

Theme 4. Classical Civilizations (600 BCE – 400 CE)

Cultural Diffusion 200–600 C.E.

Trade routes were flourishing, bringing cultures, religions, and invading tribes into constant contact with each other. Major trade routes over land, such as the Silk Road from China to the Roman Empire, took months to traverse. Pastoral communities along the way provided protection, shelter, and supplies for the merchants in exchange for payment. This meant that merchants not only interacted with people at their destination but also on the journey. Unfortunately, disease traveled the same trade routes (and with invading armies). To give just an example, Rome and China suffered from measles and smallpox epidemics, which quickly spread through the empires.

The Antonine Plague (165– 180 C.E.) killed approximately 30 percent of the Roman Empire's population, and it was even worse in the cities; it is estimated that diseases caused up to 2,000 deaths per day in Rome. The effects of these diseases caused great economic and social disruptions. Trade within the empires declined, and economies became more regionally focused.

Religion also followed the roads of the merchants. Buddhism spread through East and Southeast Asia by way of trade routes. Christianity spread rapidly in the Mediterranean region via both land and sea. Even the invading Germanic tribes were converted. By 600 C.E., Christianity had taken root as far away as Britain.

Development and Spread of Religion

Around 600 B.C.E., new religions and philosophies emerged to address some new questions or concerns that previous traditions had not sufficiently answered. Philosopher Karl Jaspers called this time period the Axial Age. The axial represents the core ideas around which a society revolves. Great philosophers emerged during this period, with new answers to difficult questions. These axial ideas went on to make indelible marks on the civilizations in which they developed.

Hinduism

In India, where Vedism had dominated since around 1500 B.C.E., a religious crisis arose after 700 B.C.E. This resulted from growing discontent with the priestly brahmins, who taught that only through unquestioning obedience to them could worshippers be reincarnated into better lives.

By contrast, a series of essays and poems called the Upanishads raised the possibility that people could liberate themselves from the cycle of life, death, and reincarnation without relying so heavily on the brahmins.

Some people turned to Buddhism, but for most people in India, Vedism was not rejected outright, but absorbed into the larger set of beliefs known as Hinduism. This process took a long time, but was essentially complete by the 300s B.C.E.

Hinduism is a polytheistic religion that believes in Brahma, the creator god, and his various incarnations including Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi. Bhatki is a popular practice in which followers have a personal devotion to a particular deity.

At the most basic level, Hindus believe they have a dharma, which roughly translates as duty, to perform in life. If all follow their dharma, the world works smoothly. If it is violated, the natural order falls out of sync. This dharma is determined by birth and one's stage in life.

If one follows his or her dharma, then good karma (the sum of all good and bad deeds performed) will be the result. It is the accumulation of this good karma that allows someone to move up in the level of Saṃsāra in their next life. Hindus believe they will be reincarnated (reborn) after death in upper cast. The new position they assume in the next life will depend on how well they performed their dharma in the past life.

The ultimate goal for Hindus is to end the cycle of reincarnation by finally reaching moksha, or oneness with the universe.

The social structure known as the caste system has had an enormous impact on the followers of Hinduism. The four varnas are the basis for the caste system. The caste system is based on the concepts of purity and pollution, including pure foods, sounds, and sights. Jobs are ranked because purity is associated with those who work with their minds, and pollution is associated with those who come in contact with polluted items such as sweat or human excrement. To ensure this purity, people have been to marry only members of their own caste.

The Law of Manu, a Hindu text compiled between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E., justified the caste system by arguing that acceptance of one's status was a moral duty: good behavior as a member of a lower caste would result in good karma, increasing the likelihood of rebirth into a higher caste.

The two epic poems the Mahabharata (with its important section called the Bhagavad Gita) and the Ramayana are key elements of Hinduism.

