, implying waste of resources) and no less (or the satiation points would fall outside the box). It follows that both S_A and S_B will lie somewhere on the sides of the box. If the two gods were identical, with wholly coincident jurisdictions ($x_A^S = x_B^S$ and $y_A^S = y_B^S$), the satiation point of each god would coincide with the origin vertex for the other god, i.e. fully satiating one god would leave the other god with a bundle $(x, y) = (0, 0)$. We leave this special case for further discussion below and focus on the general case of non-identical gods, where the two satiation points lie on two adjacent sides of the box. For concreteness, and without loss of generality, we set $x_A^S = 2\, x_B^S$ and $y_B^S = 2y_A^S$, so in our boxes below $\overline{x} = x_A^S$ and $\overline{y} = y_B^S$. Hence, here total expenditure on religious offerings is $R = x_A^S + y_B^S$.

With these assumptions, Fig. 8.1 depicts our benchmark case of *rival gods*, where each god is perceived to have jurisdiction over both issues and the two gods' indifference maps culminate at satiation points S_A and S_B. The pair of horizontal and vertical dashed lines drawn through each satiation point divide the (x, y) space into an area where both goods are below satiation levels and indifference curves are monotonically increasing in utility and strictly convex to the origin, and the rest of the space where one or both goods are above satiation levels and indifference curves become straight lines because the excess offering leaves the god indifferent—i.e. the good becomes a "neutral". Two such indifference curves are drawn for each god. The SE quadrant $S_A P\, S_B Q$ is the only subset of the box where both goods are below satiation levels for both gods, and it is easy to check that a move from any point outside $S_A P\, S_B Q$ to a point inside it represents a Pareto improvement whereby one or both gods increase their utility. The thickened curve $S_A S_B$ connects indifference curves U_{A1} and U_{B1} (A's indifference curve through B's satiation point and B's indifference curve through A's satiation point) and is the locus of tangency points between pairs of indifference curves; hence, a move from a point anywhere in the rectangle to a point on the curve represents a Pareto improvement. Thus $S_A S_B$ is the "contract curve" between the two gods, i.e. the set of Pareto optimal allocations of offerings between

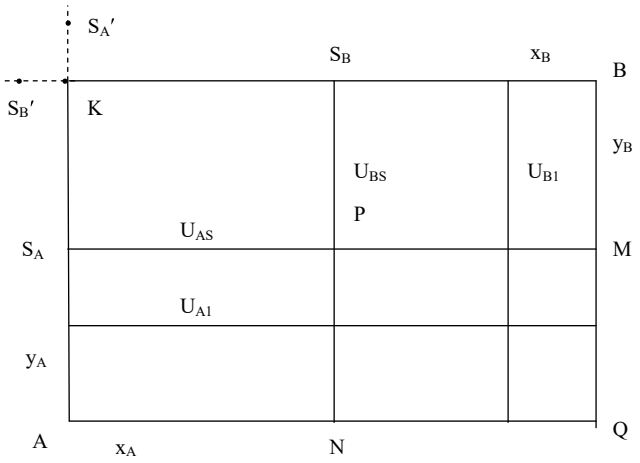

Fig. 8.2 Specialized gods: A cares only about *y*, B cares only about *x*

them. It depicts the trade-off faced by the supplicant: by increasing his offerings to placate one god, he will incur the displeasure of the other god. Along the contract curve, the gods are indeed "jealous" of each other as any change in allocation that makes one god better off will make the other worse off. Choosing an allocation on the S_AS_B curve, not outside of it, is thus the best that can be done under the existing resource constraint to minimize the harm from gods' displeasure.[3] The "hungrier", or more demanding, are the gods, given the resources, the further apart are their satiation points and the worse is the trade-off.[4] This is the *supplicant's dilemma*.

This is to be contrasted with the case of *specialized gods*, in which there is no jurisdictional overlap. There are two possible patterns of specialization, one of which is depicted by Fig. 8.2, with god A influencing only and therefore caring only about *y* and god B caring only about *x*. Here their indifference curves become everywhere horizontal and vertical lines, respectively, starting from points on the sides of the box, because the good about which the god does not care is a neutral; the corresponding

[3] The contract curve implicitly defines a "utility possibility frontier" of the gods, where the supplicant will want to choose his preferred point based on his beliefs and attitudes to risk. In a standard case of risk aversion, he will typically pick an interior solution, thus diversifying his portfolio of offerings and spreading the risk. Modeling this would be straightforward but would add little of interest for our purposes.

[4] In theory, there could be "bargaining between the gods" to find a mutually acceptable sharing of the offerings, i.e. a particular point on the contract curve, for example a Nash solution to the bargaining problem. One might perhaps interpret the elaborate system of festivals and ceremonies fixed by the Roman state as embedding some such solution—a risk-minimizing arrangement. Elsewhere, this did not happen. The reason is probably to be sought in the fact that either (in India, Iran, and the Celtic world) the priesthood was not specialized by god, so the different gods were not "represented" by different priests who would bargain on their behalf, or (in Greece) it was hyper-specialized by local temples of local specifications of a god, so again unable to represent "the" god even if they had sufficient incentives to do so (which they did not—see Sect. 8.2 below).

utility levels, including satiation levels, are measured by the quantities of the only good that the god cares about, denoted by points on the sides of the box. If scarcity prevails for both resources so that both satiation points are beyond the supplicant's resources and hence outside the box, like S_A' and S_B', he will choose the NW vertex of the box (point K) as his unique optimal bundle, exhausting his available resources. If, however, the satiation points are S_A and S_B—corresponding to the satiation levels of the relevant goods in the benchmark satiation points of Fig. 8.1—the supplicant would be in a state of bliss: both gods could be satiated without using up all the available resources. In either case, no "trade" of offerings between the gods is required or feasible: each god receives all and only the available amount of the good he cares about. There is no supplicant's dilemma. Of course, in the latter case an excess of resources is being needlessly tied down to religious offerings, violating (8.1); to maximize his utility, the supplicant should reduce these to the benefit of secular consumption and downsize the box to $PMQN$, where S_A and S_B would be made to coincide with point P, which would be the unique optimum.

Consider, however, the opposite specialization pattern (not shown), with god A specializing in good x and god B specializing in good y, and with the satiation level of each good for each god again corresponding to that of the relevant satiation point of Fig. 8.1. All utility levels, including satiation levels, are still measured by points on the sides of the box and all indifference curves inside the box are still straight lines, but the two satiation points now coincide at the SE vertex Q, which is the unique optimum. This optimum achieves full satiation of both gods, so again there is no trade-off and no supplicant's dilemma, but here no downsizing of the box and thus no saving of religious resources is possible because it would put the satiation points out of reach. Why the difference? Recall that we assumed $x_A^S > x_B^S$ and $y_B^S > y_A^S$; so in the pattern depicted by Fig. 8.2 each god specializes in the good for which his satiation level is lower than that of the other god, and therefore is "cheaper" to satisfy, whereas in the alternative pattern it is higher than the other's and therefore more expensive to satisfy. That explains why saving of resources, compared to the rival gods situation, becomes feasible in the former case but not in the latter. In both cases, however, specialization gets rid of gods' jealousy and the associated supplicant's dilemma.

The specialized gods model, with no jurisdictional overlap, no divine jealousy, and no dilemma, may capture the essence of some of the earliest Indo-European pantheons on record: in particular those of the Thracians described by Herodotus, and possibly the earliest Gauls and Germans as described by the Roman historians Caesar and Tacitus (see Sects. 1.5, 3.1.1 and 3.2.1). In these cases, the specialization has been claimed to conform to Dumézil's tri-functional structure. The model may also be used to describe the relationship between the various *yazatas* at the lower levels of the Zoroastrian hierarchy, where formerly independent gods have been turned by Zoroaster into subordinate, specialized divinities, each appointed to a particular, non-overlapping domain or function. In fact, Dumézil (1958, 40–46) claimed that despite—or rather, thanks to—Zoroaster's reform, the list of the Amesha Spentas in particular mirrors the classical tripartite structure of the earlier Indo-Iranian and Vedic pantheon. At about the same time as the Thracians, however, Herodotus'

Scythians hardly conformed to any well-defined specialization pattern, tri-functional or otherwise. Moreover, as we have seen (Chap. 3), the later-documented brethren of the Gauls and the Germans (the Irish and the Vikings respectively) show evidence of multiplication of deities and/or of shifting and broadening specializations, suggesting that the specialized structure was fragile and ill-equipped to stand the tests of time, migration, and social change.

Instead, the rival gods model seems apt to capture these later evolutions, and in general to describe the central problem that, in different forms and degrees, was at least potentially undermining all the Indo-European pantheons discussed in this book. This problem was described in the last chapter as the increase in jurisdictional overlap, brought about by the proliferation of deities and/or the broadening of their original specializations; this increase, if unchecked, was likely to harden divine jealousies and consequently to increase the burden of cult and the attendant cost and anxiety borne by supplicants in an effort to cope with them. As we have seen, this description, and hence the model, fits particularly well the early Greek and Roman pantheons and even more so the unified Greco-Roman pantheon that capped them, where the number-overlap-jealousy complex rose to unparalleled proportions. We will now develop different specifications of the Edgeworth box model to capture the various ways around the problem and out of the dilemma taken by some of the Indo-European peoples.

8.1.2 Escapes from the Dilemma

The Hindu response to the jealous gods problem was theistic sectarianism. Figure 8.3 depicts the theology of sectarian Hinduism, with the same box size and the same satiation points as in Fig. 8.1. As before, resources are scarce as the supplicant

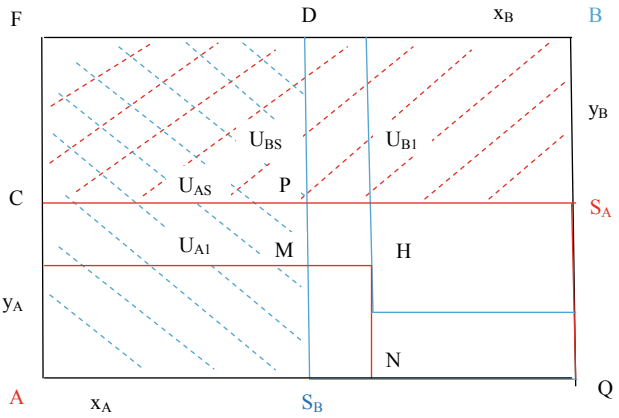

Fig. 8.3 Sectarian Hinduism: non-jealous gods

cannot simultaneously provide the gods with the bundles S_A and S_B. Here, however, the gods' preferences are monotonic but strictly *concave*, meaning that "extremes are preferred to averages", i.e., the agent prefers to specialize, at least to some degree, and to consume only or mostly one good rather than a mixed bag. For ease of illustration and with little loss of generality, in this and the following figures, we consider the limit case of indifference curves that are inverted L-shaped, i.e. with the vertex of the L placed *opposite* to the origin. For clarity, all the points and curves for A are drawn in red, for B in blue; we show two indifference curves for each god. These curves are derived from utility functions $U_A = max(x_A, \alpha y_A)$ and $U_B = max(x_B, \beta y_B)$, in which α (respectively, β) is the constant offerings ratio x_A/y_A (respectively, x_B/y_B) at the vertex of all indifference curves, where the two arguments take the same value which measures the utility level. This means that god A's satisfaction is measured by the amount of offering that is the *greatest* of x_A and αy_A; given this, the amount of the other offering is irrelevant (and similarly for god B). For example, consider bundle H from A's point of view (red line): if we move horizontally to M we decrease x_A while leaving y_A unchanged, so utility does not decrease because the greater amount (now αy_A) is unchanged; hence H and M belong to the same indifference curve. While at a cosmic level of abstraction, this captures the idea that Shiva or Vishnu value and appreciate the supplicant's effort and intention to please and acknowledge them despite his limited means—that is, his devotion (*bhakti)* rather than the amount of stuff that they themselves "consume."

