

**04 Culture and Religion in Eurasia
and North Africa, 500 BCE – 500 CE**

Introduction

- In the period around 500 b.c.e., there was a great emergence of durable cultural traditions that have shaped the world ever since.
 - China: Kong Fuzi (Confucius) and Laozi
 - India: *Upanishads* defined Hinduism
 - Siddhartha Gautama founded Buddhism
 - Middle East: development of monotheism
 - Persia: Zoroastrianism (prophet Zarathustra)
 - Israel: Judaism (prophets such as Isaiah)
 - Greece: rational humanism (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, et al.)
 - all sought an alternative to polytheism, placating of gods through ritual and sacrifice
 - quest for source of order and meaning in the universe
 - guide humans to personal moral or spiritual transformation (especially development of compassion)
 - the questions they pose still trouble and inspire humankind
 - they defined their distinctive cultures

- Why did all these traditions emerge at about the same time?
 - some historians point to major social changes
 - iron-age technology led to higher productivity and deadlier war
 - growing cities, increasing commerce
 - emergence of new states and empires
 - new contacts between civilizations
 - it's a mystery why particular societies developed particular answers

Timeline

800-400 BCE	Upanishads composed
8 th century BCE	Hebrew prophets (Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah)
c. 7 th -6 th centuries BCE	Life of Zarathrustra
600-300 BCE	Emergence of Greek rationalism
6 th century BCE	Life of Buddha, Confucius, Laozi
586-539 BCE	Jewish exile in Babylon
558-330 BCE	Achaemenid dynasty in Persia; state support for Zoroastianism
469-399 BCE	Life of Socrates
403-221 BCE	Age of warring states in China
221-206 BCE	Qin dyansty in China
Early 1 st century CE	Life of Jesus
10-65 CE	Life of Paul
4 th century CE	Christianity becomes state religion of Roman Empire, Armenia, Axum

China and the Search for Order

- China had a state-building tradition that went back to around 2000 b.c.e.
 - idea of Mandate of Heaven was established by 1122 b.c.e.(foundation of the Zhou dynasty)
 - breakdown into the chaos of the “age of warring states” (403–221 b.c.e.)
 - chaos made the quest for order urgent



– The Legalist Answer

- Han Feizi was a leading Legalist philosopher
- principle: strict rules, clearly defined and strictly enforced, are the answer to disorder
- pessimistic view of human nature; only the state can act in people's long-term interest
- promotion of farmers and soldiers, who performed the only essential functions in society
- Legalism inspired the Qin dynasty reunification of China
 - the philosophy was discredited by Qin brutality

– The Confucian Answer

- Confucius (551–479 b.c.e.) was an educated, ambitious aristocrat
 - spent much of life looking for a political position to put his ideas into practice
 - Confucius’s ideas had enormous impact on China and the rest of East Asia
 - his teachings were collected by students as the *Analects*
 - elaboration and commentary on his ideas by later scholars, creating Confucianism as a body of thought
- principle: the moral example of superiors is the answer to disorder
 - society consists of unequal relationships
 - duty of the superior member to be sincere and benevolent
 - will inspire deference and obedience from the inferior member

- humans have capacity for improvement: education is the key
 - advocated a broad liberal arts education
 - application of liberal arts education to government problems
 - need for ritual and ceremonies
- after Legalism was discredited, Confucianism became the official ideology of the Chinese state
 - Confucianism became central part of education system in the Han dynasty
- the family as a model for political life, with focus on filial piety
 - defined role of women as being humble, serving husbands
 - woman writer Ban Zhao (45–116 c.e.): *Lessons for Women*

- emphasized the great importance of history
 - ideal good society was a past golden age
 - “superior men” had outstanding moral character and intellect; not just aristocrats
 - » added a “democratic” element: poor boys could rise through talent and education
 - » modest social mobility
 - created expectations for government: emperors to keep taxes low, give justice, and provide for material needs
- Confucianism was nonreligious in character
 - emphasis was practical, focused on this world
 - did not deny existence of gods and spirits, but the educated elite had little to do with them

