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Thus Spake Ilos

A Darwinian Theory of Religious Success, the Madisonian Function of God, and Why Belief Is Irrelevant to Practice

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The author of this paper practices the behavioural codes of Christianity more rigorously than most professing Christians. He does not believe in God. This is not a contradiction. It is the thesis.

Religious traditions face Darwinian selection identical in mechanism to biological evolution. They persist, expand, or collapse in proportion to how well their properties match the selection environment. Those that survive across millennia do so because their codes produce social outcomes that make practitioners more successful: higher trust, more stable family formation, greater collective mobilisation capacity, more effective intergenerational transmission of adaptive behaviour. The survivors are not the traditions with the truest metaphysical claims. They are the traditions with the most effective behavioural codes. Truth and fitness are orthogonal variables. Religious traditions are the oldest form of accelerated evolutionary design — codified behavioural rules that deliver the adaptive outcomes biological evolution would eventually select for, but in centuries rather than millennia.

The success of a religious tradition can be evaluated against a three-variable optimisation matrix: expansion capacity (including differential fertility), civilisational longevity, and innovation freedom. Judaism demonstrates extraordinary longevity without expansion. Early Islam solved all three variables during its Golden Age; the progressive closure of *ijtihad*, compounded by Mongol destruction and subsequent political fragmentation, selected against innovation freedom. Post-Reformation Christianity solved the three-variable problem most completely among modern competitors. The empirical prediction is testable in real time: traditions that maintain their behavioural demands are currently growing, while those that accommodate secular norms are declining — exactly as the framework predicts.

The core behavioural codes work because they align individual self-interest with collective flourishing — the Madisonian function. Family obligation creates population growth, long-term thinking, and binds communities together. Honesty requirements reduce transaction costs and allow for investment. The divine mandate framing makes rules unconditional. When the delivery mechanism loses credibility, the codes become negotiable — which is precisely what has happened over the past half-century, with consequences that, amongst others, Nietzsche predicted, Unwin documented, and Lost Coherence now measures.

The prescriptive conclusion: practice the behavioural codes of successful civilisational tradition regardless of metaphysical belief. Not as performance. As rational life design — and as a short-cut that avoids reinventing an entire moral code from first principles. The prescription is adaptive: practice what works, reform what the changed environment has rendered maladaptive — ensuring always that reformed codes still create Madisonian incentives for self-interested actors to produce beneficial outcomes. Replace only when a demonstrably superior alternative exists. For most core codes, no superior secular replacement has evolved. The results are entirely as Nietzsche, Unwin, and others predicted over a century ago.

Zarathustra descended from the mountain with a message humanity was not ready to hear. This paper is that message, restated in the language of evidence: the codes work. Practise them.

A Note on Method

I am a practising atheist who lives a biblical life.

When my children were young, I confronted the problem that every atheist parent faces without recognising its scale: when you refuse to outsource a child's moral education to social media, the education system, and mainstream entertainment, how do you transmit a moral and behavioural framework to your children without invoking the traditional authority that underwrites it?

I discovered, with some discomfort, that I was attempting to reinvent from first principles a comprehensive set of rules that had already been invented, tested across millennia, and refined through the accumulated experience of thousands of societies. Discipline over impulse. Obligation over convenience. Family over self. Long-term flourishing over short-term gratification — or as Zarathustra might say: choosing what you want most over what you want now.

I discovered something else. The religious traditions had not merely invented the rules. They had invented the propagation mechanisms — and the mechanisms were themselves part of the adaptive design. One day a week devoted to communal reinforcement. Statements of commitment at every meal, before sleep, at regular intervals throughout the year. Rituals at every significant life event — birth, coming of age, marriage, death — binding individual experience to collective continuity at the moments of maximum emotional receptivity. An atheist parent attempting to replicate this infrastructure from scratch quickly discovers how much of it was invisible precisely because it was ubiquitous.

I now recognise what I was doing. I was Nietzsche's child — attempting to create new values from genuine openness. And I was arriving, rule by rule, at the same codes the religious traditions had already encoded. Every rule I invented I discovered was already an existing one. The problems those codes solve are structural features of the human condition, not contingent features of any particular cultural moment. The Übermensch does not transcend the codes. He understands them — understands why they work — and practises them with the intentionality that neither the camel's uncritical inheritance nor the lion's reflexive destruction can achieve. This paper is that understanding.

The question this paper addresses is not whether God exists. That question is bracketed as epistemically undecidable. The question is whether God's existence matters to the functional case for religious practice. For the philosopher and the disciplined thinker, the answer is no. The case for practice stands on functional grounds alone. But the honest Madisonian analysis requires a harder acknowledgement: for the median self-interested actor, the divine consequence mechanism may be functionally necessary as an enforcement architecture that secular

rationalism has not replaced. This tension runs through the paper and is not resolved prematurely. It is named honestly.

Epistemic Standards

This paper distinguishes explicitly between three categories of claim. Established findings are claims supported by documented evidence and peer-reviewed data. Strong inferences are claims that the evidence supports as the most probable explanation but which have not yet been established with certainty. Speculative extensions are claims that follow plausibly from the core thesis but rest on limited direct evidence. Where the paper ventures here, it is flagged explicitly. The Darwinian framework applied to religious traditions is a strong inference with extensive evidential support. The Moral Enforcement Scale Theory is a strong inference. The prescriptive conclusion — that practice is rationally warranted independent of belief — is a strong inference whose testable predictions are specified in Section 6.

On Uncomfortable Conclusions

This paper reaches conclusions about specific religious traditions that will provoke opposition from both religious and secular quarters. Religious readers will object to the reduction of their tradition to a Darwinian survival strategy. Secular readers will object to the recommendation of religious practice from an atheist. The defence is the precision of the analytical register — language that forces engagement with the mechanism rather than permitting dismissal through association with politically inconvenient positions.

The Darwinian framework is a fitness argument, not an apologetic claim. The prescriptive conclusion is a functional argument, not a theological one. The case studies are structural analyses, not civilisational rankings.

Scope and Series Context

This paper does not advocate for any specific religious tradition. It identifies the structural properties that determine civilisational survival and derives a prescriptive conclusion from functional analysis. The contribution is both diagnostic and prescriptive: naming what religion was doing, the mechanism by which its removal produces the costs Lost Coherence documents, and the rational case for practice on functional grounds.