Buddhism

Siddhartha Gautama, who lived from approximately 563 B.C.E. to 483 B.C.E., became an important Axial Age thinker. He was raised as a prince in a small state near present-day Nepal. After living a sheltered life, he decided to leave the palace in search of answers to questions such as: Why is there so much

suffering in the world? and Is there a way out of suffering? According to Buddhist teachings, after meditating under a pipal tree, the prince reached enlightenment and became known as the Buddha (translated variously as "Awakened One" or "Enlightened One"). The Buddha made a crucial decision that helped transform his ideas from the thoughts of one man into a world religion: he decided to teach what he had learned to others.

The Buddha taught that there were four noble truths:

- All life is suffering.
- Suffering is caused by desire.
- There is a way out of suffering.
- The way out of suffering is to follow the Eightfold Path (вісімковий шлях).

The Eightfold Path includes right understanding, purpose, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, awareness, and concentration. The idea was that if a person wants to stop suffering, he or she must stop desiring, and after the person stops desiring, he or she must live in a righteous manner by following the Eightfold Path.

The ultimate goal for Buddhists is to reach nirvana, which is the release from the cycles of reincarnation and the achievement of union with the universe.

Buddhism took the central ideas of Hinduism such as dharma, karma, and Saṃsāra, but altered them significantly. According to Buddhism, people did not need the rituals of the Brahmins.

Gods and goddesses are not necessary everyone can seek enlightenment on his or her own, and no one is an outcast by birth. This belief challenges the very important caste system in India. There is, Buddhism espouses, complete equality among all believers.

The Mauryan emperor Ashoka actively encouraged the spread of Buddhism. Buddhism spread throughout Asia along the Silk Road, where it met with great success. It greatly influenced Central Asia, China, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia. As it spread, it blended with the native ideas of the lands it encountered.

The followers of the Buddha acted as missionaries, preaching his message. These ideas particularly appealed to low-caste Hindus as well as to women. Buddhism's flexibility and message of universal acceptance helped transform it into a major world religion.

The older is Theravada (also referred to as Hinayana). Prominent in South and Southeast Asia, Theravada emphasizes simplicity and meditation and remains closer to the Buddha's actual teachings.

The newer school, Mahayana, caught on farther to the north, especially in Japan, Korea, and parts of China. Mahayana involves more ritual and symbology than the Buddha spoke of, mainly due to syncretism: upon reaching new lands, Buddhism often blended with local beliefs.

In some Mahayana denominations, the idea of nirvana came to resemble a heavenly afterlife, and the Buddha came to be seen as divine. Other elements appeared as well, such as the concept of hell and complex pantheons of gods and bodhisattvas (saintlike souls who had achieved nirvana but chose to remain in the earthly realm to help living humans).

Confucianism

Confucius (551 – 479 B.C.E.) was a philosopher who believed that his answers to the questions of why we are here and how we should live could bring an end to the warfare that existed in his time. The key to ending the chaos and to bringing back peace, he felt, was to find the right kind of leadership to rule China.

His two most important concepts were ren (жень, appropriate feelings) and li (correct actions), which must be used together in order to have any effect. Additionally, filial piety (respect for one's parents) was a key concept.

Like many great religious leaders, Confucius did not write his knowledge down. Confucius's teachings were brought together by his disciples in a book called *The Analects* (Лунь Юй).

Confucius taught that order would be achieved when people knew their proper roles and relationships to others. Rulers would govern by moral example. People would learn to behave properly through the example of those superior to them. According to Confucius, there are five key relationships:

Ruler to ruled

Father to son

Husband to wife

Older brother to younger brother

Friend to friend

Confucianism became the most influential philosophy in China. During the Han dynasty, Confucian ideas were used to bring peace and order. These ideas left a permanent mark on China and were continually used by subsequent dynasties throughout the country's history. These ideas also spread to Korea and Japan, where they became very influential.

