

## **CHAPTER FOUR: MAJOR BELIEF SYSTEMS BEFORE 600 C.E.**

Belief systems were basic building blocks for most ancient civilizations, and it is impossible to develop an understanding of them without delving into the religious and philosophical beliefs that people of these times held. Some belief systems disappeared when the civilizations ended, but others have endured to this day, including Hinduism, Judaism, Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism and Christianity. In this chapter we will focus on these major belief systems, as well as polytheism, the religion that most ancient civilizations identified with. In this early era, as in all periods that followed, belief systems and all the values, customs, and practices associated with them have shaped the story of the world.



## **PERSPECTIVES: THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE, ACCORDING TO EMILE DURKHEIM**

Emile Durkheim, an early 20th century French sociologist, stated that religion involves “things that surpass the limits of our knowledge.” He defined religion as a social institution that focuses on a conception of the sacred. He contrasted the sacred to the profane, with the sacred being the extraordinary that inspires a sense of awe and reverence, and the profane being the ordinary, unexceptional facets of everyday life. According to Durkheim, all societies make these distinctions, understanding profane things in terms of their usefulness, and setting apart the sacred from everyday life, denoting it as forbidden.

How might we define belief systems? They include both religions and philosophies, and they form comprehensive guidelines for human behavior, both for individuals and collectivities. They often answer “big questions,” such as “What is the meaning of life?”; “What things in life are most worthwhile?”; “Where did we come from?”; and “What happens after we die?” Although we may give any number of explanations as to how religions and philosophies are different, a basic distinction is that religions are more concerned with events and forces outside the natural world. Philosophies, on the other hand, are focused on human behavior in interactions with others, finding answers to the big questions in this world, not in another, less directly comprehensible one. Of course, religious and philosophical beliefs overlap significantly so that any one belief system may actually qualify as both.

### EARLIEST BELIEF SYSTEMS

The earliest belief systems appear to have centered on spirits whose presence could be sensed in certain objects or in special places. For example, hunters and gatherers often believed that particular groves, springs, or wild animals were sacred. The idea of spirits lived on in later religions that came to be focused on gods as people settled into communities. **Polytheism** is the belief in many gods, with each god having a specialty, usually related to nature. The rituals of early farmers often centered on the Earth Mother, a deity believed to be the source of new life, an all-powerful male Sky God, and divinities representing fire, wind, and rain. Most of the early civilizations – including Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Indus River valley people, the Olmec, the Chavin, Greece, and Rome – were all polytheistic. Their religions were particular to the civilizations, although there were striking similarities among many of them. Ancient China was probably originally polytheistic, but it was unique in its emphasis on the will of the ancestors, and by the Han period, Confucianism had become the most important belief system binding the Chinese civilization together.

During the classical era, an important change occurred in two of the religions – Christianity and Buddhism – that allowed them both to spread to many new areas from their places of origin. The two religions followed the Silk Road and the Indian Ocean circuit, and their numbers grew greatly. Both were transformed into **universalizing religions**, with cores of beliefs that transcend cultures and actively recruit new adherents. As a result, both religions grew tremendously in the years before 600 C.E., putting them in the position of becoming new sources of societal “glue” that would hold broad areas with varying political allegiances together. Meanwhile, some important **ethnic religions**, such as Judaism, the Chinese religions (Daoism and Confucianism), and Hinduism created strong bonds among people, but had little emphasis on converting outsiders to their faiths.

## JUDAISM

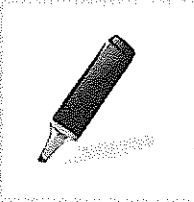
Judaism originated with a small Middle Eastern group called the Hebrews, a Semitic people influenced by Babylonian civilization. Information about the Hebrews comes partly from archaeological excavations and references in contemporary documents from Egypt and Assyria, but mainly from the **Hebrew Bible**, a compilation of beliefs, events, and people from their early history. These stories were transmitted orally for many years, and were written down probably in the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. The text that we have today dates from the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., with a few later additions. The founder of the religion was **Abraham**, a man born in Ur in Mesopotamia who rejected the polytheism of his homeland and migrated with his family to the land of Israel, on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. The Hebrew Bible tells about a move to Egypt, where the people were enslaved, and their return to Israel to found a kingdom. The kingdom reached its height under kings Saul, David, and Solomon during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E. To commemorate the faith, Solomon built a Jewish temple, but it was destroyed by the neo-Babylonians in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. The temple was rebuilt, but was destroyed by the Romans in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. In both cases, the Hebrews suffered a **diaspora**, or a scattering of their people by the conquerors, which spread its members to many parts of the earth. The religion survived, though, to influence other major religions, including Christianity and Islam, to make monotheism a powerful religious concept.

