

Thread 8.2 - Research Sources

How did Judaism begin?

Judaism began about 4000 years ago with the Hebrew people in the Middle East. Abraham, a Hebrew man, is considered the father of the Jewish faith because he promoted the central idea of the Jewish faith: that there is one God. At the time many people in the Middle East worshipped many gods. It is said that Abraham and his wife Sarah, who were old and childless, were told by God that their children would be as plentiful as the stars in the sky and that they would live in a land of their own -- the Promised Land. This gradually came true.

Abraham's son, Isaac had a son, Jacob, also called Israel. In this way the descendants of Abraham came to be known as the Israelites. God promised the Israelites he would care for them as long as they obeyed God's laws. While still traveling, the Hebrews lived in Egypt where they were enslaved. Moses, a Hebrew, was chosen by God to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt. Moses led the Hebrew people out of the Sinai Desert toward the Promised Land. At Mt. Sinai, God gave Moses the Law, which would guide the Israelites to today. The laws were called the Ten Commandments and form the basis of the Torah, the book of Jewish law.

It took many years for the Israelites to finally get to what they thought was the Promised Land - Canaan. After some fighting the Jews established the Israelite kingdom. After many years, Canaan was conquered by the Assyrians, the Babylonians and then eventually the Romans. The Israelites once again found themselves enslaved, this time by Babylonians. The Israelites were then taken over by Romans who destroyed much of what had been built in Jerusalem by the Israelites. Most of the Jews were scattered all over the region and eventually moved from place to place to avoid persecution, which continues to this day. The dispersion of the Jews is called the Diaspora.

The worst persecution of the Jews was during World War II by the Nazis who murdered more than six million Jews or a third of the world's Jewish population. This was called the Holocaust. Beginning in the 1880's Jews began returning to their homeland in growing numbers, this time to avoid persecution where they lived. After World War II, many Jews believed that for the Jewish people and culture to survive, Jews needed to live in their own country where all Jews from anywhere in the world would have the right to live and be citizens. In 1948, Palestine was divided up and a Jewish state of Israel was formed in the land that was once called Canaan, surrounded by countries with predominantly Muslim populations. Since Muslims also claimed rights to the land where the Jews were living, there was conflict, which continues to this day in the Middle East.

Today nearly fourteen million Jewish people live all over the world. Approximately half of them live in the United States, one quarter live in Israel, and a quarter are still scattered around the world in countries in Europe, Russia, South America, Africa, Asia and other North American and Middle Eastern countries. Anyone born to a Jewish mother is considered a Jew.

What do Jewish people believe?

Jewish people believe in the Torah, which was the whole of the laws given to the Israelites at Sinai. They believe they must follow God's laws which govern daily life. Later legal books, written by rabbis, determine the law as it applies to life in each new place and time.

The Ten Commandments, as written in the Torah, are:

- Worship no other God but me.
- Do not make images to worship.
- Do not misuse the name of God.
- Observe the Sabbath Day (Saturday). Keep it Holy.
- Honor and respect your father and mother.
- Do not murder.
- Do not commit adultery.
- Do not steal.
- Do not accuse anyone falsely. Do not tell lies about other people.
- Do not envy other's possessions.

There are three basic groups of Jewish people who have a different understanding of the interpretation of the Torah.

- Orthodox Jews believe that all of the practices in the Torah which it is practical to obey must be obeyed without question.
- Conservative and Reform Jews believe that the ancient laws and practices have to be interpreted for modern life with inclusion of contemporary sources and with more concern with community practices than with ritual practices.
- Reform Jews also allow everyone to sit together, men and women, and both Hebrew and the local language are spoken in services.

What are the sacred texts of the Jewish people?

The Tenakh is the ancient collection of writings that are sacred to the Jews. They were written over almost a thousand years from 1000 to 100 BCE. The word Tenakh comes from the three first letters of the three books included in this text: the Torah, plus the Nev'im (prophets) and the Ki'tuvim (writings, which include histories, prophecies, poems, hymns and sayings).

The Torah is written on scrolls and kept in a special cabinet called the aron hakodish, the holy ark, in synagogues. The Torah is read with a pointer called a yad (hand) to keep it from being spoiled. Each week, one section is read until the entire Torah is completed and the reading begins again.

The Talmud is also an important collection of Jewish writings. Written about 2000 years ago, it is a recording of the rabbis discussion of the way to follow the Torah at that time.

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Thread 8.2 - Research Sources

How did Christianity begin?

