

# THE RELIGION AND THOUGHT

## A SHORT LOOK AT THE BEGINNING OF OUR ERA

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### China: A history brief

Chinese history show tides of fragmentation by feudal states and internal warfare and unification under a single emperor. The Zhou dynasty in the 8th century B.C.E. lost control in the countryside. Internal political disorder was increased by nomadic pressure outside the borders. A new political stabilization began in the 3rd century B.C. with the victories of the Qin Dynasty but continuing revolts ended the period of fragile unity until the emergence of the Han dynasty in 207 B.C.

The Han, ruling over 400 years, reestablished and expanded the extent of Chinese civilization and created a lasting sense of Chinese identity. They founded an enduring bureaucracy whose members were coming from a traditional ruling class called "shi". Political unity was also achieved through the creation of this strong, central civil bureaucracy.



Map showing the extent of China during the Han

The following sources are used for biographies and other information:

<http://www.answers.com/>

<http://www.britannica.com/>

<http://www.wikipedia.org/>

<http://www.bartleby.com/65/>

Han dynasty will strengthen its borders and extend Chinese rule to northern Korea and southward into Vietnam. The menace from the north, The *Hsiung-nu* (Hun) powers initially were defeated, but they later returned to raiding China when rulers were weak.

Central authority again weakened as court factions, the scholar-gentry, emperor's wives, eunuchs, and regional lords dueled for power. The Han Dynasty ended in 200 A.C.

### Chinese society and system of thought

Three main social classes existed in China: the *shi* (compare with the Ottoman "askeri"), ordinary free subjects (Ottoman equivalent of "tüccar, ayan, eşraf"?), and an underclass, the "mean people" ( the Ottoman "reaya"?). Each had many occupational and status divisions in itself. Local landlord families increasingly were linked to *shi* by marriage to create a new class, the scholar-gentry.

Scholar-gentry families lived in large, extended family compounds and the imperial family lived in a "forbidden city" separate from the rest of the inhabitants. The complex was surrounded by administrative buildings and residences of the scholar-gentry and aristocrats. China then probably had the world's most urbanized civilization. There were many towns with populations over 10,000. Most were walled, and many were administrative centers. Others were centers for mining, industry, or commerce.

Trade expanded under the Han by land and sea routes into central Asia, south China, Southeast Asia, and India. Large firms controlled and grew wealthy from the trade. They also profited from lending and investing in mining and other activities. Despite their wealth, merchants were barred, because of scholar-gentry influence, from gaining political power or social status.

During the Han period China become the most technologically innovative of all classical civilizations. Innovations included the introduction of paper, watermills, powdering mills and compasses. Improved techniques also appeared in

mining, silk making, and ceramics. The advances led to the growth of a mostly urban artisan and manufacturing class. Artisans, although relegated by the scholar-gentry to a social status inferior to peasants, surpassed them in living standards.

The political disorder of China gave rise to philosophical questions over the best means to restore order. Scholars and bureaucrats blended all the thoughts and experiences into a combined ideology that will later be central to Chinese culture. The history shows that the instability and internal conflicts needing remedy lead to the emergence of a more complex and more elaborated institutions in societies

By the 5th century B.C. thinkers sought ways to create a stable society and political structure. The most known and long-lasting figure is Confucius. His life and thoughts are recorded in the *Lunyu* (Analects)

He was a social philosopher concerned with the need to reestablish order and harmony in China; he thought that achieving order depended upon rulers accepting the advice of superior men - women were excluded - who were awarded power because of their moral excellence.

Confucius thought that superior men should rule to serve the interests and welfare of the entire society. In return the common people should respect and support their ruler's superior status. Social harmony depended upon everyone accepting their social place and performing its required tasks. Society was held together by personal ties of loyalty and obedience that made state intervention minimal.



Confucius (551-479 B.C.)

## Selections from the Analects of Confucius

### The Superior Man

**XX.3:** The Master said, "Without recognizing the ordinances of Heaven, it is impossible to be a superior man (*chün tzu*)."