To find the efficient solutions, start from H: this is not an optimal point as moving to M (or N) leaves A indifferent but increases B's utility—indeed B has now a bundle that lies on his indifference curve (U_{BS}) through S_B, i.e., it gives him the same utility as satiation. But M (or N) is not optimal either as moving from there to P (or Q) leaves B indifferent (at satiation) and increases A's utility to the level of satiation as P (or Q) lies on his indifference curve (U_{AS}) through S_A. So P and Q are Pareto-optimal allocations: the remarkable feature is that at these points, due to the gods' concave preferences, resources are still scarce, but divine jealousy is no more; that is, the gods are not rivalrous.

Furthermore, since we assumed that offerings in excess of a god's satiation level neither please nor displease him (they become "neutrals"), all the bundles in the area marked with red (blue) dashed lines, which lie above the indifference curve through S_A (S_B), are indifferent to S_A (S_B). Therefore the set of Pareto-optimal allocations comprises the rectangle to the NW of P where the red and blue dashed lines overlap, up to the vertex of the Edgeworth box F, and at any of those allocations, both gods are as happy as at their respective satiation points. For example, at point P god A is receiving his satiation level of y but not of x, yet this is just as good to him as S_A, and god B is receiving his satiation level of x but not of y, and yet this is just as good to him as S_B. Then, if desired (for example, to economize on transaction costs), the supplicant can just as well specialize his offerings entirely and go to point F, thus giving all of his y offerings to A and all of his x offerings to B; Shiva and Vishnu will not mind. Thus, with these non-jealous gods, the supplicant's dilemma goes away.

To note that P and F are equivalent optima is to imply that valuable resources are being unnecessarily tied down in excess religious offerings, so even if an allocation

within this box may be efficient, the box itself is oversized and can and should be downsized to everyone's satisfaction. Suppose that both $\overline{x}$ and $\overline{y}$ are reduced and the box is squeezed in both dimensions from above and from the left, so that the NW vertex F is made to coincide with point P. Figure 8.4 represents the new box, where points S_A, P, S_B, and Q are reproduced from Fig. 8.3 for ease of comparison. God A's origin is now A', coincident with old S_B, and god B's is now B', coincident with old S_A, which shifts their satiation points to S_A' and S_B' respectively (segments CS_A and DS_B in Fig. 8.3 are equal to segments PS_A' and PS_B' in Fig. 8.4, respectively). These new satiation points lie outside the box, but the new indifference curves running through them (U_{AS}' and U_{BS}' respectively) still cross at point P, which is now the unique optimum. Clearly, no further squeezing of the box is possible because it would put satiation out of reach, i.e. it would shift satiation-level curves U_{AS}' and U_{BS}' outside the box. So the key to the Hindu solution is that, due to the concavity of preferences, satiation points can be shifted outside the box as long as satiation-level indifference curves still cross within the box, including its edges; when a single crossing is left on the edge (which necessarily will be at one vertex of the box), all possible savings have been realized.

At this unique optimum P, god A receives all and only the available amount of y and god B receives all and only the available amount of x, and both receive their satiation-level amounts. Interestingly, this solution implements a specialization pattern in which each god completely specializes in the offering for which his satiation level is lower than that of the other god, and therefore is "cheaper" to satisfy. As shown above, this is also one of the two specialization patterns possible in the specialized gods model, where, however, there is an alternative specialization pattern which does not allow any saving of resources—and one or the other pattern simply "happens" by assumption. By contrast, the Hindu solution does not assume specialization but concave preferences, and specialization is the ultimate result of concavity plus saving of excess offerings.

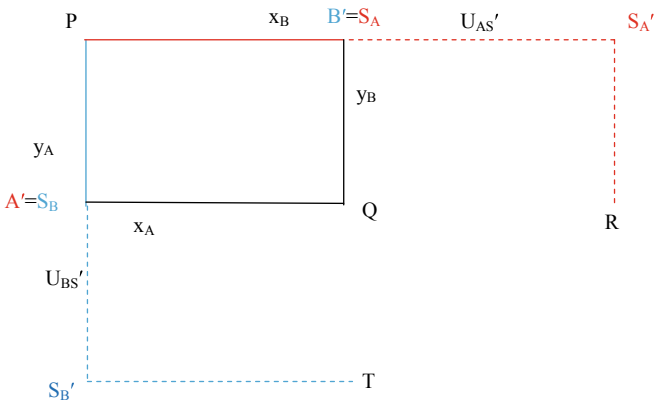

Fig. 8.4 Sectarian Hinduism: saving religious resources

However, consider a variant of the model (not shown) in which satiation point bundles are such that one god desires lower levels than the other god in both offerings, i.e. $x_A^S > x_B^S$ and $y_A^S > y_B^S$. God B is here a junior partner of god A, with more modest claims on both offerings. Then god A's satiation bundle dictates the size of the box, his satiation point S_A coincides with vertex B, and god B′ satiation curve U_{BS} is entirely contained within god A's satiation curve U_{AS}, unlike in Fig. 8.3. The reader can easily check that now the box can be downsized in two ways to eliminate the excess offerings, either by squeezing it from the left or from below, yielding a unique optimum allocation in each case; at this optimum, however, in the former case god A completely specializes in offering y and god B in x, while in the latter case the opposite specialization pattern occurs. It is easy to understand the reason for the difference: in this variant, unlike the one depicted in Figs. 8.3 and 8.4, junior god B is cheaper to satisfy than god A on both counts, so as long as he is to be retained in the pantheon at a Pareto-optimal allocation, there is no special gain to be had from granting him specialization in one offering rather than the other.

Admittedly, at any of the unique optima just discussed, the supplicant is worshiping both gods, though only one god in each field. As it stands, the model cannot handle complete dedication to one god in both fields, but it suggests how concave preferences can overcome divine rivalry, which is the essential point at issue. This in turn allows not only the resolution of the supplicant's dilemma but also the saving of resources previously committed to religion, and thus the attainment of a superior religious outcome for the supplicant. In this framework, a way of rationalizing the worship of both gods may be to think of one of the gods as a junior partner in a sect devoted to the other god, with his own limited jurisdiction—for example, Shiva in a Vaishnava sect (as mentioned in Sect. 6.1.1). The last-discussed variant of the Hindu model seems particularly suitable for this interpretation, as it allows the "choice" between specializing junior partner B in one offering or the other, and thus lends itself to alternative applications—for example, the inverse positioning of Vishnu in a Shaiva sect. Moreover, as we have seen, despite the enormous distance in theological sophistication and in historical context, "implicit" Norse theology near the end of the pagan period was evolving toward an outcome not so different from the Hindu one, although embryonic and not supported by a sophisticated priestly science but carried by the simple people's worldview and embodied in their worship practices. The Vikings' perceived freedom to "choose" one deity as one's all-purpose friend and protector, while not denying respect to the other deities in a secondary way, ultimately boils down to overcoming the fear of divine jealousy and making the jurisdictional overlap harmless, thus escaping from the supplicant's dilemma. The concave preference model, especially in its junior partner variant, seems adequate to accommodate this too.

The Zoroastrian response to the jealous gods problem of traditional polytheism was the creation of a hierarchical pantheon. By the new doctrine, Ahura Mazda is supreme and has an all-encompassing jurisdiction, while all the other divine beings—the great Amesha Spentas and the other *yazatas*—were created and appointed by him to preside over a well-defined field, without encroachment upon one another's jurisdiction; that is, they are specialized deities. In terms of religious history, the

old pantheon of *yazatas* became organized around the Amesha Spentas introduced by Zoroaster as helpers, cooperating with one another and with the supreme Lord for a common end and thus eliminating any rivalry (Boyce 1979, 41). As such, a *yazata*'s satiation level can be captured by a point on "his" side of the Edgeworth box, denoting the offering he cares for, while the other offering is considered as "neutral". By contrast, Ahura Mazda can still be depicted by strictly convex preferences culminating at an interior satiation point.

Figure 8.5 depicts the Zoroastrian theology, with the same box size and the same satiation point S_A for god A—now the supreme god Ahura Mazda—as in Fig. 8.1. By contrast, god B—now a *yazata*—cares only about good x and considers good y as "neutral"; hence his indifference curves are straight vertical lines starting from each point on the upper side of the box. His satiation bundles are described by point S_B and by the indifference line U_{BS} starting from it; this line passes through the satiation point S_B of Fig. 8.1, meaning that his satiation level of x, x_B^S, is unchanged. For clarity, an indifference curve U_{A2} is drawn to capture A's utility level at B's satiation point. As a consequence of these changes, the contract curve that in Fig. 8.1 crossed the SE quadrant, $S_A P\, S_B Q$, is replaced by the thickened horizontal segment PS_A, which is the set of efficient allocations representing the tradeoff the supplicant now faces between satisfying the two divinities. Thus scarcity of resources is still there, implying that the supplicant cannot satiate both divinities, but now it involves only offering x.

In Fig. 8.5, good y is in excess supply: starting from the allocations on PS_A and adding any quantity of y comprised in the quadrant $BS_B PS_A$ to a given quantity of x leaves both divinities indifferent. This immediately suggests that the box is inefficiently oversized as it ties down excess resources to offering y. If resources committed to offering y can be costlessly shifted to offering x, leaving the total expenditure unchanged, this can be improved upon. In Fig. 8.6, the box is shortened in height and lengthened in width with respect to Fig. 8.5 in such a way that the total expenditure of religious resources R is unchanged (the horizontal segment BB' in Fig. 8.6 is equal to the vertical segment PS_B in Fig. 8.5), thus turning all the excess

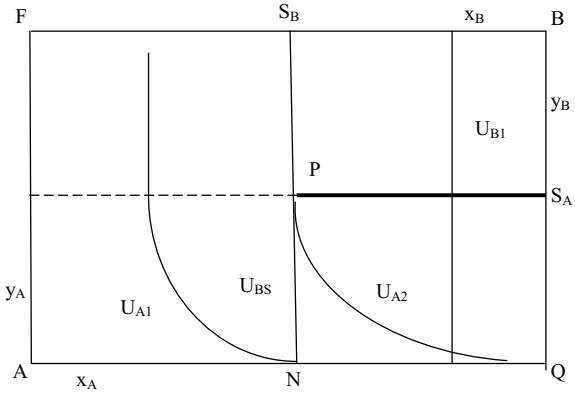

Fig. 8.5 Zoroaster's divine hierarchy: Ahura Mazda (**A**) and a *yazata* (**B**)

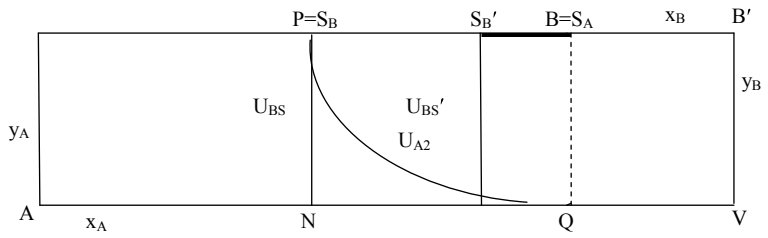

Fig. 8.6 Efficient allocation of worship under divine hierarchy

amount of y into additional x. A's position is unchanged, except that his satiation point S_A is now found on the upper side of the box, coinciding with previous origin B. B's geometry is, however, changed because his point of origin is moved from the original B to B' and therefore his satiation point is moved from the previous S_B (reproduced here from Fig. 8.5 for clarity) to $S_B{}'$. As a result, $S_B{}'$ still lies to the left of S_A but is closer and scarcity has been mitigated, as has the supplicant's tradeoff, by the additional x (the thickened segment $S_B{}'S_A$ is shorter than the segment PS_A in Fig. 8.5). However, depending on how large was the horizontal distance between satiation points S_A and S_B under polytheism (in Fig. 8.1) relative to the size of the box, the reallocation from y to x under Zoroastrianism might well be sufficient not just to reduce but to completely eliminate scarcity and achieve satiation of both divinities, thus doing away with the tradeoff (the new $S_B{}'$ would then lie to the right of S_A). In any case, the general result is that this reallocation—made possible by the reduction of B from god with encompassing jurisdiction, overlapping with A's, to specialized, subordinate yazata—allows the saving of resources previously tied to pleasing everyone on everything and thus the attainment of a superior religious outcome for the supplicant, reducing—even when not eliminating—his dilemma.