– The Daoist Answer

- associated with the legendary Laozi (sixth century b.c.e.), author of the *Daodejing (The Way and Its Power)*
 - Daoist ideas later spelled out more clearly by Zhuangzi (369–286 b.c.e.)
- Daoism was in many ways the opposite of Confucianism
 - education and striving for improvement was artificial and useless
 - urged withdrawal into the world of nature
- central concept: *dao*: the way of nature, the underlying principle that governs all natural phenomena
 - encouraged simple living, disengagement from public life
- elite Chinese often regarded Daoism as a complement to Confucianism
 - helped by the concept of yin and yang (the unity of opposites)
- Daoism entered popular religion
 - sought to tap the power of the dao for practical purposes (magic, the quest for immortality)
 - provided the ideology for peasant rebellions (e.g., Yellow Turbans)

Cultural Traditions of Classical India



- Indian cultural development was different
 - elite culture was enthusiastic about the divine and about spiritual matters
 - Hinduism (the Indian religious tradition) had no historical founder
 - developed along with Indian civilization
 - spread into Southeast Asia, but remained associated with India and the Indians above all
 - was never a single tradition; “Hinduism” is a term invented by outsiders

– South Asian Religion: From Ritual Sacrifice to Philosophical Speculation

- widely recognized sacred texts provided some common ground within the diversity of Indian culture and religion
- the *Vedas* (poems, hymns, prayers, rituals)
 - compiled by *Brahmins* (priests), transmitted orally
 - were not written down (in Sanskrit) until around 600 b.c.e.
 - provide a glimpse of Indian civilization in 1500–600 b.c.e.
 - role of Brahmins in practicing elaborate ritual sacrifices gave them power and wealth
 - » Brahmin power generated growing criticism

- the *Upanishads* (mystical, philosophical works) developed in response to dissatisfaction with Brahmins
 - composed between 800 and 400 b.c.e.
 - probe inner meaning of Vedic sacrifices—introspection
 - central idea: *Brahman* (the World Soul) as ultimate reality
 - » individual human soul (*atman*) as part of Brahman
 - » final goal of humans is union with Brahman (*moksha* or “*liberation*”)
 - » achieving moksha takes many lifetimes
 - » centrality of rebirth (*samsara*) to Hindu thinking
 - » law of *karma*: reincarnation depends on one’s actions
 - » caste system as a register of spiritual progress
 - Brahmin priests and especially wandering ascetics spread ideas

Cultural Traditions of Classical India - continued

The Buddhist Challenge



– The Buddhist Challenge

- developed side by side with philosophical Hinduism
- Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 566–ca. 486 b.c.e.)
 - spiritual journey led to “enlightenment” (insight) at age 35
 - his followers saw him as the Buddha, the Enlightened One
- central Buddhist teaching: life is suffering
 - sorrow’s cause is craving for individual fulfillment, attachment to self
 - “cure” it with modest and moral life, meditation
 - goal is achievement of enlightenment or *nirvana* (extinguishing of individual identity)
 - » serenity
 - » immense compassion for all beings

The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism

1. **Suffering [Dukkha]**

Existence is a realm of suffering; from birth to growing old, becoming sick, and dying - all life is suffering.

2. **The Source of Suffering [Samudaya]**

Suffering arises from desire. Wanting selfish pleasure, continued life, power and/or material possessions can all lead to suffering.

3. **Stopping Suffering [Nirodha]**

You must completely stop wanting things in order to cease desire. Only when no desire remains is enlightenment possible.

4. **The Way to Stop Suffering [Maggo]**

The way to attain enlightenment and stop suffering is to follow the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path

1. right view

only when you understand the Four Noble Truths and follow the Eightfold Path can you find true happiness

2. right resolve or right aims

love and help others

don't cheat or want things that other people cannot have

3. right speech

always tell the truth

listen and communicate in order to understand others

4. right action

never kill, steal or be jealous

perform good acts for the sake of benefiting others, not for your own reward

The Eightfold Path

- 5. right livelihood/proper work**
do work that will not harm any living creature
- 6. right effort/right thinking**
focus your thoughts on the positive in order to overcome difficulties
- 7. right mindfulness/proper awareness**
never let your body control your mind
know when to say “no”
- 8. right concentration/meditation**
train your mind to concentrate and think deeply,
to be inwardly attentive, and to find peace within
so you will be able to learn and do many things