**XV.17:** The Master said, "The superior man in everything considers righteousness to be essential. He performs it according to the rules of propriety (*li*). He brings it forth in humility. He completes it with sincerity. This is indeed a superior man."

**XV.31:** The Master said, "The object of the superior man is truth, not food. . . . The superior man is anxious lest he should not get truth; he is not anxious lest poverty should come upon him."

**IV.16:** The Master said, "The mind of the superior man is conversant with virtue; the mind of the base man is conversant with gain."

**IV.5:** The Master said, "Riches and honors are what men desire. If they cannot be obtained in the proper way, they should not be held. Poverty and baseness are what men dislike. If they cannot be avoided in the proper way, they should not be avoided. . . . The superior man does not, even for the space of a single meal, act contrary to virtue. In moments of haste, he cleaves to it. In seasons of danger, he cleaves to it."

**XV.20:** The Master said, "What the superior man seeks, is in himself. What the mean man seeks, is in others."

### Government

**II.7:** Tzu-kung asked about government. The Master said, "The requisites of government are that there be sufficiency of food, sufficiency of military equipment, and the confidence of the people in their ruler."

Tzu Kung said, "If it cannot be helped, and one of these must be dispensed with, which of the three should be foregone first?" "The military equipment," said the Master. Tzu Kung again asked, "If it cannot be helped and one of the remaining two must be dispensed with, which of them should be foregone?" The Master answered, "Part with the food. From of old, death has been the lot of humanity; but if the people have no faith in their rulers, there is no standing for the state."

**XII.14:** Tzu-chang asked about government. The Master said, "The art of governing is to keep its affairs before the mind without weariness, and to practice these affairs with undeviating consistency."

**XII.19:** Chi K'ang-tzu asked Confucius about government, saying, "What do you say to killing unprincipled people for the sake of principled people?" Confucius replied, "Sir, in carrying on your government, why should you use killing at all? Let your evinced desires be for what is good, and the people will be good. The relation between superiors (*chün-tzu*) and inferiors is like that between the wind and the grass. The grass must bend, when the wind blows across it."

**XIII.6:** The Master said, "When a prince's personal conduct is correct, his government is effective without the issuing of orders. If his personal conduct is not correct, he may issue orders, but they will not be followed."

The most important division among Confucius's followers was between Mencius and Sunzi. Mencius believed that humans were good by nature and that government should develop that goodness. He stressed the consent of the common people was the basis of political power, and that they had the right to overthrow oppressive rulers.

Sunzi, an advisor to a ruler produced a great classic of military theory, *The Art of War*. He argued that wars should be fought to increase the power of the state, and should be used with great efficiency.

Sunzi (5th century BC) Chinese military strategist. A general who served the state during the period (770–476 BC), he is traditionally regarded as the author of the earliest known treatise on war and military science, *The Art of War*. A systematic guide to strategy and tactics, it discusses various maneuvers and the effect of terrain, stresses the importance of accurate information about the enemy's forces, and emphasizes the unpredictability of battle and the need for flexible responses. Its insistence on the close relationship between political considerations and military policy influenced modern strategists, notably Mao Zedong.

Sunzi thought that humans by nature were lazy and evil, thus requiring a strong and authoritarian government. Education could improve people, he thought, but he rejected the idea that government was based on their consent.

The philosopher Laozi offered an alternative to Confucianism known as Daoism (or Taoism). He advised rulers to cultivate patience, selflessness, and concern for the welfare of all creatures.



A statue of Laozi

Laozi thought that strong state and absolute ethical prescriptions were not significant in solving human suffering. Laozi instead advocated a retreat from society into nature where individuals could attune with the Dao, or cosmic force.

### Laozi and Taoism

**Laozi** (also transliterated as Lao Tzu, Lao Tse, Lao tze, and in many other ways) is a major figure in Chinese philosophy whose existence is still debated. According to Chinese tradition, he lived in the 6th century BCE; however, many historians placed his life in the 4th century BCE, which was the period of Hundred Schools of Thought and Warring States Period. Laozi was credited with writing the seminal Taoist work, the *Tao Te Ching* (also known simply as the *Laozi*), and he was recognized as the founder of Daoism (or Taoism)

### Taoism

Laozi's work, the *Tao Te Ching*, is one of the most significant treatises in Chinese philosophy covering large areas of philosophy from individual spirituality and to political techniques.