This paper is the second in a five-part series — the Prothean Civilisational Architecture — which develops a unified analytical framework from diagnosis through mechanism to application.

Paper 1: **Lost Coherence** — *Published March 2026* — identified Unified Social Energy, the Monument Problem, and the Structural Conditions of Civilisational Flourishing. Establishes the diagnostic foundation: why ancient civilisations produced monument-scale collective capacity, what modernity has systematically dismantled, and the functional requirements any viable alternative must satisfy.

Paper 2: **Thus Spake Ilos** —*Published April 2026* — applies Darwinian selection theory and Madisonian institutional analysis to the religious tradition that provided the vertical trust transmission technology Lost Coherence identifies as the unsolved problem of post-religious modernity. The question is not metaphysical. It is structural: what properties of a behavioural code determine civilisational survival, and what the evidence of religious selection reveals about the functional architecture of the societies that adopted it.

Paper 3: **The Threshold** — examines the developmental conditions under which human maturity is actually completed, and what the modern institutional and cultural environment has done to those conditions. The theory resolves a genuine tension in the developmental literature that is almost never addressed honestly — and its implications for what the atomisation process is producing at population scale are more disturbing than the fertility data alone suggests.

Paper 4: **The Cage We Built** — examines the modern depression epidemic as a structural phenomenon rather than a clinical one. The standard explanatory frameworks — neurochemical, social, economic — address symptoms without identifying the generative mechanism. This paper proposes one. The argument is sex-differentiated, the evidence is cross-disciplinary, and the political consequences of what the data shows are examined directly.

Paper 5: **The Invisible Path** — applies the preceding analytical framework to the specific policy question of fertility decline, and identifies the intervention point that financial policy has consistently missed. The corrective is neither financial nor coercive. It operates at the level of cultural architecture, at the point of maximum leverage, in a vacuum that has been created and left unaddressed.

Together, the five papers constitute a single argument: that the structural conditions of civilisational flourishing are identifiable, that their dismantling follows predictable mechanisms, that the human costs of dismantling them are now visible in the data, and that the path forward — where one exists — is structural rather than moral. Lost Coherence names the problem. The papers that follow develop its dimensions and its remedies.

Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche declared God dead and spent his remaining productive years exploring the civilisational consequences of metaphysical vacancy. His Zarathustra descended from the mountain to deliver a message that humanity was not ready to hear. This paper makes a different move. It declares God's existence *irrelevant* to the functional case for practice, and explores the consequences of behavioural vacancy: what happens when a civilisation abandons the behavioural codes of its religious tradition without replacing the social outcomes those codes produced. Nietzsche predicted the Last Man — the comfortable, risk-averse creature who blinks. Unwin predicted civilisational contraction within three generations. Both predictions, made over a century ago, describe the present with uncomfortable accuracy.

The analytical framework is Darwinian. Religious traditions face selection pressures identical in mechanism to those governing any replicating system. Those that survive do so because their behavioural codes produce social outcomes that make practitioners more successful, more cohesive, and more capable of transmitting the tradition to subsequent generations. This framework makes no claim about metaphysical truth. It selects for fitness. The Madisonian policy standard applies throughout: successful religions are evaluated as proto-institutional design — behavioural codes which work because they align individual self-interest with collective flourishing.

Cultural inheritance driving biological fitness is not unique to humans. Australian crows have developed a multi-step technique for eating cane toads — lifting, dropping to stun, flipping, and consuming from the belly to avoid the dorsal poison glands — transmitted culturally across generations since the toads' introduction in 1935. Far too rapid for genetic adaptation. Orca pods transmit specific hunting techniques — the learned behaviour of attacking great white sharks by flipping them to induce tonic immobility — across generations within cultural lineages. These are fitness-relevant behaviours transmitted through cultural inheritance rather than genetic evolution — precisely the mechanism that, in humans, scales to civilisational level. Religious traditions are its oldest and most sophisticated expression: codified behavioural rules transmitted across generations through deliberate infrastructure, producing fitness advantages that genetic evolution could not deliver on its own timescale.

Recent work in evolutionary biology has formalised this observation. Waring and Wood (2025) demonstrate that cultural inheritance is overtaking genetic inheritance as the primary driver of human adaptation — an argument that could be extended across the full 200,000-year span of behaviourally modern *Homo sapiens*. Religious traditions are the oldest and most extensively tested cultural inheritance systems in human history. If cultural inheritance is the dominant adaptive system, the quality and content of what gets transmitted is the civilisational question. This paper answers it.

1. The Darwinian Framework

1a. Religions as Replicating Systems

A religious tradition is a package. It contains metaphysical claims about the nature of reality, behavioural codes governing individual and collective conduct, principles of social organisation, rituals binding practitioners to each other and to the tradition itself, and mechanisms for transmitting the entire package to the next generation. These components are not independent. They interact, reinforce each other, and collectively determine the tradition's capacity to persist, expand, and adapt.

This package replicates. It does so through specific mechanisms — parental transmission, institutional education, community ritual, text, narrative, and the behavioural modelling that children absorb before they are old enough to evaluate it. A tradition that replicates effectively persists. One that does not, disappears. The archaeological and historical record contains thousands of religious traditions that no longer exist. Their disappearance requires no conspiracy. They were outcompeted — by traditions whose packages replicated more effectively, adapted more readily, or produced social outcomes that made their practitioners more successful in the specific environments they inhabited.

Darwinian selection operates on any system that exhibits variation, differential fitness, and heritable transmission. Religious traditions exhibit all three. They vary in their behavioural codes, their social organisation, their transmission mechanisms, and their metaphysical claims. They differ in fitness — measured not by metaphysical truth but by the social outcomes they produce for practitioners: cohesion, trust, family stability, collective mobilisation capacity, and the ability to sustain the tradition itself across generations. And they transmit their properties with sufficient fidelity that the tradition a child inherits is recognisably the tradition its grandparents practised, even where adaptation has occurred.