- large elements of Hinduism are present in Buddhist teaching
 - life as an illusion
 - karma and rebirth
 - overcoming demands of the ego
 - practice of meditation
 - hope for release from the cycle of rebirth
- much of Buddhism challenged Hinduism
 - rejection of Brahmins' religious authority
 - lack of interest in abstract speculation
 - need for individuals to take responsibility for their own spiritual development
 - strong influence of Indian patriarchy
 - » but thousands of women became Buddhist nuns
 - » position was inferior, but offered more independence than did Hindus

- appealed especially to lower castes and women in India
 - teaching was in local language, not classical Sanskrit
 - linked to local traditions with establishment of monasteries and *stupas* (shrines with relics of the Buddha)
 - state support from Ashoka (268–232 b.c.e.)
- the split within Buddhism
 - early Buddhism (*Theravada*, the Teaching of the Elders)
 - » the Buddha was a great teacher, but not divine
 - » set of practices rather than set of beliefs
 - » the gods are relatively unimportant
 - by early in the Common Era, development of *Mahayana* (Great Vehicle)
 - » *bodhisattvas* provide help on journey to enlightenment
 - » the Buddha developed divine qualities; earlier and future Buddhas could offer help in spiritual path
 - » Buddhism became a popular religion of salvation
 - » winning religious merit through acts of piety

– Hinduism as a Religion of Duty and Devotion

- Buddhism was gradually reincorporated into Hinduism in India
- Mahayana Buddhism in particular spread elsewhere in Asia
- first millennium c.e.: development of a more popular Hinduism
 - expressed in epic poems, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*
 - action in the world and performance of caste duties provide a path to liberation
 - *bhakti* (worship) movement began in south India

**Monoththeism
in the Middle East**



– The radical notion of a single supreme Deity developed in Zoroastrianism and Judaism and became the basis for both Christianity and Islam.

– Zoroastrianism

- Persian prophet Zarathustra traditionally dated to sixth or seventh century b.c.e.
- some state support during Achaemenid dynasty (558–330 b.c.e.)
- single god Ahura Mazda is source of truth, light, goodness
 - cosmic struggle with Angra Mainyu (force of evil)
 - Ahura Mazda will eventually win, aided by a final savior
 - judgment day: restoration of world to purity and peace
 - » followers of Ahura Mazda will have eternal life in Paradise
 - » followers of the “Lie” will have everlasting punishment
 - need for the individual to choose good or evil

