Introduction to Unit

From earliest times, humans sought to understand their place in the cosmos and to explain the natural world around them. Why does the sun rise and set? Why does the moon wax and wane? What causes the floods, winds, and fires that threaten human life? What happens after death? The desire to answer these questions lay at the core of how religion and philosophy developed. A powerful need arose to define the relationship between the cosmos and the human community. Because sources are often fragmentary, historians use art, myth, archaeology, and ethnography along—with textual sources—to reconstruct early religious traditions. Historians are still seeking to understand the development and role of early religions in helping humans make sense of the world.

Learning Objectives

· Identify how people across the globe understood themselves in relation to the natural world and to the unseen realms beyond.

· Analyze the historical causes for the emergence of early philosophical and ethical traditions.

· Investigate how historians try to reconstruct the beginnings of religions through textual sources and religious art.

Preparing for This Session

Read Unit 5 in the Bridging World History online text. You may also want to refer to some of the Suggested Readings and Materials. If you feel you need more background knowledge, refer to a college-level world history textbook on this subject (look under the index for Shinto, Hinduism, Greece, Confucianism).
Unit Activities

Before You Begin—30 minutes

Reread the “Introduction to Unit” paragraph on the previous page. Discuss in small groups the courses you have taken in which religion was discussed. What is the difference between learning about religious beliefs and being taught to believe in a religion? To what extent do you agree with the historians who claim that the “desire to answer these questions [about humans’ relationship with the cosmos] lay at the core of how religion and philosophy developed?” Do you have to agree with this statement to understand why historians make this claim?

Watch the Video for “Unit 5: Early Belief Systems”—30 minutes

Activity 1: Supernatural Contact—60 minutes

Use the sources below for evidence to support your claims in the class discussion on how ancient peoples across the globe understood themselves in relation to the natural world and to the unseen realms beyond.

Early religious traditions were tied to community life and experience. Protection and benefits were solicited from gods and spirits. Religious beliefs offered individuals solace in the face of death and fear in a hostile world. The earliest attempts at contacting the supernatural may have been designed to ward off misfortune (such as poor harvests or disease), to seek benefits for the living, to mourn and care for the dead, to offer thanks, or simply to honor/venerate gods and ancestors. These activities were central to early social organization, as evidenced in the shamanism and animism of early Japan that came to be known as Shinto.

Eighteenth-century Japanese scholar Motoori Norinaga describes early Japanese perceptions of the supernatural thus,

Kami are, first, deities of heaven and earth and spirits venerated at shrines, as well as the humans, birds and beasts, plants and trees, oceans, and mountains that have exceptional powers and ought to be revered .... (Delmer M. Brown, The Cambridge History of Japan, ed. John Whitney Hall [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988] 1: 318.)

Historian Linda Walton says,

Shamans were extremely important figures in early Japan as they are in other societies that practice shamanism. In the case of early Japan, the role of shaman was really equated in very early times with the ruler with political authority. So the two roles, the political and religious authority, were really fused into one figure of the shaman—so it’s an extraordinarily important position. (Linda Walton, interview by Oregon Public Broadcasting, Bridging World History, Unit 5: Early Belief Systems [Oregon Public Broadcasting, October 2003].)

Look at the three photographs of shamans on the next page and discuss the following questions:

· In various societies around the world, shamans serve as a bridge between this world and the spirit world. From the photographs, what conclusions can you draw about the methods shamans use to contact the spirit world?
· When historians cannot see shamans conduct their rituals and ceremonies, how can they use photographic evidence or ethnographic data to investigate the methods shamans use to contact the spirit world?
· What do you think makes certain people or genders more important as shamans?
· How do historians explain the role of shamans and priests in other religions as bridges between humans and the cosmos?
Activity 2: Rituals of Invocation—20 minutes

Use the sources below for evidence to support your claims in the class discussion on the historical causes for the emergence of belief systems.

Religious traditions helped integrate people through common beliefs and practices. The desire to revere, please, or influence an unseen power was often expressed through rituals, which themselves promoted social cohesiveness and bound members of a community together. The power to invoke spirits and to mediate with them on behalf of a community supported the exercise of political authority in many early societies.

Use the following excerpts from the Confucian Analects and The Book of Rites to answer the questions that follow the excerpts.