The selection pressures operating on religious traditions are identifiable. Internal coherence: a tradition whose behavioural codes contradict each other or whose metaphysical claims conflict with observable reality accumulates internal tension that eventually produces schism or abandonment. External competitive pressure: traditions compete with each other for practitioners, territory, and institutional authority — sometimes through direct conflict, sometimes through differential demographic success, sometimes through the quiet mechanism of which tradition's practitioners build more successful societies. Environmental fit: a tradition whose codes are adapted to pastoral nomadism faces selection pressure when its practitioners urbanise. Transmission capacity: a tradition that cannot reliably transmit its codes to the next generation declines regardless of the quality of its content.

A further selection pressure operates across longer timescales: the balance between short-term gratification and long-term sustainability. A tradition that promises too

much immediate reward — the socialist-religious variants that periodically emerge, offering communal abundance without individual discipline — attracts practitioners rapidly but lacks the structural depth to sustain itself across generations. A tradition that demands too much austerity and offers too little fails to sustain itself — the Plymouth Puritans, whose rigid codes drove defection to less restrictive neighbouring settlements within decades, illustrate the mechanism. The community stagnated; the most adaptive elements of its culture — Thanksgiving, the town meeting, the work ethic — survived by adoption into the broader civilisation that overtook it. The surviving traditions occupy a specific band on this spectrum: sufficient demand to produce genuine behavioural change, sufficient reward (social, psychological, communal) to make the cost worth bearing, and a temporal horizon that extends benefits across generations rather than concentrating them in the present. As Zarathustra might say: the successful tradition is one that teaches its practitioners to choose what they want most over what they want now.

The framework is indifferent to metaphysical truth. The Christians, the Zoroastrians, and the ancient Egyptians held completely contradictory metaphysical claims about the nature of God, the afterlife, and cosmic order. Yet each encoded a set of behavioural rules and social organisation principles that sustained their civilisation for over a thousand years, often in overlapping environmental and social conditions. The metaphysical claims cannot all be true. The behavioural codes can all be functional. A tradition can be extraordinarily fit without any of its metaphysical claims being true. Fitness and truth are orthogonal variables.

The most successful sets of behavioural rules show substantial convergence — prohibitions on theft, requirements of honesty, family obligation norms, structured community gathering — appearing across traditions that had no contact with each other. This convergence reflects the shared human nature the codes are designed to govern. But the convergence is not total. The most successful codes also depend on environment and the underlying human community they serve. The behavioural codes that produce flourishing in Persian urban civilisation are not identical to those that produce flourishing in Polynesian maritime societies, Andean agricultural societies, or English maritime trading cultures. The universals reflect shared human nature. The variations reflect adaptation to specific selection environments. Both are predicted by the Darwinian framework.

The claim is not that religious codes correlate with successful societies. It is that they encode specific mechanisms which, when isolated, predictably produce those outcomes — and when removed, predictably produce the degradation this series documents.

1b. The Three-Variable Optimisation Matrix

Three variables determine civilisational-scale success.

Expansion capacity. The ability to acquire new practitioners — through proselytisation, conquest, demographic advantage, or demonstrated superiority of social outcomes. Fertility is a major and underappreciated component: traditions coding for large families outcompete those that do not, purely through demographic weight. This is observable now — Orthodox Jewish, Amish, traditionalist Catholic, and conservative Muslim communities are growing relative to secular populations in Western countries despite no conversion advantage.

Civilisational longevity. The capacity to sustain the tradition across generational timescales. Longevity requires transmission fidelity, internal coherence sufficient to survive external pressure, and behavioural codes that continue to produce functional outcomes as environments change.

Innovation freedom. The capacity to adapt and reform without losing identity continuity. Too much interpretive freedom dissolves the tradition into incoherence; too little produces brittle conformity.

The variables trade off against each other. A tradition can expand rapidly by lowering behavioural demands, but reduced demands weaken the social outcomes sustaining longevity. **Traditions solving all three simultaneously become dominant civilisational operating systems.** Those optimising for fewer achieve partial success with predictable limitations.

1c. What This Framework Is Not

This is not religious apologetics — an apologist argues from truth to practice; this paper argues from fitness to practice. It is not New Atheist dismissal — Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (2006) applies a similar framework and incorrectly infers that understanding the mechanism diminishes the case for practice; Wilson's *Darwin's Cathedral* (2002) comes closer but stops short of the prescriptive conclusion this paper reaches. And it is not civilisational ranking — the Madisonian diagnostic traces outcomes to structural conditions, never to the virtue or vice of practitioners.

2. The Moral Enforcement Scale Theory

The Darwinian framework explains how religious traditions compete. It does not explain why religion emerges. The standard accounts — comfort in the face of mortality, proto-scientific explanation, tool of elite control — each capture a real function but none identifies the structural mechanism that makes religion *necessary* at a specific threshold of social development.

2a. Stage 1 — The Tribe

In communities below approximately 150 people — the Dunbar number — moral behaviour requires no formal enforcement. Every action is observed by people who will remember it. Trust, honour, and shame operate through the inescapable fact that everyone knows what everyone else has done. The system is extraordinarily effective at its operating scale. The tribe does not need God. It needs only the condition that makes defection visible and costly.

The Dunbar limit is a biological constraint — the number of stable social relationships the human neocortex can maintain. Below this threshold, informal enforcement works. Above it, the observation network fragments, anonymity becomes possible, and the mechanism fails — not because human nature changes but because its operating condition no longer holds.

2b. Stage 2 — The Village and City

As communities scale beyond the Dunbar limit, a person can defect from cooperative norms, relocate within the settlement or to another, and face no reputational consequence. The observation network has holes. Anonymity is not universal — people still know their neighbours — but it is available as a structural option in ways the tribe did not permit. The rational response to available anonymity is selective defection: cooperate where observed, defect where unobserved, and calculate the probability of detection against the benefit of defection. This is not moral failure. It is the rational behaviour of self-interested actors in an environment where the enforcement mechanism has degraded. The Madisonian diagnostic applies: the structure changed, and the behaviour followed.

There is always an individual benefit to defection within a cooperative society where the defector can avoid accountability — the Judas problem. In a high-trust community where everyone else cooperates, the individual who defects captures disproportionate advantage precisely because the cooperative infrastructure makes defection profitable. The tribe solved this through inescapable observation. The city lost that solution. A new enforcement architecture was required.