This conditional result seems apposite. As we have seen, unlike traditional Iranian polytheism (and its Indo-European counterparts), Zoroastrianism is a strenuous faith, laden with moral obligations, purity laws, and ritual observances. As a consequence, the expenditure of resources that determine the size of the Edgeworth box, and which may be in scarce supply compared to the full demands of the faith, here must be understood as opportunity costs. These include not just the direct cost of the offerings (and the upkeep of the priests) but also the value of the time and effort that the supplicant is asked to devote, and of the consumption that he is asked to forgo, for the discharge of his individual duties—duties which are particularly testing and time-consuming in this religion. So the supplicant may not be able to fully live up to the demands and may again be forced to submit to a (reduced) choice dilemma.

Two notes may usefully conclude our discussion. The first regards the flexibility of use of religious resources. We have assumed throughout that total offerings devoted to each outcome can be made variable subject to an overall resource constraint $R = \overline{x} + \overline{y}$, but we have used this property only in the Zoroastrian case, because in the Hindu case the saving of resources involves no shift from y to x but only reduction of both (cf. Fig. 8.4). Suppose now that for whatever reason, $\overline{x}$ and $\overline{y}$ are fixed offerings

in kind, so they cannot be converted from one use to the other—for example, offering x is required to be personal attendance at public rituals while offering y consists of spending time undergoing purification in isolation, with no substitution allowed. How would the Zoroastrian type of solution be affected? Clearly, there could be no restructuring of the box and no Fig. 8.6, hence no way to resolve or mitigate the supplicant's dilemma over offering x. However, waste could still be avoided simply by squeezing the box from above, in Fig. 8.5, until S_B coincides with P and B with S_A, getting rid of the excess offering y. This useless amount of y could not be turned into much-needed x but it would be saved for non-religious uses, which still represents a Pareto-improvement.

Finally, we have assumed throughout gods with overlapping, but non-coincident, jurisdictions. What if those jurisdictions were perfectly coincident? The two gods would in effect be identical twins, with identical satiation points as seen from each god's point of origin ($x_A^S = x_B^S$ and $y_A^S = y_B^S$), so by our rules of construction of the Edgeworth boxes, discussed at the beginning of the preceding subsection, the satiation point of each god would coincide with the origin vertex for the other god. It will be no surprise, then, that the rivalry between such heavyweights will be especially hard to manage. The reader can easily see the effects of this identity assumption by looking at our figures. In Fig. 8.1, the classical rival gods, there would be no room for "neutrals", all indifference curves would be strictly convex throughout the box, and the contract curve would cross the whole box from vertex A ($=S_B$) to vertex B ($=S_A$). In the Hindu case, with concave L-shaped preferences (Fig. 8.3), god A's satiation curve U_{AS} would coincide with the upper and right sides of the box FBQ, while god B's satiation curve U_{BS} would coincide with its lower and left sides FAQ, yielding two optimal allocations where these two curves meet, i.e. at the vertices F and Q. So the supplicant's dilemma would still go away, but no saving of resources would be possible because any squeezing of the box from any side would not only push the satiation points out of the box, which as we have seen is all right in the concave case, but would prevent the satiation curves from meeting, thus wiping out all the optimal allocations. Finally, following Zoroaster's reform of the polytheistic system (Fig. 8.5), the *yazata*'s satiation point S_B would coincide with vertex F, so the contract curve would become the whole upper side of the box, going from S_A to S_B. However, since there is no excess offering of y to drop or shift, there would be no way to reduce the supplicant's dilemma or to reduce the expenditure of religious resources inherited from the polytheistic system. On reflection, this last finding is neither surprising nor disappointing: it only goes to confirm that the whole Zoroastrian reform makes sense only if god A was not equal to god B under paganism, but was already in some ways superior to his rival, and precisely for this reason he was then chosen as supreme god (as we have seen in Sect. 4.2.1).[5] More generally, the whole problem of identical gods may largely be an artificial construct: if two gods had been really perceived as

[5] In the same vein, when god B was diminished to a *yazata* role by Zoroaster, he was advisedly given jurisdiction over offering x, not y: x is the offering for which his satiation claim under polytheism (in Fig. 8.1) was lower than for y—it was "cheaper" to make him lord of x. Had he been given jurisdiction over y, no restructuring of the box and saving of resources would have been feasible.

identical in every respect, people would have long since equated them as a single divinity and thus gotten rid of the imagined rivalry, as so often happened in the Greek and Roman world.

8.2 Rent-Seeking or Rent Dissipation: The Priestly Dilemma

The divine preference model of the previous section considered a direct transaction between a supplicant and the gods and made no mention of priests; we started with the benchmark case of rival gods and then proceeded to consider different ways to escape the supplicant's dilemma.[6] In most of the polytheistic systems under study, however, priests mediate these transactions, so in the same theological setting where people are transactional in their relationship with gods and gods have overlapping jurisdictions, we now introduce the priests. Multiple gods may—or indeed, should—be propitiated for the same reason, but propitiating gods is a costly business in a world with scarce resources. Priests receive rents for mediating between gods and people. Therefore, propitiating one god reduces resources (and therefore rents to priests) available to propitiate another. We model a simultaneous game between two priests in this polytheistic setting, focusing on the contrast between Greco-Roman and Hindu priests; the other polytheistic systems will be briefly taken up toward the end.

In this model, each priest can choose between a "systematic" religion (S) and an "accommodative" religion (A), defined as follows. Systematic religions focus on ritualistic consistency and purity rather than any particular god. Priests in a systematic religion are effective at mediating transactions between gods and people precisely because *all* priests follow the same or very similar rituals. If they do not, then bad things can happen, or at the very least good things may not happen when they are needed. Even though gods have overlapping jurisdictions, the focus on consistent rituals implies that ritual propriety is critical rather than which god is being propitiated; therefore, all available resources are used to satisfy ritualistic consistency—the identity of the targeted god is not consequential. Hence, ritualistic unity *makes* cultic transactions non-rival: these gods are not jealous of each other. Thus, systematic religions capture an essential element of classical Hinduism, non-rival gods, complementing the model of divine preferences outlined above. By contrast, accommodative religions do not require a unified ritual set but are focused on the specific god. Consequently, propitiating one god through one ritual does not satisfy another who demands his/her own ritual; hence, given overlapping jurisdictions, all gods with similar jurisdictions must be propitiated. With scarce resources, gods with overlapping jurisdictions are jealous of each other because they all demand a share of the limited earthly resource pie. As we have seen, this is a crucial feature of Greco-Roman religion.

[6] This section is based on the model developed in Basuchoudhary, Ferrero and Lubin (2020).

Each priest makes his choice at the same time as the other, capturing the idea that at any given point in time, belief systems are private information. This "choice" could be thought of as implying meta-preferences over beliefs, but it can be rationalized in an even simpler way as a choice between giving priority to the service of a given god rather than another or to the ritual forms and practices of the religious service—something which does not actually involve faith. Be that as it may, the choice of S or A becomes a strategy for each priest, so there are four possible outcomes in this model: S-type priests can coordinate with each other, and A-type priests can do the same; however, it is also possible for one priest to choose S while the other chooses A, and vice versa. These interactions have payoffs to each player, and the game is symmetric in the strategy space.

If a systematic priest can coordinate with another systematic priest who believes in the same set of rules, then they can enforce their rituals for all transactions. This is what Brahmanical priests did, enforcing the Shrauta rituals laid out in the Vedas and developed in the late-Vedic literature. These rituals might invoke different gods for different or similar reasons, but they could only be invoked by Brahmins using similar, codified rites. In the age of sectarian Hinduism, the gods again had overlapping jurisdictions; for example, Shaivites might propitiate Shiva to receive the same benefit that Vaishnavites might seek from Vishnu. In contrast to the earlier Vedic age, Shaiva and Vaishnava priests no longer performed the same rites but there remained a structural similarity of rituals across traditions because they stemmed from the same Shrauta foundation and were tailored to the sectarian loyalties. Therefore, in this setting, which god is propitiated is secondary as long as uniform rituals are followed, and devotees of a particular god do not have to propitiate multiple gods to get a benefit. Scarce earthly resources do not have to be divided across many gods, and therefore across many priests and the concomitant transactions costs, to secure a specific benefit. The highest possible *total* rents/payoffs, therefore, occur with the {S, S} strategy profile.

Accommodative priests, on the other hand, do not need other priests to coordinate on rituals, as ritual unity and consistency is the essence of the S religion but is irrelevant to the A religion. Therefore, the very act of challenge to a unified ritualistic system lays out the possibility that those systematic rituals are ineffective. S priests cannot really coexist with A priests then because the latter's choice is a blow to S priests, implying that an A priest gains market share, and rents, at the S priest's expense. Thus, in the {S, A} or {A, S} strategy profile, the A priest receives a larger share of rents than the S priest.

Of course, accommodative priests, by definition, can coexist with other accommodative priests. This is the {A, A} strategy profile. Given overlapping jurisdictions among the gods they serve, scarce resources imply that less is available to propitiate individual gods and, therefore, to reward individual priests in this strategy profile. Warriors hoping for victory will ask priests to propitiate both Ares and Athena for fear of angering one or the other if s/he was left out. However, in a world of limited resources, the priests of Ares and Athena have a lower share of available resources than when all priests follow ritualistic purity, and gods do not compete with each other.

Table 8.1 The priestly dilemma

	S	A
S	5, 5	0, 6
A	6, 0	2, 2

Our model, therefore, follows the structure of a simultaneous coordination game. We have structured the payoffs, in the light of the above description, like a Prisoner's Dilemma. The model does not have to be a Prisoner's Dilemma, as the religious structure described above may well be an Assurance game. However, keeping the payoff to deviating from S larger than the payoff to coordinating on S ($6 > 5$) allows us to discuss the possible mechanisms through which the Brahmanical system was resilient while the Greek and Roman system was not.[7] Table 8.1 represents this model. Obviously, in this setting, the Nash equilibrium is to accommodate—the {A, A} profile. Nevertheless, a simple application of the Folk Theorem implies that if the players are sufficiently patient, then the {S, S} profile is a subgame-perfect equilibrium. That is, if the game is repeated with some certainty δ, then {S, S} becomes an equilibrium outcome for a large enough δ.