*The Analects* by Confucius

A disciple of Confucius, Ji Lu, asked his master about serving the spirits of the dead. Confucius said, “While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve their spirits?” Ji Lu added, “I venture to ask about death.” He was answered, “While you do not know life, how can you know about death?”

Li Ji, a disciple of Confucius, recorded his master’s wisdom in *The Book of Rites*. In section 4.6, Confucius explains,

The son of Heaven sacrifices (or presents oblations) to Heaven and Earth; to the (spirits presiding over the) four quarters; to (the spirits of) the hills and rivers; and offers the five sacrifices of the house—all in the course of the year. The feudal princes present oblations, each to (the spirit presiding over) his own quarter; to (the spirits of) its hills and rivers; and offer the five sacrifices of the house—all in the course of the year. Great officers present the oblations of the five sacrifices of the house—all in the course of the year. (Other) officers present oblations to their ancestors. There should be no presuming to resume any sacrifice which has been abolished (by proper authority), nor to abolish any which has been so established. A sacrifice which it is not proper to offer, and which yet is offered, is called a licentious sacrifice. A licentious sacrifice brings no blessing. The son of Heaven uses an ox of one color, pure and unmixed; a feudal prince, a fattened ox; a Great officer, an ox selected for the occasion; an (ordinary) officer, a sheep or a pig.
Chinese sources show evidence of ancestor worship before the time of Confucius. The first step of ancestor worship involved checking that the ancestor was buried properly. The second important aspect of ancestor worship was for the living male descendants to leave offerings in ritual vessels at the tomb or in front of the spirit tablet in the home. The early Chinese believed that they could still be in contact with their ancestors, and that their ancestors needed help from their descendants. The spirit world where the ancestors existed was parallel to the world of the living. All of the items the living needed, the ancestors also needed—but in symbolic form; paper money is an example. Spirits of other people's ancestors could be bad ghosts who could haunt the living in retribution for wrongs done. Look again at the quote from Confucius and his student: Why would Confucius edit a whole book on how to give sacrifices in the proper way to one's ancestors? Do you think the quote from *The Analects* means that he urged his students not to dwell on what happens after death?

The Shang ritual items pictured below are similar to what was used during the period of the Warring States, when Confucius wrote and edited his books. The vessels were made of bronze and kept highly polished. These items likely were found in a tomb and are less brilliantly colored than when they were used. What kinds of offerings do you think the Chinese royal family put in these vessels for their ancestors?

If one only read the quote from Confucius to his student, it might be possible to misinterpret the Confucian view on the importance of ancestor worship. How do historians deal with limited access to sources? What do historians do when they recognize that a misinterpretation has happened?
Activity 3: Offerings to the Divine—20 minutes

In the following selections, identify when the desire to revere, please, or influence an unseen power is expressed through rituals. How can historians use these texts to investigate how the rituals promoted social cohesiveness and bound members of a community together? Why do historians look to connect the power to invoke spirits and to mediate with them on behalf of a community with the exercise of political authority in many early societies?

Early Judaism

It is written in Genesis 35 of the Torah, or Old Testament,

God said to Jacob, ‘Arise, go up to Bethel, and remain there; build an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau.’ So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, ‘Rid yourselves of the alien gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your clothes; 3Come, let us go up to Bethel, and I will build an altar there to the God who answered me when I was in distress, and who has been with me wherever I have gone.’ 4They gave to Jacob all the alien gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the terebinth that was near Shechem. 5As they set out, a terror from God fell upon the cities all around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. 6 Thus Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. 7There he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because it was there that God had revealed himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother. 8And Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died, and she was buried under the oak below Bethel. So it was called Allon-bacuth. 9God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him. 10God said to him, ‘You whose name is Jacob: You shall be called Jacob no more, but Israel shall be your name.’ Then He named him Israel. 11And God said to him, ‘I am El Shaddai. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation, an assembly of nations shall descend from you. Kings shall issue from your loins. 12The land that I assigned to Abraham and Isaac, I assign to you, and to your offspring to come will I assign the land.’ 13God parted from him at the spot where He had spoken to him, a pillar of stone, and he offered a libation on it and poured oil upon it. Jacob gave the site, where God had spoken to him, the name of Bethel.

