

The Emergence of Monotheism: Cultural Traditions in the Middle East and Mediterranean

I. Towards Monotheism: The Search for God in the Middle East

What aspects of Zoroastrianism and Judaism subsequently found a place in Christianity and Islam?

A. Zoroastrianism

What was distinctive about the Jewish religious tradition?

B. Judaism

II. The Cultural Tradition of Classical Greece: The Search for Rational Order

What are the distinctive features of the Greek intellectual tradition?

A. The Greek Way of Knowing

B. The Greek Legacy

III. The Birth of Christianity...with Buddhist Comparisons

How would you compare the lives and teachings of Jesus and the Buddha? In what different ways did the two religions evolve after the deaths of their founders?

A. The Lives of the Founders

B. The Spread of New Religions

C. Institutions, Controversies, and Divisions

IV. Religion and Historians

How have individuals and historians balanced elements of faith and personal beliefs with evidence available?

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Personal Note: While we will return to this concept at the end of the lecture, I want to point out the fact that my faith is Roman-Catholic (Christian) and that I want to be as transparent about my own faith journey and how I have balanced that with my role as a historian. I also want you to think about your own faith traditions. Odds would suggest that a majority would have more exposure to the religions discussed here today. In this class and our look at religions we are working on “summaries” or the main principles, foundations, etc. of the world’s major religions, we are just scratching the surface. These generalizations are in no way meant to value one faith over another, nor invalidate your own beliefs, more so we are trying from a historical perspective to understand how and why religions have developed and how they have and continue to impact the world around us.

Introduction and Claim: No other period in history had such influential developments in belief systems as major religions developed and spread throughout almost all regions of the world. The codification and further developments of existing religious traditions provided a bond among the people and an ethical code to live by. New belief systems and cultural traditions emerged and spread, often asserting universal truths. **Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity each carried cultural importance and relevance to the people of the Middle East and the Mediterranean and marked a radical departure from the previously accepted polytheistic beliefs. While neither Zoroastrianism nor Judaism spread beyond the region, both laid the basis for the rise of Christianity (and eventually Islam), marking the emergence of monotheism on a more global scale.** The possibility of a universal and inclusive religion represents the best of what religion has to offer mankind, but it cannot be denied that the rise of core religions also opened the negative forces of exclusivity and intolerance.

I. Towards Monotheism: The Search for God in the Middle East

What aspects of Zoroastrianism and Judaism subsequently found a place in Christianity and Islam?

- ✓ (Z) Concepts of the conflict between Good and an evil counterpart
- ✓ (Z) The notion of a final judgment and salvation
- ✓ (Z) Heaven and Hell and a coming savior
- ✓ (J) concept of the divine as singular, transcendent, personal, apart from nature
- ✓ (J) God as morally righteous, demanding of social justice, beyond sacrifice and ritual

A. Zoroastrianism

1. Zarathustra
 - Zoroaster (in Greek)
2. Achaemenid Dynasty (558 – 330 BCE)
3. Ahura Mazda
 - Benevolent God, countered by devil Angra Mainyu
4. The Spread and Decline of Zoroastrianism
 - Placed an emphasis on free will which was popular
 - Not missionary in its focus to spread
 - Disastrous invasions by Alexander the Great weakened
 - Ultimately Islam’s rise in the region will prove fateful
5. Influenced Judaism in the Persian Empire

What was distinctive about the Jewish religious tradition?

- ✓ Unlike other Mesopotamians, the Jewish people came to believe in a single God = Yahweh
- ✓ Jewish people came to understand relationship with God as a covenant = Chosen People

B. Judaism

1. Recorded in Hebrew Scripture
2. Judean exiles in Babylon
 - Migration out of Mesopotamia to Canaan, also out of slavery in Egypt to Palestine/Israel/Syria/Lebanon
3. Distinctive Conception of God
 - Yahweh, as a powerful and jealous deity
 - 10 Commandments to follow
 - Covenant with God as the "chosen people"
4. Foundation for both Christianity and Islam
 - People of the Book
5. Material world not an illusion
 - God the creator and humans as the stewards of creation

II. The Cultural Tradition of Classical Greece: The Search for Rational Order

What are the distinctive features of the Greek intellectual tradition?