Vedic rituals remained unwritten for perhaps a millennium; by definition, then, only initiates within hearing distance of a teacher could learn the rituals, and this limited the number of priests who could perform them. Moreover, there was an extreme emphasis on fidelity of transmission: rituals passed verbally from teacher to pupil with a great deal of certainty, and this continued even after the Vedas and later liturgical texts were written down. At the same time, the emphasis on *grihastha* (the disciplined householder) ensured these rituals were transmitted within families. Together, the reliance on auditory fidelity and a familial priesthood also created barriers to entry, which helped to keep rents high in the {S, S} equilibrium. As a result of these features, δ was high in the Brahmanical setting. It insulated the Hindu religion from accommodating pluralism by ensuring {S, S} as SPE.[8]

The priestly dilemma outcome was different in the Greco-Roman world. Priests had no incentive to teach rituals to anybody; priestly functions were official, and

[7] What would happen if the payoff to deviating from S were smaller than the payoff to coordinating? The game would be an Assurance game with a payoff-dominant equilibrium and a risk-dominant equilibrium. Here too, the relatively closed nature of the Brahmanical priesthood would create more particularized trust among them while ritual purity might generate generalized trust, leading to the payoff-dominant equilibrium. By contrast, the very accommodation among Greco-Roman priests and the lack of any focal ritual would potentially push their system toward the risk-dominant equilibrium. However, we chose the Prisoner's Dilemma version because we wanted to model the extreme case of large benefits to deviation. Thus, the model is hardwired with the sense that accommodating religions can bring large benefits to practitioners at the expense of systematic religions. If the systematic religion can survive this strong incentive to deviate merely strengthens our case.

[8] This inference is consistent with the idea that finitely lived agents with overlapping generations can achieve mutually beneficial equilibria if their life spans and overlapping generations are long enough (Kandori 1992). While actual life spans for Brahmins may be hard to know, the long apprenticeship within a familial priesthood common in the period we consider certainly suggests a more than usual "overlapping generation"—something completely missing in the Greco-Roman framework.

offices could not be passed down from father to son (except in some ancient Greek priesthoods controlled by gentile families). The theology of this world encouraged the dissipation of scarce resources in the propitiation of many gods to achieve the same purpose; so it is not surprising that, as we have seen (Sects. 2.1.3 and 2.2.3), the monetary incentive to even be a priest was low or negative (a cost, not a reward), and the value of priesthood was more a matter of signaling civic virtue and elite status than garnering rents. Thus, even if a priest was serious about his god, death would ensure a finite time horizon for the priest while the likelihood of repetition of the game (δ) was close to zero. We know that in this case {A, A} is the Nash equilibrium.

As we have seen, the rise of Shramanic movements made a dent in the Brahmanical priesthood, who lost significant followings and rents to them. However, the very intergenerational ritualistic continuity within the Brahmanical priesthood, coupled with the higher rents associated with a non-rival polytheism, inoculated Brahmanism from the competition by increasing certainty about the future of the repeated priestly dilemma game and therefore the expected payoff to maintaining the priesthood relative to any alternative. The ascetic sects, scorning the rituals themselves and lacking the family network, could not match this forward-looking attitude. So the Brahmins did maintain the coordination on the systematic strategy, holding Jainism at bay and outlasting Buddhism in India while stemming the tide of Abrahamic evangelism when it came.

By contrast, the very nature of pluralism in the Greco-Roman world worked in the opposite direction. The ever-expanding accommodation of rival gods and the lack of a professional, hereditary priestly class preserving a unified ritualistic system ensured an uncertain future for a priest's job and thus tended to slacken his commitment to the group. It is hard to care about a god whose priesthood confers little benefit on the living priest, the priesthood itself, and the children of the priest. If those priests saw people drifting away to new gods or new religions, they might have complained about the loss of ancient virtues and the decay of the world but would not have taken action. Nevertheless the system was stable for many centuries because it was never really challenged. When, however, an alternative pattern of civic virtue was forcefully promoted by Emperor Constantine and his successors, there was little incentive for the elite to keep signaling civic virtue by holding on to a priesthood of Jupiter. And they did not, making a relatively smooth transfer from a priest of Jupiter to a bishop of Christ when the state required it.

In addition to modeling the formation of a priests' monopoly as the outcome of an indefinitely repeated Prisoner's Dilemma game among them, another, complementary approach is to see this monopoly as an established incumbent subject to a threat of competitive entry and engaged in an entry deterrence game with the potential entrant (Ferrero 2014b, c). Two exclusive religions employ missionary effort to maximize the number of members (or converts) from a fixed population, like two boats that go out fishing from a common pool; membership maximization can be seen either as an effort to acquire new members or to retain existing members who might otherwise drift away to the competition. The incumbent enjoys a first-mover advantage: it can credibly precommit to a given effort level if entry occurs (like a preemptive capacity expansion), which will decrease its marginal cost of effort; this precommitment can

be such as to either deter entry, in which case the incumbent remains a monopolist, or accommodate the entrant in a Stackelberg equilibrium in which the incumbent is the leader. By making a prior decision on its effort commitment, the incumbent can in effect choose whether to let the entrant in or keep it out, whichever solution brings the incumbent higher benefits. The deterrence option turns out to be superior to the accommodation option if the entrant's entry cost is sufficiently high, and this cost can be further manipulated by the incumbent (like the building of an entry barrier) to its own advantage. Even if deterrence is optimal, however, the threat of entry distorts the incumbent's level of effort upward, and hence its benefits downward, relative to the outcome it would achieve if its monopoly went unchallenged. So in this equilibrium, entry is not observed but overcommitment of effort is. In the articles cited above, this entry deterrence model was applied, respectively, to Pauline Christianity' response to the threat of Jewish entry into the Gentile mission market and to the Catholic Church's response to the Protestant Reformation (the so-called Counter-Reformation). However, it could as well be applied to the Brahmins' response to the entry threat by the Shramanic sects, when the Brahmins engaged in an extraordinary effort to re-invent themselves and multiply and differentiate their services; and, conceivably, it could also be used as a model of a non-event, that is, a model of what could have happened if the Greco-Roman priests had managed to develop a corporate, unified response when faced with the Christian entry threat.

Our model of a priestly game is nicely complemented, and supported, by Tridimas' (2021) study of Greek religion. He asks if a priestly interest group, hence a monopolist supplier of religion, will come into being starting from a collection of single unorganized priests, and models the problem as a utility-maximizing decision by a priest about whether or not to join the group. The model shows that the interest group will fail to form if the cost of joining is greater than the benefit from the very start, and this will be the more likely, the higher is the number of gods worshiped and the higher the political power of the citizens. Focusing on the Greek case, the first factor increases the heterogeneity of the priestly class because Greek priests were specialized by god and temple, thus increasing the individual cost of joining, while it decreases the rents potentially available to the group through dispersion of resources, thus reducing the individual benefit. The second factor reduces the probability of successful rent extraction by the interest group because the Greek democratic city-states, unlike the kings of old, had no use for divine legitimation of their government. This is another way to reach the same result we found with the priestly dilemma game.

Turning to the other religions, we know next to nothing about the early centuries of Zoroastrianism and the role of the priests in it; we only know that at the end of the process, when its outcome is recorded in the Avesta, the role and prominence of the priesthood is greatly enhanced. We know something about the starting point though: the organization, recruitment, and functions of the Iranian priests were very similar to those of the Vedic priests; in contrast with the Indo-Aryans, they migrated to territories populated by kindred people and with broadly similar climate and resources, which lessened the problem of assimilating foreign local deities; and most importantly, as far as we know, they were never the target of challenges by

ascetic sects or other outsiders as the Brahmins were. There surely was conflict with the original "accommodationists" among their ranks, i.e. the priests devoted to the banned gods (Indra and the other *daevas*) who must have been popular among Iranian peoples, especially the warrior groups. But then they enjoyed a unique bonus unavailable to their Indian colleagues: a rupture in historical continuity set in a precise, if unknown, moment in time when a prophet initiated the building of the new religion from the bricks of the old one. All these factors together would have made the job of (S, S) coordination a relatively simpler matter for the Iranians than for their Indian cousins, so if the priestly dilemma model is adequate to capture the Indians, it will be all the more fit to the Iranians.

On an a priori basis, one would think that the model should also fit the Celts, whose druids in Gaul were reported by the classical writers, particularly by Caesar, as having an organization strongly reminiscent of the Brahmins'—indeed, one even going beyond that in the sense that they met annually in a general council to decide matters and were presided over by a chief druid, something that the Indian priests never had. Unfortunately we will never know because we have no reliable information after Roman times; in particular, we know nothing about the Irish priests, who appear in the extant Christian sources only as sorcerers trafficking with demons that St Patrick and his successors readily defeated. So there is no way of knowing how, if at all, they confronted the Christian onslaught and why, unlike their Indian colleagues, they went down so thoroughly as to leave no trace. Indeed, we do not even know if their theology evolved in any way over time to address the supplicant's dilemma problem, even before the rise of Christianity. So the Celtic case must remain an open question.

By contrast, the Germanic and Scandinavian case most definitely lies outside the purview of our priestly model. As we have seen (Sect. 3.2.2), even toward the end of the pagan period, not to say earlier, the Scandinavian priesthood was not just fragmented, uncoordinated, and subordinated to politics like the Greek and Roman ones: it existed only scantily and embryonically, most priestly functions being fulfilled by chiefs and kings as a side occupation among their secular duties. So, even aside from the emerging non-rivalry of their theology, it is no surprise that Christianization of these peoples went through basically unopposed.

8.3 Institutional Equilibria: A Game Between Gods and Priests

The idea of institutional equilibria (discussed in Sect. 7.6 above) can be made more rigorous in the framework of a coordination game—a type of game which has multiple equilibria and where the occurrence of one equilibrium rather than another depends on the players' ability to coordinate their moves. The players here are the priests and the gods. This may seem odd as gods do not "play" a game—they are what they are, their nature and personalities being inscribed in the cult and mythology of the

various religions surveyed in this book. Nevertheless, even though the gods' chosen "strategies" at any given time and place are the product of prior evolution, it may be instructive to think of the priests—these, more properly players—as playing their strategies against gods conceived in different ways in the different theologies and see what the outcome is. On reflection, the priests too are what they are depending on the religious organization in the different societies, but in the previous section we treated them as making strategic choices just as well. Here we consider not individual priests but the priestly class as a group, and similarly, not individual gods but the gods of a given theology as a group. Thus, our players are groups.

The priests' strategies are Corporate and Atomized, i.e. behaving as a corporate profession or as atomized practitioners of religious service. We change the terminology from the previous section because here we do not have a game among priests but one between priests and gods, so what counts is the institutional organization of the priesthood. Corporate priesthood was found with the Hindus (H), the Zoroastrians (Z), and the Celts (C), whereas atomized priesthood was found with the Greeks (G), the Romans (R), and the Vikings (V). The gods' strategies revolve around the most critical feature emphasized throughout our study: they can be Jealous or Non-jealous. As we know, gods are jealous with the Greeks, the Romans, and the Celts, while they are non-jealous with the Hindus, the Zoroastrians, and the Vikings. These strategies yield payoffs for the players. The payoffs of the two players are, strictly speaking, incommensurable: it is a rent for the priests and a level of utility for the gods; remember, however, that behind the gods' perceived satisfaction lies the very concrete satisfaction of the supplicant in his quest for benefits and protection from them. To avoid giving the impression that the two players are sharing in the "same" pie, we made the model non-symmetric, i.e. the players are not interchangeable.

