

# The Origin of World Religions

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Monk Praying at Thatbyinnyu Temple, Myanmar. Courtesy of Karen Kasmauski/Corbis.

Early agrarian societies were becoming more and more complex. They created governments and new ways to communicate. They also developed religion.

I have looked at some things these early farming cities had in common. Now I want to look at religion. Why did all civilizations adopt some form of religion? How did these religions spread across large areas?

By 1200 BCE, cities had developed in most parts of the world. We can review early writing from the city of Sumer in Mesopotamia. We learn that people there believed in gods who cared about their well-being.

But the major world religions I know of did not exist in only one city or region. They became global. Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam were all developed within a few hundred years, but have now lasted for thousands of years.

Since early times, humans have had local religions. What happened between 1200 BCE and 700 CE? Why did all the major world religions appear during that era?

## Why religions became global

By about 100 BCE, the population in Afro-Eurasia was over 1 million. More people were trading and exchanging culture on this large continent. This allowed religious ideas to be shared more easily.

People were now dealing with strangers from far-away lands. New religions gave people a common foundation that made it easier to share ideas and do business together.

Sharing a religion gave strangers a common culture and common morals. It allowed them to trust people they did not know well.

Historians J.R. and William McNeil call these religions portable and congregational. They called them "portable" because they can be brought to new places, and "congregational" because they bring people together.

The major religions have some common features:

a founder who receives the word of God;

a book or documents that explain man's relationship with God;

recommended ways of living and worshipping;

people coming together regularly to worship;

a path to self-improvement and the saving of one's soul (eternal salvation).

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

*People who lived in cities — especially the poor — had a hard time. Life was difficult. There was less sense of community than in the small villages they had come from. Religious life filled the gap. Religion brought guidance, shared faith, and mutual support for believers.*

*Religion could give meaning and value to ordinary lives, even though everyday life was difficult. In big cities, strangers were often uncaring. Religion was good for the cities, as well. It helped to keep things stable. In a city, life is often very unequal and sometimes dangerous. Religion made city life more tolerable.*

The McNeills are saying that religion provided structure and meaning for large groups of people. In the past, tight-knit village communities provided this. Now religions, especially ones that were shared by large groups of people, provided a sense of belonging and safety in cities.

These religions were accepted by thousands of followers. They appealed to many different people, from the rich to the poor, and people from many 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 one has its own answers to questions about human life, and each has its own practices and traditions.

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

All faiths offer eternal salvation in one form or another. This means your soul is saved forever. Actually, Confucianism does not offer this, but some scholars think of it as an ethical way of living, not really a religion.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all monotheistic, meaning they all have a single, powerful God.

Under Hinduism, people worship many powerful gods and goddesses.

In Buddhism and Daoism, there are also several holy beings.

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

## **A closer look at Hinduism and Buddhism**

How did each religion 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." This is because Hinduism has no single founder. Hinduism's main ideas appear in many different texts written over time. The first appeared around 4,000 years ago. Hinduism was developed by a group of people in the Indus Valley who lived under a very strict social system.

The social structure was called the caste system. It separated people into different classes. People were born into a caste, and stayed in that caste for their whole life.

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

*The untouchables were the lowest members of society. They dealt with human waste and the dead. This group did the jobs no one else wanted to do. They were seen as impure, not even a part of 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 Brahmans — 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 believed in karma. Karma is 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 still practiced today.*

*The Hindus also believed in the Purusharthas: Four Goals of Life. These goals guided people in their lives: dharma - living a moral life kama - pleasure of the senses artha - achieving wealth and success while following the law 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 good, moral life?

Remember what the McNeills said about religion giving meaning to unpleasant daily life. Hinduism seems to fit that perfectly. It is also an effective system for allowing ruling elites and other people in power to stay at the top and keep control over the population.

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

It is also interesting that the four paths in life are not 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 ideas that America was founded on: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The second religion I'm going to look at is Buddhism. It evolved from Hinduism and ancient Indian society.

In this case, there is a founder of the religion. His name was Siddhartha Gautama. He was born in South Asia (what is now Nepal) in 563 BCE. He came from 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 the human suffering in the world: sickness, poverty, death. He fled his home and began wandering, looking for peace. Siddhartha spent six years wandering around South Asia, searching for 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 — he 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 he had learned under the Bhodi tree. These teachings include the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path. I learned that in Buddhism, the whole purpose of ending suffering (dukkha) in the world is to achieve enlightenment (nirvana).

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

Life is filled with suffering (dukkha).

The causes of this suffering are a person's material desires (to want what you do not have).

In order to stop suffering, you must get rid of desire and greed.

If you follow the Eight-Fold Path, you can get rid of your material desires, and end your suffering.

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

Right View - Understand that there is suffering in the world. The Four Noble Truths can break this pattern of suffering.

Right Intention - Avoid harmful thoughts. Care for others. Think about more than yourself.

Right Speech - Speak kindly. Avoid lying and gossiping.

Right Action - Be faithful and do the right thing. Do not kill, steal, or lie.

Right Living - Make sure that your job does not harm others. Do not promote slavery or sell weapons or poisons.

Right Effort - Work hard and avoid negative situations.

Right Awareness - Exercise control over your mind and increase your wisdom.

Right Concentration - Become more peaceful and calm. Meditation can help with this.

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

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

They are simple rules. Actually, they are present in all of the other religions as well: Be kind to each other. Do not gossip. Do not 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. He 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. Here, 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 path and documents (texts) on how to find salvation. In Buddhism and Hinduism, that means ending the cycle of death and rebirth.

## Quiz

- 1 In the section "A closer look at Hinduism and Buddhism," Michelle Ferrer says the following.

*The untouchables were the lowest members of society. They dealt with human waste and the dead. This group did the jobs no one else wanted to do. They were seen as impure, not even a part of the caste system.*

Which answer choice BEST explains what Ferrer meant by "impure"?

- (A) lazy or lacking ideas
  - (B) dirty or unclean in spirit
  - (C) mentally unable to work
  - (D) dangerous or possibly violent
- 2 Read the SECOND paragraph of the section "A closer look at Hinduism and Buddhism".

What does the author mean by "Hinduism has no single founder"?

- (A) Many different writings and ideas contributed to Hinduism.
  - (B) It is difficult to understand the rules of Hinduism.
  - (C) Hinduism was based on the lives of several leaders.
  - (D) A king created Hinduism to enforce his rules.
- 3 Read this paragraph from the introduction [paragraphs 1-5].

*Since early times, humans have had local religions. What happened between 1200 BCE and 700 CE? Why did all the major world religions appear during that era?*

Why did the author include this paragraph in the article?

- (A) to show that there are many questions surrounding religion
- (B) to suggest that these are questions that many people share
- (C) to admit that she is not an expert on world religions
- (D) to present the main questions that the article will answer

4 Read the following paragraphs from the section "A closer look at Hinduism and Buddhism."

Which paragraph shows a cause and its effects?

- (A) The Hindus also believed in the Purusharthas: Four Goals of Life. These goals guided people in their lives: dharma – living a moral life kama – pleasure of the senses artha – achieving wealth and success while following the law moksha – release from reincarnation.
- (B) It is also interesting that the four paths in life are not 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.
- (C) In this case, there is a founder of the religion. His name was Siddhartha Gautama. He was born in South Asia (what is now Nepal) in 563 BCE. He came from a Ksatriya Hindu family — the warrior/ruler class.
- (D) Later, Siddhartha left the palace. He saw the human suffering in the world: sickness, poverty, death. He fled his home and began wandering, looking for peace. Siddhartha spent six years wandering around South Asia, searching for ways to ease the suffering of the world.