The *Tao Te Ching* is said to contain 'hidden' instructions for Taoist adepts (often in the form of metaphors) relating to Taoist mediation and breathing. Laozi developed the concept of "Tao", often translated as "the Way", and widened its meaning to an inherent order or property of the universe: "The way Nature is".

Laozi believed that violence should be avoided as much as possible, and that military victory — which logically would be attained through use of force — should be an occasion for mourning rather than triumphant celebration.

As with most other ancient Chinese philosophers, Laozi often explains his ideas by way of paradox, analogy, appropriation of ancient sayings, repetition, symmetry, rhyme, and rhythm. The writings attributed to him are often very dense and poetic.

They serve as a starting point for cosmological or introspective meditations.

Many of the aesthetic theories of Chinese art are widely grounded in his ideas.



By the end of the 2nd century B.C. when the “shi” were the dominant ruling class, Confucianism also became the main thought system in Chinese civilization for the next 2000 years. Knowledge of Confucius's teachings was required for employment in government service. The candidates of government services were passed through a strict examination and education system.

Confucian classics were the focus of the educational system. An examination process was established for entering the bureaucracy.

### When we come to India

Around 500 B.C. large kingdoms arose along the Ganges River valley. Urbanization emerged in the capitals of the kingdoms and near major religious temples. The social hierarchy was occupied by priests, warriors, and merchants. The Vedic priests, or “Brahmans”, used a rigid caste structure to assure their social dominance and were the followers of Veda (Refer to the box).

**The Vedas** are among the most ancient books in the world, and they are the foundation texts of Hinduism. Hindu tradition regards the Vedas as uncreated, eternal and being revealed to sages. These verses were combined and written in the Vedas in poetic form. Veda means knowledge. Any form of Knowledge acquired is considered as a Veda whereby it has no beginning or end. While it might surprise people how a book can have no beginning or end, the ancients who wrote these accepted that the complete knowledge of the Universe could never fit in any book, so there would always be new things to discover. This philosophy makes Hinduism a tolerant religion, always ready to accept new ideas from within and without.

From the Vedas developed the following *Upavedas* or “secondary Vedas” which are still practiced today:

**Ayurveda-** Indian healing system, it lays more stress on living with nature instead of fighting it, hence preventive instead of corrective medicine.

**Dhanur Veda-** Martial arts.

Ayurveda and Dhanurveda have points in common. They both work with Marma, or natural Pran(Life Energy) that flows in the body. Ayurveda heals the body, while Dhanurveda is used for defending the body. This concept is also known to Chinese as Acupuncture and related Chinese Martial Arts.

**Stahapatya Veda-** Architecture, sculpture and geomancy. Used especially for Temple design.

**Gandharv Veda-** Music, poetry and dance.

By the sixth century B.C., religious thinkers were beginning to challenge the system. The most important of these thinkers, the Buddha, created a new religion that would have world-wide significance.



**Siddhartha** called **Buddha** meaning “the enlightened”, is the founder of Buddhism.

He is also called the Tathagata [he who has come thus], Bhagavat [the Lord], and Sugata [well-gone].

He probably lived from 563 to 483 B.C. The story of his life is overlaid with legend, the earliest written accounts dating 200 years after his death.

Siddhartha first studied yogic meditation and, decided that these did not lead to the highest realization. He seated himself under a tree and swore not to stir until he had attained the supreme enlightenment. On the night of the full moon, after overcoming the attacks and temptations of Mara, “the evil one,” he reached enlightenment, becoming a Buddha at the age of 35. For the remainder of his life he traveled and taught in the Gange plain, instructing disciples and giving his teaching to all who came to him, regardless of caste or religion.

The rivalry between Buddhism and Vedic religion known as Hinduism helped to reshape Indian culture.

Brahmans, as a literate group, were the natural candidates for royal administrative positions.

