

Student Handout 1: World Religions in Expanding Networks – 1200 BCE to 500 CE

An important development of this era, and one related to the spread of writing, was the appearance of several belief systems that included people of differing languages and cultural traditions, that is, "world religions." The great majority of people in that era practiced local religions, that is, belief systems that centered on local gods and goddesses, sacred (special) places in nature, astrology, magic, and pronouncements of shamans (individuals who connected the natural and supernatural worlds).

In the large states and empires early on, there were many different religions, although many of the rulers wanted their people to worship (the rulers) in one way or another, and sometimes even see them as gods.

Since humans had many local religions at this time, why did large-scale belief systems develop in this particular era? In fact why did all the major world religions appear in this era, with the exception of Islam? One possibility is that by about the middle of the first millennium B.C.E (around 500 BCE), Afroeurasia had large population centers and growing trade networks, and all of the different people needed some sort of value and belief system that they all shared. If they had similar beliefs and rules, it might be easier to get along and do business.

Turn and Talk: Why did world religions develop at this time in human history?

The Emergence of World Religions		
Belief system	Time of appearance	Homeland
Zoroastrianism	1200-1500 B.C.E	Southwest Asia
Hinduism	around 1500 B.C.E.	Northern India
Judaism	around 1500 B.C.E.	Southwest Asia
Buddhism	5th century B.C.E.	Northern India
Daoism (Taoism)	5th century B.C.E.	Northern China
Confucianism	5th century B.C.E.	Northern China
Christianity	1st century C.E.	Southwest Asia

The new religious systems provided common ideas that made it easier for people to communicate and share the same rules. This helped develop trust and connection between people who were meeting, sharing ideas, and doing business often times far away from their home communities. The new belief systems, however, were by no means all the same. Each one offered different answers to important questions about humanity and life and different ways of approaching worship, ritual, and living in a community.

Belief Systems

Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and Taoism all offered paths to self-transformation (changing to become a better person) and to eternal salvation (saving your soul or reaching a state of peace for eternity) in one form or another. Christianity and Judaism were the most monotheistic, proclaiming one omnipotent (all powerful) and omniscient (all knowing) god. Hinduism made room for many powerful gods and goddesses, although there was still a belief in one supreme power. Buddhism and Daoism also accepted the existence of multiple divine beings in various forms. The worship of many different gods tied to a particular place, however, was not a part of most of these new religions.

Buddhism and Christianity emphasized their appeal to all humans, and both spread widely across different cultures and languages. Judaism remained closely identified with the Hebrew people and their descendants, though by the end of this era a diaspora of Jewish communities extended nearly across Afroeurasia.

All six systems taught that human relations should be guided by kindness, selflessness, and decency. Confucianism, which some scholars characterize as an ethical system rather than a religion, particularly emphasized public moral behavior, good government, and social responsibility.

These six systems may of course be compared and contrasted in numerous other ways, and within each tradition important differences developed depending on local cultural tendencies and social environments. The only major belief system that did not appear in this era was Islam, which emerged in the seventh century C.E.

Stop and Jot: Why were world religions helpful to large, growing societies?

What types of beliefs in these world religions would have helped people get along better?

How and Why World Religions Spread

World religions often had missionaries, or people who actively traveled to preach and teach others about the religion. These people often traveled on existing trade routes. Empires developed networks of roads and communication to help their armies control large areas and to also increase the amount of trade that was happening. These networks made it easier for world religions to spread.

Religions also spread because they appealed to many people. A lot of people living in the age of empires were very poor. Many of these world religions offered comfort to poor people by talking about how they could overcome their suffering on earth. Buddhism taught that life was suffering, and that suffering was caused by desire. To ease their suffering, people had to give up on their desire for more material wealth. In a similar way, Christianity taught that suffering on earth would be rewarded in heaven. Poor people took comfort in these beliefs, and rulers liked these beliefs as well because they taught people to be obedient and to wait for the afterlife for better things. As empires rose and fell, and as war came and went in this era, people began to turn to these religions for a sense of stability and hope.

As world religions spread, they mixed with the animist beliefs that people already practiced. Animism, in many cases, did not completely go away, but instead was absorbed by the new religions. For example, natural objects like mistletoe or pine trees, which had been seen as having special, spiritual qualities before Christianity, became incorporated into the Christmas tradition over hundreds of years.

Of course, not every part of the world was affected by these new beliefs at this time. The Americas and parts of Asia and Africa were still geographically isolated from the rest of the world, so these religions did not arrive in these places until much later.

Stop and Jot: How and why did world religions spread? Where did they NOT spread? Why not? (*underlined sentences will help you!*)

Now Turn and Talk about your ideas!

Philosophy Develops Alongside World Religions

World religions tried to explain the answers to important questions, such as where humans came from, why we are here, what does it mean to be good, and so on. As world religions were emerging, so were other belief systems that tried to answer these questions. However, in contrast to world religions these belief systems focused on investigation, discussion, and rational argument, and tried to base the search for answers more in the human world and less in the supernatural world of gods. These systems developed into what we now call philosophy, the pursuit of knowledge through thought and inquiry based on reasoning, and they were connected to the beginnings of what we now call science. In Greece, for example, people

believed in a number of gods, but Greek scholars developed a method of scientific and moral questioning known as natural philosophy. According to natural philosophy, human reason could be effectively used to explain natural, cosmic, and psychological phenomenon. These thinkers saw no contradiction between their efforts to understand the natural world through observation and study and their belief that the gods fundamentally ruled it.

In China, the writings of Confucius offered another system of beliefs and guidelines for moral behavior, suggesting that humans had the ability to improve and develop moral behavior on their own. Confucius used his writings to suggest guidelines for good leadership, moral behavior, family relationships, and overall human improvement for the good of the community.

Stop and Jot: What are key similarities and differences between philosophy and religion?

Turn and Talk: Share your ideas with a partner!

Reading adapted from: World History For Us All...and Stearns

SUMMARIZATION PRACTICE:

Identify and write in your words at least five important points from this reading:

1)

2)

3)

4)

5)