In our model, there are two equilibria, one of which offers both players a higher payoff than the other; so if faced with a choice among equilibria, both players would agree on it. Achieving such a payoff-dominant equilibrium, however, requires coordination, but each player chooses his strategy independently and simultaneously with the other. If each player is uncertain about the choice of the other player and does not trust his willingness to cooperate, they may end up at the alternative, Pareto-inferior equilibrium because the payoff that each player achieves there does not depend on coordinating with the other player. This type of coordination game is called an Assurance game, exemplified by the classic Stag Hunt game.

Table 8.2 represents this model. By the usual convention, the pair of numbers in each cell gives the payoff of the Row player (the priests) and the payoff of the Column player (the gods), in this order; each cell also indicates the religion(s) where

Table 8.2 The gods and priests game

Priests	Gods	
	Non-jealous	Jealous
Corporate	HZ 6,5	C 2,4
Atomized	V 4,1	GR 4,3

the payoffs occur. There are two Nash equilibria in pure strategies, (Corporate, Non-jealous) and (Atomized, Jealous), of which the former payoff-dominates the latter as both its payoffs are higher. Note that the payoff-dominated equilibrium (Atomized, Jealous) is "safer" in the sense that each player can achieve an equal or higher payoff if the other player deviates from that equilibrium (if Row plays Atomized while Column plays Non-jealous, he still gets 4; if Column plays Jealous while Row plays Corporate, he gets $4 > 3$); this is not true for the (Corporate, Non-jealous) equilibrium, which requires coordination between the players to be implemented. Additionally, to further emphasize this aspect, we gave the (Atomized, Jealous) equilibrium the property of risk dominance, a refinement of the Nash equilibrium concept introduced by Harsanyi and Selten (1988): this equilibrium is less risky, hence the more uncertain players are about the actions of the other player(s), the more likely they will choose the strategy corresponding to it.[9]

The relationships between the numbers in Table 8.2 are meant to capture the differences among the religions of interest, as discussed at length in this book—keeping in mind that only relative values (greater or lesser than or equal to) matter, not absolute values per se. If priests are a corporate profession (upper row), their rents are higher when they exercise their monopoly in the service of non-jealous gods (6), like the Hindus and the Zoroastrians, than when they have to appease a range of jealous gods (2), like the druids; on the other hand, if priests are atomized (lower row), their rents are about the same (4) when they are one with the social elite honoring non-jealous gods, like the Vikings, or when they are part-time specialized officials servicing jealous gods, like the Greeks and the Romans. From another angle, if gods are non-jealous (left column), priests fare better when they are corporate (6) than when they are atomized (4) because the corporate organization makes them central in the performance of cult; on the contrary, if gods are jealous (right column), priests fare better when they are atomized (4) than when they are corporate (2) because the druids of the latter structure, unlike the Greco-Roman priests of the former, were required for the performance of all sacrifices and hence, presumably, under a much greater stress to please all the gods with their idiosyncrasies.

Turning to the gods, non-jealous gods (left column) attain a far higher utility when priests are corporate (5) than when priests are atomized (1) because in the former case, following the Hindu and Zoroastrian reforms, the supplicant' dilemma is eliminated or reduced whereas in the latter case the Viking public cult is kept to modest proportions; on the other hand, jealous gods (right column) presumably received a somewhat more systematic cult when managed by corporate priests like the druids (4) than when serviced by the fragmented Greek and Roman priesthood

[9] Technically, a strategy pair risk-dominates another if the product of the two players' losses from deviation is higher for the former than for the latter. If Row plays Corporate and Column deviates to Jealous, Rows gets 2; if instead Row himself deviates to Atomized, he loses 2 if Column plays Non-jealous but avoids losing 2 if he plays Jealous. At the same time, if Column plays Non-jealous and Row deviates to Atomized, Column gets 1; if instead Column himself deviates to Jealous, he loses 1 if Row plays Corporate but avoids losing 2 if he plays Atomized. So the product of the losses from deviation is (2–4) (1–3) = 4 for (Atomized, Jealous) while it is (4–6) (4–5) = 2 for (Corporate, Non-jealous): the former strictly risk-dominates the latter.

(3). From another angle, if priests are corporate (upper row), gods achieve a greater satisfaction when they are non-jealous and the supplicant's dilemma is resolved (5) than when they are jealous and the dilemma is in place (4); on the contrary, if priests are atomized (lower row), gods are better serviced when they are jealous (3) than when they are non-jealous (1) because in the former case the public cult is targeted to controlling the gods' touchiness whereas in the latter case the anxiety about the gods' possible neglect is allayed so that the pressure to worship is reduced.

If, then, the relationships among the values in Table 8.2 make sense as stylized descriptions of the fundamental character of theology and priesthood in our religions, our modeling approach gives a crisp meaning to the idea of alternative institutional equilibria: they are the two Nash equilibria in an Assurance game of gods and priests, and they are "institutional" because they combine divine preferences with priestly institutions. Precisely because they were equilibria, i.e. configurations toward which the religious system tends to gravitate, these alternative arrangements were stable and long lasting: in both of them, the priesthood structure was congruent with the theology. In the (Corporate, Non-jealous) equilibrium, the Hindu and Zoroastrian priests managed to resolve the quandary that beset Indo-European polytheism, make the gods non-jealous, and thereby achieve an efficient allocation of religious resources and maximize the rents for themselves – which is why we called it a payoff-dominant equilibrium. In the (Atomized, Jealous) equilibrium, the Greco-Roman priests submitted to the pervasive and growing problem of overlapping jurisdictions among jealous gods by adjusting to it and taking a low profile, making religious service a part-time, specialized business, and forgoing any prospect of exercising a monopoly power and claiming the associated rents. The stability of such an arrangement, despite its ubiquitous and growing inefficiency, was due to inertia, or the lack of any viable alternative and any serious challenge before the Christian onslaught in the Roman Empire. There is a sense in which, absent a decisive effort at reform on the part of the priestly class, this Pareto-inferior equilibrium was the natural outcome of the evolution of Indo-European polytheism as we have described it: an outcome that requires not action but inaction, and which therefore is safer—which is why we called it a risk-dominant equilibrium.

Conversely, the model makes clear why the Viking and the Celtic arrangements failed to take hold and proved brittle and transient: they were not equilibria of a coordination game, because in both, even if in opposite ways, the theology and the priestly institutions were mismatched. The Vedic Brahmins, who were apparently so similar to the early druids, may have been in a similar predicament, described by the cell (Corporate, Jealous) which is out of equilibrium; but then, under the pressure of competition from the ascetic groups, they found the strength and the inventiveness to turn the theology around and land on the (Corporate, Non-jealous) equilibrium. Similarly, the earliest Greeks too—the Mycenaeans, and perhaps their successors in the Dark Age from which no information survives—may have had an aristocratic, professional, hereditary priestly class linked with the royal palace, which could perhaps be housed in the same cell as the druids and the Vedic priests since they pantheon was already oversized and conflict-ridden. But then, under the pressure of the new democracy of the polis and the obvious difficulty of handling an

ever-growing pantheon, they gave up any residual of corporate priesthood, took the line of least resistance, and landed on the safer (Atomized, Jealous) equilibrium.

8.4 The Missionary Expansion: A Discriminating Cooperative Model

For ease of exposition, we first set up and solve the mission problem with reference to the Zoroastrian mission in the Iranian setting.[10] We then show that, by suitable reinterpretation, the model can also be used to rationalize the Brahmanical expansion in the classical Hindu period.

Traditional polytheistic religions are not missionary enterprises and one does not "convert" to them (except perhaps spouses and slaves), so we can think of traditional Iranian religion as a religious community that from time immemorial had structured itself in such a way as to provide the maximum net benefits to its members; alternatively, one that had acquired a level of membership that was efficiently maximizing net benefits, or welfare, per capita. The switch to Zoroastrian monotheism and the start of a mission to convert other Iranian peoples inevitably involved, on the one hand, a fall in per capita benefits because the community was diluted and the priests distracted toward missionary work, and on the other hand an increase in the marginal and average cost borne by members, as new members were naturally more and more difficult to convert and retain as the expansion proceeded. Nevertheless, the switch to mission—the road that ultimately led to an empire-wide religion—could be made acceptable to the original community and still remain viable if the *total* net benefits generated by the *new* members were sufficient to both compensate the old members *and* leave a residual—a rent—to support the expanded priestly class that the missionary spread of Zoroastrianism, as we have seen, entailed. Thus described, the move involved the equivalent of a kind of wage discrimination—unequal post-transfer benefits for old and new members.

If we think of religious consumption as the output of a household production process that employs only the members' "labor" as an input, the traditional community equilibrium described above can be modeled as the solution to the problem of a producer cooperative that chooses its membership level to maximize net benefits per member—measured as the difference between gross benefits and cost of participation. Starting from here, expansion yields net benefits from new members; these can be partly siphoned off to compensate the original members and partly used to provide a rent to the new priests, while still leaving a nonnegative residual net benefit to the new members themselves. Hence, the new equilibrium level of total membership is constrained by the condition that the total net benefits generated by the new members be strictly greater than the total losses of the old members. However, an even better solution is one that turns this constraint into an objective, i.e. one which maximizes the difference between net benefits from new members and losses of old members.

[10] This section is based on the model developed in Ferrero (2021).

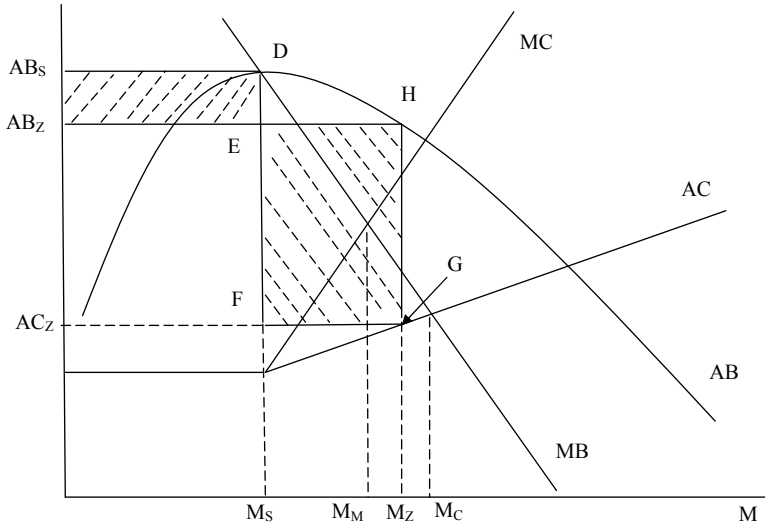

Fig. 8.7 The Zoroastrian mission and the priests' rents

Figure 8.7 depicts the Zoroastrian mission problem and its solutions. The above assumptions imply that average benefits are first increasing and then decreasing with membership, and that the optimal membership of the traditional community occurs where average benefits (*AB*) peak, i.e. where they equal marginal benefits (*MB*) from additional members, determining membership M_S and benefits per member AB_S. The subscript S denotes the equilibrium of a traditional community that functions as a closed sect which maximizes its members' average benefits; this solution is analytically identical to the classic solution of a dividend-maximizing producer cooperative.[11] Missionary expansion, following the Zoroastrian reform, starts from here. As posited above, unlike with the old members (who have long since adjusted to sect life and can be taken to be homogeneous), the average cost (*AC*) and marginal cost (*MC*) of joining are assumed increasing with new members because, at least beyond a certain point, conversion involves people who are more removed from the original group and whose opportunity cost is therefore higher.[12] Seen from another angle, the Zoroastrian community enjoys potential market power as it is the only

[11] The theory of the producer cooperative or labor-managed firm is old but seems now out of fashion. For a good introduction to the model see the survey by Bonin and Putterman (1987) and the literature cited therein. A full analytical treatment is in Ireland and Law (1982). Nowhere in this literature, however, is our special constrained optimization problem addressed.

