



From Social Function to Ontological Conclusion: Reassessing Yuval Noah Harari’s Account of Religion in Sapiens

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Abstract

Yuval Noah Harari’s Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind explains religion as a humanly created framework that enabled large-scale cooperation, political order, and social stability. He also presents monotheism as emerging when followers of a polytheistic deity came to treat their patron as the sole supreme God. This article critically evaluates these claims through anthropology of religion, sociology, history, and philosophy of science. It advances a three-level inference test: a claim about religion’s social function does not by itself establish its historical origin, and a historical explanation does not settle the truth or falsity of religious belief. The article argues that Harari correctly identifies some social functions of religion. Still, his account is weakened by functional reductionism, a simplified account of monotheism, and a shift from methodological naturalism to philosophical naturalism. Contemporary cultural-evolutionary research provides partial support for the proposition that certain religious beliefs can facilitate cooperation. Yet this literature is probabilistic, multicausal, and contested; it does not show that religion was consciously invented, that monotheism universally arose from polytheism, or that a scientific account of religion disproves the existence of God.

Keywords: Harari; religion; monotheism; methodological naturalism; anthropology of religion; sociology of religion; cultural evolution

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Introduction

Yuval Noah Harari’s *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* has shaped public discussion of religion by presenting it as an “imagined order” that enabled large populations to cooperate. His argument has considerable explanatory appeal. Religions have often created shared moral norms, collective identities, political loyalties, and institutions that unite people beyond kinship networks. However, a persuasive broad narrative is not necessarily a sufficient historical explanation.

This article examines three related claims in *Sapiens*. First, Harari argues that agricultural societies created stories about gods because they required social links capable of connecting large populations. Second, he presents monotheism as developing from polytheism. Third, he claims that biology leaves no place for a Creator who endows human beings with rights or purpose. These claims operate at different levels: social function, historical origin, and metaphysical conclusion. The central argument of this paper is that Harari moves too quickly between them. The critique is not an attempt to prove revelation or disprove naturalistic explanations of religion. Anthropology and sociology can study religious practices, institutions, historical changes, and social effects. They cannot, solely through their methods, decide whether God exists or whether a revelation is true. The narrower question is whether Harari’s explanation is adequate as anthropology, sociology, history, and philosophy of science.

Harari’s Argument

Harari’s theory is clearest in his discussion of the Agricultural Revolution. He writes that when cities and empires emerged, people “invented stories about great gods” to provide the social links required for mass cooperation (Harari, 2014, p. 75). Religion, in this account, is not merely a set of personal beliefs. It is an institutional mechanism that helps strangers cooperate within large and fragile social systems.

Harari repeats this functional view in his chapter on religion. He argues that religion has served as a major unifying force because it gives social and political structures an authority beyond ordinary human preference. Religions, he states, present laws as grounded in a superhuman order, thereby helping stabilize societies (Harari, 2014, pp. 149–150). Harari also presents monotheism as historically derived from polytheism. He writes that followers of polytheistic gods eventually believed that “their god was the only god” and supreme power in the universe (Harari, 2014, p. 154). He treats Akhenaten’s Aten cult, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam within this broad developmental narrative.

Finally, Harari connects his historical account to a broader naturalistic worldview. Discussing equality and rights, he writes that biology leaves “only a blind evolutionary process, devoid of any purpose” (Harari, 2014, p. 80). This statement is more than an account of biological mechanisms. It implies that evolutionary biology excludes a Creator and renders claims about divine endowment non-scientific or false.

To assess these claims, it is necessary to distinguish three questions:

Level of claim	Example in Harari	What would be required to establish it
Social function	Religion can support cooperation and stability	Sociological and behavioral evidence
Historical origin	Religion was invented to create cooperation.	Direct historical or comparative evidence about origins and causal mechanisms



Level of claim	Example in Harari	What would be required to establish it
Metaphysical conclusion	A Creator does not exist	Independent philosophical argument, not biology alone

Harari’s strongest evidence concerns the first level. His weakest moves occur when he treats that evidence as sufficient for the second and third levels.