The timing of the Axial Age is the empirical anchor for this theory, though the relationship requires precision. The great religious and philosophical traditions of the sixth to fourth centuries BCE — Zoroastrianism in Persia, Buddhism and the Upanishadic tradition in India, Confucianism and Daoism in China, the Greek philosophical tradition, the prophetic tradition in Israel — emerge independently across four distinct civilisational centres within a remarkably compressed historical window. But divine surveillance as an enforcement mechanism is not an Axial Age innovation. Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Levantine city-states had sophisticated religious systems solving the enforcement problem for thousands of years before this — and had cities well beyond the Dunbar limit from the third millennium BCE onward.

What the Axial Age traditions represent is not the invention of religious enforcement but its second generation: the shift from localised, ethnically embedded, state-

dependent traditions to universalising codes with portable ethical systems, individual moral accountability, and transmission mechanisms independent of any particular political structure. Egyptian religion died with Egyptian political sovereignty. Judaism survived the destruction of its temple and the loss of its territory precisely because its codes were portable. The Axial Age innovation was not divine surveillance itself but universal divine surveillance — codes that applied to all humans regardless of tribal affiliation, carried by transmission mechanisms that could survive political collapse. The traditions that solved the enforcement problem in this portable form are the ones that still exist.

Religion solves the scale problem by internalising the enforcement mechanism. The omniscient God who observes all actions and enforces consequence regardless of anonymity is a direct functional substitute for the tribal community that previously performed the same function through social observation. The mechanism is different — divine surveillance rather than communal reputation — but the function is identical: making defection from cooperative norms costly even when no human observer is present. You cannot escape God's reputation network by moving to the next street.

This is not a claim about the conscious intentions of religious founders. It is a claim about the selection mechanism that determined which traditions survived. Traditions that solved the scale problem — that provided an enforcement architecture effective beyond the Dunbar limit — produced more cooperative, more cohesive, more collectively capable societies. Those societies outcompeted societies without equivalent enforcement mechanisms. The religious traditions that solved the scale problem most effectively are the ones that still exist.

2c. Stage 3 — The Secular Metropolis

As religious authority declines, the enforcement architecture degrades for the second time. What remains is the law — the minimum governance required to prevent the war of all against all. It prohibits the most egregious defections. But it cannot enforce trust, honour, or the rich behavioural substrate that both tribal reputation and divine surveillance maintained.

The law produces compliance. It does not produce virtue. And compliance without virtue is exactly what a low-trust atomised society looks like.

The enforcement vacuum is not remaining empty. Secular ideological systems are partially filling it — replicating structural features of religious transmission (regular reinforcement through media consumption, social shaming of deviation, identity-group binding, moral certainty) without the tested behavioural codes that millennia of selection pressure refined. The transmission architecture is being rebuilt. The content being transmitted has not undergone equivalent testing.

The apparent counter-examples — the Nordic countries, Japan — require honest engagement. The Nordic societies' high trust is the product of their Protestant cultural

inheritance operating on residual civilisational capital within ethnically homogeneous populations. Research consistently identifies high-trust countries as characterised by ethnic homogeneity, Protestant religious traditions, good government, wealth, and income equality — precisely the features the Lost Coherence coordination cost framework predicts. Japan's social coherence operates through Confucian shame and obligation mechanisms that were substantially secular from the outset. Neither case demonstrates that high trust can be generated *de novo* without religious or quasi-religious behavioural inheritance. Both are exhibiting the predicted depletion patterns: Nordic fertility has fallen below replacement, Japan's TFR has collapsed to approximately 1.2, and social atomisation among the young is rising in both. They are not counter-examples. They are cases operating on different timelines — living on inherited capital they are no longer generating.

Lost Coherence documents the broader consequences: formal governance expands to fill the gap left by eroding informal norms, at increasing cost and decreasing effectiveness. The state that tells you how to raise your children, what you may say, and how you must structure your household is a tyranny — inadvertent perhaps, but a tyranny nonetheless.

2d. Stage 4 — The Binary Collapse

Without tribal enforcement (lost to scale), without divine surveillance (lost to the Enlightenment), and with only the legal minimum, modern societies face a structural binary. One direction: legislate comprehensively — toward theocracy or totalitarianism. The other: accept progressive dissolution into atomised equilibrium.

Some technological innovations suggest a partial escape. eBay's vendor ratings, Airbnb reviews, Google ratings, and China's social credit system are structural attempts to reconstruct the tribal reputation mechanism at scale — reinstating shame and honour consequences that anonymity destroyed. Whether these can replicate the depth of the architectures they replace is an open question. What they demonstrate is that the problem is real and even purely secular systems gravitate toward reputation-based enforcement when technology permits it.

The question is precise: if the divine surveillance mechanism was the innovation that allowed moral enforcement to scale beyond the tribe, and if its credibility has irreversibly declined, what follows? Not reconstruction of belief. Reconstruction of practice — on grounds that create Madisonian incentive structures making cooperative behaviour rational for self-interested actors at civilisational scale.

3. The Three-Variable Matrix — Case Studies

The matrix generates specific predictions from coding properties before consulting historical outcomes.

3a. Expansion Without Longevity — The Limiting Case

The Mongol Empire under Genghis Khan and his successors achieved the most rapid territorial expansion in recorded history. The pagan shamanistic tradition that accompanied this expansion had no independent replication mechanism. It was carried by political and military power, not by behavioural codes that produced social outcomes making practitioners successful in the absence of that power. It had no proselytising mandate, no textual tradition capable of sustaining identity across displacement, no institutional structure independent of the khan's authority.

The prediction is precise: when the political structure collapses, the tradition disappears. Within two generations of the empire's fragmentation, the Mongol successor states adopted the dominant religious traditions of their conquered territories — Islam in the western khanates, Buddhism in the eastern. The pagan tradition left no independent civilisational trace because it had no independent civilisational function.

