

7

# THE ORIGIN OF WORLD RELIGIONS

1170L



A HISTORIAN'S JOURNAL ENTRY / BY ANITA RAVI

As people created more efficient systems of communication and more complex governments in early agrarian civilizations, they also developed what we now call religion.



BIG HISTORY PROJECT



Having done some research on the common features of early agrarian cities, I'm interested in finding out why all civilizations adopted some sort of religion and how these religions spread over vast regions. I know that by 1200 BCE, there were developed cities in most parts of the world. Having examined some early writing from the city of Sumer in Mesopotamia, I know that people had already conceived of gods that looked out for them and the welfare of their crops and cities. But the world religions I know of — Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam — were bigger than a single city or even a single region of the world. In fact, these religions have survived for thousands of years, and all of them seem to have developed around the same time. Since people do not appear to have lacked for religious life on a local scale from very early times, why did several large-scale belief systems emerge between 1200 BCE and 700 CE? In fact, why did all the major world religions appear in that era?

#### WHY RELIGIONS BECAME GLOBAL

One possibility is that by about 100 BCE, the population in Afro-Eurasia had climbed to over a million. As a result of increasing commercial and cultural interaction between people across this large area, religions were shared. The new religious systems provided foundations of cultural communication, moral expectation, and personal trust among people who were meeting, sharing ideas, and doing business with one another far beyond their local neighborhoods. The historians J.R. and William McNeil call this the development of "portable, congregational religions." Common features of these religions are the following: there is usually a founding man who receives the word of

God; there is a key text or set of texts that defines man's relationship with God; there are recommended ways of living and worshipping; people come together regularly to have God's word interpreted for them by an authority; and there is a path to self-transformation and eternal salvation in one way or another. In *The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History*, the McNeills argue that religion took hold during this time period for the following reasons:

*In subsequent centuries, urban dwellers, and particularly poor, marginal persons, found that authoritative religious guidance, shared faith, and mutual support among congregations of believers could substitute for the tight-knit custom of village existence (within which the rural majority continued to live) and give meaning and value to ordinary lives, despite daily contact with uncaring strangers. Such religious congregations, in turn, helped to stabilize urban society by making its inherent inequality and insecurity more tolerable. (61)*

So what they're saying is that religion provided structure and meaning for large groups of people in ways that small, tight-knit village communities used to do. Religion, especially faiths that were shared by large groups of people, actually provided stability in cities. These religions were accepted by thousands of followers because they appealed to many different people from all social classes and occupations. If the texts and tenets of these faiths spoke to such a wide variety of people then the religious beliefs were more likely to spread along trade routes, unlike the earlier village-based religions.

Faith	Approximate start date	Place of origin	Approximate number of followers (2014)
Hinduism	c. 2000 BCE	Northern India	979 million
Judaism	c. 2000 BCE	Middle East	15.6 million
Buddhism	c. 500 BCE	Northern India	480 million
Confucianism	c. 500 BCE	Northern China	6.5 million
Daoism (Taoism)	c. 550 BCE	Northern China	3 million
Christianity	c. 100 CE	Middle East	2.3 billion
Islam	c. 622 CE	Middle East	1.6 billion

While many people were drawn to these early religions, they are not all the same. Each faith has its own answers to questions about humanity and each one has different practices. All faiths, apart from Confucianism, which some scholars classify as an ethical system rather than a religion, offer eternal salvation in one form or another. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all monotheistic, with one omnipotent and omniscient deity. Hinduism allows for the worship of numerous, powerful gods and goddesses. Buddhism and Daoism also accept the existence of multiple divine beings in various forms and incarnations. All of these religions teach that human relations should be guided by kindness, selflessness, and decency. Confucianism, in particular, emphasizes public moral behavior, good government, and social responsibility.

#### A CLOSER LOOK AT HINDUISM AND BUDDHISM

So how did each belief system define these relationships with God, with society, and with other humans? First, I'm going to take a look at Hinduism. I learned through a few web searches and from several secondary sources that Hinduism is often called the "oldest religion" mainly because there is no single founder and because the main ideas of the religion appear in a variety of different texts written over time, starting around 4,000 years ago. What's interesting about Hinduism is that it was developed by a group of people living in the Indus Valley who had a rigid hierarchical social structure called the caste system. Michelle Ferrer sums up the basic tenets of Hinduism in *The Budding of Buddhism*, which is quoted below.

*The untouchables, the lowest members of society, dealt with human waste and the dead. This group did the jobs no one else wanted to do. They were regarded by the other groups as ritually impure and therefore outside the hierarchy of groups altogether. The Sudras had service jobs, and the Vaisya were herders, farmers, artisans, and merchants. The Ksatriyas, the second highest caste, were the warriors and rulers. At the top were the Brahmins, who were priests, scholars, and teachers. Because priests were part of this caste, the early religion is known as Brahmanism. Brahmanism evolved into the larger Hindu tradition.*

*The Hindus revered many gods. They believed that people had many lives (reincarnation). Also, they believed in karma. This meant that whatever a person did in this life would determine what he or she would be in the next life. Thus, reincarnation creates a cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. The cycle ends only when a person realizes that his or her soul and God's soul are one. To help achieve this goal, the Hindus had several spiritual practices, some of which are done in the western world today, including meditation and yoga.*