Christianity traces its beginning to the miraculous birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, known as Jesus Christ. Over 2000 years ago in Palestine (today's Israel), Jesus was born into a humble Jewish family. His mother was a young peasant woman named Mary. Christians believe that his father was the Holy Spirit of God, making Jesus both fully human and fully divine. His earliest followers came to believe that he was the Messiah, or messenger, sent by God to free God's people from slavery, sin, and death. God sent his son Jesus in human form so that people would better understand God as a caring and loving parent. Jesus lived and experienced the suffering of humans. Jesus healed the sick and told stories, or parables, and preached sermons that taught what God wanted people to do – to love God with all their hearts and love their neighbors as themselves. Jesus taught by example. By being loving and forgiving himself, Jesus taught others to be loving and forgiving - especially toward those who were considered outcasts in society. This is the central message and style of Jesus' teaching. During his adult ministry, Jesus built up a loyal following, led by his twelve disciples. But Jesus also made enemies among the religious and political leaders of his time. In the end, these powerful leaders were so threatened by Jesus' growing following that the Roman governor sentenced Jesus to death and had him crucified. The third day after Jesus' death, his followers found his tomb empty and discovered that he had been raised from the dead. Christians believe that the painful sacrifice of Jesus' life on the cross shows how much God loves God's people. Jesus paid with his life on Earth for the sins of the world. Christians believe that in raising Jesus' from the dead, God showed that Jesus' message of love and forgiveness was more powerful than death, and that believing in Jesus and following the example of his life and his teaching would lead to eternal life after death. The resurrection (rising from the dead) is the sign of God's salvation offered to all people.

After his resurrection, Jesus Christ's followers spread his message throughout the world, creating the Christian Church. Today there are about two billion Christians living all over the world.

What do Christians believe?

Christians believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God – fully human and fully divine – and that through believing in him and following his teachings they can inherit eternal life. Christians believe that Jesus died for humanity, that God raised him from the dead, and that Jesus will come again at the end of time. In addition, Christians believe in the Trinity, or the three parts of God: God the Father or Creator, God the Son (Jesus) or Redeemer, and God the Holy Spirit or Sanctifier. The Holy Spirit is God's presence in the world.

The essence of Jesus' teaching comes from his summary of the Jewish law he grew up with:

- Love God with all your heart, soul and mind.
- Love your neighbor as yourself.
- Christians also seek to follow the Ten Commandments God gave Moses to give the Israelites:
- Worship no other God but me.
- Do not make images to worship.
- Do not misuse the name of God.
- Observe the Sabbath Day (Sunday, for Christians). Keep it Holy.
- Honor and respect your father and mother.
- Do not murder.
- Do not commit adultery.
- Do not steal.
- Do not accuse anyone falsely. Do not tell lies about other people.

What are the sacred texts of Christianity?

The sacred text of Christianity is the Holy Bible. The Christian Bible has two parts: the Old Testament which is essentially the Hebrew scriptures of Jesus' time; and the New Testament which contains writings about Jesus Christ and about the early church. The four gospels (a word meaning 'good news') of the New Testament are accounts of Jesus' life and teaching, of his death and resurrection. The New Testament also contains the Acts of the Apostles, which describes the early growth of the Christian church; the letters of Paul and other important leaders in the early church; the Letter to the Hebrews; and the Book of Revelation. The New Testament teaches that salvation comes through believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in following his teachings. It teaches that salvation is a gift God extends freely through Jesus Christ to all people.

Why are there so many different kinds of Christians?

From its beginning with a tiny group of Jesus' followers, Christianity has spread all over the world. Today, it is practiced by two billion people. As with any large group, Christianity has experienced many different interpretations, disagreements and struggles for power over the centuries. These have led to the growth of many different branches of Christianity interpreting the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in different ways. There are three basic streams of Christianity: Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic

Source: http://www.uri.org/kids/world_chri_basi.htm

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Thread 8.2 - Research Sources

How did Confucianism begin?

A Chinese philosopher named K'ung Fu-tzu or Confucius, the Westernized version, believed that a society could become perfect, if the people who lived in it exhibited "beautiful conduct." Confucius was born in 551 B.C.E. He had a government job which he gave up to devote his life to teaching people how to behave. Today over five million people, mostly in China and the Far East, practice Confucianism.

What did Confucius teach people?

Confucius taught people five basic ideas about behavior:

- 1) Always be considerate to others.
- 2) Respect your ancestors.
- 3) Try for harmony and balance in all things.
- 4) Avoid extremes in behavior and emotion.
- 5) If you live in peace and harmony, then you will be in contact with the spiritual forces of the universe, including nature.

Confucius taught five basic virtues:

- 1) kindness
- 2) righteousness
- 3) sobriety
- 4) wisdom
- 5) trustworthiness

Confucius also taught that your well-being depends directly on the well-being of others. This principle is called Jen. Jen stresses the importance of showing courtesy and loyalty to other people.

Those who practice Confucianism also believe the family and family values are very important. Children are taught to be very respectful of their parents and are taught to obey their parents.

Where are Confucius' ideas written down?

There are five texts containing Confucian scriptures. These include poems, history, rituals, and sayings.

Where do Confucians worship?

Some say Confucianism is more a description of how to be a good person than a spiritual practice. However, after Confucius's death, people built temples in his honor. There are ceremonies that take place in these temples. Confucius believed that "heaven is the author of the virtue that is in me." He meant that he saw heaven itself as a kind of god, the god (or supreme being) who created virtue in us. This helps show how Confucianism is more than just a code of behavior. Also, over time aspects of Buddhism and Taoism have influenced Confucianism. Many people practice a combination of these religions.