State atheism in the Soviet Union is a modern instance: enforced by political authority for seventy years, it left remarkably little cultural residue once the authority structure dissolved. The Orthodox tradition it suppressed is re-emerging — though the Madisonian diagnostic applies to its resurgence as much as to its suppression. The Putin government has actively promoted Orthodoxy as a tool of social cohesion and political legitimacy, with Patriarch Kirill himself a documented former KGB agent. The state sees value in the church's enforcement architecture precisely because secular authority alone proved insufficient to produce the social cohesion it requires. That a post-atheist government reaches for the religious lever is itself evidence for the MEST thesis: the enforcement vacuum is real, and even actors with no metaphysical commitment recognise that the religious mechanism fills it more effectively than the alternatives they tried.

3b. Longevity Without Expansion — Judaism

Judaism presents the most extraordinary case of civilisational longevity in the historical record. Four millennia of continuous identity maintenance across multiple dispersions, sustained persecution, the destruction of its central temple (twice), and the loss of territorial sovereignty for nearly two thousand years — without ever optimising for expansion. The tradition is explicitly non-proselytising. The coding is designed for persistence, not growth.

The properties producing this longevity are identifiable. First, intense internal coherence through shared practice rather than shared belief. Judaism is a tradition of orthopraxy more than orthodoxy — what binds practitioners is not doctrinal conformity but shared ritual: dietary law, Sabbath observance, lifecycle rituals from

circumcision to burial, the annual liturgical calendar structuring collective time. These practices create dense social boundaries that maintain group identity under conditions of dispersion and hostile external pressure. A Jewish community in twelfth-century Córdoba and one in eighteenth-century Kraków share recognisable practice across seven centuries and three thousand kilometres, not because they agree on theology but because they observe the same Shabbat.

Second, the Talmudic interpretive tradition — sustained, rigorous, multi-generational commentary on foundational texts — creates a mechanism for adaptation while maintaining identity continuity. This is innovation freedom operating within a longevity-preserving structure.

Third, the intellectual cultivation norm — literacy, textual study, and intellectual engagement as religious obligations — systematically cultivated intellectual capacity across generations through cultural inheritance, producing civilisational contribution wildly disproportionate to population size. This is not a genetic claim. It is a coding property claim.

The matrix prediction holds precisely: extraordinary persistence, profound influence, never civilisational dominance.

3c. Islam — The Golden Age, the Mutation, the Selection Outcome

Early Islam was a genuine three-variable solution. The early caliphate produced extraordinary civilisational energy: rapid expansion, robust longevity mechanisms, and genuine innovation freedom. Women held property rights exceeding contemporary Christian Europe. The House of Wisdom systematically incorporated Greek, Persian, and Indian knowledge. Al-Khwarizmi's algebra, Ibn al-Haytham's optics, Ibn Sina's medical synthesis were foundational civilisational achievements.

The decline was multi-causal, though the *ijtihad* closure was the critical coding mutation. The theological conflict between the rationalist Mutazilites — who championed freedom of thought and held the Quran was created and contextually interpretable — and the traditionalist school of Ibn Hanbal had been shifting the intellectual balance for centuries. Al-Ghazali's *Incoherence of the Philosophers* in the late eleventh century attacked philosophical inquiry's foundations. The Ash'arite position — that causation is contingent on divine will, that natural regularities are merely habits of divine action — progressively removed the basis for systematic empirical investigation.

The Mongol destruction of Baghdad in 1258 then devastated the institutional infrastructure sustaining the rationalist tradition — the House of Wisdom, libraries, patronage networks. The Darwinian mechanism operated directly: rationalist variants depended on concentrated institutional patronage vulnerable to political destruction. Conformity-stable traditionalist variants replicated through distributed community transmission — family, mosque, local teaching — which survived political collapse. The

more resilient transmission mechanism won, not the more intellectually productive one.

Subsequent factors compounded the selection outcome: Ottoman institutional rigidities, political fragmentation across competing successor states, and later European colonial interventions disrupted whatever reformist currents might otherwise have emerged. Eight centuries of cumulative selection pressure produced the dominant forms defining mainstream Islam today. The relative weighting of these factors remains contested; the relevance here is not the precise historical causality but the observable selection outcome. The current incarnation is not Islam as originally coded. It is the Darwinian survivor of specific selection events — theological, military, institutional, and geopolitical.

Christianity underwent equivalent conformity pressure during the medieval period. The Reformation reintroduced innovation freedom. Islam's leadership could have reformed and chose not to — though the Madisonian diagnosis applies: the incentive structure for religious leadership within a conformity-stable tradition actively selects against reformers.

3d. Christianity — The Post-Reformation Solution

Post-Reformation Christianity solved the three-variable problem most completely among modern competitors.

Expansion was coded from the origin — the Great Commission. Fertility reinforced it: family formation norms coding for early marriage and large families produced demographic advantage across centuries. Longevity was sustained through textual foundation, liturgical practice, institutional structure, and family transmission — with a decisive structural innovation: church-state separation creating space for political adaptation without theological revolution. Innovation freedom was reintroduced by the Reformation: individual interpretive authority, sola scriptura, the right of conscience.

Weber's Protestant work ethic is a specific Madisonian instance: a behavioural code aligning individual self-interest with collective economic productivity. The practitioners needed only to follow the code. The outcomes followed from the coding properties.

The behavioural codes producing these outcomes — monogamy norms generating trust infrastructure, family obligation creating population growth and long-term community investment, honesty requirements reducing transaction costs, Sabbath structuring rest and weekly communal reinforcement — are what Lost Coherence identifies as the structural conditions of unified social energy. Christianity inherited many from Judaism. What it achieved was their most effective packaging among modern competitors — though the ancient Egyptians and Romans could make comparable claims within their respective eras. The Catholic institutional tradition

and Orthodox theological depth contributed alongside Protestant innovation freedom – the solution was not exclusively Protestant, even if the Reformation was the decisive mutation.

The solution is not permanent. The post-Enlightenment erosion of metaphysical credibility has degraded the delivery mechanism. The codes remain structurally valid. Their enforcement mechanism does not.

