

TOTEMISM

Totemism is no longer regarded as a religion, and has no real significance in our study of religions. Totemism does have some similarities to a current world view that assigns the various powers of nature to the relationship between human beings and our environment. Sometimes that relationship can reach into the realm of religion with its tendency toward worship of nature and its systems. Sometimes this is an undue reverence for mankind and our dominion over the things of nature.

Totemism was sometimes used as a way of sorting and separating various social groups within a society. The society used names and identities from various plants and animals.

We have all seen or heard of Totem Poles. These are made showing objects, such as birds, animals, or plants in various combinations and carved to represent a system of ideas, or symbols. The symbols assumed some relationship between an individual or social group to the objects in some way.

There were some prohibitions against harming, eating, or touching the items represented on the totem.

The totems were found in Africa, Guinea, Malaysia, among the Australian Aborigines, and Native American people (which we call Indians.)

ZOROASTRIANS

Zoroastrianism, religion founded in ancient Persia by the prophet Zoroaster, also called Zarathustra. The doctrines preached by Zoroaster are preserved in his metrical Gathas, (psalms) which form part of the sacred scriptures known as the Avesta Tenets. His teachings became the guiding principles of Persian civilization.

The Vendidad is a part of the Avesta. And gives the laws of the religion. It contains some useful laws of hygiene, which were available before the days of modern medicine.

The Gathas and the Seven Chapters form part of the liturgy called the Yasna. This incorporated the Aryan polytheistic paganism into Zoroastrianism. Among these deities is Anahita, a fertility and river goddess.

Probably the first Persian king to recognize the religion proposed by Zoroaster was Darius 1. His inscriptions are full of the praises of Ahura - Mazda; he stresses rationality and seems to regard Lie as a world force. His son, Xerxes 1, was also a worshipper of Ahura - Mazda. Artaxerxes 1 (reigned 465-425BC) was also a worshipper of Mazda. Artaxerxes 2 (reigned 409-358 BC) venerated Ahura - Mazda, Mithra, and Anahita; in his reign the first Persian temples were built. The new Persian dynasty of the Sassanids (AD 224-641) established Zoroastrianism as the state religion of Persia.

After Alexander the Great conquered Persia, Zoroastrianism began to die out, but was revived during the early days of Christianity. The teachings of Zoroaster are the basis of the Parsi religion in India. Some still recite the Avestan liturgy and tend the sacred fires, and a few still follow the Magian doctrine of placing corpses on raised edifices (called towers of silence) to be prey of vultures.

There are a number of sects of Zoroastrians. One group are fire worshippers in Iran called Ghebers.

Persia was gradually converted to Islam after its conquest by the Arabs in the 7th century. Zoroastrianism survived, however, in small communities of Gabars (a derogatory term coined by the Arabs) in the mountainous region of Yezd and Kerman.

There is a mix of various religious thought in these religions and influence from one religion to another, but they do not follow from a source from the creation of mankind, or provide a savior for the sins of mankind, or a promise of a future with God in the here-after. Would these religions be as good as any other? What was the source of religious ideas by Zoroaster?

BUDDHISM

Buddha lived around the period from 563 to 483 BC. He was born in Kapilavastu, India. This is now in the area of the city of Nepal. Buddha was taught to be a warrior and a ruler. He married at an early age and participated in the life of the court. Buddha found this worldly, carefree existence dull and self-indulgent. He had an early inclination toward meditation. He began wandering in search of enlightenment.

While wandering in Northern India, he first investigated Hinduism and took instruction with Brahman teachers. Hinduism has some extremely rigid exercises in religious duties and austerities toward worldly desires. Buddha, whose family name was Gautama, found the Hindu caste system repellant, and ascetic way of life futile. About 526 BC in a place that is now Buddha Gaya in the state of Bihar, he was sitting under a tree and experienced the great enlightenment he sought. This enlightenment revealed the way of salvation from suffering. The name Buddha means 'Enlightened One.' His name was Siddhartha Gautama Buddha.

Soon afterward he preached a sermon that is still preserved today, which contains many elements of Buddhism.

Tradition has it that in the year 533 he encountered a sick man, and aged man, and a dead man. Suddenly he noticed and deeply realized that suffering is the common lot of mankind. He then determined to live as a begging man devoting himself exclusively to a religious life, living a calm and serene life, forsaking wealth, family, and power in a quest for truth. Being far from the land of Israel, it was not likely that he would know what God was doing to preserve the seed of Abraham, and having descended from people who had already rejected God, he would not know that truth that leads to life with God; but it is always a good idea to seek truth. His decision to change his life is known to Buddhism as the Great Renunciation.

