

Bryson's AP World History

Belief systems

Hinduism—no known founder. A Vedic religion (based on religious poetry called the Vedas) was brought to the Indus River valley by the Aryan invaders about 1500 B.C. and served as the basis of Hinduism. These invaders established a caste system as a means to integrate the indigenous people into a foreign and domineering society. Subsequently, the development of the *Upanishads* brought to Hinduism a mystical element based on two ideas: that of a divine force that shapes the world, and a disregard for the material concerns of this world. This divine force in Hinduism, the *Brahma*, forms part of everything in the world. All creatures participate in it. The *Atman* that dwells in each human being is part of Brahma. It reincarnates into another form of life when the human dies and thus is eternal. This endless cycle of reincarnations is called samsara. Hindus try to escape samsara with its dreaded repetitions of the life cycle.

A person's moral and ethical obligations in life are called one's dharma (the great battle in the Bhagavad Gita takes place on the field of dharma.)

The priestly caste was responsible for overseeing the elaborate array of rituals within Hinduism's caste system. This caste system, in return, helped the Mauryan and Gupta Dynasties rule over a vast area. It provided a social and religious cohesion in local regions in the absence of a strong centralized bureaucracy. When the caste system, priesthood and empty rituals led to a spiritually unfulfilling religion, a reform movement emerged out of Hinduism. This reform movement came to be called Buddhism.

Buddhism—founded by an Indian prince named Gautama in what is present day Nepal. Gautama tried the excesses of both worldliness and aestheticism before he finally moderated his view with the Path of the Middle Way. When he found enlightenment he became the Buddha, the enlightened one. Buddhism is similar to Hinduism in its belief in a divine force, reincarnation, and one's ethical and moral duties. However, it does not support a caste system or any authoritative priestly caste who presides over one's performance of religious duty. Buddhists also hold all of life to be suffering. They believe they can escape this suffering and reach enlightenment in this life through disciplined yoga.

Buddhism attracted many followers in India after the conversion of Ashoka, but its long term hold there proved to be minimal. Through the missionaries sent out by Ashoka, however, it did spread to Sri Lanka and then to China during the expansion of the Han dynasty. From China it entered Korea and Japan.

Judaism—the world's first monotheistic religion. It began among the Semitic peoples who migrated from Mesopotamia to present day Palestine. God made an agreement (a covenant) with Abraham that his descendents would be set aside as a special nation through whom all other nations would one day be saved. This religion has endured remarkably well with relatively few variations. This is because the Jews, set apart as a nation by God, never felt the need to convert non-Jews thus solving the problem of integrating the cultures of converted foreigners. After Solomon, this religion centered on

the rituals and traditions associated with the Temple in Jerusalem. Since the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. it began to emphasize the application of the Torah (laws of Moses) as interpreted by Rabbis. This form is called Rabbinic Judaism.

Christianity—began in the first century A.D. Founded on the religion of Judaism but departed from it radically in some ways, Christianity is the belief that the life and work of Jesus Christ fulfills the promises given by God to Abraham. Thus the life of Christ allows people of any race to be heirs of God's promise to bless all nations through Abraham's descendents. The first Christians were driven by their belief in Christ's death and literal resurrection from the dead. They used the agency of the Roman Empire to spread their religion first among the lower classes and finally to the Emperor himself, Constantine.

Christianity has gone through some dramatic divisions, first between the eastern churches of the Byzantine Empire (Orthodox Church) and the western churches (Roman Catholic); then between the Roman Catholics and the Protestants beginning in the 16th century A.D. Unlike Judaism, Christianity has a strong evangelical drive and has spread to every continent on earth.

Confucianism—based on the teaching of Confucius who lived around the year 500 B.C. Technically, Confucianism is neither a religion nor a philosophy; it is more a set of teachings and instructions about orienting oneself to a social hierarchy. One scholar has called it "family-ism." Confucius stressed the virtues of submitting to those in authority as well as setting a good example to those who are in submission to you. These virtues, he believed, could correct the political disorder that existed in his lifetime. Generally speaking, Confucius advocated a patriarchal family order (father dominated) with respect for elders and the modeling of good behavior by those above. Obedience and respect are the cardinal virtues.

The teachings of Confucius are collected in a work called the *Analects*. Knowledge of this work became part of the requirements for civil service during the Han Dynasty, a fact that grounded Confucian sensibilities into Chinese culture for centuries. Confucian social order was a well suited complement to the bureaucratic structure of Han rule and helped to stabilize society from the bottom up. The opposing system of political thought in China was Legalism.

Daoism—founded upon the teachings of Lao-tsu. Daoism has both a religious and a philosophical branch but its primary emphasis is the same: man's relationship to the harmony of nature. Everything in nature has its binary opposite: hot-cold, man-woman, Ying-Yang, etc. Man must find his path amidst these opposites. Daoism has a strong mystical inclination. It has little interest in politics, or in anything worldly for that matter.

Hellenism—This is the culture of ancient Greece as spread across the ancient world by Alexander of Macedonia (the Great). Alexander's father, Phillip of Macedonia, sent his son to Greece where he was a student of Aristotle. There he learned the Hellenistic culture. In Athens, although there was much religion, there was no religious caste or priestly order to decide on what was to be the official version of any body of knowledge. As a result, Athens had a higher premium on individualism than any of the other classical

civilizations. They were curious about the nature of the world and were not hindered in their attempt to formulate theories about it. The Greeks never did establish a veritable science; they placed too much emphasis on theories without ever subjecting those theories to physical experiments. In other words, they would hold to a hypothesis about the physical world if no logical argument could be found to contradict it; they would never test the hypothesis experimentally. They came up with half of the scientific method.

This culture placed a high regard on symmetry, proportion, and the pursuit of the ideal. Greek statues do not so much depict an individual person as they do celebrate an ideal. Most Greek statues have identical proportions (the height six times the length of the foot; hence our modern measurements). The Parthenon is a model of symmetry and proportionality.

As these elements of Greek culture became more cosmopolitan with the expanding empire of Alexander the Greek, the resulting culture was called Hellenism. Alexander purposefully attempted to spread this culture (after defeating Persia he ordered ten thousand of his troops to remain in Persia and marry Persian women in order to establish Greek families there.) Hellenism influenced India for a short time as well. But when cultural contact with India ceased, the Greek influence soon disappeared.