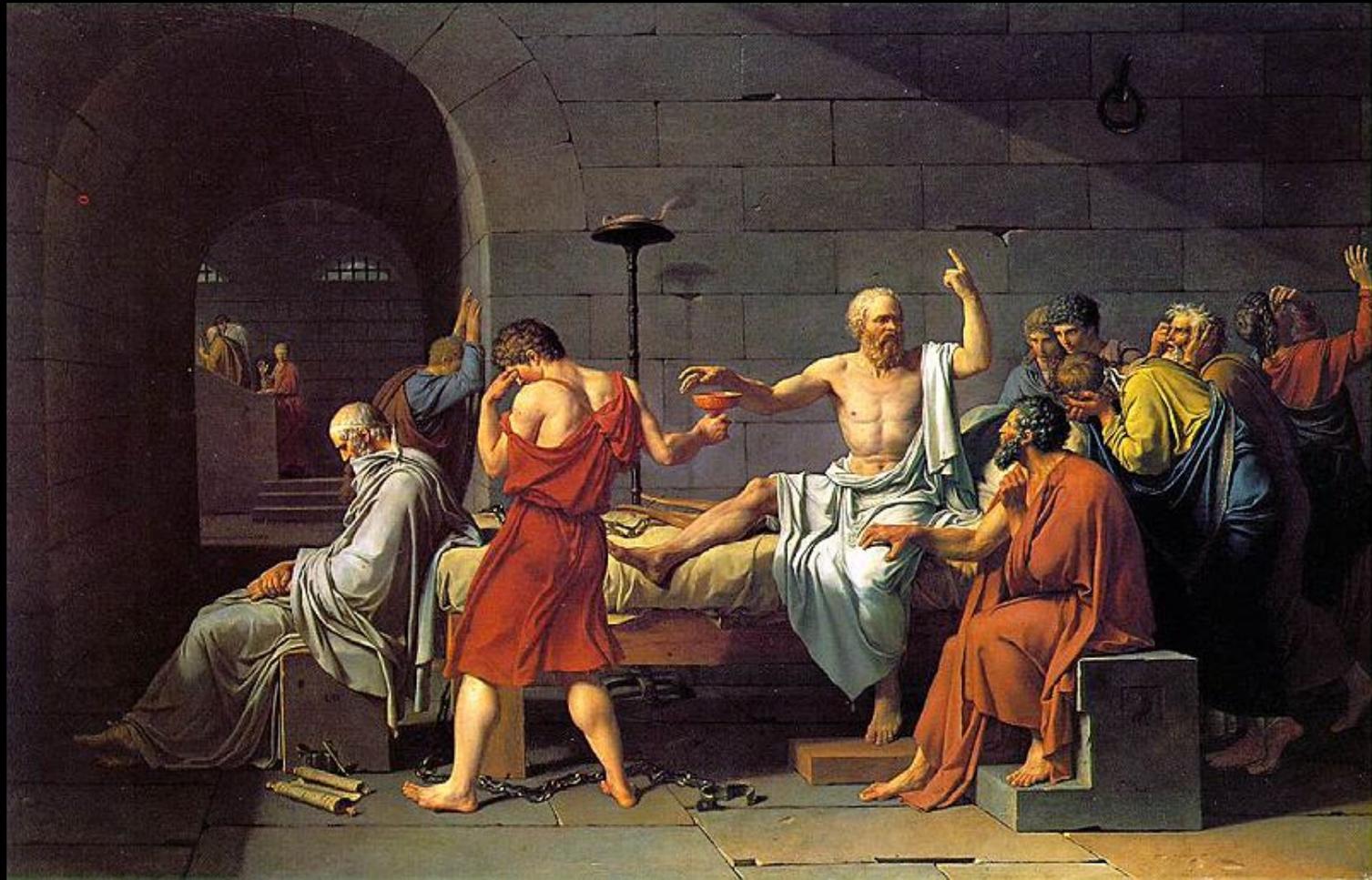
- Zoroastrianism did not spread widely beyond Persia
 - Alexander and the Seleucid dynasty were disastrous for it
 - flourished in Parthian (247 b.c.e.–224 c.e.) and Sassanid (224–651 c.e.) empires
 - final decline caused by arrival of Islam; some Zoroastrians fled to India, became known as Parsis (“Persians”)
- Jews in the Persian Empire were influenced by Zoroastrian ideas
 - idea of God vs. Satan
 - idea of a last judgment and bodily resurrection
 - belief in the final defeat of evil, with help of a savior (Messiah)
 - remaking of the world at the end of time

– Judaism

- developed among the Hebrews, recorded in the Old Testament
 - early tradition of migration to Palestine, led by Abraham
 - early tradition of enslavement in Egypt and escape
 - establishment of state of Israel ca. 1000 b.c.e.
 - » soon divided into Israel (north) and Judah (south)
 - » precarious existence thanks to great empires
 - » Assyrian conquest of Israel in 722 b.c.e.
 - » Babylonian conquest of Judah in 586 b.c.e.
- Judean exiles in Babylon retained their cultural identity, returned to homeland
 - centerpiece of their identity was their unique religious ideas

- distinctive conception of God
 - Yahweh demanded exclusive loyalty
 - relationship with Yahweh as a covenant (contract)
 - » role as chosen people in return for sole devotion
 - lofty, transcendent deity—but communication was possible
 - » divine action in the historical process
 - » transformed into a god of social justice and compassion
- foundation for both Christianity and Islam

The Cultural Tradition of Classical Greece: The Search for a Rational Order



- Classical Greece did not create an enduring religious tradition
 - system of polytheism, fertility cults, etc., remained
 - Greek intellectuals abandoned mythological framework
 - world is a physical reality governed by natural laws
 - humans can understand those laws
 - human reason can work out a system for ethical life
 - perhaps was caused by diversity and incoherence of mythology
 - intellectual stimulation of great civilizations
 - possible influence of growing role of law in Athenian political life