3e. Summary of the Three-Variable Matrix

The case studies above illustrate how the interaction of the three variables produces distinct civilisational trajectories. The following table summarises the mapping:

Tradition	Expansion Capacity	Civilisational Longevity	Innovation Freedom	Resulting Trajectory
Judaism	Low (non-proselytising)	High	High (Talmudic interpretation)	Extraordinary persistence and influence without dominance
Early Islam (Golden Age)	High (conquest + conversion)	High	High (House of Wisdom era)	Dominant civilisational operating system (temporarily)
Post-Reformation Christianity	High (Great Commission + fertility)	High	High (Reformation + individual conscience)	Most complete modern solution; shaped Western civilisation
Mongol Paganism	Very High (military conquest)	Low	Low	Rapid expansion followed by disappearance

This pattern confirms the Darwinian logic: traditions that solve all three variables simultaneously achieve the greatest civilisational impact, while imbalances produce predictable limitations or decline.

4. The Madisonian Function of God

4a. Rules That Work

The core behavioural codes of the surviving Abrahamic traditions are rules that consistently produce social outcomes making practitioners more successful — across radically different contexts, across millennia, against sustained competitive pressure.

The prohibition on theft makes property rights socially enforceable. Honesty requirements make contracts credible. Monogamy generates trust infrastructure and distributes reproductive stake. Family obligation creates population growth, long-term thinking, and binds communities to invest in the future. Sabbath structures rest and community gathering — and serves as a massive weekly transmission, reinforcement, and trust-building mechanism. The regular communal assembly is part of the adaptive design. Dietary laws maintain group identity under dispersion. Tithing sustains collective investment.

Each code aligns individual self-interest with collective flourishing. Madison's insight — durable institutional design must produce good outcomes from self-interested people — applies with precision. The codes work not because practitioners are virtuous but because following them in one's own interest simultaneously serves the collective.

These codes did not emerge solely through blind trial and error. Many were deliberately introduced by visionary leaders who understood, intuitively or explicitly, the Madisonian case for them. Moses did not stumble upon the Ten Commandments through random variation. Paul did not construct the early Church's organisational structure by accident. The Quranic framework represented a deliberate institutional design for governing a rapidly expanding multi-tribal community. Luther's Reformation was a conscious reintroduction of interpretive freedom. The Darwinian framework operates on the *tradition's* survival across centuries — but the coding itself often reflects the deliberate reasoning of founders who understood what rules would produce what social outcomes. The combination of intentional design and subsequent selection pressure is what makes these codes so robust: they were designed with intelligence and then tested against reality for millennia.

Douglass North's institutional economics describes the secular equivalent: informal normative constraints are the primary mechanism by which societies reduce transaction costs. Religious behavioural codes are the most extensively tested informal normative systems in human history.

4b. The Divine Mandate as Delivery Mechanism

The divine mandate framing makes rules unconditional — resistant to case-by-case renegotiation by self-interested actors. A divinely mandated prohibition cannot be argued away in specific cases of inconvenience. Madison understood precisely: men are not angels.

When the delivery mechanism loses credibility, rules become *negotiable*. This is what has happened to Western Christianity over the past half-century. Not abolition —

negotiation. Not revolution — erosion. Many churches are actively facilitating the process: the Catholic Church accommodating positions on divorce, cohabitation, and homosexuality that it resisted for 1,500 years; the Anglican Communion fracturing over women bishops and same-sex marriage, with the Global South churches — growing rapidly — rejecting reforms that the declining Western provinces adopted; the Uniting Church in Australia progressively abandoning core commitments on marriage, sexuality, and gender ideology in pursuit of contemporary relevance. These types of change undermine the authority the tradition's leadership exists to maintain. A tradition that continuously adapts its rules to match mainstream secular opinion is not adapting — it is dissolving. The Darwinian prediction is precise: the accommodating variants will decline; the traditions that maintain their behavioural demands will grow.

The empirical evidence confirms the Darwinian prediction with striking clarity. Research by Haskell and Flatt (2017) in the *Review of Religious Research* found that congregations holding traditional orthodox beliefs are the most likely to grow. Orthodox Christian parishes in the United States report conversion-driven growth bucking the overall decline — one St. Louis parish grew from 15 to over 100 members in four years. Among American Jews, Orthodox children are currently 22% of the total, but because Orthodox families have substantially more children, demographic projections suggest a majority within fifty years. The pattern extends globally: the most traditionally observant Muslim communities are growing fastest in Western countries.

The traditions that demand more are winning the Darwinian competition. The traditions that demand less are losing it. The accommodation strategy is a fitness-reducing mutation — it makes the tradition more similar to its secular competitor while sacrificing the distinctive social outcomes that gave it competitive advantage. This is the three-variable matrix operating in real time.

4c. Environmental Adaptation

The appropriate response to a maladapted code is not wholesale abandonment but diagnosis: what was this code doing? Has the environment changed in ways that make the mechanism unnecessary, or does the same outcome require a different mechanism?

As a concrete demonstration that the framework is genuinely adaptive: consider the Sabbath. Originally coded as absolute prohibition on labour, enforced by divine mandate. The adapted version retains structured weekly rest and communal gathering because the behavioural outcomes — restoration, community bonding, transmission reinforcement — remain valid. The form changes. The function is preserved. The Madisonian incentive holds: people who rest and gather weekly measurably outperform those who don't, in physical health, mental resilience, and social connectedness. This is reform, not dissolution.

The wholesale abandonment of family formation norms, by contrast, removed the mechanism without understanding what it was producing. The consequences are the consequences this series documents.

The adaptation principle: reform the code to the extent the environment has changed, and only to the extent the reformed code continues to create a Madisonian incentive for a rational self-interested individual to produce the beneficial outcomes the original generated. The ijthad principle held permanently open. The distinction: a tradition that reforms a code to function in changed conditions is adapting. A tradition that abandons a code because it has become unfashionable is dying.

Any replacement for religious systems must solve three problems simultaneously: enforce cooperative behaviour beyond the reach of observation, transmit behavioural norms across generations, and bind individuals into a cohesive identity structure. No existing secular system has solved all three. Most have not solved one.

5. The Errors of New Atheism and Design Philosophy

5a. The New Atheist Error

The New Atheist position — developed most influentially by Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and Dennett — deserves analytical generosity before its error is identified. What they got right was substantial. The metaphysical claims of religious traditions are not supported by available evidence to the standard scientific epistemology requires. The historical record of religious institutions includes sustained and well-documented harm. The epistemic standard applied to religious claims should be the same standard applied to any other proposition. On each point, the New Atheist position is correct, and this paper does not dispute it.