[12] Although we have next to no information on the prehistoric spread of the religion, it may well be that for an initial range of expansion the average cost of membership would have decreased, for example because of a fixed cost or of network effects. The Appendix to Ferrero (2021) shows that, under some conditions, the Zoroastrian solution can survive this extension. Unlike in the increasing cost case, however, it may (though need not) imply a level of membership lower than in the "monopsony" solution because the rapid expansion of *M* triggered by the decreasing *AC* also involves a rapid fall of *AB* and hence a large loss for the old members.

provider of that brand of religion, and so it faces a supply curve of members which will sooner or later slope upward; symmetrically, the marginal benefit curve *MB* can be thought of as its demand curve for members. Even through its expansion process, however, it remains a cooperative organization bound by the constraint to protect the welfare of the original group—in effect, a discriminating cooperative that redistributes benefits from new to old members. To proceed further, we need some simple math.

With little loss of generality, we use quadratic average and marginal benefit functions and linear average and marginal cost functions to derive easily comparable closed-form results. Let $TB = \alpha M^2 - \beta M^3$ (with $\alpha, \beta > 0$) be the religious community's total benefits as a function of membership M. This yields average benefits per member:

$$AB = \alpha M - \beta M^2 \tag{8.3}$$

and marginal benefits:

$$MB = 2\alpha M - 3\beta M^2 \tag{8.4}$$

Function (8.3) has an interior maximum, which is found by maximizing it with respect to M and coincides with the value of M that equates (8.3) and (8.4) (see Fig. 8.7). This yields the level of membership M_S:

$$M_S = \alpha/2\beta \tag{8.5}$$

This is the standard solution of a producer cooperative that determines its membership so as to maximize benefits (or income) per member, and will be the solution that describes our traditional community equilibrium. Note that this solution is not responsive to the availability of outsiders who might be willing to join the community to partake in the benefits (for a producer cooperative, the labor supply), for, on the traditional assumption that all members receive the same benefits, their admission would lower the existing members' average benefits.

When the community starts on its missionary expansion, the outsiders' average opportunity cost of joining (in production, the labor supply price or wage) becomes relevant. This average cost is constant, and lower than average benefits, for the old members up to M_S and then increases with every new recruit as $AC = \gamma M$, $\gamma > 0$, for simplicity; the corresponding marginal cost is $MC = 2\gamma M$. Hence both the *AC* and the *MC* curves cross the *AB* curve in its decreasing region, which implies that, at the starting equilibrium M_S, there are people whose cost of joining is lower than the current average benefit level, so they are willing to join.

As benchmarks, it is useful to compute two standard solutions. The first is the solution that maximizes *total* benefits net of the cost (in production, total profits) without exploiting the community's market power but taking average cost as if it were a market parameter (like a market wage)—in effect, the "competitive" solution *C*. This solution is found by equating *AC* to marginal benefits *MB* (Eq. 8.4) and yields

membership M_C:

$$M_C = (2\alpha - \gamma)/3\beta \tag{8.6}$$

The second benchmark is the solution that maximizes total net benefits exploiting the community's market power vis-à-vis potential new members—in effect, the "monopsony" solution M. This is found by equating MB (Eq. 8.4) to marginal cost MC and yields membership M_M:

$$M_M = 2(\alpha - \gamma)/3\beta \tag{8.7}$$

Obviously, as can be easily checked, $M_C > M_M$.

As explained above, the condition for the missionary expansion to be both viable and acceptable to the traditional community is that the *total net* benefits brought in by the *new* members be strictly greater than the total losses incurred by the *old* members from the lowering of their traditional benefits: this is the *compensation constraint*. If the former is greater than the latter, it allows for full compensation of the old members while still leaving a positive residual to both finance the missionary expansion and provide nonnegative net after-tax benefits to the new members. At any membership level $M > M_S$, the difference between these two measures is:

$$(AB - AC)(M - M_S) - (AB_S - AB)M_S \tag{8.8}$$

where AB_S is found by substituting (8.5) into (8.3).

Calculation shows that (8.8) is greater than zero at both M_C and M_M, satisfying the compensation constraint. However, the community can do better than either and turn the compensation constraint into the *objective* of a maximization problem. Since inequality of benefits between old and new members is necessary for the former to agree on the mission, if we think of the community as seeking the most profitable expansion over and above full compensation of the old members, this is tantamount to maximizing (8.8) with respect to M. Using the above expressions to substitute into (8.8), the FOC for a maximum is:

$$2(\alpha - \gamma)M - 3\beta M^2 + (\alpha\gamma)/(2\beta) = 0 \tag{8.9}$$

which can be rewritten as:

$$2\alpha M - 3\beta M^2 - 2\gamma M = -(\alpha\gamma)/(2\beta) = -\gamma M_S < 0 \tag{8.9'}$$

or:

$$2\alpha M - 3\beta M^2 - \gamma M = \gamma M - (\alpha\gamma)/(2\beta) = \gamma(M - M_S) > 0 \tag{8.9''}$$

The positive root of (8.9) yields the Zoroastrian solution M_Z:

$$M_Z = \left[2(\alpha - \gamma) + \sqrt{4(\alpha - \gamma)^2 + 6\alpha\gamma}\right]/6\beta \tag{8.10}$$

Direct comparison of (8.5), (8.6), (8.7), and (8.10) shows that $M_S < M_M < M_Z < M_C$. Expressions (8.9′) and (8.9″) provide analytical proofs of these results. The LHS of (8.9′) is $MB - MC$, which is equal to zero at M_M but negative here, proving that $M_Z > M_M$. The LHS of (8.9″) is $MB - AC$, which is equal to zero at M_C but positive here, proving that $M_Z < M_C$. Thus the Zoroastrian solution turns out to lie somewhere in between the competitive and the monopsony solutions, as shown in Fig. 8.7.

As can be seen in the figure, the move from M_S to M_Z (or to any other level of M greater than M_S) would not be acceptable to the old members without redistribution and discrimination because average benefits fall from AB_S to AB_Z. The outcome at this equilibrium is shown by the two shaded rectangles: the area EFGH measures the net benefits from the new members while the area AB_S DE AB_Z measures the total losses of the old members; the difference between these two areas, though positive also at other membership levels such as M_M and M_C, reaches a maximum at M_Z. This confirms that the switch to missionary monotheism can be Pareto-improving and therefore unanimously accepted.

We have hardly any direct observation of the missionary, pre-state period of Zoroastrianism, so one wonders what the compensation to the old members may have been then. Enhanced reputation and influence, which facilitated profitable trade connections in the newly converted territories, are a fair guess (cf. Boyce 1982, 7–9, for the spread of Zoroastrianism in western Iran). In the longer run, however, there was one great new benefit: the fire temples, which began under the Achaemenians and spread all over the empire, including the northeastern region of the Iranian plateau which was the homeland of the original Zoroastrian community. These "old members" surely drew benefits from such institutionalization of the cult—witness the fact that the fire temples became a fixture of Zoroastrian communities the world over, down to the tiny groups surviving today.

Turning to India, we have seen that the Brahmins' obsessive concentration on their own uniqueness and separate identity as a class allowed them to overcome the dark period of the ascetics' rise and the concomitant weakening of the traditional royal demand for their *shrauta* services. They managed to successfully promote themselves as ascetics of a new kind and at the same time superior providers of non-religious services to the royalty and other elite. This happened through the Brahmins' migration to new lands in South India and outside the subcontinent, often at the behest of local rulers; hence, it must have involved a growth in the numbers of "active" Brahmins, i.e. those who not only qualified as such by their training and lifestyle but also found employment as professional providers of the above services. We can then call this movement a missionary movement, on the understanding, however, that their mission was not about converting anybody to new gods or theological beliefs—although they did carry the new Hindu sects with them and helped to assimilate local, foreign deities into those sects—but about "converting" people to Brahmanism itself, i.e. the ideology of Brahmanical supremacy. At the same time, this renewal and elevation

was conditional on their ability to maintain a tight, closely guarded monopoly of their services and prevent uncontrolled entry into their ranks, as the model of the priestly dilemma in the previous section made clear; and this naturally implies that the migrant Brahmins would be careful to protect the welfare of their brethren "left behind" in their original homeland.

On these premises, the model introduced above for the Zoroastrian mission can readily be taken to describe the Brahmanical "mission", with M now denoting not the members or adherents of the Zoroastrian religion but the active Brahmins and their patrons. There was a vast potential demand for the new religious and nonreligious services of this priestly class, while individual costs of joining would naturally be the higher, the farther away from the starting point they were in both geographical and cultural terms, consistent with the assumptions of the model. In this setting, it seems appropriate to posit that the Brahmin order's objective was to seek the most profitable expansion in their numbers and influence consistent with fully compensating the old members for their losses from the transition. After all, there is nothing in the technical machinery of the model that is specifically religious. All it takes is that the group functions as a producer cooperative engaging in benefit discrimination to maintain its unity and cohesiveness throughout its growth process, or else its market power would fall apart—and this seems like a perfect description of a self-perpetuating, self-congratulating *varna* like the Brahmins'.

Chapter 9
Conclusions

Abstract This chapter summarizes the main findings and emphasizes the parsimonious nature of the economic assumptions and models employed. It suggests that the systematic joining of theology and priestly institutions may offer new insights to comparative religious historians, while showing economists the power of their toolbox to shed light on theology and the fate of religions. It then discusses several problematic aspects, including the contrast between monotheism and polytheism, the role of the nexus between morality and afterlife, and the unusual results regarding competition and monopoly, due to the understudied feature of divine jealousy and the need to provide insurance against it. Finally, some suggestions for future research are offered, centered on the differential role of migration in the evolution of different religious traditions.

The core findings of this book can be simply summarized. It may well be, though it is controversial, that the ancestors of the historical Indo-European religions had a tri-functional pantheon with a clear division of tasks among the gods, and that the priests occupied the leading rank in the corresponding social hierarchy. But even if that was the case, it did not last, at least not uniformly across the daughter religions; specifically, it did not survive the great migrations. As the PIE peoples started off in different directions, thus settling into radically new environments and societies and coming into contact with different indigenous religions, the pristine simplicity of that pantheon was lost. Whether by absorption and assimilation of indigenous deities or by endogenous evolution, Indo-European deities started to multiply and their jurisdictions to broaden and encroach upon one another. We have seen that both developments can be explained as rational choices. This last development—the broadening of jurisdictions—might in principle be beneficial and lead to the conception of a deity with all-encompassing powers and universal competence, which could be "chosen" by a supplicant as "his" all-purpose protector god or goddess. But divine jealousy stands in the way of such a welfare-improving development. Under divine jealousy, the proliferation of gods and tasks leads to a growing confusion of assignments and a consequent build-up of uncertainties and fears of danger from neglecting a relevant deity, which only an ever-expanding cult system can hope to keep under control, with obvious consequences for material costs. We have seen that

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conceiving of gods as jealous is rational under the given informational constraints—an inbuilt insurance mechanism against adversities. This is what we have called the supplicant's dilemma. It was shown to have been present in at least incipient stage in the Celtic, Germanic, Vedic, and Iranian religions and to have literally exploded to staggering proportions in the Greek and Roman religions and still further in the Greco-Roman one, the fusion product that thrived in the Roman Empire.