*The Hindus also believed in the Purusharthas: Four Goals of Life.*

*These goals motivated people in their lives:*

*1. dharma: living a virtuous life*

*2. kama: pleasure of the senses*

*3. artha: achieving wealth and success lawfully*

*4. moksha: release from reincarnation*

So what this is telling me is that the religion evolved from a social class structure where people had very defined roles. Since the religion hinges on this idea of karma — what you do in life today determines what you do in the next life — I wonder if the untouchables could come back as a higher caste if they "lived a virtuous life." If I look back to what the McNeills said about religion giving meaning to the drudgery of daily life, Hinduism seems to fit that description perfectly. What's more, it seems to be an effective system for maintaining a social hierarchy and control over the population. If indeed you can improve your lot in the next life by living well in this one, why dwell on how miserable your life is now if you can focus on having a better one next time around? It is also interesting that the four paths in life aren't just about spirituality and God. The second and third goals are really about daily life — specifically, living a pleasurable daily life. In this view, the path toward moksha seems enjoyable. You're supposed to be happy, wealthy, and successful. This sounds a lot like later seventeenth and eighteenth century political philosophies that would shape the founding of America: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Focusing on the positive and trying to achieve happiness now does indeed bring meaning to life and lift people's focus away from daily drudgery or suffering, with the hope that one day people might achieve eternal salvation or be released from the reincarnation cycle (samsara).

The second religion I'm going to take a look at is Buddhism. Buddhism evolved from Hinduism and the ancient Indian social structure. In this case, there is a male founder of the religion. His name was Siddhartha Gautama and he was born in South Asia (what is now Nepal) in 563 BCE. He was born into a Ksatriya Hindu family, which was the warrior/ruler class. The story goes that Siddhartha's father asked some wise men what his son would become in life. These wise men said he would become a great leader, unless he saw suffering. So Siddhartha's dad kept him inside the palace walls all of his life. When he was 16, he got married and had a son. Then, he went outside of the palace and saw all the illness, poverty, death, and human suffering in the world. He fled his home and began to search for peace. Siddhartha spent six years wandering

around South Asia trying to find ways to ease the suffering of the world. One day, he sat under a Bodhi tree to meditate. While he was meditating, he became enlightened, or saw the truth. This is how he earned the name Buddha, the Bodi Satva, or the Enlightened One. After his enlightenment, he began to share what had been revealed to him under the Bodhi tree. These teachings include the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path. I learned that the whole purpose of ending suffering (dukkha) in the world is to achieve the ultimate goal of enlightenment (nirvana).

#### **The Four Noble Truths:**

1. Life is filled with suffering (dukkha).
2. The root of this suffering comes from a person's material desires (to want what you do not have).
3. In order to stop suffering, you must get rid of desire or greed.
4. If you follow the Eight-Fold Path then you can eliminate your material desires, and therefore, your suffering.

#### **The Eight-Fold Path:**

1. **Right View:** Understand that there is suffering in the world and that the Four Noble Truths can break this pattern of suffering.
2. **Right Intention:** Avoid harmful thoughts, care for others, and think about more than yourself.
3. **Right Speech:** Speak kindly and avoid lying or gossip.
4. **Right Action:** Be faithful and do the right thing; do not kill, steal, or lie.
5. **Right Living:** Make sure that your livelihood does not harm others. Do not promote slavery or the selling of weapons or poisons.
6. **Right Effort:** Work hard and avoid negative situations.
7. **Right Awareness:** Exercise control over your mind and increase your wisdom.
8. **Right Concentration:** Increase your peacefulness and calmness, in particular through meditation.

What a story! This young man from the upper class of society gave up his status and position when he saw the effects his status was having on people outside of his palace walls. These eight tenets of Buddhism are really about how people should relate to each other and how people develop self-discipline. Each of the eight "rights" is a simple statement about how to ease suffering in life. They are simple and they are, in fact, present in one form or another in all of the other religions as well: be kind to each other, don't gossip, don't kill or steal, be loyal, make good choices, learn a lot, and chill out. I also learned that after he revealed these ideas, the Buddha stopped worshipping Hindu gods and stopped believing that one caste was better than the others. But similar to Hinduism, Buddhists came to believe that following these steps leads toward nirvana and therefore, stops the cycle of reincarnation.

So what have I learned about the development of early religions from studying Hinduism and Buddhism? In both cases, the development of religious ideology was intimately linked to the already established systems that humans used to relate to one another — the social hierarchy of caste, in this case. The major ideas in each religion provided more structure and guidance for how people should peacefully relate to one another and how they should live their best lives. Both provided a pathway and documents (texts) on how to earn salvation — in this case, by ending the cycle of reincarnation.

## Working Bibliography & Notes

"Big Era Four: Expanding Networks of Exchange and Encounter 1200 BCE — 500 CE." *World History for Us All*. Web.

Ferrer, Michelle. "Closeup Teaching Unit 4.4.1: The Budding of Buddhism, 563 BCE — 150 CE." *World History for Us All*. PDF file.

McNeill, J.R. and McNeill, W. *The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History*. New York: W.H. Norton & Co., 2003. Print.

Cover image: Monk Praying at Thatbyinnyu Temple. Courtesy of Karen Kasmauski/Corbis.

*This short journal entry is an example of how historians go about exploring important questions and looking at new information. They use a mixture of historical documents and the writings of other historians to inform their thinking. All sources are listed in the working bibliography.*