The Ancient Greeks

Historians link Greek mythology, and even the names of some deities, to the Indo-European speaking peoples: These peoples include those who spoke Sanskrit (and its descendants in India), Greek, Latin, and German. When the Greeks ended their nomadic phase and settled in the Mediterranean, they kept their sky god, Zeus, and river gods; but they did not have gods of the sea. The Greeks—like the Hebrews and the Chinese—organized rituals to offer sacrifices to their gods. To the right is an image of Minoan Greeks offering plant and animal sacrifices in a temple.

Based on the excerpts above and the explanation of shamanism in Activity 1, what conclusions can you make about how people several millennia ago understood themselves in relation to the natural world and to the unseen realms beyond? How do historians deal with the uncertainty of not knowing the entire story of how humans understood their relationship with the cosmos?
Activity 4: Generation of Belief—20 minutes

Use the information below to investigate how historians try to reconstruct the beginnings of religions through textual sources and religious art.

In southern Asia, a number of religions developed to explain the cosmos. During the eighth and the seventh centuries BCE, Indo-European invasions of India resulted in tumultuous disruption and movements of people across the land. The Indo-Europeans brought with them new notions that melded with indigenous thought, leading to the creation of what we now call Hinduism. The dominant culture of the invaders was steeped in the tradition of the Vedas—a collection of ritual hymns that portrayed Indo-Europeans as heroes who triumphed over the inferior “alien” peoples they encountered. It also laid out the cosmological foundations of human society.

The sculpture of Shiva in the photograph to the right illustrates the deity whose dance creates and destroys the world. Shiva is accepted in the Vedic tradition as one part of the manifestation of the Hindu trinity, along with Brahman, the creator, and Vishnu, the preserver. Between 800 and 500 BCE in southern Asia, Vedic teachers developed a number of speculative treatises. Called the Upanishads, these texts postulate that the universe is comprised of only one reality, personified by an all-inclusive being called Brahman.

It is written in the second Khanda of The Upanishads,

1He (the knower of the Self) knows that highest home of Brahman, in which all is contained and shines brightly. The wise who, without desiring happiness, worship that Person, transcend this seed. (They are not born again.)

2He who forms desires in his mind, is born again through his desires here and there. But to him whose desires are fulfilled and who is conscious of the true Self (within himself) all desires vanish, even here on earth.

3That Self cannot be gained by the Veda, nor by understanding, nor by much learning. He whom the Self chooses, by him the Self can be gained. The Self chooses him (his body) as his own.

4Nor is that Self to be gained by one who is destitute of strength, or without earnestness, or without right meditation. But if a wise man strives after it by those means (by strength, earnestness, and right meditation), then his Self enters the home of Brahman.

Discussion Questions
- What does the sculpture tell you about Shiva as an important deity in Hinduism?
- What does the text tell you about the concept of Brahman?
- How would artifacts in archaeological sites and linguistic analysis help the historian go beyond the sculpture of Shiva and the text to reconstruct the beginnings of Hinduism?
- What other kinds of sources would help you understand better the beginnings of religions?
Abstract: This essay explores the relationship between changing forms of community and how people understood and interpreted their worlds. It seems clear that, from the earliest times, ideas have been used to explain and justify the unequal distribution of power among individuals and groups in society, or to sanction and legitimize the power of rulers and states. It also seems likely, despite incomplete evidence, that the rise of dynastic states resulted in a shift away from matristic (woman-centered) societies towards societies based on the veneration of warriors. Finally, this essay traces the association of political authority with religious beliefs and practices, from Shang China to Egypt, and from Sumer and Akkad to Teotihuacan.

Reading Questions

- How were ideas about gods and goddesses translated into power in the realm of human affairs? How were ideas about divinity and the cosmos themselves reflections of power relations, social hierarchies, and the experiences of daily life in the human world?
- How are the definitions of religion, cosmology, and ideology different from one another?
- Trace the changes in the beliefs about goddesses over time.
- How was the invention of writing important to political and religious leaders?
- Compare the way female deities were perceived in ancient Egypt and in Olmec society. Contrast how the Mayan kings saw their relationship to the gods with the divine views of Egyptian rulers.
- How did all of these societies use religious ideas to sanction the exercise of power by central rulers?

Optional: Visit the Web Site

Explore this topic further on the Bridging World History Web site. Browse the Archive, look up terms in the Audio Glossary, review related units, or use the World History Traveler to examine different thematic perspectives.