Daoism

Some claim that the Chinese sage Laozi founded the Daoist school of thought during the sixth century B.C.E., around the same time as Confucius; however, its ideas can be traced back further in Chinese history

The Tao te Ching or Dao de Jing (Дао де цзін), a collection of Daoist wisdom, is attributed to Laozi. Daoist ideas represent a protest movement during the troubled times of the Warring States period. Laozi gained many disciples in China, though some mixed his ideas with magic and attempted to search for immortality.

The literal translation of the Dao is the way. Daoist belief maintains that the universe is governed by the dao, an invisible yet irresistible force. According to Daoism, all life is interdependent, and human beings should exist in harmony with nature. Its advice is to relax and be in harmony with the Dao.

In order to solve the problems of the day, Daoists taught the concept of wu wei (у-вей), which means act by not acting. Do nothing and problems will solve themselves, like in nature. Be like water— soft and yielding— but at the same time, very naturally powerful.

Daoists believe it is useless to try to build institutions to govern men, because institutions (or anything that rewards knowledge) are dangerous. Institutions lead to competition and, eventually, to fighting. The less government interference, the better; the ideal state is a small, self-sufficient town. The ultimate goal should be to cultivate the virtues of patience, selflessness, and concern for all.

In Chinese society, Daoism provided a counterpoint to the proper behavior of Confucianism. It encouraged people to take time off, relax, and just let things happen. It allowed the Chinese to be Confucian at work and Daoist while not at work. Daoism's attitude toward war was that it should be used only for defensive purposes. The Han followed this idea by stationing troops along the Great Wall to maintain the safety of trade routes.

Legalism

The philosophy of Legalism was based on the principle that man was inherently evil and needed strict laws and punishment to behave properly. Additionally, a strong central government with an absolute leader would ensure a more stable society. Legalism was adopted by the first emperor of the Qin dynasty, Qin Shi Huang, who created China's first centralized government and ended the Warring States period.

Christianity

Jesus was born to Jewish parents between 6 and 4 B.C.E. in the area known as Judea (modern-day Israel), which was part of the Roman Empire. At the time, tension existed between Rome and its Jewish subjects. Christian teachings describe Jesus as being concerned with the growing cosmopolitan nature of Jewish society and preaching a simple message of love and compassion.

The faithful would experience eternal life in heaven with God. These ideas appealed to the lower class, slaves, and women. Men and women were considered spiritually equal before God. For many, this message gave them a sense of purpose. Christian tradition attributes Jesus the power to perform miracles, such as healing the sick and raising the dead.

This message of the Kingdom of God alarmed Roman authorities, however, and to quell a potential rebellion, they had Jesus executed by crucifixion around 30 C.E. His followers believed that Jesus rose from the dead and that he was the son of God. As such, they compiled a body of writings about his life and his messages, which became the New Testament.

The terms Old Testament, New Testament, and Gospels are Christian. Although the Christian Old Testament contains much of the Jewish holy texts, the Torah, the term Old Testament implies to a Christian point of view.

The earliest followers of Jesus were all Jews, but in the mid first century C.E., a Roman citizen named Paul began to spread Jesus message to non-Jews (gentiles).

He and other missionaries used the Roman roads and sea lanes to spread this new religion. Disciples became known as Christians. However, Christians, much like the Jews, refused to honor the state cults or to worship the Roman emperor as a god. As a result, they were often persecuted.

Even so, the religion continued to spread throughout the empire until Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 C.E., making Christianity legal in the Roman Empire. Emperor Theodosius went on to later make it the official religion of the empire.

Christianity also spread to Mesopotamia, Iran, and even parts of India. Over time, the Southwest Asian Christians and the Western (or Roman) Christians grew apart. Southwest Asian Christians followed a form of the religion called Nestorianism. This form of Christianity continued to spread across the Silk Road into Central Asia, India, and China. Another form of Christianity developed in Northern Africa and is called Coptic Christianity based on the Coptic language its followers use. Coptic Christian kingdoms existed in Ethiopia since the sixth century, and the religion still thrives in Egypt and Ethiopia to the modern-day.