The Jewish concept of God represents an important change in human views toward the sacred. The gods in most early religions were whimsical, capricious, and quite human, despite their supernatural powers. The Hebrews saw God as more abstract, less human, all knowing, all powerful, and always just. They also viewed their relationship to God as a covenant (agreement) that assured them divine care in exchange for their devotion to one God. The belief that God sets high standards for ethical conduct and moral behavior was also powerful, one that set Hebrews apart from other early religions and has endured through the ages.

## CHRISTIANITY

Christianity emerged as a new religion in the early years of the Roman Empire in Judea, the old Jewish kingdom that had become a Roman province. Its founder was **Jesus of Nazareth**, a Jewish prophet and teacher that Christians regard as the son of God. His supporters believed that he fulfilled a long-standing belief in the coming of a Messiah. He lived during the time of Augustus, and he advocated a purification of the Jewish religion that would establish the kingdom of God on earth. He appealed especially to the poor because his message was universal: all people were welcome in the kingdom of God, no matter what their

social status or ethnicity. Jesus also promised a better life, not only after death, but on earth as well, since the just would be rewarded and the evil punished with a “Second Coming” of God. His message of a moral code based on love, charity, and humility, and not on possessions and money, also made the new religion appealing. However, his talk about a kingdom of God on earth alarmed the Romans, who saw his message as insubordinate to their rule. Some Jewish officials also believed him to be a dangerous agitator that threatened their religious authority. As a result, Jesus was put to death about 30 C.E., but his followers believed that he, as the son of God, was resurrected from the dead, a belief that became central to the new faith.



### MARKER EVENT: THE DEVELOPMENT OF MONOTHEISM

Monotheism, or the belief in one god, is an important marker event in world history for many reasons, including the influence it has had on many major world religions. Some scholars identify Akhenaten, an Egyptian ruler of the New Kingdom, as the originator of the idea, with his attempt to promote his god, Aten, as the supreme deity. However, the idea did not catch on outside the royal family, and the religion died with Akhenaten.

The first monotheistic religion to last was probably Judaism, originating in the Middle East about 4000 years ago. The Jewish belief in one god distinguished the Hebrews from all other people around them, and it remains basic to the faith today. Christianity and Islam have very strong roots in Jewish traditions, including the belief in one god. Another early religion with close ties to Judaism was Zoroastrianism, which recognized Ahura Mazda as a supreme deity engaged in a cosmic conflict with a destructive spirit, Angra Mainyu. Zoroastrianism was the religion of the Ancient Persians and several of the states that rose from its remains.

The new religion was spread by Jesus’ disciples, twelve men who followed him, but the man most responsible for the rapid growth of Christianity was **Paul**, a missionary who appealed to Greeks and Romans. Paul was Jewish, but he had

been born in a Greek city and was familiar with the Greco-Roman culture, so he put basic Christian beliefs in terms that Greeks and Romans could understand. He preached in Greece, Italy, Anatolia, and other areas around the eastern Mediterranean shores. Paul's emphasis on Christianity as a universal religion was largely responsible for the fact that by the 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E., about 10 percent of the residents of the Roman Empire were Christian. Although early Christians were persecuted, the Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313, which announced the official toleration of Christianity as a faith. Constantine became a Christian himself (probably on his deathbed), and thereafter all emperors in the East and West (except one) were Christians. In 381, the emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of Rome, too late to serve as a new "glue" for the crumbling empire, but in time to preserve Christianity as a faith that would help to organize the chaos when political power failed.

## HINDUISM

Although Hinduism is the world's third largest religion today, most of its 800 million adherents live in India. Its historical roots are grounded in the caste system and reflect the cultural development of the Indian subcontinent, making it today's largest ethnic religion. Hinduism evolved over thousands of years, blending the early religions of the Aryans and Dravidians. After Buddhism challenged the inequality endorsed by the earlier religions, Hinduism emerged during the classical era with revisions that increased its appeal to ordinary Indians, but still very much tied to Indian society and culture.

Most eastern religions, including Hinduism, emphasize a universal spirit that is responsible for what occurs in the universe that encompasses humankind. The spirit is disembodied but all pervasive, and all human souls, each called an **atman**, are actually pieces of the spirit that are trapped in physical bodies.

