



Overview of Belief Systems

By Bridgette Byrd O'Connor and Bob Bain

The many belief systems in our world all stem from a fundamental human ability, and desire, to pursue the big questions. Here's a look at when we started asking ourselves who we are.

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Introduction – The Big Questions

What happens when we die? What's the meaning of life? Why are we here? Do we have a creator?

For thousands of years, we humans have asked these big questions.

We still don't have clear answers. But people do believe in many different explanations. Some believe in an all-knowing god or many gods. Others believe in a spiritual connection that we share as humans and with Earth. Historians call these varied ways of thinking "belief systems" or "systems of belief." All of these belief systems seem to be trying to answer these "big" questions about life's meaning.

However, "systems of belief" do not match up exactly with religious beliefs. Nor do they match perfectly with religious organizations, sacred books, temples, and holy practices. Of course, these are all important parts of human history. Many religious people consider their beliefs and practices as sacred because they come from God (or gods). Most Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians do. But many other people have participated in systems of belief without referring to the divine—that is, the god or god-like. You will see that when studying Confucian China or Ancient Greek philosophies. Many varied belief systems and experiences have emerged from our big questions over time.

These varied systems of belief and rituals—that is, ceremonies—have grown and changed over time. They shaped the changes in how we interact, in our communities, and in our understanding of the world. Here's an overview of some of these changes.

The Human Spirit – Our Earliest Belief Systems

The creation of belief systems probably begins with humanity itself. Thousands of years ago, primates evolved into consciously thinking human beings. We call this a cognitive revolution. Humans gained the ability to think abstractly and communicate about things beyond the "here and now." It may have led to the creation of a spiritual, and later, religious world.

The earliest systems of belief imagined a spirit world, often invisible. It existed alongside the physical world of human communities. For example, some hunter-gatherer communities may have created ritual songs or dances. They hoped these would please the spirits in the natural world. Some spirits were attached to certain people, families, places, or objects. Others controlled



That frights the maidens of the villagery ;
Skims milk, and sometime labors in the quern,
And bootless makes the breathless housewife churn ;
And sometimes makes the drink to bear no barm ;
Misleads night-wanderers, laughing at their harm ?
Those that Hobgoblin call you, and sweet Puck,
You do their work, and they shall have good luck :
Are not you he ?

Puck. Thou speak'st aright ;
I am that merry wanderer of the night.
I jest to Oberon, and make him smile.

In this page from [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#), Puck, a fairy from the spirit world, makes trouble in our world. Shakespeare's imaginative setting is based on a variety of actual beliefs from long before his time.

certain parts of life. Across societies, there are many different beliefs. These spirits weren't gods. Their belief systems were not organized religions like we have today. Instead, the whole of the natural world was a part of this spiritual world. Such a system is often called animism.

In animistic communities, spiritual beings could be nice or naughty or downright evil. People handled the spirits based on these qualities. Sometimes specific rituals such as dances or sacrifices were performed to please the spirits or ask for aid, or to get answers. At other times a diviner or a shaman communicated with the spirit to get something they wanted. A diviner received messages from the spirit world. A shaman entered a trance-like state to visit the spirit world. Many early belief systems also aimed to contact ancestors who had passed into the spirit world. Everything was connected from humans to nature to spirits. Ghosts, fairies, monsters, and demons are examples. Humans asked these spirits for protection and well-being when facing Earth's harsh realities. In this way, belief systems comforted people in a frightening, uncertain world. Animism served our ancestors well. It offered people meaningful connections to the world they inhabited. It united communities through common rituals and beliefs, and still does today. Some historians think that these animistic systems of belief deserve our respect. Say John and William McNeil: "[n]o worldview has lasted nearly so long nor explained so much to so many so convincingly" (The Human Web, 18).



Oracle bone from Shang dynasty China, c. 1600-1046 BCE. A diviner carves a question into the bone to ask if anything bad will happen in the next 10 days. The Shang ruler wrote that he asked the diviner's question to an ancestor in a worship ritual. By Editor at Large, CC BY-SA 2.5.



Sahure, pharaoh (divine king) of Ancient Egypt, who reigned from 2490 to 2477 BCE. By Keith Schengili-Roberts, CC BY-SA 2.5.

