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THE ORIGIN OF WORLD RELIGIONS

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A HISTORIAN'S JOURNAL ENTRY / BY ANITA RAVI

People in early agrarian civilizations created more complex governments and more efficient forms of communication. As they did so, they also developed what we now call religion.



BIG HISTORY PROJECT



I've researched some features early agrarian cities had in common. Now I want to find out why all civilizations adopted some sort of religion. How did these religions spread over vast areas?

By 1200 BCE, there were developed cities in most parts of the world. Early writing from the city of Sumer in Mesopotamia tells us that people there believed in gods who cared about their well-being.

But the major 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, all of these religions developed within a few hundred years. By now, they have survived for thousands of years.

It seems that people have had local religions since early times. Why did several important global religions emerge between 1200 BCE and 700 CE? Why did all of the major world religions appear in that era?

WHY RELIGIONS BECAME GLOBAL

By about 100 BCE, the population in Afro-Eurasia was over a million. More people were trading and exchanging culture on this large continent, which allowed religious ideas to be shared more easily.

Now, people were interacting with strangers far from their homes. The new religious systems gave people a common foundation which made it easier to share ideas and do business together.

Sharing a religion gave strangers a common culture and common morals. These bonds allowed them to trust people they didn't know.

The historians J.R. and William McNeil call this the development of "portable, congregational religions." They saw them as "portable" because they are not tied to one place, and "congregational" because they bring people together.

These religions have some common features: a founding man who receives the word of God; a key text or texts that define man's relationship with God; recommended ways of living and worshipping; people coming together regularly to have God's word explained to them; and a path to changing oneself and the saving of one's soul, or eternal salvation.

In *The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History*, the McNeills try to explain why religion took hold during this time period:

City dwellers — particularly the poor — found that religious life served the same purpose as village life had. Religion brought guidance, shared faith, and mutual support among believers.

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

Religion could give meaning and value to ordinary lives despite daily contact with uncaring strangers.

The religious groups, in turn, helped to stabilize city life. Life in a city is always unequal and insecure, but religion made it more tolerable.

They are saying that religion provided structure and meaning for large groups of people. In the past, tight-knit village communities provided this. Religions, especially ones that were shared by large groups of people, actually provided a feeling of belonging, safety and stability in cities.

These religions were accepted by thousands of followers. They appealed to many different people from all social classes — whether rich or poor — and people doing all types of jobs. That is one reason why these religions spread along trade routes. The earlier local religions did not spread in this way.

Many people were drawn to these early religions. Still, they are not all the same. Each faith has its own answers to questions about humanity. Each one has its own practices and traditions.

All faiths offer eternal salvation in one form or another. This means your soul is saved forever. Actually, Confucianism doesn't offer this, but some scholars call it an ethical system that teaches how to live a good, moral life — not really a religion.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all monotheistic, with one omnipotent (all-powerful) and omniscient (all-knowing) God.

Hinduism allows for the worship of many powerful gods and goddesses.

Buddhism and Daoism also accept the existence of multiple divine beings.

All of these religions teach that human relations should be guided by kindness, selflessness, and decency. Confucianism, in particular, emphasizes moral behavior, good government, and social responsibility.

A CLOSER LOOK AT HINDUISM AND BUDDHISM

How did each belief system define relationships with God, with society, and with other humans?

First, let's take a look at Hinduism. I learned that Hinduism is often called the "oldest religion" because Hinduism has no single founder and Hinduism's main ideas appear in many different texts written over time, starting around 4,000 years ago. Hinduism

was developed by a group of people living in the Indus Valley who lived under a very strict social system.

The social structure was called the caste system. The caste system separated people into different classes. People were born into a caste.

Michelle Ferrer sums up the beginnings of Hinduism in *The Budding of Buddhism*:

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 seen as impure, and not even within the caste system.

The Sudras had service jobs. 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 — 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 worshipped many gods. They believed that people had many lives (reincarnation). They also believed in karma, the idea that your actions in this life will influence your next life.

In Hinduism, 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 them, like meditation and yoga, are practiced in the western world today.

The Hindus also believed in the Purusharthas: Four Goals of Life. These goals motivated people in their lives:

- 1. dharma – living a virtuous, moral life*
- 2. kama – pleasure of the senses*
- 3. artha – achieving wealth and success lawfully*
- 4. moksha – release from reincarnation*

I can see that this religion came from a society with strict roles. Hinduism is based on karma: your actions determine your future lives. I wonder, could the untouchables come back in a higher caste if they lived a moral life?

Remember what the McNeills said about religion giving meaning to unpleasant daily life. Hinduism seems to fit that description perfectly. It's also an effective system for keeping society ordered and keeping control over the population.

Karma can give people hope. You can have a better life next time if you live well this time. Why worry about how terrible your life is now?

It is also interesting that the four paths in life aren't just about spirituality and God. The second and third goals are about having a happy and successful life. In this view, the path toward moksha seems enjoyable.

That sounds a lot like the political ideas that shaped the founding of America: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The second religion I'm going to look at is Buddhism. It 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. He was born in South Asia (what is now Nepal) in 563 BCE. His was a Ksatriya Hindu family — the warrior/ruler class.

According to the story, Siddhartha's father asked some wise men what his son would become in life. The wise men said he would become a great leader unless he saw suffering. So Siddhartha's father kept him inside the palace all his life. When Siddhartha was 16, he got married and had a son.

Later, Siddhartha left the palace. He saw all the human suffering in the world: sickness, poverty, death. He left his home and began wandering, looking 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 Bhodi Satva — or the Enlightened One.

After his enlightenment, he began to share what had been revealed to him under the Bhodi 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 goal of enlightenment (nirvana).

The Four Noble Truths:

1. Life is filled with suffering (dukkha).
2. The causes of this suffering are a person's material desires (to want what you do not have).
3. In order to stop suffering, you must get rid of desire and greed.
4. If you follow the Eight-Fold Path, you can eliminate your material desires, and end 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, avoid lying and gossiping.
4. **Right Action:** Be faithful and do the right thing. Do not kill, steal, or lie.
5. **Right Living:** Make sure that your job 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:** Become more peaceful and calm, particularly through meditation.

What a story! This young man came from the upper class of society. He gave up his rich life when he saw the suffering in the world.

The eight tenets, or principles, of Buddhism explain how people should treat each other and how to develop self-discipline. Each is a simple statement about how to ease suffering in life.

They are simple rules that are present 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, try to be calm.

I learned that after he revealed these ideas, the Buddha stopped worshipping Hindu gods and stopped believing that one caste was better than the others.

Still, Buddhism stayed similar to Hinduism in some ways. Buddhists believed that following these steps leads toward nirvana. Eventually, the goal is to stop the cycle of reincarnation.

So what have I learned about the development of early religions from studying Hinduism and Buddhism?

In both cases, religion developed from the systems that humans already used to relate to one another. In this case, it was the caste system.

The ideas in each religion provided structure and guidance on how people should live together and how to live their best lives. Both provided a pathway and documents (texts) on how to find salvation. In Buddhism and Hinduism, that means ending the cycle of death and rebirth.

Working Bibliography & Notes

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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.