Anthropology: Why Social Function Does Not Prove Origin

Harari’s account resembles older evolutionary theories of religion. E. B. Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* defined religion as belief in spiritual beings and proposed that animism was the earliest form from which more complex religions developed (Tylor, 1871, Vol. 1, p. 1). Nineteenth-century evolutionary anthropology frequently arranged societies on a single path from supposedly simple beliefs toward supposedly advanced religions and modern science. Modern anthropology became highly critical of such unilinear reconstructions. Franz Boas (1896) argued that cultural similarities do not prove that all societies passed through the same historical stages. His historical-particularist approach required scholars to investigate the specific histories, environments, contacts, languages, and institutions of particular communities. This critique remains relevant to Harari. The fact that religion may perform similar social functions in different societies does not show that all religions began for the same reason.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1965) similarly criticized speculative theories of “primitive religion.” He argued that scholars should not infer the origins of religion from abstract assumptions about what ancient people must have believed or needed. Rather, religious systems should be understood through close ethnographic and historical study. This does not make comparison impossible; it makes comparison more demanding.

Harari’s phrase that people “invented” gods is especially problematic because it implies deliberate design. A religious practice may become socially useful without being consciously created to solve a coordination problem. Language promotes cooperation, but it was not necessarily invented by a group that first calculated its political benefits. Kinship systems organize obligations and inheritance, but they generally emerge through long historical processes rather than a single act of intentional design. The same caution applies to religion. Clifford Geertz’s interpretive anthropology provides a more adequate model. Geertz (1973) describes religion as a cultural system of symbols through which people understand reality, shape moral dispositions, and experience the world as meaningful. In this perspective, religion involves ritual, memory, authority, emotion, sacred space, law, theology, and collective identity. It may support social cohesion, but it cannot be reduced to a tool consciously manufactured for that purpose.

Talal Asad’s critique is even more fundamental. He argues that no universal definition of religion can be fully neutral because religious categories are historically shaped by particular traditions, institutions, and power relations (Asad, 1993, p. 29). Harari’s definition of religion as a system of norms grounded in a superhuman order is analytically useful. Still, it brings together very different phenomena—Islam, Buddhism, nationalism, capitalism, and humanism—under one expansive category. Such breadth may obscure the difference between a religious claim about divine revelation and a political ideology or legal convention.

Thus, anthropology does not deny that religion can support cooperation. It challenges the inference that social usefulness explains religion’s origin. Function and origin must be demonstrated separately.

Sociology: Construction Is Not Fabrication

Sociology provides qualified support for Harari's emphasis on religion's social role. Durkheim (1995) argued that religion creates a moral community through shared beliefs and rituals. Religious symbols can represent collective values, bind individuals to groups, and give social obligations a sacred character. This supports Harari's observation that religion may stabilize social life.

Yet Durkheim does not argue that religion is a conscious fabrication. For him, religion is a social fact: it is collectively produced, experienced, enacted, and transmitted. A social fact may be historically constructed without being fictional in the sense of arbitrary deception. Money, law, citizenship, and marriage are socially constructed institutions, but they have real consequences and command real obligations. The same point applies to religion.

This distinction is central. "Social construction" means that a practice depends on shared meanings, institutions, and historical processes. It does not mean that individuals knowingly invented falsehoods. Harari's use of the term "fiction" risks conflating these different ideas. A believer may understand a religious claim as revelation; a sociologist may study its social consequences; and a historian may trace its development. None of these perspectives, by itself, settles the others.

Max Weber's sociology of religion also complicates Harari's account. Weber (1963) examined the interaction among religious ideas, social authority, ethical commitments, and economic interests. Religious ideas can shape history; they are not simply reflections of material interests or instruments of social control. The rise of monotheistic ethical traditions, for example, cannot be reduced to the administrative needs of empires, because religious ideas often criticize rulers, disrupt established institutions, and demand sacrifice from their adherents.

Harari is therefore most persuasive when he says religion can produce social unity. He is less persuasive when he treats this function as a full causal explanation of why religion exists.

History: Monotheism Is Not a Universal Linear Outcome

Harari's claim that monotheism emerged from polytheism has some historical support in particular cases. The history of ancient Israelite religion, for example, developed within a broader West Semitic religious environment that encompassed multiple deities and local cultic traditions. Smith (2001) demonstrates that the emergence of biblical monotheism involved a complex relationship between Yahweh worship and the polytheistic background of the ancient Near East.

However, this does not validate Harari's broad formula that monotheism emerged because devotees became increasingly attached to one patron god. Smith's account involves political transformation, textual development, religious reform, ritual practice, communal identity, and theological argument. It is a historically specific analysis, not a universal law of religious evolution.