Thread 8.2 - Research Sources

Hinduism

The word Hindu comes from the river Indus, and it just means the people who live near the Indus River (actually in modern Pakistan). The Harappa people who lived near that river about 2500 BC carved images of several different gods on their clay seals. We can't read Harappan writing, so we don't know what the Harappan people called their gods. But some of these gods look a lot like the later Hindu gods Shiva and Vishnu, so this may be the earliest part of Hinduism.

About 1500 BC, when the Indo-Europeans invaded India, they brought their Indo-European sky gods. As the two cultures mixed, and people in India began speaking Hindi, an Indo-European language, it seems that their gods mixed too. So Hinduism got some new gods, and also some new ideas.

The first written evidence of Hinduism that we can read is the Rig Veda, a long poem in Sanskrit probably composed about 1000 BC. People sang or recited the Rig Veda for hundreds of years before it was written down around 300 BC. The Rig Veda is a bunch of hymns (HIMS) (songs for the gods), magic spells, and instructions for what to say when you are sacrificing animals.

The Rig Veda mentions many different gods (polytheism). Most of the gods are male, and many of them are sky gods or weather gods like a god of rain, Indra, or like Varuna, the god of the sea. People sacrificed animals to their gods. The Rig Veda also tells that people sometimes got in touch with gods by talking to them.

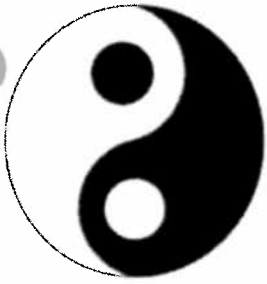
About 600 BC, the idea of reincarnation became more and more common among Hindus. Most people began to think that after you died you would be reborn into another body. If you had been good, and lived in accordance with dharma, you would get a good body, like a princess. If you had been bad, you would come back as an animal.

Gradually people began to have the idea that you had to be endlessly reborn in different forms. They wanted to get free of this cycle of rebirth, and just be left alone. People began to think that sacrificing animals was a way to get rid of karma, or fate, that prevented you from getting free of reincarnation. So animal sacrifice was a popular.

Around 500 BC, people began to worship new gods, who didn't need animal sacrifices. These new gods were Vishnu and Shiva. Generally people gave Vishnu and Shiva flowers, incense, prayers, fruit, or music, but they didn't kill animals for them. They began to worship Vishnu and Shiva more, and paid less attention to their old gods Indra and Varuna and the others. One example where they're sacrificing fruit is the story of how Ganesh cursed the moon.

Much later, between 400 and 650 AD, at the end of the Gupta period, another new god came into Hinduism. This new god was a Mother Goddess. Cows were sacred to this Mother Goddess, and so Hindus gradually stopped eating beef. Like Vishnu and Shiva, the Mother Goddess had many incarnations and many names. Parvati, Uma, and Annapurna were beautiful goddesses, who brought blessings to people. But other incarnations were called Kali, Chandi, Durga or Chamunda, and these goddesses were terrible giants with fierce tusks. These had many arms and each arm held a weapon.

Thread 8.2 - Research Sources



Taoism

Taoism is a philosophy or way of life that may have been started by a man named Lao Tsu (or Lao Tzu) who lived a little before Confucius, about 600 BC. Tao means the "way" or the "path". According to the traditional story, Lao Tsu worked as a librarian in the emperor's library (this was in the Eastern Chou dynasty).

Lao Tsu believed that the way to happiness was for people to learn to "go with the flow." Instead of trying to get things done the hard way, people should take the time to figure out the natural, or easy way to do things, and then everything would get done more simply. This idea is called "wu-wei", which means "doing by not doing".

Lao Tsu also thought that everything alive in the universe (plants, animals, people) shared in a universal life-force. There were two sides to the life-force, which are called the yin and the yang. This picture is often used to show how the yin and the yang are intertwined with each other.

The yin (the dark side) is the side of women, the moon, things that are still like ponds, and completion and death. The yang (the light side) is the side of men, the sun, things that move like rivers, dragons, and creation and birth. Everyone has some yin and some yang in them, and Taoism says that it is important to keep them balanced. Chinese doctors believed that a lot of illnesses were caused by too much yin or too much yang. Because everything has this life force in it, Lao Tsu thought it was wrong for people to fight each other in wars, killing the life force, and people should be sad when they had to fight, instead of celebrating their victories.

He also thought it was wrong for governments (or anybody else) to make a lot of rules and laws about how people should behave. This would only make people act the same way all the time, and sometimes they would go against the Tao, breaking the principle of wu wei. So Taoism was against anything with rules, like special food diets. He thought people should make their own decisions in each situation. Lao Tzu (or someone else pretending to be Lao Tzu) wrote down his ideas in a book called the Tao Te Ching, which has been copied over and over and which you can read online at this site.

Sources:

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