

Level of theistic belief correlates with degree of class differentiation in the Ethnographic Atlas

Petró Ádám – 2025.04.24. (Pre-registration: <https://aspredicted.org/z9vt-pgf2.pdf>)

Introduction

Religion has long been a frequently debated subject of analysis within anthropology, sociology and related fields. One prominent perspective, which remains widely influential to this day, stems from Karl Marx, who most famously formulated his view in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* in the following way: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people” (Marx, 1843). In this manner, the Marxist view regards religious belief as resulting from class inequality, providing illusory happiness and peace of mind for the oppressed masses but, by the same token, helping to maintain the socio-economic status quo that engenders the oppression of the masses in the first place, thus ultimately serving the interests of the ruling class (Rogers & Konieczny, 2018). It follows that the Marxist theory would predict that in a truly classless and equal society, religion – like many other forms of what we call “culture” – would naturally wither away and disappear, having no purpose to serve (Wolff & Leopold, 2025).

In the following analysis, I examine whether currently available ethnographic data supports this prediction.

Data

For the analysis, I use the openly available Ethnographic Atlas dataset (Murdock et al., 2024), which contains data on 1291 societies in total, categorizing them according to a multitude of aspects. For the purposes of this analysis, the relevant independent variables are “EA066 – Class differentiation: primary” and “EA067 – Class differentiation: secondary”.

“Class differentiation: primary” is described as “The degree and type of class differentiation, excluding purely political and religious statuses. See also “Class differentiation: secondary,” as some societies exhibit important features of two different types of class differentiation,” and has the following categories:

- 1 - Absence of significant class distinctions among freemen (slavery is treated in EA070), ignoring variations in individual repute achieved through skill, valor, piety, or wisdom
- 2 - Wealth distinctions, based on the possession or distribution of property, present and socially important but not crystallized into distinct and hereditary social classes
- 3 - Elite stratification, in which an elite class derives its superior status from, and perpetuates it through, control over scarce resources, particularly land, and is thereby differentiated from a property-less proletariat or serf class
- 4 - Dual stratification into a hereditary aristocracy and a lower class of ordinary commoners

or freemen, where traditionally ascribed noble status is at least as decisive as control over scarce resources

5 - Complex stratification into social classes correlated in large measure with extensive differentiation of occupational statuses

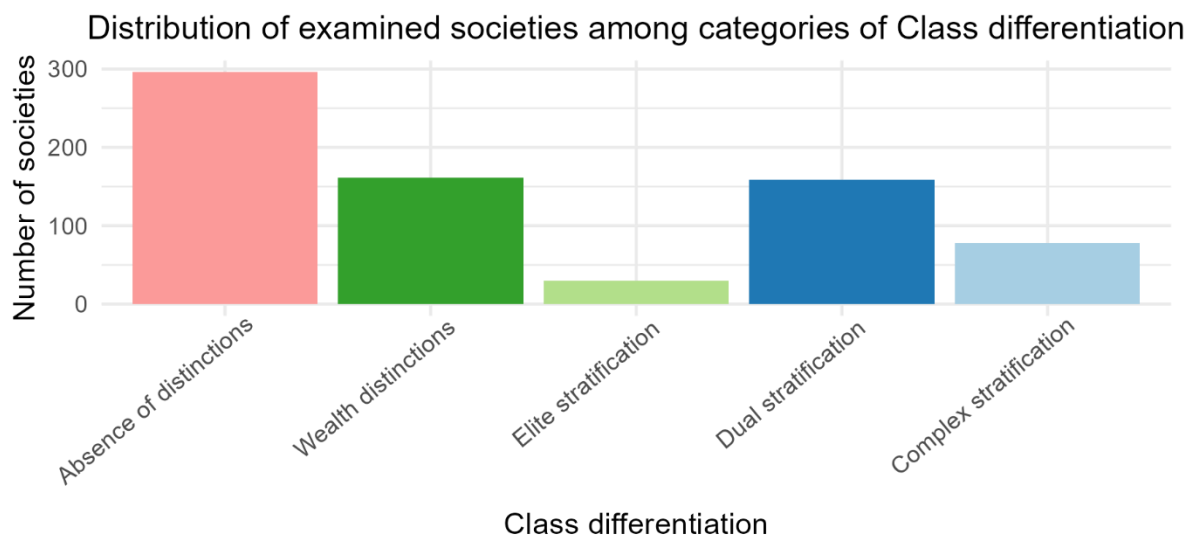
“Class differentiation: secondary” is not used, as it takes the value “No secondary type” in 82 percent of the cases and is not available for 14 percent of societies.