The soul's greatest desire is to reunite with the universal spirit, an opportunity that it has whenever a person dies. Each person has a **karma**, or a destiny that has been shaped by years of cause and effect, that is outwardly revealed by an individual's caste, or station in life. Attached to that karma is **dharma**, or a set of duties that the individual must fulfill. If a person has fulfilled his or her dharma, the atman will be reincarnated in the next life as a person of a higher caste. Members of the Brahmin caste, then, in the original Aryan religion, had attained their status through many reincarnations. Ultimately, the higher castes have the opportunity to attain **moksha**, or reunion with the universal spirit, a rare, but highly prized goal. In modern India, castes are now illegal, so the religion has been modified over time, but it is this basic entanglement between spiritual attainment and social status that Buddhism was most critical of in its early days.

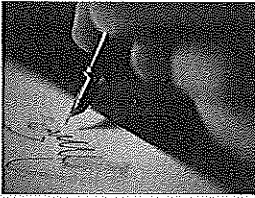
Hindu beliefs allow for many different forms that the universal spirit (Brahman) may take, including almost any of the pantheon of Hindu gods. It is simplistic to say that Hinduism is polytheistic because all the gods are actually part of the universal spirit. Historically, the religion almost certainly incorporated local gods into the mainstream beliefs. The two supreme deities are **Vishnu**, the preserver, and **Shiva**, the destroyer. They are opposites, and yet each is too complex to be summed up in those basic descriptions. Different aspects of Indian gods are usually represented in sculpture or painting by the presence of multiple arms and **mudras**, or hand signals, that communicate with Hindu believers.

The doctrines of Hinduism stem from the *Vedas*, the epic poems sung by ancient priests that were eventually written down. The most significant is the *Rig Veda* that deals with deities (Indra and Varuna) and their relationships with humans. Central Hindu beliefs may also be found in the *Mahabharata*, the world's longest poem, and the *Ramayana*, a poem that demonstrates the fulfillment of dharma, particularly as it relates to husband and wife relationships. Probably the single best known story is the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a segment of the *Mahabharata* about the warrior Arjuna, who strove to treat other human beings well, while fulfilling his dharma. All of the poems provide moral guidelines for Hindus.

## BUDDHISM

As discussed in Chapter Three, Buddhism started in the Ganges River valley area with Siddhartha Gautama, a member of the kshatrya caste who abandoned his privileged life to seek the meaning of life. The enlightenment that he experienced while meditating under a bodhi tree in a deer field became the heart of the religion, although it took many forms as it diffused to other parts of Asia. The Buddha ("Enlightened One") taught that everyone, regardless of caste, could attain **nirvana**, or union with the universal spirit, which offers release from human suffering. Nirvana is the rough equivalent to moksha in Hinduism, but moksha could only be achieved by the upper classes, not the people of ordinary castes. The Buddha also taught that nirvana can be reached through an understanding of the **Four Noble Truths** and the **Eightfold Path**, not through reincarnations from one caste to another. The Four Noble Truths are:

- 1) All of life is suffering.
- 2) All suffering is caused by desire for things that ultimately won't fulfill us.
- 3) Desire can only be overcome by ending all desire.
- 4) Desire can only be ended by following the Eightfold Path.



## ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS; THE *BHAGAVAD-GITA*

The *Bhagavad-Gita* is a segment from the longest epic poem in the world, the *Mahabharata*. Just before the warrior Arjuna must go to battle against his cousins, his charioteer, the god Krishna in disguise, reveals to him the nature of the human soul (atman) and the cycle of rebirth:

“Our bodies are known to end,  
but the embodied Self is enduring,  
indestructible, and immeasurable;  
therefore, Arjuna, fight the battle!  
He who thinks this Self a killer  
and he who thinks it killed,  
both fail to understand;  
it does not kill, nor is it killed.  
It is not born,  
it does not die...  
it is enduring, all pervasive,  
fixed, immobile, and timeless...  
The self embodied in the  
body of every being is indestructible;  
you have no cause to grieve for all these creatures, Arjuna!”

*Reference:* Barbara Stoler Miller, *The Bhagavad Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*. New York: Bantam, 1986.

The Eightfold Path is composed of eight steps that must be mastered one at a time, and they all involve “right” thinking and acting: right knowledge, right purpose, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation. By following the Eightfold Path, anyone can attain nirvana. Buddhism has a broad appeal since its message is that through self-discipline, anyone can achieve satisfaction in life.