Faith Communities – Organized Systems of Belief in Early Societies

Communities became larger and more structured. Soon, some belief systems changed. This probably had much to do with the creating of hierarchies, or ranking of social groups. It was brought on by early farming societies. Farming created food surpluses—that is, extra food. Soon after, jobs got more specialized. From this,

social hierarchies developed. Certain members of society had specific jobs, like priests and priestesses. They communicated with gods and goddesses. Additionally, as religion became more structured, it gave rulers a way to start common practices and beliefs. Such ideas connected everyone living in the state. The increased organization of religion gave rulers more control over those below them. It was especially true when the ruler claimed to be divine. These more structured beliefs systems usually had a pantheon, or collection of gods and goddesses. Often a main or supreme god or goddess stood at the top. They also had creation stories about how the world and humans began. Soon trade networks grew. Empires began conquering new territories. With that, these religions and their stories began to spread. Eventually, belief systems began changing. Some local community spirits and rituals were included into the wider pantheon of gods and religious practices.

God on the Go – Portable and Universal Systems of Beliefs and Ideas

Our systems of beliefs and ideas saw major changes in some regions around 3,000 years ago. Networks and connections were increasing then among Afro-Eurasian peoples. Many started to transform their specific, local belief systems to make them more movable. The ideas were also more universal. In other words, they were open to people outside their local community.

German philosopher Karl Jaspers argued that these portable and universal systems of belief weren't like past ones. He points out three important differences. First, the new systems did not depend on spirits, rituals, or ideas tied to a specific place. In those older systems, worshippers had to be close to the sacred place to be able to perform the rituals or to communicate with a spirit or god. A river or temple would be examples. These new systems could be transported to different regions. Believers could perform the rituals and communicate with the spirits, gods, and goddesses almost anywhere. Sacred writings helped make the belief systems transportable to new places. These texts helped ensure that new and existing believers would be able to perform the rituals as they were written. It was also a way to ensure they were sincere in their devotion to the faith.

Second, anyone could join these new systems of belief. It went beyond the original community of believers. We call these systems "universal." To join, all a person had to do was learn and accept the required beliefs, ideas, and rituals.

Finally, along with belief and ritual these systems inspired a change in behavior. In one way or another, the new systems encouraged people to cooperate with others. They were taught to think beyond themselves. Some examples of these systems were Confucianism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Daoism, and Zoroastrianism. Many of these universal systems of belief established compassion, respect for life, and care for children as important behaviors. Earlier belief systems may have often called for these qualities too. But the new systems made these characteristics part of their sacred scriptures and rituals. They guided how people lived their daily lives.

These portable systems of belief affected and were affected by the expanding networks, increasing populations, and more complex societies such as empires. Over time, some of these systems of beliefs or ideas became popular. Some even became the main system for many people. Historians refer to these portable faiths as "world religions" or universal belief systems.



Page from an eleventh-century CE Quran from North Africa, housed in the British Museum. By LordHarris, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Conclusion

Ideas have continued to expand across global networks into new areas. And so, new followers join these world religion communities every day. But local belief systems still exist. In addition, people have blended many of these belief systems throughout history in a process called syncretism. Thousands of years of human history have passed. And still, most of these religious and spiritual systems of belief are still trying to answer those same big questions that began the article:

- Why are we here?
- What's our place in the universe?
- What's the meaning of life?

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Cover: Hands of a Tibetan monk with an ancient prayer book while he is reading in the assembly hall of a monastery in Central Tibet. © guenterguni / E+ / Getty Images

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Oracle bone from Shang dynasty China, c. 1600-1046 BCE. A diviner carves a question into the bone to ask if anything bad will happen in the next 10 days. The Shang ruler wrote that he asked the diviner's question to an ancestor in a worship ritual. By Editor at Large, CC BY-SA 2.5. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CMOC_Treasures_of_Ancient_China_exhibit_-_oracle_bone_inscription.jpg#/media/File:CMOC_Treasures_of_Ancient_China_exhibit_-_oracle_bone_inscription.jpg

Sahure, pharaoh (divine king) of Ancient Egypt, who reigned from 2490 to 2477 BCE. By Keith Schengili-Roberts, CC BY-SA 2.5. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SahureAndNomeGod-CloseUpOfSahure_MetropolitanMuseum.png#/media/File:SahureAndNomeGod-CloseUpOfSahure_MetropolitanMuseum.png

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