The relevant dependent variable is “EA034 – Religion: high gods”, described as “The range of beliefs in high gods. A high god is defined, following Swanson, as a spiritual being who is believed to have created all reality and/or to be its ultimate governor, even if his sole act was to create other spirits who, in turn, created or control the natural world.” It can take the following values:

- 1 - A high god absent or not reported in substantial descriptions of religious beliefs
- 2 - A high god present but otiose or not concerned with human affairs
- 3 - A high god present and active in human affairs but not offering positive support to human morality
- 4 - A high god present, active, and specifically supportive of human morality

For the analysis, all rows in which either value (of EA066 or EA034) is not available are omitted, which reduces the number of examined societies to 724, with a distribution as illustrated in Fig.1.

Fig. 1



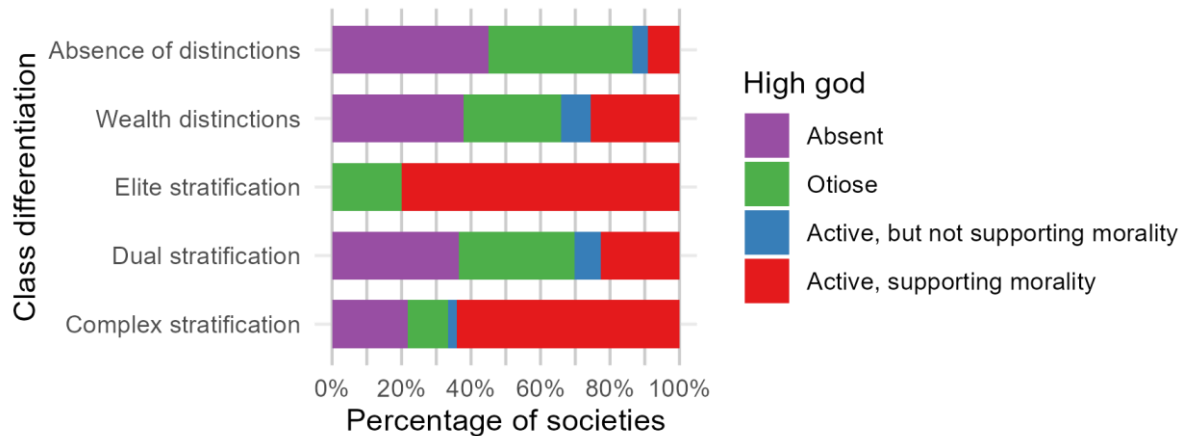
Analysis

The distribution of different conceptions of god among societies belonging to each category of class differentiation can be seen in Fig.2. Societies with no significant class distinctions among freeman (N = 296) have the highest percentage of no belief in a high god, with almost half of them falling into this group. Societies with wealth distinctions (without crystallized class distinctions) (N = 161) and societies with hereditary aristocracy-based dual stratification (N =

159) also have a similarly high prevalence of lack of belief in a high god, but a significantly higher percentage of societies believe in an active god who supports human morality.

Fig. 2

Conception of High god in relation to Class differentiation in society

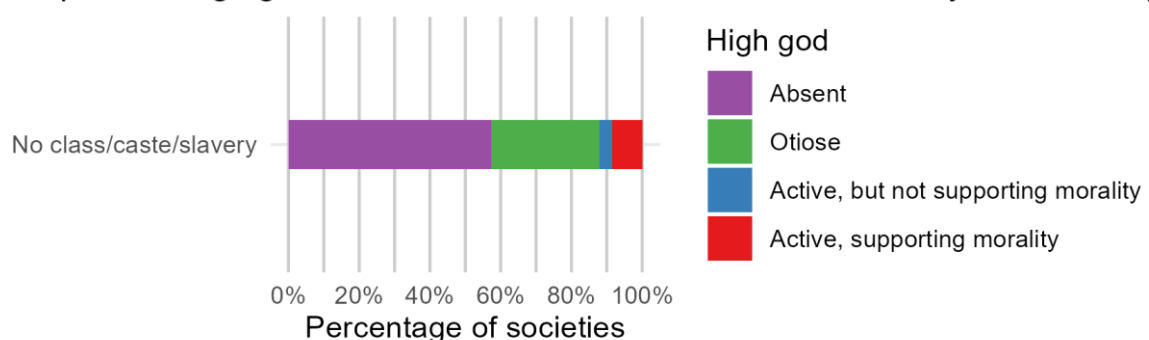


Societies with an elite stratification into a ruling and a proletariat class based on control over scarce resources (N = 30) overwhelmingly have belief systems centered around a high god who is present, active, and specifically supportive of human morality (80%). Furthermore, there are no instances of a lack of belief among them. Societies that show a complex stratification into social classes (N = 78) also mostly believe in an active, morality-supporting god.

To further focus the analysis, and to make use of all possibly relevant data available, I examine the subcategory of societies with no class differentiation that also lack caste differentiation (EA068 Caste differentiation: primary – 1: Caste distinctions absent or insignificant) and slavery (EA070 Slavery: type – 1: Absence or near absence of slavery), narrowing down the scope of analysis to 190 societies.