- ✓ Mythological Framework, but no lasting religious tradition
- ✓ Willingness of Greek intellectuals to abandon myths to affirm natural laws and human rationality
 - Why? Fanciful storytelling less believable to begin with; intellectual stimulation from geographic and regional exchange exposed them to a wider range of ideas and processes; growing rule of law
- ✓ Emphasis on logic
- ✓ Relentless questioning of received wisdom
- ✓ Confidence in human reason
- ✓ Enthusiasm for puzzling out the world without reference to the gods

A. The Greek Way of Knowing

1. Flourished 600-300 BCE
 - The height of "The Classics" art, literature, and theatrical traditions
2. Argument, Logic, Questions
3. Socrates, 469 – 399 BCE
 - Questioned everything, the importance of wealth and political power
4. Earliest classical Greek thinkers
 - Thales, Democritus = universal science
 - Pythagoras = math, physics, chemistry
 - Hippocrates = biology, medicine
5. Greek rationalism of Herodotus, Plato, and Aristotle
 - Herodotus = history, warfare
 - Plato = ethics, governments, political science
 - Aristotle = a little bit of everything

B. The Greek Legacy

1. Greek Rationalism Spread Widely

- Arts especially popular, but made possible by Alexander the Great and Roman Empire's spread throughout the region
- Somewhat dormant amid Christianity's rise, but classics reemerged in 1200-1400s
- Embraced by and influential with Islamic thinkers

III. The Birth of Christianity...with Buddhist Comparisons

How would you compare the lives and teachings of Jesus and the Buddha? In what different ways did the two religions evolve after the deaths of their founders?

- ✓ Different Backgrounds / Class
- ✓ Called for personal transformations of followers
- ✓ Their message emerged soon after their death as separate religions
- ✓ Transformed from teachers to Gods by their followers
- ✓ Both offered universal salvation (compared to Confucianism, Hinduism, Greek rationalism)

A. The Lives of the Founders

1. Gautama was royal, Jesus was lower-class
2. Spiritual Seekers
 - Mystics in their respective traditions
3. "Wisdom Teachers"
 - Challenged conventional wisdom; attacked income inequality; importance of love, compassion
4. Importance Differences
 - Jesus/Christianity: devotion to single, personal deity; miracles as Son of God; shaper political and social edge; spoke on behalf of the poor; crucified by those in power
 - Buddha: largely ignored supernatural; intense self-effort; less threatening; died old

B. The Spread of New Religions

1. Followers transformed Jesus and Buddha into gods
 - Disciples spread the word to wider and more inclusive audience
2. How Christianity became a world religions
 - Saint Paul, disciples and missionaries message of unity from the New Testament
3. Spread of Christianity
 - Spread throughout and around the Roman Empire
 - (Similar to Buddhism) adapted to local cultures, traditions, languages to diffuse the religion in different parts of the world
4. Roman persecution of Christians
 - Worship of God threatened the cult of the emperor

5. Buddhism
 - Approval of Ashoka; monotheistic structure clashed with existing Indian traditions
6. Roman polytheism
 - Adopted aspects of Roman culture ex. Cult of saints, dating of Jesus birth to winter solstice
7. Networks of cultural connections
 - Buddhism throughout Asia, while Christianity established an Afro-Eurasian presence

C. Institutions, Controversies, and Divisions

1. Church councils defined texts of New Testament
 - Theological debates ex. Jesus divinity, trinity
2. Christianity developed a male hierarchical organization
 - Pope, patriarchs, bishops, priests
 - Bishop of Rome rose to power within
 - Eventual West-East split
3. Division in Buddhism over Buddha's teachings
 - Theravada
 - Mahayana
4. Buddhism did not develop an overall church hierarchy
 - Communities of monks, nuns, but no real political power

IV. Religion and Historians

A. Individual Faith

1. How do we rationalize our own beliefs and personal experiences

B. Clash with science, physical world, reality

C. Element of Change: Timeless Revelations or Human Phenomenon

D. Real or Authentic Version of Faith

1. Which group represents the real faith

E. (Unarguable) Significance of Religion

1. Shaped the meaning humans have attached to life
2. Have justified and attempted to remedy social inequality
3. Stimulated tremendous reform and rebellion
4. Has greatly unified and divided people
5. Provided a sense of morality and understanding