He gathered disciples and traveled through the Ganges River valley teaching his doctrines, gathering more followers. He then established monastic communities that admitted anyone, regardless of caste. He returned for a brief time to his home town and while there, converted his father, his wife, and other family members to his beliefs. He spent about 45 years converting people to his teachings. He began a new religion during this time. His teachings have influenced many people for nearly 2500 years. He died at age 80. All of the surviving accounts of his life were written many years after his death by his followers.

His teaching against self-indulgence, the caste system, and extremes of spiritualism and asceticism also influenced the Hindu religion.

Buddhism was a monastic movement within the dominant Brahman tradition of Hinduism. It quickly developed its own direction. Rejecting significant aspects of Hindu philosophy, the authority of its

priesthood, and the Vedic scriptures, while denying that a person's spiritual worth depended on his birth status.

Buddhism has been significant in Asia, from India east through Burma.

Four Noble Truths are the core of Buddha's enlightenment:

1. Life is suffering, human existence is essentially painful from birth to death. There is no relief in death as life is a cycle. Leading to rebirth.
2. Suffering is caused by ignorance of the nature of reality and the attachment and grasping to life.
3. Suffering can be ended by overcoming ignorance and attachment.
4. There is an eight-fold path to suppressing suffering consisting of the right views, intentions, speech, actions, livelihood, efforts, right mindedness, and right contemplation. These eight are in three categories that form the Buddhist faith; Morality, Wisdom, and Concentration.

Buddha taught the denial of a permanent soul. Existence being characterized as having no soul, no permanence, but with suffering. He taught a doctrine of dependent origination. Ignorance in a previous life creates a tendency for the mind and senses to lead to craving and clinging to existence. This condition triggers a process of becoming once again in a renewed cycle of birth, old age, death, and a connection between one life and the next, in a stream of existences. These renewed existences are not permanent life, but a passing of the soul from one life to another.

Closely related to this belief of recycled life is the teaching of 'Karma'. Karma consists of the ethical consequences of a person's acts. There is a universal justice in that good deeds are rewarded and evil deeds are punished in the actions leading to rebirth. This karmic process operates through a moral law rather than a divine judgment. The karma determined your species, beauty, longevity, wealth, intelligence, and social status. According to the Buddha, karma of varying types can lead to your rebirth as a human, a ghost, an animal, or even a devil or a Hindu god.

Buddhism does not assign the gods any special significance as they are in the same process as all other creatures. While they are gods they are living in heaven in a long and pleasurable condition. Even the gods are subject to death and a rebirth of some other, maybe a lower state of existence. Gods are not in control of human destiny, nor were they the creators of it. **There is no value in offering sacrifices or prayers to them.** Human existence is to be preferred, as enlightenment is only possible for humans.

The ultimate goal in the Buddhist cycle is to be released from existence with its inherent suffering. To achieve this is called Nirvana. Nirvana is the enlightened condition where greed, hatred, and ignorance are gone. This would not be a condition of total annihilation but of a state that is indescribable.

Over time there have been changes and divisions of Buddhism too. Zen and Pure Land were the most important of these Zen was developed in China and later in Japan. Zen advocates the practice of meditation as the way a sudden, intuitive realization of the inner Buddha nature in you. Zen was founded by an Indian monk named Bodhidharma who went to China in the year 520 AD. Zen emphasizes practice and personal enlightenment rather than a study of doctrine or scripture.

Pure Land stresses faith and devotion to the Buddha of infinite light. This is the means to a rebirth in an eternal paradise known as Pure Land.

There is also a Japanese Buddhism named after its founder, Nichiren. From the 13th century AD this sect believed that the Lotus Sutra contains the essence of Buddhist teaching. By repeating a formula "*Homage to the Lotus Sutra*" the devotee may gain enlightenment.

Worship in Buddhism is individual rather than congregational. An expression of faith has been the reciting of the three refuges. "*I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the dharma (doctrine), and I take refuge in the Sangha.*" The Sangha is the monastic community of various orders. Some honor Buddha by walking around a dome-like sacred structure carrying flowers and incense. For some, images and temple altars serve as a focus for worship. Prayer and chanting are common acts of devotion as are offerings of fruit, flowers, and incense.

Buddhism has the ability to adapt to changing conditions and cultures, but always opposed too materialism.

