

Unit 5

Early Belief Systems

Section 1

Unit Materials

Questions To Consider

Question 1.

How did people across the globe begin to understand themselves in relation to the natural world and to the unseen realms beyond?

Question 2.

What accounts for the emergence of early philosophical and ethical traditions?

Question 3.

How did Hinduism, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism influence the religious philosophies of Buddhism (ca. 500 BCE), Christianity (ca. 100 CE), and Islam (ca. 600 CE)?

Question 4.

How did Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam (discussed in Unit 7) differ from earlier beliefs and practices rooted in local communities and cultures?

The Big Picture

How is this topic related to Increasing Integration?

Religious and ethical traditions helped integrate people through common beliefs and practices. Also, religious traditions often spread because of economic integration and interaction.

How is this topic related to Proliferating Difference?

Different religious traditions can divide and separate people. In particular, monotheistic religions require a belief in only one god and a rejection of all others.

Unit Purpose

- Because sources are often fragmentary, historians use art, myth, archaeology, and ethnography in conjunction with textual sources to reconstruct early religious traditions.
- Early religious traditions were tied to community life and experience. Protection and benefits were solicited from gods and spirits.
- Religious beliefs offered solace for individuals facing fear and death in a hostile world.

- Early religious beliefs often provided the background and foundation for later religious belief systems.

Unit Content Overview

Religious urges — expressions of belief in and reverence for supernatural powers — have appeared in all societies throughout history. The earliest religious beliefs, however, lie far beyond the historian's reach. They have to be reconstructed from archaeology, mythology, and even modern ethnographic evidence. Some anthropologists believe that all religion originated in shamanism, the effort to communicate or mediate between the world of spirits and the world of humans. The desire to revere, please, or influence an unseen power was often expressed through rituals, which themselves promoted social cohesiveness and bound members of a community together. The earliest attempts at contacting the supernatural may have been designed to ward off misfortune (such as poor harvests or disease), to seek benefits for the living, or to mourn and care for the dead. These activities were central to early social organization, as evidenced in the shamanism and animism of early Japan that came to be known as Shinto. The power to invoke spirits and to mediate with them on behalf of a community supported the exercise of political authority in many early societies.

The earliest highly organized societies — centered on a temple and priesthood, and led by a divinely sanctioned ruler or god-king — emerged well before 3000 BCE in Mesopotamia. In the mid-first millennium BCE, philosophical and ethical traditions that evolved in Greece and China sought in their own ways to address fundamental questions about how humans should organize societies and how they relate to the cosmos. Also in the first millennium, Hinduism, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism combined elements of earlier religious and philosophical traditions to emerge as organized religions with priesthoods, texts, practices, and followers. These organized religions, in turn, provided the foundations for the eventual development of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

Unit References

Elisabeth Anne Benard and Beverly Ann Moon, *Goddesses Who Rule* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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James A. Brown, "The Archaeology of Ancient Religion in the Eastern Woodlands." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, no. 26 (1997): 465–85.

Daniel L. Overmyer, David N. Keightley, Edward L. Shaughnessy, Constance A. Cook, and Donald Harper, "Chinese Religions — The State of the Field, Part I: Early Religious Traditions." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 1 (1995): 124–60.

David Riches, "Shamanism: The Key to Religion." *Man* 29, no. 2 (1994): 381–405.

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Global Historical Context

- Time Period: Foundations, especially 600 BCE to 600 CE
- Once humans settled into permanent, agricultural communities, societies tended to grow more complex. Trade, state formation, social structure, and belief systems became more sophisticated. By the sixth century BCE certain areas — including China, the Mediterranean, India, and Persia — developed exceptionally vibrant societies that proved

to be extremely influential in spreading both their authority and their traditions to distant areas. While these “classical societies” were each quite different in terms of organization, values, and beliefs, they all developed highly structured bureaucracies, strong militaries, long-distance trading networks, and sophisticated religious and cultural traditions from Confucianism in China, Zoroastrianism in Persia, and Hinduism in India. At the same time, it is important to remember that the belief systems that emerged out of the classical societies were not the first human attempts to understand the supernatural world. Indeed, both animism and shamanism existed long before historical records were kept.

AP Themes

- Examines interactions in economies and politics. Social turmoil and increasing connections between societies provided the context for thinkers of this period to develop moral and ethical systems around which societies could be ordered.
- Explores change and continuity by exploring how new belief systems offered fresh ways of understanding the human purpose — even as these new belief systems shared continuities with both past and future belief systems.
- Discusses systems of social structure by looking at the ways belief systems helped provide the foundations for political and social order within societies.
- Pays attention to cultural and intellectual developments by demonstrating that belief systems had a profound impact on both cultural and intellectual traditions.