– The Greek Way of Knowing

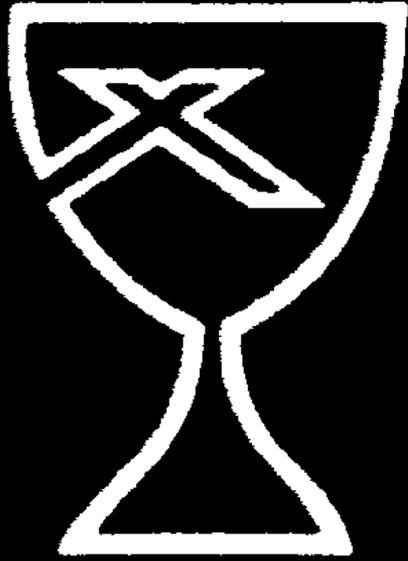
- flourished 600–300 b.c.e. (same time as city-states flourished)
- key element: the way questions were asked (argument, logic, questioning of received wisdom)
- best example: Socrates (469–399 b.c.e.) of Athens
 - constant questioning of assumptions
 - conflict with city authorities over Athenian democracy
 - accused of corrupting the youth, executed
- earliest classical Greek thinkers
 - applied rational questioning to nature
 - » Thales—water as basic stuff of universe
 - » Democritus—world made up of atoms
 - » Pythagoras—mathematical order beneath all
 - application to medicine
 - » Hippocrates—theory of “humors” that are balanced in a healthy body

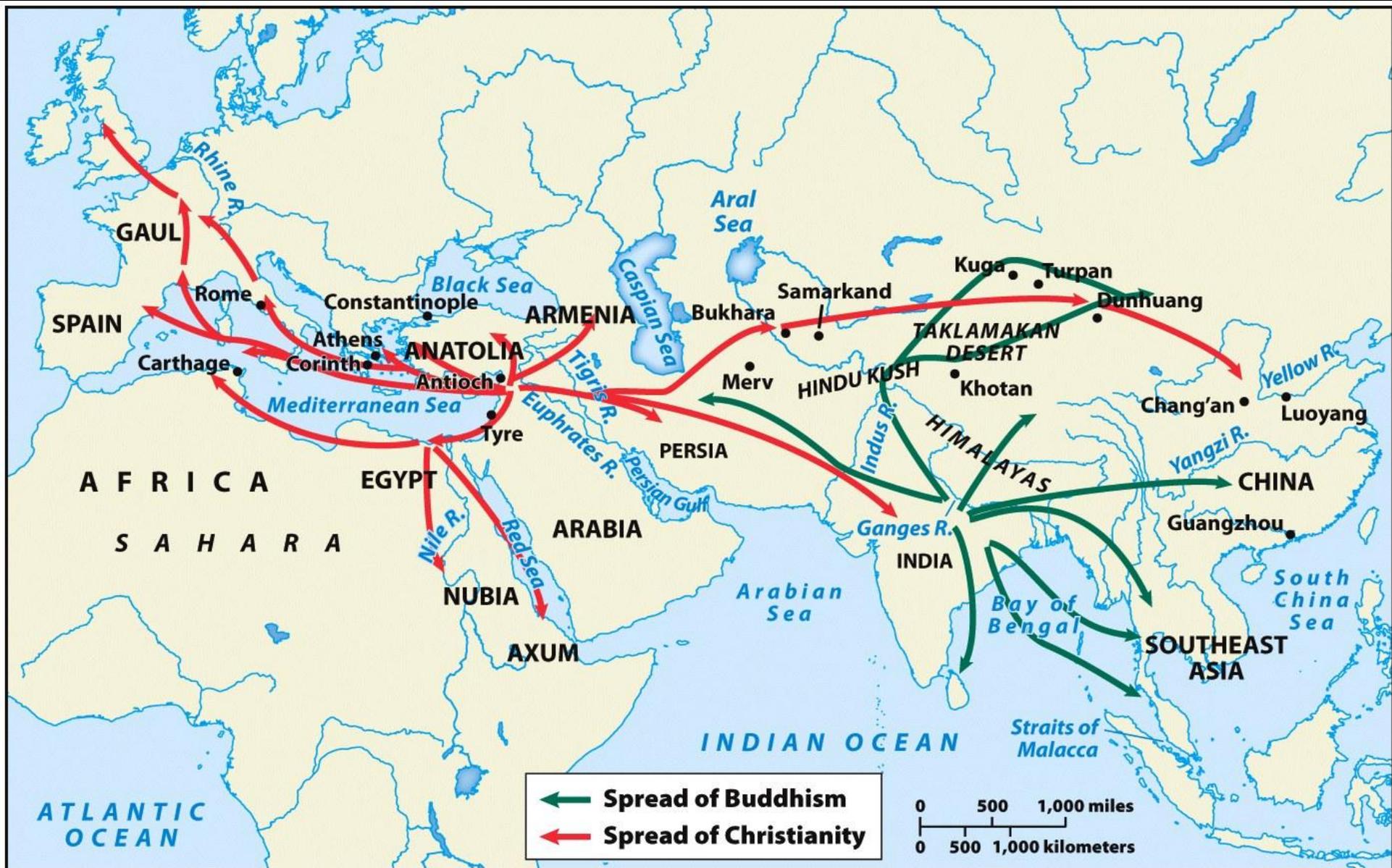
- application of Greek rationalism to understand human behavior
 - Herodotus: why did Greeks and Persians fight each other?
 - Plato (429–348 b.c.e.) outlined design for a good society (*Republic*) led by a “philosopher-king”
 - Aristotle (384–322 b.c.e.)
 - » student of Plato, teacher of Alexander the Great
 - » most complete expression of Greek way of knowing
 - » emphasis on empirical observation