The position of the Brahmans was due to their attributed ability to mediate between deities and humans through offering proper sacrifices.

Towns developed around the capitals of the new monarchies, and commercial centers arose along the Ganges River. With urbanization, merchants and artisans were recognized as separate social groups. Merchants, because of their wealth, enjoyed a relatively high place in the social hierarchy. Farming villages, irrigation networks, and technological advance permitted the agricultural system to support a larger population.

The original “caste” that was based on the social hierarchy of warriors, priests, and commoners began to change as merchants and peasants were added to the system. However the “caste” as a system persisted. At the top of the hierarchy were the warriors, Brahmans, and merchants. Most belonged to the artisan and peasant castes. At the bottom of the social order were the “untouchables”, who performed socially shameful tasks such as “cleaning”! Individuals were born into castes and could not rise above their social status. It was believed that the caste system was divinely designed. The caste position and career of individuals was determined by that person's “dharma”. It was believed that each soul migrated from one being to another after death. Merit earned during the previous life determined one's karma, which in turn determined to which caste the soul was assigned at the time of rebirth.

### Some notes on Buddhism

Buddhism developed as a challenge to the traditional Brahman dominance. The founder of the religion Buddha lived from the middle of the sixth century B.C. to the second decade of the fifth century B.C. His teaching was based on the vainness of earthly desires.(Refer to the box)

As all earthly things are transitory, one can escape suffering by ceasing to desire material things of the world. The removal of desire allows one to attain “nirvana” an eternal state of tranquility and harmony. Buddha soon attracted disciples, who transformed his teachings into an organized religion. After Buddha's death, his followers dedicated their lives to teaching and contemplation. In order to make their religion more accessible to all men, they stressed popular tales of Buddha's life, transformed Buddha into a deity, and the concept of nirvana as a heaven attainable during life.

### Quotes from Buddha

“Everything changes, nothing remains without change”.

“Believe nothing merely because you have been told it. Do not believe what your teacher tells you merely out of respect for the teacher. But whatsoever, after due examination and analysis, you find to be kind, conducive to the good, the benefit, the welfare of all beings -- that doctrine believe and cling to, and take it as your guide. “

“Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one getting burned. “

“Anger will never disappear so long as thoughts of resentment are cherished in the mind. Anger will disappear just as soon as thoughts of resentment are forgotten. “

“You will not be punished for your anger, you will be punished by your anger.”



The front of a Buddhist temple. The symbol you see at the top is called “Swastika”

**Swastika** is used widely throughout the world as a symbol of prosperity and good fortune. In India, it continues to be the most common symbol of Hindus and Buddhists.

It symbolizes the Buddha's feet or footprints. In China and Japan, it has been used to denote plurality, prosperity, and long life.

It occurs as a motif in early Christian and Byzantine art, as well as in Maya and Navajo art. The swastika was also adopted as the symbol of the Nazi Party of Germany.

Alexander the Great's invasion of the region in 327 B.C. had impacts of Greek astronomical and mathematical ideas entering India. In return, Indian religious ideas began to be known in the Mediterranean.

Buddhism and Hinduism competed for religious dominance in India. As Buddhism became more dependent on isolation and monasticism, it lost some of its contacts with popular religion.

Although Indian civilization after 500 B.C. developed several empires, the system of social hierarchy and Hinduism remained the most apparent aspects of Indian culture. Hinduism and the caste system succeeded also absorbing and transforming later invaders of the India and continued until modern times.

### Roman culture and thought

The Mediterranean region more difficult to establish a single power had not the relative stability that characterized certain aspects of Chinese and Indian cultures.

The center of Mediterranean civilization shifted from Greece and its Hellenistic successor states to Rome. Rome developed during the fifth century B.C. After consolidating their hold on Italy, Rome expanded also into the areas of Hellenistic civilization.

This new phase lasted for four centuries before entering a prolonged period of decline. It demonstrated a greater degree of centralization and bureaucratic organization than Greek civilization but could not prevent a final collapse.

Although the Roman Empire was based on a concept of universal law enforced by the military, considerable autonomy was granted to local governments. Rome lacked the coordinated bureaucratic system of Chinese state. Roman law, based on a concept of universal natural law, provided the unity for the empire at the heart of which was the protection of private property.