Among the religions we have examined, it seems that a way out of the supplicant's dilemma could only occur in two ways: a spontaneous evolution of supplicant beliefs from the grassroots, as with the Vikings, or a determined theological reform undertaken by priests, as in Iran and India. In every case, the key to a solution was taming the jealousy or shielding people from its harmful effects—in effect, a problem of insurance against known and unknown risks, and one of staggering proportions. Any solution had to be a replacement of the enormously burdensome insurance represented by the multiplication of gods and cults with a more economical one that covered also the other gods' jealousy. This, then, is our answer to the question posed by the subtitle of this book, "How to deal with too many gods": one could specialize the gods and hence remove the jurisdictional overlap and the jealousy with it—a fanciful return to the mythical prototype, which was evidently out of the question; or one could leave the jealousy in place but drastically shrink the number of overlapping gods and hence downsize the problem; or one could accept, and indeed expand to a universal compass, the overlapping spheres of influences of the gods but remove the jealousy problem by allowing each deity to grant his worshipers protection from the displeasure of the other, neglected deities; or, finally, one could dispose of the jealousy by arranging and harmonizing all the gods (while possibly casting some out of the pantheon) in a hierarchy in which they all have their appointed place and function subordinate to a supreme god—a functional specialization arising not spontaneously by chance, as in the mythical prototype, but by design. The last two options amount to, in effect, offering people a divine insurance policy with universal coverage.

To be successful, however, these theological reforms require an agent that has both the ability and the incentives to provide the required insurance. Here we see the critical importance of the other element of the supposed ancestral religious structure: a cohesive priestly class which, in its own self-interest, could be the agent of change if needed. Like their pantheons, the priesthoods of the historical Indo-European religions too evolved in different directions: a cohesive, generalist, professional priestly class was maintained in India, Iran, and the Celtic lands; the priests were just barely and sporadically distinct from the aristocratic elite in the Germanic lands; and in Greece and Rome they were specialized, non-professional, part-time officers, totally subordinate to the political system of the city or the state as the case might be. Unassisted by a powerful priesthood, the Vikings apparently embarked on the third course listed above—individual choice of a personal, near-universal protective deity—in a do-it-yourself way, by a spontaneous evolution of popular belief, and predictably they did not proceed very far nor were they able to consolidate this intuition into an organized theology.

A professional, monopolistic priesthood, however, turned out to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for such a lasting theological reform. The Celts did have

such a priesthood but, for reasons that are lost to us, their druids did not decide to reform and went down with their unreformed, messy pantheon. By contrast, their Indian and Iranian colleagues did reform and manage to escape from the supplicant's dilemma: the former by taking the same course as the Vikings (which we have termed parallel monotheisms) but in an organized, institutionalized way and supported by an impressive doctrinal literature; the latter by taking the last course listed above (divine hierarchy, or single monotheism) and unifying the priestly class and its scriptures around it. Neither outcome was inevitable, however: the priesthood in both religions was a decentralized profession and so the prospect of continuing, stable interaction in the future was necessary to ensure the superiority of the cooperative outcome over the individual incentive to defect. We know what exogenous factors triggered the superiority of the cooperative, or monopolistic, outcome: in India, an existential threat to the Brahmins posed by the competition from the ascetic movements and the withering of their traditional sources of patronage; in Iran the vision, or revelation, of a great prophet. In India, then, competition from the outside fostered monopoly by pushing the Brahmins to close ranks. We also know that in both cases the success of the priests involved not just a reordering of the old pantheon but a radical change in it: in Iran the disowning of some of the major pagan gods, in India the transition from the Vedic pantheon to the pantheon of sectarian Hinduism. And, in both countries, success was underscored by the priests' ability to expand their influence well beyond their traditional homeland while maintaining their support there. Such theological and organizational feats were definitely beyond the reach of the Vikings left to their own devices. And, although we have no sound information about the terminal stage of the Celtic religion, the absence of either trigger—outside competitive challenge or prophecy—might arguably lie behind the druids' failure.

Finally, in Greek and Roman paganism not only were outside challenges or prophetic revelation unknown, but the priestly agent itself was lacking. There was no incentive for those priests to join in collective action and cooperate for their common good qua priests; so even the more limited but real improvement listed above, which could have been pursued without a theological turnaround—the reduction, if not elimination, of multiplicity and overlap in the pantheon—was never tried, and that spelled the doom of Greco-Roman religion when faced by the existential threat of the rise of Christianity to imperial religion. So our analysis may be conveniently wrapped up in the definition of two institutional equilibria in the tangled relationship of theology and priesthood: a low-risk, inefficient equilibrium featuring jealous gods and atomized, non-cooperative priests in the Greek and Roman religion, a spontaneous order produced by slow accretion, which was stable by virtue of inertia until and unless seriously challenged; and a high-payoff, efficient equilibrium featuring non-jealous gods and corporate, cooperative priests in Hinduism and Zoroastrianism, one achieved by purposeful action and design.

The foregoing summary encapsulates the main findings of this research. To reiterate, this is the first application of economic methodology and economic models to the study of polytheism, a modeling built on the data of its Indo-European branch and specifically tailored to it. An effort has been made to make the modeling parsimonious in its assumptions and to employ only those tools that seemed useful for

the purpose at hand, and indeed required by it, rather than wandering off into free-wheeling, unsubstantiated suggestions—a license sometimes indulged by applications of economics to foreign, non-traditional fields. The assumptions have been limited to the bare minimum that economists need to ply their trade and which require no special pleading: the transactional nature of the dealings between men and gods under polytheism; the rational attitude of all participants—supplicants, priests, and gods—who try to achieve their maximum satisfaction or utility from such transactions within the limits set by the resources, information, and powers available to them; the capacity of organized interest groups, such as a professional priesthood where it exists, to achieve levels of utility or extract rents that would not be available to them under atomistic behavior or unbridled competition; and the universal fact of life that people, in religion as elsewhere, are averse to risk and willing to seek protection or buy insurance against it. As to the models, we have a model of divine preferences constructed as a sequence of Edgeworth boxes, which illustrates the supplicant's dilemma and the theological escapes from it; a model of a Prisoner's Dilemma game among priests, which illustrates the incentive to defect from cooperation and the ways to overcome it; a model of an Assurance game between gods and priests, which illustrates the two institutional equilibria described above; and a model of the missionary expansion of a cooperative religious organization that protects the benefits accruing to the old members as a condition for the expansion to be acceptable to them and hence for the organization to hold together through the expansion. Of these, the model of divine preferences is perhaps the most innovative in conception as it brings standard utility theory directly to bear on the analysis of a pantheon. A further step, not taken in this book, would be to complete it by moving from our textbook version with two agents (gods) and two goods (fields of offerings) to a general model with many gods and many offerings, which would be able to account explicitly, and not just by implication, for the number of gods in a pantheon.

Being parsimonious in its assumptions and in the tools it employs, our approach may hopefully suggest to religious historians and comparativists a new way of looking at the big picture of the historical evolution of these religions, one based on the interaction of theology and priestly institutions; of course, there is no suggestion that these should be the only factors at work, only that they should be among the key ingredients of any explanation of the diverging historical outcomes. This interaction of theology and priests often transpires from the scholarly works on each religion used as sources in this book, but it does not seem to have been previously applied to the whole Indo-European field in a systematic way. Put differently, while historians often tend to focus on their trees, we have used their trees as best we could but tried to see the forest for the trees. There was, and still is, a previous attempt at drawing the big comparative picture, represented by Dumézil's school, but whatever its merits in other respects, we have seen that it holds no answer to our questions—indeed, it does not even ask the fundamental question that motivated this study, i.e. why and how some branches of Indo-European polytheism managed to survive while others died out. So a new start seemed worthwhile. To economists, beyond the various details of the general argument and the intrinsic interest of the topic itself, the main reason of theoretical interest of the present work may be to show that

the economist's basic toolbox can be applied, without resort to any adhockery, to such an apparently forbidding subject as theology, and through it, it has something meaningful to say about the grand problems of the birth, development, decline, and death of religions—which is saying something for those who care about such methodological matters.

To complete this balance sheet, a few comments about less obvious aspects of our approach and results are in order. First, picking up on comments scattered at various points in this book, it needs to be emphasized that our main line of argument was not meant to be, and cannot be construed as being, either a case for monotheism (as conventionally understood) or a theory of the transition from polytheism to monotheism. The importance of this point cannot be overstated as ancient and modern discussions of polytheism, including much scholarly work on its history, are shot through with the ubiquitous idea that polytheism has all but disappeared today because monotheism is "obviously" so superior. Our journey through this book is at variance with such heavily Christianized accounts. Our focus throughout has been polytheism, or rather, the polytheism embodied in the historical religions of one ethno-linguistic group, and the problems and tensions that bred within it and which, if unaddressed, could have brought it down. Greco-Roman paganism failed to address the problems and eventually collapsed, but it cannot be said that its failure "explains" the rise and triumph of Christianity. The latter was an exogenous factor, not a product of, or a response to, the inefficiency of polytheism. In a parallel universe where everything was the same as here but Christianity never arose, Greco-Roman religion might well have persisted indefinitely. On the other hand, the inefficiency of that unreformed polytheism did make the Christian success relatively easy as the incentive to seriously resist it in the imperial elite was lacking; but where another, reformed version of polytheism had been developed, as in India and Iran, Christianity, and later Islam, had a much harder time fighting their way in. Furthermore, we have seen that the contrast between polytheism and monotheism as mutually exclusive polar opposites is largely a Christian construction, as both Hinduism and Zoroastrianism managed to devise ways toward monotheism that did not involve the total rejection of all that came before. In another parallel universe where all else was the same but the Greek and Roman priests (and, a fortiori, the Viking priests) had magically found a way of overcoming their political dependency and acting together as a professional interest group, they might have been able to reform the pantheon and thereby garner more rents for themselves. Then, a reformed polytheism (in one of the various ways described above) could well have taken hold in the Mediterranean or in the Nordic countries, making a much harder target for the Christian attack.

Therefore, our book does not support the claim that monotheism proved historically superior to polytheism: to put it bluntly, the Christians were so successful only because the Greco-Roman priests were such hopeless failures; so, if anything, what was proved was the superiority of one priesthood (or one religious organization in general) over another. The message of this book, in a nutshell, might be that *some* monotheisms turn out to be superior to *some* polytheisms: the first "some" because of the range of options mentioned above (parallel versus single monotheism, reform of preexisting polytheism versus brand-new religion), the second "some" because of

the range of possible reforms of polytheism (including none).[1] Then, as mentioned in Sect. 6.2.3, an adequate account of this contrast would have to zoom in on the polytheistic elements that worked their way into the rising Christianity and bloomed into full-fledged cultic institutions in the Roman Catholic Church—an old scholarly theme that would deserve a separate study. So the story of the life and death of Indo-European polytheism is not a showcase of the transition to monotheism as conventionally understood; a theory of that transition will have to wait for a study of other polytheistic systems, and for another book.