Related Units

- Unit 6. Order and Early Societies: How do people bring order to their world? Political structures and relationships are ways of distributing both power and material resources. This idea is examined through a comparison of Greek city-states and the Roman Empire with early Chinese states and the Chinese Empire. Drawing on examples from the Maya to the Luba in West Africa, this unit considers alternative ways of ordering the world that do not result in increasing centralization of power. It is related to Unit 5 because the ethical system developed by Confucius laid the foundations for later Chinese empires.
- Unit 7. The Spread of Religions: How do religions interact, adopt new ideas, and adapt to diverse cultural circumstances? This unit looks at the evolution of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam as these religions moved across cultures; absorbed new believers, beliefs, and practices; and transformed the peoples and places they encountered. It focuses on the missionaries, pilgrims, and converts who were the agents of these religions in motion. It is related to Unit 5 because earlier religious traditions provided the setting and background for the rise of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.
- Unit 9. Connections Across Land: Through case studies of the Eurasian Silk Roads, the trans-Saharan Gold Road, and the Meso-American Turquoise Road, this unit develops the idea of trade routes as conduits of both commerce and culture. Using the stories of men and women who traveled these roads, it traces the transmission of commodities, religions, and diseases, as well as the movements of peoples across vast land routes. It is related to Unit 5 because religions moved across land routes in Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas.

- Unit 12. Transmission of Traditions: People use many different means to transmit their cultural traditions: oral, written, artistic, and architectural. Case studies drawn from Islamic Spain, Korea, and West Africa illustrate the variety of modes of transmission of traditions across cultures and over time. The role of technology in shaping transmission is shown through transformations wrought by the invention of printing. This unit is related to Unit 5 because it demonstrates the ways Islam traveled to Spain and the ways Confucianism traveled to Korea.

Section 2

Video-Related Materials

Video Segment 1: Shinto

In the ancient world, animism — the belief that natural objects or forces contained a spirit or consciousness — was common to many societies and often provided the foundation for the later development of other religions. This segment explores early Japanese animistic beliefs that came to be known as Shinto, their effects on the development of Japanese society, and their continuing influence in modern Japan. Early Japanese beliefs about the supernatural world understood gods, or kami, to be the spirits of the natural world. The notion of kami, however, was more complicated, and could include any person or thing with an unusually strong presence. In order to pacify and please the kami, Japanese animists — like animists all over the world — enlisted the help of shamans, or people who were believed to have special talent for communicating with the supernatural world. Because of their power to communicate with the gods, Japanese shamans also became political rulers. The first Japanese emperors were also the chief Shinto shamans, who traced their lines through the Sun Goddess. In the nineteenth century, the Meiji emperor proclaimed Shinto as the official state religion — a practice that continued until the end of World War II. Today, Shintoism and Shinto shrines continue to play an important role in Japanese cultural identity.

Video Segment 2: Early Greece and China

In the last 500 years BCE, social turmoil and increased human interactions led thinkers in widely dispersed places to develop moral and ethical systems around which society could be ordered. This segment examines the ideas of the early Greek thinkers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, as well as the ethical code developed by Confucius in China. The early Greek thinkers rejected prevailing religious beliefs, arguing that society should be ordered on the basis of reason. Socrates believed that people should behave with integrity and honor, and that society should be just. Plato, his disciple, built on these ideas in his treatise *The Republic*, and argued that a just society ought to be ruled by a philosopher-king. Aristotle further argued that philosophers could apply their reason to the world around them to solve the mysteries and problems of life. In China, Confucius sought to construct a moral code that would guide individuals and communities toward ethical living. His teachings, recorded in the *Analects*, advocated a hierarchical social order in which behavior was dictated by one's station in society. The idea was that maintaining social harmony would maintain harmony with the cosmos.

Video Segment 3: Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism

In the last millennium BCE, social turmoil and increased interaction between peoples also led to the development of Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Hinduism. In India in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, Indo-European invaders melded indigenous Indian beliefs with their own. The result, Hinduism, provided some of the core concepts that would later be incorporated into Buddhism, including the notion of samsara (recurring cycles of life), dharma (duty), and karma (the results of one's actions). In Persia in the sixth century BCE, a priest named Zoroaster postulated a cosmological vision of two gods — one good, one evil. He also postulated a heaven and hell rather than an endless cycle of rebirth. In the same century, Hebrews in Palestine

developed a similar belief in good and evil, heaven and hell. They also came to believe that there was only one god who would not tolerate the worship of any others, and that humans should behave morally. Together, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism provided the foundation and context for the development of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

Perspectives on the Past: Reconstructing Religions

Why do scholars think that ancient peoples tried to connect themselves to the supernatural and spiritual world? How can rock art help us understand ancient religious beliefs? By studying the patterns of rock art throughout the world, archaeologists have noticed recurring themes such as spirals, cross-hatchings, and zigzag shapes. These patterns have been linked to phosphenes, or chemicals produced in the human brain during trance experiences. Scholars believe that shamans in trances may have produced such art, and that the evidence of trances demonstrates a worldwide longing to connect with the world beyond.

Video Details

Who Is Interviewed

- Candice Goucher
- Jerry H. Bentley
- Linda Walton
- Richard Bulliet

Primary Source Materials Featured in the Video

- Motoori Norinaga, eighteenth-century Shinto scholar
- Confucius, ancient Chinese philosopher
- The Bible

Program Contents

Begins	Ends	Contents
00:00	01:41	Show tease, show opening credits
01:42	04:41	Program overview/introduction
04:42	10:03	Video Segment 1. <i>Shinto</i>
10:04	17:32	Video Segment 2. <i>Early Greece and China</i>
17:33	24:38	Video Segment 3. <i>Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism</i>
24:39	26:22	Perspectives on the Past: <i>Reconstructing Religions</i>
26:23	28:25	Show close and program credits