– The Greek Legacy

- many people continued traditional religious beliefs and practices
- Greek rationalism spread widely
 - helped by Roman Empire
 - Christian theology was expressed in Greek philosophical terms
 - classical Greek texts preserved in Byzantine Empire
 - Western Europe: neglect of classical scholarship after fall of Roman Empire
 - » rediscovery beginning in twelfth century
 - » Greek legacy as central to “Western” civilization
 - part of Islamic culture
 - » rediscovery in West was largely through Arabic translations

BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY





← Spread of Buddhism
← Spread of Christianity

0 500 1,000 miles
 0 500 1,000 kilometers

– The Lives of the Founders

- Gautama was royal, Jesus was from a lower-class family
- both became spiritual seekers
 - both were mystics: claimed personal experience of another level of reality
 - based life's work on their religious experience
- both were “wisdom teachers”
 - challenged conventional values
 - urged renunciation of wealth
 - stressed love or compassion as the basis of morality
 - called for personal transformation of their followers
- important differences
 - Jesus had Jewish tradition of single personal deity
 - » Gautama largely ignored the supernatural
 - Jesus' teaching was more social and political than Gautama's
 - Jesus was active for about three years; Gautama for over forty
 - Jesus was executed as a criminal; Gautama died of old age

– Establishing New Religions

- probably neither intended to create a new religion, but both did
- followers transformed both into gods
- how Christianity became a world religion
 - process began with Paul (10–65 c.e.)
 - » missionary journeys
 - » inclusion of non-Jews
 - women had more opportunities (but early still reflected patriarchy of time)
 - early converts were typically urban lower class and women
 - attraction of miracle stories
 - attraction of Christian care for each other

- Roman persecution of Christians as “atheists” for their antagonism to all divine powers except their one god
 - ended with conversion of Emperor Constantine in early fourth century c.e.
 - later Roman emperors tried to use Christianity as social glue
 - Theodosius ordered closure of all polytheistic temples
 - spread of Christianity throughout Europe, parts of Africa, Middle East, Asia
- Buddhism: Ashoka’s support helped, but Buddhism was never promoted as India’s sole religion

– Creating Institutions

- Christianity developed a male hierarchical organization to replace early “house churches”
 - women were excluded from priesthood
 - concern for uniform doctrine and practice
 - emergence of bishop of Rome (pope) as dominant leader in Western Europe
 - » eventual split between Catholic and Orthodox branches of Christendom
 - doctrinal controversies
 - » nature of Jesus
 - » nature of the Trinity
 - » series of church councils to define correct views
- Buddhism clashed over interpretation of the Buddha’s teachings
 - series of councils did not prevent divisions
 - less sense of “right” and “wrong” than with Christian conflicts
- Buddhism did not develop an overall church hierarchy
 - did develop carefully regulated monastic communities

Reflections: Religion and Historians

- Religion is a sensitive subject for historians, too.
 - for believers, religion goes beyond earthly evidence
- There are important points of tension between believers and historians
 - change: religions present selves as timeless, but historians see development over time, as a human phenomenon
 - experience of a divine reality: historians have trouble dealing with believers' experiential claims
 - need for historians to take spiritual claims seriously
 - which group within a religion is “authentic”: historians usually refuse to take sides
- It can be difficult to reconcile personal religious belief with historical scholarship.
- Classical religious traditions are enormously important in world history.