Buddhism survived through the sponsorship of the great king Ashoka, and it spread rapidly along the trade routes that became so active during the classical era. As it spread it intermingled with native religions along the way and developed many variations, including these major divisions:

- **Theravada (Hinayana)** – This division is the stricter version of the faith, with “Theravada” literally meaning “the narrower vehicle.” Theravada Buddhism emphasizes the monastic life for both men and women, and strictly adheres to the steps that must be taken on the Eightfold Path. It claims to be the pure form of the Buddha’s teaching, and does not believe that the Enlightened One was anything other than a mortal man. This branch spread mainly to Southeast Asia, although it always has remained relatively small.
- **Mahayana** – This “great vehicle” division grew to encompass most Buddhists, and took many variations. Mahayana Buddhists believe that Siddhartha Gautama took the initial steps toward defining the religion, and that other Buddhas appeared after him. A concept that came to be accepted was a **bodhisattva**, a person who had taken the Eightfold Path and reached perfection, but had delayed entering nirvana in order to help others along the way. Bodhisattvas serve as examples of inspiration that often appear in Buddhist temples beside the image of the Buddha. Mahayana Buddhists began to worship Buddha as a god, and erected stupas (mounds that symbolize the universe) over relics of Siddhartha in temple courtyards. This version of Buddhism is much more accepting of different life styles and paths to nirvana, and as it traveled to other lands, it often absorbed concepts from native religions.

## CONFUCIANISM

**Confucius (Kung Fu-tzu)** lived in the late Zhou Era during the Warring States period. He was a middle-level bureaucrat in the Chinese government whose wisdoms became more celebrated after his death than they were while he was still alive. He did not leave any writings, but his followers compiled his teachings into *The Analects* after his death. Confucius built on earlier Chinese traditions, including the mandate of heaven and the **yin-yang** principle of opposite forces in harmony. Most importantly, Confucius based his philosophy on the model of the Chinese family. He was most concerned with the chaos of the times he lived in (551-479 B.C.E.), and his philosophy envisions an ideal society of harmony and order that contrasted greatly with the reality around him.

Confucianism rests on the principle of **reciprocity**, or the notion that people give and take equally within the context of five basic relationships of society:

- parent and child
- sovereign and minister



- husband and wife
- older and younger brother
- friend and friend

The first four relationships are hierarchical or unequal, but a natural part of society, according to Confucius. Superior rank (parent, sovereign, husband, older brother) does not mean that behavior is unchecked. Just as the mandate of heaven required the emperor to be responsible to his people, Confucius reminded those in superior positions of their duties regarding their inferiors. For those in subordinate positions, their duty is to obey and support their superiors. If everyone within these five relationships behaves as he should, society would be ideally harmonious, and such political and social turmoil as occurred during the Warring States Period, could never happen again. Confucian teachings rest on three essential values:

- **Xiao** – Filial piety is the devotion of the individual to family and the strong ties that hold families together. Xiao obliges children to respect their parents and obey family elders, look after their welfare, support them in old age, and remember them as revered ancestors after their deaths.
- **Ren** – Confucius believed that the five basic relations should be characterized by ren, or kindness and benevolence. Outward behavior that reflects ren includes courtesy, respect, diligence and loyalty. Confucius believed that the Chinese government desperately needed ren in its relationships with its subjects and other states.
- **Li** – A sense of propriety requires people to treat one another according to convention, and li puts emphasis on orderly rituals that demonstrate respect and reciprocity in relationships.

Confucian principles were reinforced after his death by his disciples, and many important poets expanded the philosophy, including Mencius and Xunzi, who established different interpretations of it in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C.E.

Because Confucianism lays the foundation for an orderly society, it is a “belief system” in that it touches on a broad range of human behaviors, serving as an overall guide that integrates many interrelated values and customs. It is usually seen as a philosophy because it emphasizes human societal relationships, and although it does not refute the existence of gods or “the heavens,” Confucianism clearly puts people in control of their own behavior.



### ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS: *THE ANALECTS ON THE* “GENTLEMAN”

Confucius idealized the “gentleman” (or noble man) as the model for all human behavior. The gentleman’s behavior reflects the values of xiao, ren, and li, and he operates comfortably within the context of the five reciprocal relationships of humankind.