The relevant categories also require precision. Belief in a supreme being is not identical to strict monotheism. A society may recognize a creator or High God while also affirming spirits, ancestors, local deities, or other supernatural agents. Likewise, monolatry—the exclusive worship of one god while accepting the possible existence of others—is not identical to monotheism. These distinctions make simplistic global sequences difficult to sustain. Harari's account may therefore describe one pathway to monotheism, particularly in some ancient Near Eastern settings. It cannot be established that all monotheistic traditions developed through the same sequence. The historical study of religion instead points toward multiple pathways: reform movements, prophetic traditions, political centralization, textual

canonization, interreligious contact, migration, conflict, and institutional change.

Methodological Naturalism and Philosophical Naturalism

The most important philosophical issue concerns Harari's use of biology. Methodological naturalism is a rule of scientific inquiry: scientists explain observable phenomena through natural causes, mechanisms, and regularities. It does not automatically state that supernatural realities do not exist. Philosophical naturalism, by contrast, is the metaphysical view that nature is all that exists.

Donahue (2025) explains that methodological naturalism restricts scientific explanation to natural phenomena but does not entail the stronger thesis of metaphysical naturalism. Science may be unable to use God as a testable explanatory variable, yet that methodological limit does not itself prove that God does not exist.

Harari's statement that biology finds no Creator and only a purposeless evolutionary process (Harari, 2014, p. 80), therefore, requires careful classification. Harari does not merely employ methodological naturalism; he makes a philosophical inference from biological explanation to an ontological conclusion. That inference may be defended philosophically, but it cannot be presented as a direct result of biology alone.

This point does not mean that naturalism is irrational or that science should include supernatural claims as ordinary hypotheses. Rather, it means that explaining a phenomenon naturally does not logically disprove divine action, revelation, or transcendence. A social-scientific explanation of why people believe in God is not equivalent to a philosophical demonstration that God does not exist.

The Strongest Case for Harari

A balanced assessment must acknowledge that an important contemporary research program partially supports Harari's emphasis on cooperation. Norenzayan et al. (2016) argue that prosocial religious beliefs and practices may have contributed to large-scale cooperation among strangers. Their model includes moralizing supernatural agents, ritual commitment, cultural learning, group competition, and feedback between religious traditions and social complexity.

Purzycki et al. (2016) provide behavioral evidence that belief in punitive, morally concerned, and knowledgeable gods can increase impartial behavior toward distant co-religionists. Such findings support a limited conclusion: under some conditions, certain religious beliefs may encourage cooperation beyond immediate kinship networks. However, these scholars do not support Harari's strongest wording. Their model does not claim that people consciously invented gods to solve a social problem. It proposes long-term cultural processes in which certain belief-and-ritual systems spread because of their social effects. Norenzayan et al. (2016) also acknowledge multiple routes to cooperation, including markets, political institutions, property arrangements, and nonreligious norms.

Moreover, causal direction remains debated. Watts et al. (2015) found that broad supernatural punishment preceded political complexity in Austronesian societies, whereas moralizing High Gods tended to follow political complexity. This result complicates claims that one type of religious belief universally caused complex societies. It suggests a more cautious conclusion: religion and social complexity may develop through reciprocal and context-dependent processes.

The cultural-evolutionary approach is therefore not a marginal position. It is an influential but contested research program. Its major limitation, for present purposes, is that it supports a weaker and more nuanced thesis than Harari's. Some religious systems may facilitate cooperation, but this does not prove their deliberate invention nor determine their

metaphysical truth.

Conclusion

Harari offers an important insight: religion can create shared norms, political legitimacy, group identity, and cooperation among strangers. Anthropology, sociology, and cultural-evolutionary research all provide reasons to take this possibility seriously.

Yet Harari's broader explanation is insufficient. He moves from social function to historical origin when he claims that people invented gods to create social links. He moves from selected historical cases to a broad account of monotheism. Finally, he moves from methodological naturalism in biology to philosophical naturalism about God and purpose. A more defensible approach keeps these levels distinct. Religion may have social functions without having been consciously invented for them. Monotheism may emerge from polytheistic settings in some cases without constituting a universal developmental law. A naturalistic explanation may describe religious behavior without disproving the truth of religious belief. Harari's narrative is therefore best understood as a provocative interpretive framework, not as a settled anthropological, sociological, historical, or philosophical conclusion.

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