Another issue that deserves comment is the nexus between morality and afterlife. We touched on it in Sect. 7.5, but the point bears repeating. It is almost commonplace in religious studies, including the social sciences, that religion is a cornerstone of morality in that it defines criteria of righteous behavior and appoints a god—himself a high moral being—to monitor and enforce them; even though it is admitted that a secular morality is possible, especially in past times the common people needed a guardian god to go after their sins. Furthermore, it is usually understood that religion can enforce a moral order all the more effectively by leveraging afterlife incentives for behavior—promises of reward and punishment after death. The case of Judaism ancient and modern (with the exception of some currents of thought in the late Second Temple period) is sufficient to disprove this last connection (and traditional Chinese religions could also be cited for good measure). But, as we have seen throughout this book, neither of these generalizations fit the Indo-European religions. Moralizing gods and afterlife retribution emerged as available to all only with the Hindu and Zoroastrian reforms. In the original religions, only some gods were preoccupied with ethical behavior in interpersonal dealings (pledge-keeping and contract enforcement) and none at all with private morality, while public morality was mostly a secular matter, and afterlife rewards were either reserved for an elite or did not exist at all. Yet it would be difficult to make a general case for the proposition that public or private morality was defective in those ancient societies. It is true that, as all the ancient writers testified, the Celtic and Germanic tribes were constantly at war with each other and the later Vikings were hardly better until the formation of stable kingdoms, and that the Greek poleis of the classical age were fighting one another all the time; presumably, some similar tribal warfare affected the Indo-Iranians of the prehistoric nomadic period too. But this, here as everywhere, can be simply put down to the absence of a state that oversees law and order for the whole society; there was surely no lack of law and order in the later northern Indian kingdoms, the Hellenistic kingdoms, or the Roman Empire. Therefore, the point to bring home here is that the absence of a religious foundation to morality and of an afterlife anchoring of it cannot be brought forward as a fatal weakness of Greco-Roman religion and a

[1] If I may be allowed a personal note, I studied the Greek and Roman classics in high school, and have been always uneasy about how those shallow, credulous minds, benighted by superstition (such as they were presented to us), could produce such wonderful works of poetry and literature and such deep philosophy. Now that I'm near the end of my professional career, with the benefit of hindsight, I'm relieved if I contrived to do better justice to them with this book.

reason for its demise; and, conversely, there seems no evidence that the offer of these beliefs was a decisive factor for the success of Christianity in the empire.[2]

A final comment is in order regarding the role played by competition and monopoly in our analysis of Indo-European polytheism. Trained economists, as well as many readers not so trained but alert to the problem, will have been surprised and confused by an economist's arguing that, contrary to the established wisdom on the matter, in the conditions of our problem competition among priests was bad and monopoly good for society. Yet this is what our analysis reveals, and the proximate reason for it has been a leading motif throughout this book: a theological innovation was needed to get out of the supplicant's dilemma trap and improve supplicant welfare, but for this to happen incentives had to be provided to the priests/suppliers who alone could contrive such an innovation, incentives which only the prospect of monopoly rents could allow. In Sect. 8.2 we modeled this choice for the priests as a Prisoner's Dilemma game, and suggested other, complementary modeling approaches that would support the same conclusions. That, however, formalized the result but did not get down to the rationale for it. In Sect. 7.3 we suggested in passing a rationale for the superiority of a more concentrated pantheon: when two goods are complements in consumption, as the offerings to two jealous gods having jurisdiction on the same field are, joint provision of the benefit or merger of the two gods, reducing the overlapping, reduces the required offerings and thereby improves the supplicant's welfare. This, however, explains the efficiency gains from a shrinking of the pantheon and consequent reduction of the overlap but goes no further. The root of the problem is divine jealousy, i.e. the gods' ability and willingness to punish the supplicant when they feel neglected or slighted—a rare feature of markets which seems to be ignored in the theory of competition and monopoly, except perhaps when dealing with protection rackets in illegal markets. It is this that causes the inefficiency of competitive provision of cult by atomized priests, who by definition are powerless to master the interactions among gods that breed their jealousy; and it is the neglect of divine jealousy that makes the competitive market model of the religious economy

[2] A recent paper by Skaperdas and Vaidya (2020) argues that "Big God" religions, i.e. religions featuring an all-knowing, "moralizing" god (not necessarily the single god of pure monotheism) who constantly watches men and enforces moral behavior through rewards and punishments in this life and the next, conferred advantages to rulers who adopted them and consequently spread in the pre-modern era. These advantages included a reduction of the ruler's costs of providing internal security and of enforcing contracts through enhanced discipline and social cooperation, which in turn promoted economic exchange and hence increased tax revenues for the ruler. The idea and the model are interesting but the argument is speculative, relying on proof by result (such as "this must be true because those religions did spread") but providing no evidence about the assumed advantages. Regarding the Roman Empire, for example, it is conceivable that Constantine had some such hopes in mind when he embraced Christianity, but I'm not aware of any evidence that the costs of security and law enforcement decreased in the Christian empire. If anything, judging by the growth of enforcement legislation and the inflation of the civil service, those costs increased, as remarked by MacMullen (2012; based on MacMullen 1988, 263–264) in reply to similar unwarranted assertions by Ekelund and Tollison (2011).

fundamentally inapplicable to ancient polytheism.[3] Taming the jealousy or providing insurance against it requires concerted action by priests, who can collectively make the gods non-jealous, or make their jealousy toothless, in various ways through a reformed pantheon and/or a unified, noncompetitive ritual system, and who stand to gain from doing so. When viewed from the standpoint of jealousy, then, there is no mystery in the seeming paradox of the superiority of monopoly over competition in our setting. Adequate modeling of markets with jealous and revengeful suppliers, however, would certainly be a promising task for future research.

Aside from the last-mentioned theoretical suggestion, where do we go from here? The obvious first task would be to replicate the analysis of this book with other, non-Indo-European polytheistic religions and see whether and how the problems and evolutionary trends identified here played out in those different environments. Did their pantheons too show an inherent propensity to inflate and multiply the overlap of divine jurisdictions? Were their gods jealous, and what, if any, was the response to, or protection from, the jealousy? Did an endogenous tendency arise to the simplification and concentration of the divine landscape, leading toward a non-competitive conception of divinity and, in the limit, to some form of monotheism? Were their priests instrumental in bringing about a change in theology and, if so, what was the effect? How did those religions respond to outside challenges? These and other such questions arise naturally from the present study, and testing them on different religious traditions would be the appropriate way to evaluate our theoretical explanations and the models we have pressed into service. Beyond these generalities, however, we may venture a more specific hypothesis in the way of conclusion.

All the descriptions of Indo-European peoples in our historical chapters emphasized a great, though unequal, length of travel in their migration from the PIE homeland in the Pontic-Caspian steppe to their later attested historical homes. In Chap. 7 we argued that the distance traveled, and the consequent encounter with climates, natural environments, and indigenous economies and societies very different from those of the homeland, was a powerful engine of change in the original PIE religion, even supposing that the latter could be parsimoniously described as a tri-functional structure as Dumézil maintained. If so, it seems to follow that other, non-Indo-European polytheistic religions whose carriers did not travel as much and did not enter so different an environment and society would have evolved differently. It may then be useful to attempt a rough back-of-the envelope calculation to put some flesh on this idea.

Let us start from the conservative assumption that the westernmost section of the proto-Indo-Europeans moved west into Europe while the easternmost section moved east into central and south Asia—which was not necessarily the case—so as to get a lower-bound estimate of the distances covered. The first groups would have turned south-west and followed up the Danube valley to present-day Vienna. From there, a group would have continued north to Denmark for a total of some 3,000 km, with most continental Germans settling along the way; the Scandinavians

[3] Missing this core feature of religious competition under polytheism is perhaps the major oversight of Stark's (2007) ambitious approach, surveyed in Sect. 1.2.

would then have traveled another 700 km to central Sweden or another 1,100 km to central Norway. Another group would have gone from Vienna to the English Channel for some 3,000 km total, whence to cross and continue for another 600 km to the west of England where they would have crossed the Irish Sea to Ireland. Meanwhile the continental Celts would have continued from Vienna through France to the heart of Spain for more than 4,000 km total, with the Gauls settling along the way. Yet another group might have turned south-west from Budapest through Slovenia to get to Rome for a total of more than 2,600 km. Finally, a last group would have gone south-west through Bulgaria to make the shortest journey of all, some 1,800 km to Greece. Allowing some 1,200 km from the western to the eastern point of departure, the Indo-Aryans would have traveled some 3,900 km via Uzbekistan and Afghanistan to northwestern Pakistan—just the launching pad of their subsequent expansion into the Indian subcontinent. Meanwhile, the Iranians would have turned due south and followed the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea to get to the northeastern edge of the Iranian plateau in some 2,900 km, thence to continue and settle in the historical region of Khorasan ranging from northeastern Iran (another 300 km) to western Afghanistan (another 700 km). Besides travel distances, what is striking is the huge diversity of climates and environments among the final destinations: from the tropical north of India to the extremes of heat and cold of the Iranian plateau, from the temperate continental climate of central and western Europe to the cold, challenging climate of the lands facing the North Sea and the Baltic, to the shores of the warm, friendly Mediterranean Sea where both Greeks and Romans overwhelmed or rubbed shoulders with long-established non-Indo-European, urban civilizations.[4]

As a contrast, consider the Semitic peoples of the Middle East. Scholars are not agreed on the original homeland of the proto-Semitic people and language, the most likely candidates being the Levant and (less likely) somewhere in the Arabian peninsula. In any case, distances within the region are not that big. To get a sense of the journeys involved by the migration, consider what is perhaps the longest journey reported by the Bible: the journey of Abraham from Ur of the Chaldeans through Harran to the vicinity of Hebron where he finally settled (Genesis 11:27–32; 12: 4–5; 13: 18). The location of Ur is controversial but it could be near Nasiriyah in southern Iraq, while Harran is a town in southeastern Anatolia and Hebron lies in the Palestinian West Bank. This totals some 2,200 km.[5] Most importantly, in the second millennium BCE (when the story, if historical, would have taken place) the area

[4] I calculated the underlying road distances using Google Maps and rounding the figures upward, as follows. The western starting point is Odessa (Ukraine) while the eastern point is Volgograd (Russia), 1,200 km apart. From Odessa to Budapest via Bucarest is 1,400 km, from Budapest to Rome 1,200, from Budapest to Vienna 300. From Vienna, 2,400 km to Madrid, 1,300 to Calais, 1,200 to Copenhagen. From Calais 600 km to Liverpool, and from Copenhagen 700 km to Uppsala and 1,100 to Trondheim. From Odessa to Athens via Sofia is 1,800 km. From Volgograd to Peshawar via Samarkand and Kabul is 3,900 km, and from Volgograd to Ashgabat (Turkmenistan) is 2,900, whence another 300 km to Nishapur or another 700 km to Herat. I have followed the broad routes of Indo-European migrations outlined in Mallory (1989, Chaps. 6, 8).

[5] Again by Google Maps, the distance is 1,200 km from Nasiriyah to Harran and 1,000 km from Harran to Hebron.

involved was densely populated by other Semitic peoples and the natural environment, economy, and social organization was fairly homogeneous across the area. This contrast with the Indo-European religions may provide a clue, for example, to the fact that the original polytheistic religion of early Israel did not show any tendency for its pantheon to inflate and breed divine jealousy but, on the contrary, to shrink—down to the final inauguration of uncompromising monotheism. This clue seems to arise naturally from the analysis of this book and may provide a link to Raskovich's (1996) groundbreaking analysis of the rise of exclusive worship of Yahweh in ancient Israel through a combination of theological reform and priestly monopoly of sacrifice—an industrial-organization model which is technically different but much in the same spirit as our approach. More generally, this clue suggests a promising direction for future research into comparative polytheistic traditions.

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