Fig. 3

Conception of High god in societies without social classes, caste system, slavery



With these additional considerations, more than half of the examined societies do not believe in a high god, a trend suggesting that if societies with further forms of inequalities – not documented in the present dataset – could be excluded, this ratio might be even higher.

Limitations

A main limitation of the analysis is that the data specifically addresses the presence and level of belief in a high god, a supreme creator, whereas from a Marxist perspective, any religion – whether monotheistic, pantheistic, nontheistic, or otherwise – can serve as a manifestation of and vehicle for false consciousness if it obscures class relations and legitimizes the status quo. It could also be argued that Marx's analysis is most applicable to societies that have progressed through the historical socio-economic stages described in his theory – such as European societies – and may not fully apply to societies with different developmental trajectories.

Conclusion

Based on the data from the Ethnographic Atlas, the Marxist position regarding religion is only partially supported. The fact that belief in a high god exists in a large percentage of societies where clear social distinctions are absent (although it is debatable how closely these communities align with Marx's idea of a truly communist society), at the very least implies that religiousness has sources other than systemic inequality – for example, dreams and visions (Tylor, 1871). On the other hand, the type and severity of class distinction does appear to be indicative of the conception of god within a community – most notably, societies with an elite class deriving its superior status from resource ownership predominantly feature belief systems with a morality-supporting god – lending empirical support to certain aspects of Marxist theory.

References

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Appendix

Geographic locations of examined societies plotted on the world map:

Fig. A1

Class differentiation in examined societies

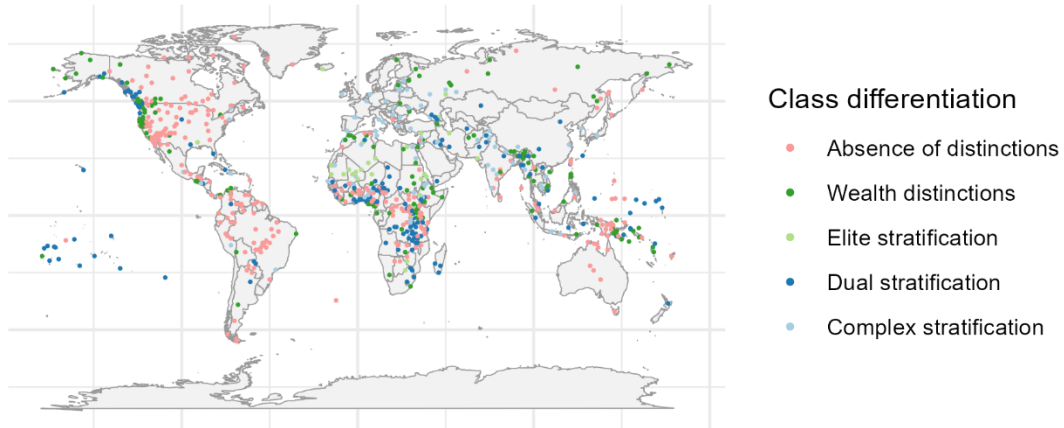


Fig. A2

Conception of High god in examined societies

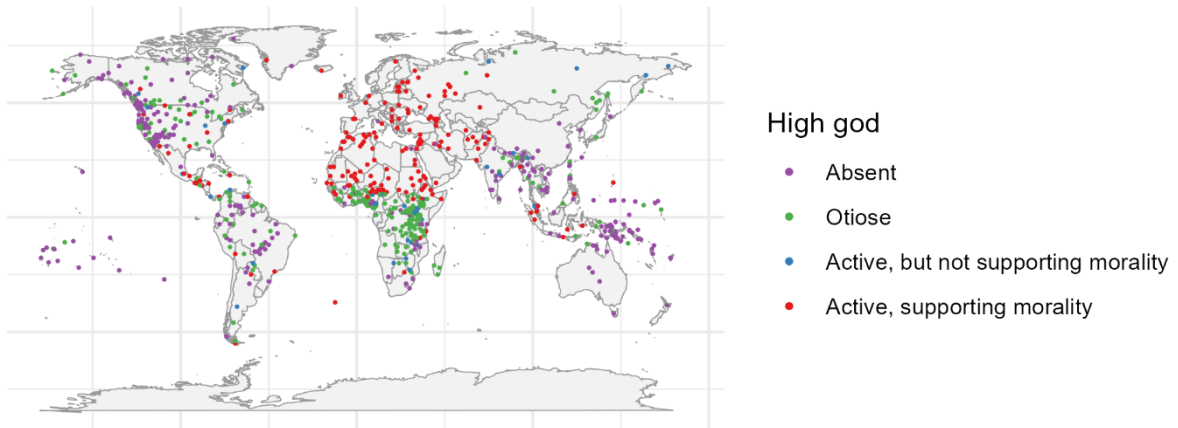


Fig. A3

Conception of High god in societies without social classes, caste system, slavery

