God and the good earth

Only when nomads settled on fertile soil did the notion of progress found in Abrahamic religions take root

Easter is one of those occasions on which human beings entertain a number of contradictory ideas. Christians celebrate a pagan fertility cult, while non-believers make their biannual journey to church. People whose lives are dominated by godless consumption give something up for Lent. A society governed by science engages in the ritual sacrifice and homeopathic magic – eggs and chicks and rabbits – required to induce the earth to bear fruit.

Why? Well, having read this you might fairly accuse me of drawing wide inferences from limited data, but the work of a soil geologist at the University of Oregon offers such a fascinating possible explanation of some of these contradictions that I cannot resist indulging in speculation.

Professor Greg Retallack has spent much of the past few years taking soil samples from the sites of the temples of ancient Greece. He has stumbled on a remarkable phenomenon. There is a strong link, challenged by only a few exceptions, between the identity of the god worshipped at a particular temple and the temple's location. Where Artemis or Apollo were celebrated, the soil was of a kind called a lithic xerept, where montane scrub suitable only for nomadic herders grows. Nomads living on soils called xeralfs, by contrast, worshipped Hera and Hermes. Subsistence farmers cultivating soils called rendolls built temples to Demeter and Dionysus, while fluvent soils capable of supporting large farms lie beneath shrines to Hestia, Hephaestus and Ares. The gods of ancient Greece, Professor Retallack suggests, "came not from an imaginary poetic city on Mt Olympus, but personify ancient local lifestyles". The ancients were worshipping their own means of subsistence.

The Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – were constructed by recently settled nomads. These are people who were likely to have been making use of soils such as lithic xerepts and xeralfs. Nomads, being without permanent homes, characteristically have no local deities: most of them worship a single God of the heavens. The Turkana of northern Kenya use the same word – Akuj – to mean both sky and God. The Mongols, Turks and Tartars all worshipped Tengri, God of the Blue Sky.

In the first books of the Bible, the nomads are God's children, the city people his outcasts. The first city the Bible mentions was built by Cain, a tiller of the ground (and therefore an inhabitant of more fertile soils), who was cursed by God after murdering his nomad brother. The defining ecological image of the Pentateuch is that of the nomad Abraham, gazing down upon the plains, where the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are burning.

Thereafter, God's relationship to the city becomes more equivocal. In Kings I we discover that the ark of the covenant is housed in "the city of David, which is Zion". By Nehemiah's time, Jerusalem has become "the holy city". But to Ezekiel it is a place of "lewdness" and "whoredoms". "Woe to the bloody city! I will even make the pile for fire great ... that the scum of it may be consumed." This tension survives into the New Testament. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus speaks of his flock as a city on a hill. But even then the wilderness – the uncultivated pasture of the nomads – remained the realm of terrestrial purity, the haunt of John the Baptist and the retreat of Christ.

What happened between the time of Abraham and the time of Christ was that the nomads, having seized the fertile soils where the farmers dwelt, settled down. While they still looked back with longing upon the lives of their ancestors, their theology shifted to match their circumstances.

With this shift came something new: a belief in progress. The philosopher John Gray has pointed out that, while pagans typically see history as a cyclical process, Judaism, Christianity and Islam all claim to be working towards a denouement: "salvation is the culmination of history". The followers of these religions see life not as an endless cycle of hubris and nemesis, but as a journey towards a moment of transformation.

If you are constantly subject to the whims of the environment, as hunters and gatherers, nomads and primitive farmers are, an awareness of the cyclical nature of history is forced upon you. Your fortunes change with the seasons, the patterns of rainfall, the happenstances of ecology. Glut is followed by famine, followed by glut, followed by famine. Nomas, the Greek word from which nomad comes, means "the search for pasture". The name recognises the fragility of the people's existence.

A belief in progress, by contrast, is surely possible only after you have developed secure means of storing crops for long periods, and a diversified – and therefore more robust – economy. It is possible, in other words, only if you live on rendoll or fluvent soils, and build

cities there. The myth of the Fall is the story of hunters and gatherers exceeding their ecological limits. They were forced out of Eden and into cultivation (Cain) and nomadism (Abel). But having conquered the fertile lands and developed an advanced agricultural economy, the former nomads who worshipped a single God were able, as technology improved, gradually to release themselves from some of the constraints of nature.

It is surely this release which permitted them to believe that the cycle of history need no longer apply: that the human story could instead be cumulative and progressive. From there it is a short step to the belief that history is moving towards a fixed point, when humans enjoy total victory over the material world, as the dead rise and live forever. If the myth of the Fall is the story of our subjection to biological realities, the myth of eternal life is the story of our escape from them. The first myth invokes the second. The gun on the wall in act one must be used in act three.

Is it difficult to see why this doctrine should be attractive to people still subject to the gruelling realities of nature? The Christian God would cure disease and even death, calm storms, summon food out of thin air. With a handful of literate evangelists, the fantasy of material abandonment was able to conquer the world.

My untested hypothesis is as follows. The peculiarities of the Abrahamic religions – their astonishing success in colonising the world and their dangerous notion of progress (inherited by secular society) – result from a marriage between the universal God of the nomads and the conditions which permitted cities to develop. The dominant beliefs of the past 2,000 years are the result of an ancient migration from soils such as xerepts and xeralfs to soils such as fluvents and rendolls.

At Easter, the Christian belief in a permanent resurrection is mixed up with the pagan belief in a perpetual cycle of temporary resurrection and death. In church we worship the Christian notion of progress, which has filtered into every aspect of our lives. But, amid the cracking of Easter eggs and the murmur of prayer, there can still be heard the small, faint voice which reminds us that our ecological hubris must eventually be greeted by nemesis.