What they got wrong is the inference. The move from "the metaphysical claims are unsupported" to "the behavioural codes are invalidated" is a non-sequitur — and it is the non-sequitur on which the entire New Atheist prescriptive programme depends. The behavioural codes of successful religious traditions were not validated by their metaphysical justification. They were validated by their social outcomes across millennia of Darwinian selection. A prohibition on theft does not become less functional because the divine authority mandating it turns out to be a human construction. Family formation norms do not stop generating trust infrastructure because the metaphysical framework delivering them loses credibility. The codes and their justification are separable. The New Atheists conflated them.

The deeper error is one of inheritance. The New Atheists — educated, prosperous, operating within stable democratic institutions with high social trust — benefited from

civilisational infrastructure built by the behavioural codes they were dismantling. They could not see the infrastructure because they had always lived inside it — the way a person cannot hear an accent they themselves have. And the irony compounds: these individuals inherited, and lived consistently with, the strong personal moral framework grounded in the very same traditions they were dismantling for others. The high-trust societies that produced the conditions for their intellectual freedom were the output of centuries of religious behavioural coding. They inherited the output and attacked the mechanism, assuming the output was the natural condition of human civilisation rather than the product of a specific cultural inheritance system.

Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006) applies the Darwinian framework correctly and draws the wrong conclusion. Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (2006) comes closer but makes the same inferential error: understanding the mechanism by which religion produces its effects does not diminish the value of those effects. Understanding that aspirin works through prostaglandin inhibition rather than divine intervention does not make headaches less painful or the aspirin less effective.

5b. The Design Inference Error

The symmetrical error: philosophers and theologians who infer intelligent design from religion's evolutionary success confuse Darwinian fitness with metaphysical truth.

Thomas Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos* (2012) represents the most intellectually serious recent version. Nagel argues that the materialist framework cannot fully account for the emergence of consciousness, reason, and value — and that the functional sophistication of systems like religion suggests a teleological dimension. The argument deserves engagement rather than dismissal.

The Darwinian framework provides the response. The functional sophistication of surviving religious codes is fully explained by the selection process that produced them. Thousands of traditions have existed. Most are extinct. The survivors exhibit sophistication because selection eliminated those that did not — the same mechanism producing the eye, the immune system, and the brain without requiring a designer. No metaphysical reality is required to complete the explanation.

Berlinski's *The Devil's Delusion* (2008) occupies more defensible ground: the New Atheists have not adequately reckoned with what religion does and what its removal costs. This paper agrees — and goes further by specifying the mechanism and deriving the prescription.

5c. The Position This Paper Occupies

Religion's metaphysical claims may be false. But its behavioural codes are validated by outcomes, not justification. The appropriate response is not abandonment but practice on functional grounds — while honestly acknowledging that for ordinary populations, belief may serve as the enforcement mechanism rationalism alone cannot replace.

This position yields a precise prescription.

6. The Prescriptive Conclusion

6a. The Conclusion Stated

A person in a Christian civilisation has a strong rational case for practising Christianity's behavioural codes regardless of metaphysical belief. Not as performance. As rational life design — and as a short-cut avoiding the need to reinvent a moral code from first principles. As I discovered: the codes have already been invented. The transmission mechanisms have already been designed. The experiment of living without them has been conducted, and the results are in.

What practice means: traditional family structure as non-optional responsibility architecture generating population growth, long-term thinking, and community investment. Moral fortitude — honouring commitments when defection is individually advantageous. Sabbath as structured rest, community gathering, and weekly transmission reinforcement. Lifecycle rituals binding individual experience to collective continuity. Non-optional obligation to family and community.

The prescription is civilisationally indexed but not unconditionally so. A person in a Buddhist civilisation has a case for Buddhist practice — the community infrastructure exists within that tradition. But the core behavioural codes that produce the strongest outcomes are closer to universal than the indexing might suggest: discipline, honesty, family obligation, long-term thinking over immediate gratification produce measurably superior outcomes in virtually any context.

6b. Objections Addressed

The hypocrisy objection fails because it confuses delivery mechanism with content. Sincerity is measured by commitment to practice, not subscription to metaphysical claims.

The community objection understates the tradition's capacity to accommodate doubt. Judaism's name — Israel — means "wrestles with God." Christianity has accommodated doubt from Thomas onward. What the tradition cannot accommodate is abandonment of practice. A doubting practitioner who maintains the codes contributes to the social outcomes. A confident believer who abandons them does not.

The conservatism objection misreads the framework. The argument is explicitly adaptive. Where a code is maladapted, the framework demands reform with the same force it demands preservation of codes that remain functional.

6c. Nietzsche's Child and the Übermensch

The strongest objection is structural: does recommending practice ossify the tradition?

Nietzsche's three metamorphoses in *Zarathustra*: the camel carries tradition uncritically. The lion destroys it — the New Atheist move. The child creates new values with genuine openness.

This paper's prescription is the child. And the autobiographical arc completes itself. I set out to create new values — Nietzsche's child, before I had read Nietzsche. I discovered I was reinventing the religious codes. I now recognise that the Übermensch would necessarily arrive at the same place — not because the codes are divinely mandated, but because they solve structural problems of the human condition that do not change. The Übermensch does not transcend the codes. He understands *why* they work and practises them with conscious intentionality that neither uncritical inheritance nor reflexive destruction achieves. This is what Nietzsche was reaching for — the child who creates new values necessarily creates the same values, because the problems are structural.

The Madisonian adaptation principle prevents ossification. The ijtehad principle held permanently open: continuous evaluation of which rules still create incentive structures making cooperation rational. The ijtehad closure is the documented failure mode. The child requires more rigour than camel or lion — deep understanding of what the tradition was doing, what has changed, and what contemporary mechanism preserves the beneficial behaviour.

6d. The Convergent Wisdom Principle

As Rudyard Lynch observed: if Gandhi, Jesus, Plato, Confucius, and the Buddha all agree on something about human nature, it is probably right. Five independent traditions, radically different contexts, converging on the same observations — strong Bayesian evidence for structural features of the human condition rather than culturally contingent preferences. The Axial Age convergence is itself explained by the Moral Enforcement Scale Theory: these traditions responded to the same structural problem from different starting points.

