

# The Origin of World Religions

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

As people in early agrarian civilizations created more complex governments and more efficient forms of communication, they also developed what we now call religion. After researching the common features of early agrarian cities, I'm interested in finding out why all civilizations adopted some sort of religion and how these religions spread over vast regions.

I know that by 1200 BCE, there were developed cities in most parts of the world. Looking at some early writing from the city of Sumer in Mesopotamia, I can see that people there believed in gods that looked out for them and the well-being of their cities and crops.

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 around the same time and all of them have survived for thousands of years.

It seems that people have had smaller, local religions and religious life since very early times. Why, then, did several major belief systems emerge between 1200 BCE and 700 CE? In fact, why did all the major world religions appear in that era?

## Why religions became global

One explanation is that by about 100 BCE, the population in Afro-Eurasia had climbed to over a million. There was increasing trade and cultural interaction between people in this large area, and this allowed religious ideas to be shared more easily.

The new religious systems provided common foundations for people who were meeting, sharing ideas, and doing business together far from home. A common religion allowed for cultural communication, a set of morals, and personal trust among strangers.

The historians J.R. and William McNeil call this the development of “portable, congregational religions.”

These religions have some common features: there is usually a founding man who receives the word of God; there is a key text or set of texts that defines man’s relationship with God; there are recommended ways of living and worshipping; people come together regularly to have God’s word interpreted for them by an authority, and there is some kind of path to self-transformation and eternal salvation that promises worshippers their souls will be saved.

In *The Human Web: A Bird’s-Eye View of World History*, the McNeills argue that religion took hold during this time period for the following reasons:

*In subsequent centuries, urban dwellers — particularly poor, marginal persons — found that authoritative religious guidance, shared faith, and mutual support among believers could substitute for the tight-knit custom of village existence. Religion could give meaning and value to ordinary lives, despite daily contact with uncaring strangers. Such religious congregations helped to stabilize urban society by making its inequality and insecurity more tolerable.*

They are saying that religion provided structure and meaning for large groups of people that small, tight-knit village communities used to provide. Religious faiths that were shared by large groups of people provided stability in cities.

These religions were accepted by thousands of followers. They appealed to people from all social classes and occupations. The texts and tenets (principles) of these faiths attracted a wide variety of people. This made the religious beliefs more likely to spread along trade routes. The earlier village-based religions, by contrast, were not made to spread far.

While many people were drawn to these early religions, they are not all the same. Each faith has its own answers to questions about humanity and each one has different practices.

All faiths, apart from Confucianism (which some scholars classify as an ethical system rather than a religion) offer eternal salvation in one form or another.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all monotheistic. They all feature one omnipotent (all-powerful) and omniscient (all-knowing) God. Hinduism allows for the worship of numerous, powerful deities, or 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.

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

## A closer look at Hinduism and Buddhism

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

First, I'm going to take a look at Hinduism. I learned through research that Hinduism is often called the "oldest religion." Hinduism has no single founder. Its main ideas appear in a variety of different texts written over time, starting around 4,000 years ago. What's interesting about Hinduism is that it was developed by a group of people living in the Indus Valley who lived under a very strict social system.

These people had a rigid hierarchical social structure called the caste system. In the caste system, people were born into a certain class and stayed in it for their entire lives. Michelle Ferrer sums up the basic tenets of Hinduism in *The Budding of Buddhism*, which is quoted below.

*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 regarded by the other groups as ritually impure and therefore outside the hierarchy of groups altogether. The Sudras had service jobs, and 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, who were 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 revered many gods. They believed that people had many lives (reincarnation). Also, they believed in karma. This meant that whatever a person did in this life would determine what he or she would be in the next life. Thus, 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 which are done in the Western world today, including meditation and yoga.*

*The Hindus also believed in the Purusharthas: Four Goals of Life. These goals motivated people in their lives: dharma – living a virtuous life kama – pleasure of the senses artha – achieving wealth and success lawfully moksha – release from reincarnation.*

This tells me that religions evolved from a social class structure where people had strictly defined roles. This religion is based on the idea of karma: what you do in life today determines what you become in the next life. I wonder, could the untouchables come back as a higher caste if they “lived a virtuous life?”

If we think about what the McNeills said about religion giving meaning to the unpleasantness of daily life, we can see that Hinduism seems to fit that description perfectly. It also seems to be an effective system for maintaining a social hierarchy of rich elites, and control over the population.

If you can improve your position in the next life by living well in this one, why dwell on how miserable your life is now? You can instead focus on having a better one the next time around.

It is also interesting that the four paths in life are not just about spirituality and God. The second and third goals are really about daily life. Specifically, they are about living a pleasurable daily life. In this view, the path toward moksha seems enjoyable. You are supposed to be happy, wealthy, and successful.

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

Focusing on the positive and trying to achieve happiness now can bring meaning to life and can move people's focus from daily drudgery or suffering. It brings hope that one day people might achieve eternal salvation or be released from the reincarnation cycle (samsara).

The second religion I'm going to take a look at is Buddhism. Buddhism 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 and he was born in South Asia (what is now Nepal) in 563 BCE into a Ksatriya Hindu family, which was the warrior/ruler class.

The story goes that 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 walls all of his life. When Siddhartha was 16, he got married and had a son.

Later, Siddhartha left the palace walls and saw all the illness, poverty, death, and human suffering in the world. He fled his home and began to search 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:**

Life is filled with suffering (dukkha).

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

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

If you follow the Eight-Fold Path then you can eliminate your material desires, and therefore, your suffering.

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

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

Right Intention – Avoid harmful thoughts, care for others, and think about more than yourself.

Right Speech – Speak kindly and avoid lying or gossip.

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

Right Living – Make sure that your livelihood does not harm others. Do not promote slavery or the selling of weapons or poisons.

Right Effort – Work hard and avoid negative situations.

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

Right Concentration – Increase your peacefulness and calmness, in particular through meditation.

What a story! This young man from the upper class of society gave up his status and position when he saw people suffering outside of his palace walls.

These eight tenets of Buddhism are really about how people should relate to each other and how people 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, do not gossip, do not kill or steal, be loyal, make good choices, learn a lot, try to be calm.

After he revealed these ideas, the Buddha stopped worshipping Hindu gods. He no longer believed that one caste was better than the others.

Still, Buddhism kept some similarities to Hinduism. Buddhists believed that following these steps led toward nirvana, which would stop the cycle of reincarnation.

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

In both cases, the development of religious ideology was closely linked to the already established systems that humans used to relate to one another. In this case, it was the social hierarchy of caste.

The major ideas in each religion provided guidance for how people should live their best lives. These ideas also gave people advice on how to live together peacefully.

Both provided a pathway and documents (texts) on how to earn salvation. Here that meant ending the cycle of reincarnation.