The following excerpts from *The Analects*, the classic compilation of Confucian beliefs and sayings, describe the gentleman:

“The gentleman first practices what he preaches and then preaches what he practices.” (Vol II:13)

“The gentleman understands what is right; the inferior man understands what is profitable.” (Vol IV:16)

“The gentleman makes demands on himself; the inferior man makes demands on others.” (Vol XV:20)

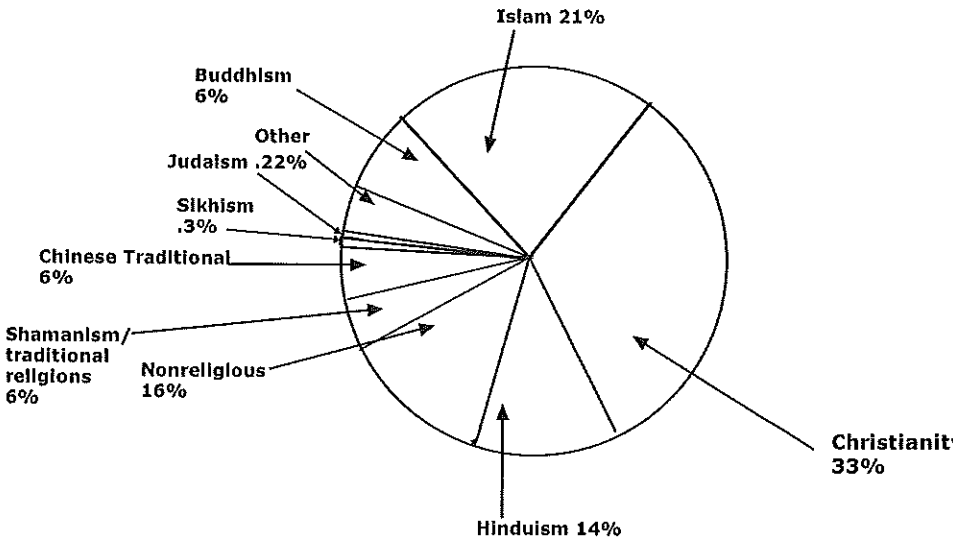
*Reference: Sources of Chinese Tradition*, W. Theodore de Bary, ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1960.

## DAOISM

Unlike Confucianism that encourages people to become active citizens, **Daoism** encourages them to retreat from society and develop a reflective and introspective consciousness. Dao is the “way” of nature, or a force that is not necessarily good or bad, but is inevitable. Some works describe it as the original force of the cosmos, and others see it as a passive force that does nothing, yet accomplishes everything. Dao has often been compared to water, which even though it appears to be soft and compliant, still has the power to erode mountains. Since the Dao is inevitable, human beings must learn to live in harmony with it, which means the path of least resistance. Governments under the control of ambitious men try to defy nature, and as a result, they end in ruin. Human striving has brought about the chaos in the world because people have not accepted the Dao. A chief value of Daoism is “wuwei” – disengagement from the affairs of the world, and the ability to live simply, and in harmony with nature.

According to Chinese tradition, the founder of Daoism was **Laozi**, who lived during the 6th century. Although he wrote mainly about withdrawal from the world, he did give some advice to Chinese rulers. He warned them not to enjoy war and its spoils or to overindulge when the people were hungry. He believed that happy kingdoms resulted from wise rule, but he disagreed with Confucius on the need for a strong, centralized state. Instead, he emphasized the wise man's individual search for the meanings of life through following the Dao.

As the classical era ended, Confucianism and Daoism were well entrenched in Chinese society and had spread to Southeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula, but they were beginning to collide with the steady diffusion of the universal religions along the trade routes. Christianity spread into the western areas of China, but established a firmer foothold in the remote areas north of the Mediterranean Sea. Buddhism, however, slowly but surely picked up followers in east and central Asia, and soon challenged the foothold that Confucian scholars had established during the Han Dynasty. Only one of the world's great religions – Islam – had not made an appearance yet, but all of that changed during the 7<sup>th</sup> century as the new faith rapidly grew.



**Major Religions of Today's World as a Percentage of World Population.** Although there are many different religions in the world, most people that identify themselves as religious adhere to the few religions identified on the chart. 60% of the world's population identifies with one of the three universalizing religions: Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism. The largest single ethnic religion is Hinduism, with 14% of the world's population, mostly located on the Indian subcontinent.

**Note:** Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding up for all categories.

CONCEPTS AND IDENTIFICATIONS

Abraham

*The Analects*

atman

*Bhagavad-Gita*

bodddhisatva

Dao, Daoism

dharma

diaspora

Eightfold Path

ethnic religions

Four Noble Truths

Hebrew Bible

Hinduism

Jesus of Nazareth

Judaism

karma

Laozi

*Mahabharata*

moksha

monotheism

mudras

nirvana

Paul

polytheism

*Ramayana*

reciprocity (principle of)

Rig Veda

Shiva

universalizing religions

Vedas

Vishnu

xiao, ren, li

yin-yang