Christianity emerged during the first years of the Roman Empire under Augustus. Originally an derivation of Judaism, early Christianity developed as a reaction and resistance to Roman culture and social inequalities.

Particularly after around 200 A.C. there were times of immense social crisis and fear. During this period, the Romans underwent deep religious and philosophical changes. The fear and panic evoked by the loss of territory and the

economic decimation of the country led people to adopt far more mystical religions and philosophies. Christianity, with its promise of rewards in an afterlife, its emphasis on the individual and on spirituality, and its explanation of suffering in this world, it was a powerful world view in a world that was unpredictable.

Other eastern religions, particularly Zoroastrianism and Mithraism also promised an afterlife and a meaning to suffering, were as popular as Christianity in the Roman world.

**Zoroastrianism** is the philosophy based on the teachings ascribed to the prophet Zoroaster (Zarathushtra, Zartosht or Zerdüşť in Turkish).

**Mazdaism** is the religion that acknowledges the divine authority of Ahura Mazda, proclaimed by Zoroaster to be the one uncreated Creator of all the God.

Founded in the 6th century BCE, it influenced the monotheistic religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

It rejects polytheism, accepting only one supreme God, Ahura Mazda. In early Zoroastrianism, the struggle between good and evil was seen as an eternal rivalry between Ahura Mazda's twin sons, Spenta Mainyu (good) and Angra Mainyu (evil). Later Zoroastrian cosmology made the rivalry between Ahura Mazda himself (by then called Ormizd) and Angra Mainyu (Ahriman).

The practice includes an initiation ceremony and various rituals of purification intended to ward off evil spirits. Fire worship, a carryover from an earlier religion, survives in the sacred fire that must be kept burning continually and be fed at least five times a day. The chief ceremony involves a sacrifice of haoma, a sacred liquor, accompanied by recitation of large parts of the Avesta, the primary scripture. Zoroastrianism enjoyed status as an official religion at various times before the advent of Islam.

From:

<http://www.britannica.com/ebc/article-9383384>



Mithraism is an ancient Iranian religion based on the worship of Mithras, the greatest of Iranian deities before the coming of Zoroaster in the 6th century BC.

It spread from India through Persia and the Hellenic world; in the 3rd–4th century AD, soldiers of the Roman empire carried it as far west as Spain, Britain, and Germany.

The most important Mithraic ceremony was the sacrifice of the bull, an event associated with the creation of the world.



Roman Mithraic sacrifice of bull

Mithraic ceremonies were held by torchlight in subterranean caverns. A form of Mithraism in which the old Persian ceremonies were given a Roman interpretation was popular in the 2nd–3rd century A.C. in the Roman empire, where Mithra was honored as the patron of loyalty to the emperor. After Constantine accepted Christianity in the early 4th century, Mithraism rapidly declined.

The interaction between these two religions affected mainstream Christianity itself.

For example the moving of the Sabbath day to Sunday and the celebration of the birth of Christ on December 25, both of which have no precedent in foundational Christianity and were taken wholly from Mithraism. Mithraism had its day of worship on Sunday as Mithras was the god of the sun so where comes our “Sunday”.

Meanwhile the practical philosophies of Rome, particularly Stoicism, were challenged by new eastern and Greek philosophies.

The most important and influential of these philosophies was **Neo-Platonism**.

Founded in the first century by Plotinus, Neo-Platonists were saying that they were reviving the original philosophy of Plato.

They believed that the multiplicity of all phenomena and existence derived from a single deity. Everything in existence “emanates” from the One. This thought is known as **Pantheism** (Refer to the box) and in Islamic philosophy it will be named “**Vahdet-i Vücut**”.

Remember the famous phrase “Enel-Hak”, uttered by the Sufi Hallac-ı Mansur, means “I am the God.” It can be said that Hallac summarized a pantheist idea in this phrase.

**pantheism** [Greek *pan*=all, *theos*=God], is used to denote any system of belief that includes the teaching “God is all, and all is God.” Pantheism identifies the universe with God or God with the universe.