What they converge on maps onto the Darwinian framework's outputs: self-discipline over immediate gratification, family and social obligation as non-optional, virtue and flourishing as causally linked, the dangers of purely material motivation, contemplative practice as counterweight to reactive present-orientation. When evolutionary analysis and independent wisdom traditions converge from completely unrelated directions, the probability those prescriptions are functionally valid is very high.

6e. How Practice Works Without Belief

The claim that practice produces outcomes independently of belief requires a mechanistic account, not merely an autobiographical assertion.

The empirical evidence is substantial. Harvard longitudinal research (Chen and VanderWeele 2018) found that weekly religious service attendance in youth predicted greater life satisfaction, lower depression, and reduced substance abuse in early adulthood. Crucially, the measure most strongly and consistently associated with positive health outcomes across the literature is service attendance — that is, *practice* — not measures of theological belief. Swedish research found that even in one of the world's most secular societies, a positive correlation between religion and social trust was limited specifically to religion as social organisation, not theological belief.

The mechanisms are identifiable. Regular communal practice produces habit formation — the behavioural codes become automatic responses rather than deliberate calculations, reducing the cognitive cost of cooperation. Costly signalling — the visible investment of time and resources in communal practice — generates trust among fellow practitioners by demonstrating commitment. Identity fusion — the embedding of individual identity within a community through shared ritual — produces the collective identity that Lost Coherence identifies as a structural condition of unified social energy. And the embodiment effects that Haidt documents — moral intuitions shaped by physical participation in communal practice rather than by propositional belief — suggest that the practice literally rewires the practitioner's moral architecture regardless of their metaphysical position.

No study has yet cleanly isolated believing-but-not-practising from practising-but-not-believing in terms of social and developmental outcomes, likely because of the novelty of “practising but not believing” as an idea. The prediction is clear: practising-but-not-believing should produce outcomes closer to practising-and-believing than to neither-practising-nor-believing. If this prediction fails, the core thesis of this paper is weakened.

6f. Testable Predictions

A thesis that cannot specify the conditions under which it is wrong is not a thesis.

The framework predicts: communities that adopt the behavioural codes without the metaphysical framework should show measurably higher family stability, social trust, and intergenerational transmission effectiveness than comparable secular communities within two generations. If they do not, the claim that practice is separable from belief is weakened.

The framework predicts: traditions that maintain their behavioural demands will continue to grow relative to those that accommodate. If accommodating traditions reverse their decline while maintaining lower demands, the three-variable matrix is weakened.

The framework predicts: the Nordic high-trust model will show continued erosion of social trust and civic participation as the residual effects of Protestant cultural inheritance deplete across generations. If Nordic trust stabilises or rises without religious or quasi-religious institutional renewal, the MEST theory is weakened.

The framework predicts: secular institutional mechanisms for behavioural code transmission (the question of what replaces weekly communal reinforcement) will prove structurally necessary for maintaining social cohesion. If societies sustain high trust and social coherence without any form of regular communal practice, the transmission mechanism thesis requires revision. This question — what secular institution can replicate the transmission function of weekly communal gathering — connects directly to Lost Coherence's identification of vertical trust transmission as the unsolved problem of post-religious modernity, and is developed further in Paper 5.

6g. The Civilisational Stakes

I return to first person because the conclusion is personal before it is theoretical.

Fifty years of dismantling metaphysical scaffolding without replacing the behavioural codes has produced results consistent with both Darwinian prediction and Madisonian diagnosis — and entirely as Nietzsche, Unwin, and others predicted over a century ago. Declining social trust. Declining family formation. Rising atomisation. Expanding governance overhead. The institutionalisation of permanent adolescence.

Charles Murray documents the class dimension in *Coming Apart*: the educated elite continues to practise the codes while publicly endorsing the framework that dismantled them for everyone else. The elite practises what it no longer preaches. Those who depended on the institutional enforcement mechanism have lost both the mechanism and the codes. The class gradient follows directly.

Nietzsche was right that God is dead in the metaphysical sense. He was incomplete about what follows. What follows is not the Last Man blinking. What follows — what this paper argues must follow — is the child becoming the Übermensch. Understanding what the tradition was doing. Why it worked. What the changed environment demands. And practising the codes with the conscious intentionality that understanding provides.

Zarathustra descends a final time from the mountain to share what he had learned. The Übermensch does not care whether God is alive or dead. He needs only to understand what the codes were doing, to build on them where the environment demands, and to practise them because they work.

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Paper 2 of 5 in the Prothean Civilisational Architecture series.

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About Prothean Institute

The Prothean Institute is an independent research organisation dedicated to understanding the structural conditions of civilisational flourishing — and to preserving that understanding for those who come after.

We take seriously what history demonstrates and modern institutions prefer to ignore: that civilisations are not the default condition of human organisation. They are fragile achievements, sustained by specific cultural, developmental, and institutional conditions that can be eroded gradually and lost completely. The mechanisms of that erosion are not mysterious. They are structural, predictable, and — where identified early enough — addressable.

Prothean's work is grounded in three intellectual commitments.

The first is epistemic rigour without institutional deference. Institutional consensus is a data point, not a ceiling. Where the evidence leads to conclusions outside the current Overton window, we follow the evidence and state the conclusions clearly. We distinguish carefully between what is established, what is inferred, and what is speculative — but we do not soften findings for political, social, or institutional comfort.

The second is the Madisonian policy standard, applied in both directions. Constructively: all policy proposals are stress-tested against the behaviour of self-interested actors. Durable institutional design produces good outcomes from normal human behaviour — it does not rely on exceptional virtue. Diagnostically: all observed social pathologies are traced to the structural conditions and incentive environments that make them rational or inevitable. The policy task is always structural, never moral.

The third is intellectual honesty about civilisational stakes. The questions Prothean addresses — fertility, maturity development, social coherence, the function of cultural institutions, the conditions of collective flourishing — are not policy puzzles to be optimised at the margin. They are questions about whether the societies we inhabit will sustain themselves across generations, and what understanding is required to give them the best chance of doing so.

The archive exists for those paying close enough attention to find it.

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