Is Buddhism as good as Hinduism? Is Buddhism as good as the religion of the ancient Egyptians or the Chaldeans? Is one religion as good as the another? Does Buddhism connect to our origins? Did we ever have an origin or has recycling been forever? Does it provide forgiveness from sin, or just relief from suffering? Does Buddhism ever give promise of eternal life with the God of creation, or just a temporary existence with some gods.

Would a person of the Buddhist or Hindu persuasion finding themselves as a human now, living in the Christian age, be able to trust Jesus Christ who suffered for mankind, pass through their personal suffering; obey the principles of the New Covenant in Christ, and have the hope of a permanent life with God , as the Christians do? Would this end the cycle of rebirths? Would this belief in Christ end the cycle of existence that Buddha believed in, and that the Hindus teach?

CONFUCIAN

Confucianism is a major system of thought in China. It developed from the teachings of Confucius and his disciples. Confucius lived in the period of time approximately 551 to 479 BC. He was a philosopher in China, a scholar, and a teacher who taught the principles of good conduct, practical wisdom, and proper social relationships. He taught good government with honest and educated officials. Confucianism has influenced the Chinese attitude toward life and social standards. It has spread from China into Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, and has some interest to scholars in Western countries.

Confucius established a school about 530 BC in which he taught history, poetry, government, music, divination, and socially correct behavior.

Although Confucianism became an official ideology of the Chinese state, it has never existed as an established religion with a church or priesthood. It does need to be evaluated in our question, "Is one religion as good as another?" Not as a religion, but because many have thought of it as a religion over time, it may be good to look at what it teaches. Confucius was honored as a great teacher but he was never worshipped as a god, nor did he ever claim divinity. The temples built to honor Confucius were not built to worship, but as public places for annual ceremonies such as the philosopher's birthday. Several attempts to deify Confucius have failed because of the secular nature of the philosophy.

The Confucian 'Bible' would be nine ancient Chinese works handed down by Confucius and his followers. Some existed from ancient time many centuries before Confucius. These nine writings are from two groups; the Five Classics and the Four Books.

The Five Classics include a 'Book of Changes' which is a manual of divination probably as old as the eleventh century BC. A supplement which may have been written by Confucius or his disciples is philosophical. Another of the classics is a 'Book of History'; a collection of ancient historical documents. There is a 'Book of Poetry' with ancient poems, a 'Book of Rites' which deal with principles of conduct for private and public ceremonies. There is a work on 'Spring and Summer Annals' which may be the only work compiled by Confucius. It is a chronicle of major historic events in feudal China from the 8th century BC to the days nearing the death of Confucius in the 5th century BC.

The Four Books were compiled by Confucius and Mencius, one of the followers of Confucius. The 'Analects' is a collection by Confucius that form the basis of his moral and political philosophy. The 'Great Learning' and the 'Doctrine of the Mean' contain some of the philosophical utterances of Confucius arranged with comments by his disciples. The fourth book contains the teachings of Mencius and is called the 'Book of Mencius'.

The writings of Confucius present philosophies on love, goodness, humanity, righteousness, piety, integrity, and propriety. In politics he advocated a paternalistic government in which the sovereign is honorable and benevolent and the subjects are respectful and obedient. The ruler is then a good example for the people. Confucius upheld the theory that 'in education, there is no class distinction.'

After Confucius died, Mencius continued the ethical teaching of Confucius stressing the innate goodness of man. He did acknowledge that man has become depraved by his own destructive behavior, and contact with an evil environment. In politics, Mencius advanced the idea of the people's supremacy in the state, which may also be called democracy.

Another line of thought emerged about this time represented by Hsuntsu. He contented that a person is born with an evil nature, but can be regenerated through moral education. He taught that character should be molded by an orderly observance of rites and by the practice of music.

For many centuries Confucianism was taught in varying degrees, sometimes almost neglected and sometimes restored. but always had a firm hold on Chinese intellectual and political life.

During the Song (Sung) dynasty from 960 to 1279 AD a new system of Confucian thought began blending a mixture of Buddhist and Taoism elements. This school of thought was known as Neo-Confucianism. The line of thought included interest in theories of the universe and the origin of human nature. Neo-Confucianism also split into two schools stressing 'law' in one and 'mind' in the other.

During the Ch'ing dynasty from 1644 to 1911 there was a strong reaction to law schools of Neo-Confucian thought. Ch'ing scholars advocated a return to a more authentic Confucianism before it was mixed with Buddhist and Taoist ideas.