Stoicism gave a more definite expression to pantheistic doctrine, emphasizing the identity of God and the world.

Some forms of pantheism have had their beginnings in religion; others have been based upon a philosophic, scientific, or poetic point of view.

Following the tradition this idea of the god and the universe will also find an important place in Islamic philosophy and belief.

The writings of Giordano Bruno of the 16th century carried such weight as to influence the development of modern thought, especially through Spinoza, in whose monistic system pantheism receives its most complete and precise expression.

The pantheistic thought may be expressed as below:

**“So the One has all existence, and since your soul is an emanation of God, it originally was a part of God and desires to be reunited with God. The material and physical world binds your soul to matter so that it can't escape and achieve its mystical reunion with God. Human life, then, should be spent in spiritual and intellectual contemplation in order to free the soul from matter. Everything that is associated with the body, such as pleasure, should be rejected since these pleasures further chain the soul to the material world.”**

While this philosophy was becoming the major philosophy in Rome during the third century, it corresponded to the phenomenal growth of Christianity within the Empire as well. Many of the Neo-Platonist ideas were incorporated into Christian theology.

### **Religion as survival and resistance: Christianity**

Jesus, son of Mary of Nazareth, who taught that he was the Son of God, began to preach a new religion and his message was widely received among the poor of Palestine.

Jewish leaders were suspicious of his motives and convinced the Roman governor to execute him around 30 A.C.

Disciples spread the news of this message throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. Christianity gained converts immediately among the lower strata of the population and slaves.

In the text box read from the New Testament how the new teaching of Jesus Christ approaches "the poor".

The promising of the paradise to the poor and believers and the atmosphere of group solidarity against the Roman administration caused Christianity to spread rapidly among the poor and disadvantaged classes of the empire.

The social structure of the Mediterranean, as a whole, did not last much beyond the classical period. Unlike India or China, the end of the classical period in the Mediterranean was final. There was no ultimate revival of western classical civilization. And this gap was filled by Christianity and the Christian Church as an institution.

There were strong similarities between Christianity and Buddhism, both stressing otherworldliness and produced an important monastic movement. Christianity differed from Buddhism by placing emphasis on the organization of the Church.

When the Roman Empire began to deteriorate, Christianity became even more widespread.

### **The End of the Classical Era**

From 200 to until around 400 A.C. we observe a decline of the classical civilizations of Asia and Europe. All of the core civilizations of the Old World suffer from external invasions.

The fall of the classical civilizations coincided with the rise of religions. As the great classical empires fell, the world's great religions spread and became new forces in civilization. Christianity became an important force in the region formerly dominated by the Roman Empire.

Buddhism's entry into East Asia was contemporary with the fall of the Han Empire. In India, Hinduism continued its evolution toward a popular religion.

The fall of the classical empires allowed Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam to spread beyond boundaries of a single region.

### **The Gospel According to Matthew, Ch XIX**

19:16 And one came to him and said, Master, what good thing have I to do, so that I may have eternal life?

19:17 And he said to him, Why are you questioning me about what is good? One there is who is good: but if you have a desire to go into life, keep the rules of the law.

19:18 He says to him, Which? And Jesus said, Do not put anyone to death, Do not be untrue in married life, Do not take what is not yours, Do not give false witness,

19:19 Give honour to your father and your mother: and, Have love for your neighbour as for yourself.

19:20 The young man says to him, All these things have I done: what more is there?

19:21 Jesus said to him, If you have a desire to be complete, go, get money for your property, and give it to the poor, and you will have wealth in heaven: and come after me.

19:22 But hearing these words the young man went away sorrowing: for he had much property.

19:23 And Jesus said to his disciples, Truly I say to you, It is hard for a man with much money to go into the kingdom of heaven.

19:24 And again I say to you, It is simpler for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a man with much money to go into the kingdom of God.

19:25 And the disciples, hearing this, were greatly surprised, saying, Who then may have salvation?

19:26 And Jesus, looking at them, said, With men this is not possible; but with God all things are possible.