After the victory by the Chinese Communist in 1949 many traditions based on Confucianism were put aside. The family system which was revered in the past has been de-emphasized. Official campaigns against Confucianism were organized in the late 1960's and early 1970's. During the Communist rule few Confucian classics have been published.

TAOISM

Taoism has been a Chinese philosophy and religious system originating sometime around 500 BC. Followers of Taoism are called Taoists. It is one of three great Chinese religions and had been second to Confucianism in the number of followers.

The Chinese word Tao means 'the way or channel,' and Taoists believe that everything in the universe is designed to move in an ordered and harmonic way. According to Taoism, man has lost 'his way' and created disharmony by substituting his own designs. In our studies of various religions we should agree that this is true. The way has been lost and man has created many religions as substitutes for the way shown from the beginning of creation.

Taoism teaches that man can find harmony by simplicity and humility. Taoists believe that a person will regain happiness by giving himself up to the great Tao. A person should avoid all distinction and honor, be good to all things, and be humble and quiet, like the forces of nature. An individual should ignore the dictates of society and seek only to conform to the pattern of the universe, the Tao, (the way). The way is not described in words and to be in accord with the way, nothing strained, artificial, or unnatural is done. By emptying oneself of all doctrines and knowledge, being in compliance with the impulses of one's own nature, one achieves unity with Tao and derives a mystical power which enables one to transcend all mundane distinctions, even that of life and death. (There seems to be an oxymoron here, a self-contradiction, if all teaching and knowledge of Taoism were achieved how would anyone know how to practice emptying oneself?)

More simply stated, Taoism teaches that fate determines the direction and the outcome of each life. It is useless to struggle against your destiny. Happiness is a result of submitting to whatever happens. To resist this power working on you will make you unhappy, while submitting to the power is to be happy.

According to tradition, the Chinese philosopher Lao-tse founded Taoism and wrote the Tao Te Ching, Additional ideas may have been added around 369-286 BC by many thinkers, including Chuang Tzu. Taoism was mostly philosophical in its early stages, but turned to magic and superstitions later. Its ideas of returning to nature for peace and harmony has had a great influence in the Far East and in the religions there.

Taoism has developed a cult in which immortality was sought through magic and the use of various elixirs. Experimenting in alchemy developed a general hygiene system seeking to prolong life by regular breathing and concentration, to prevent disease and promote longevity.

About the 2nd century AD Taoist organizations concerned with faith healing began to appear. Under the influence of Buddhism they adopted monasticism and a concern for spiritual afterlife, rather than just longevity of life. Taoism had been the official religion of China for a few brief periods. Taoism has lost its clergy when ousted by the Communist in 1927 and Taoism has merged with Buddhism and other religions in some areas.

Earth was an object of worship by building mounds of soil in various districts to which the people, who were mostly farmers, bowed down. The Yellow River and mountain of China were objects of worship also.

Later the heavens were also added to the worship, followed by the worship of localized spirits, man eating demons, vampires, ghouls, and gigantic devils with horned foreheads, long fangs, and red fuzzy hair.

Ancestor worship is fundamental to Taoism. Dead ancestors were conceived as living and powerful spirits. The dead being dependent on the living and the bond to the living was strengthened by prayers to them, and sacrifices made in their honor. The living were also dependent on the dead, as dead ancestors could help a family prosper, or if displeased could inflict punishment and poverty.

The ancestral shrine became the center of family life. The shrine would have a name of ancestors inscribed and have a place for it in the home. Wealthy families had family temples. Food sacrifices were offered, and ceremonies would take place in the presence of the ancestors here. The father of the family serves as priest. The worship is patriarchal.

Taoism is in decline under Communist rule and was declared dead by the government, but it is not dead, and there are occasional protests indicating that it is only suppressed and may have a revival one day.

Again, we ask the questions; Is Taoism as good as any other religion? Is a religion that was founded around 500 BC going to be the religion that will lead us to our sources of life, and provide for our afterlife? Does this religion in any way tie in to the origins of life from God? Does this religion bring us to or even mention the 'seed of the woman' who can be our savior? Are our ancestors going to help us find what they were not able to find doing their time on earth? Or, did they really find 'the way'? Jesus claimed, as recorded in **John 14: 6-7**, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, (God) but by me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also..."*

Yes, the way has been lost, but can be found by retracing from the sources of history to Jesus, who is 'the way'.