

# Origins of Religion

Robert Brow

What was the first religion of man? Answers to this question differ widely and depend very much on what view is taken of man's origin. Those who go to the early chapters of the Bible as their source point out that religion was not invented, evolved or discovered by man: from the day of his creation man knew the one Creator-God who had made him, and from the time of his fall man worshipped this God through sacrifice. Monotheism and the practice of animal sacrifice—these, they say, are clearly shown by the Bible to be the twin characteristics of original religion. God was God, and sinful man could not approach him in his own righteousness.

In support of this view it is often pointed out that the most ancient literature of the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Chinese, the Hindus, and the traditions of many races agree that the first men brought animals to represent and substitute for them in their worship of God. As we shall see, there came a time when Buddha in India, Confucius in China, and the Greek philosophers reacted against the animal sacrifices of a corrupt priesthood, and the main non-Christian world religions were built on other premisses. At this stage, however, we are not concerned with the merits or demerits of animal sacrifice. What we are discussing is basically a matter of history, and obviously the evidence provided by the ancient

documents of the Bible about man's original religion must be taken seriously.

## Evolution of religion

There is, however, another answer to the question which denies all this. It starts with the view that man evolved from a pre-simian ancestor. Since animals have no religion, there must have been, it is said, a long ascent through apish chatter and fear of the dark unknown to what Bouquet calls 'animatism', a 'belief in a vague, potent, terrifying inscrutable force'.

Animatism developed into 'animism', the spirit-fearing religion of most isolated tribal people. Then came the polytheism immortalized in the Greek mythologies. Israel's glory, so this summary of the development of religion suggests, was that she was able to narrow down the many gods of the surrounding nations to one tribal god. And eventually the one Creator-God of the Hebrew prophets, together with the philosophical monotheism of Plato, paved the way for higher religion.

This answer has held the field among many scholars since Darwin. Evolution was regarded as proved, and it was attractive to infer the evolution of religion from it. The only problem was how to fit the Bible into this scheme. This was neatly solved, however, by Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis which rearranged the Old Testament scrip-

tures in line with the evolution of religion theory.

Wellhausen's reconstruction has now, however, been discredited. And we also have examples of monotheism and elaborate priestly religion from long before the time of Abraham. The theory of the upward evolution of religion is therefore being restated to push the emergence of monotheism back into the shadows of prehistory. Led by Wilhelm Schmidt of Vienna, anthropologists have shown that the religion of the hundreds of isolated tribes in the world today is not primitive in the sense of being original. The tribes have a memory of a 'high god', a benign creator-father-god, who is no longer worshipped because he is not feared. Instead of offering sacrifice to him, they concern themselves with the pressing problems of how to appease the vicious spirits of the jungle. The threats of the medicine man are more strident than the still, small voice of the father-god.

We see, then, that the evolution of religion from animatism can no longer be assumed as axiomatic and that some anthropologists now suggest that monotheism may be more naturally primitive as a world-view than animism. Their research suggests that tribes are not animistic because they have continued unchanged since the dawn of history. Rather, the evidence indicates degeneration from a true knowledge of God. Isolation from prophets and religious books has ensnared them into sacrificial bribery to placate the spirits instead of joyous sacrificial meals in the presence of the Creator.

So the evidence of history brings us back to reconsider the biblical answer. This, as we have seen, states that the first man was created in the image of God; he was a monotheist; and he practised animal sacrifice. But how, you may ask, can this be squared with evolution, the apish chatter, the cave-men, and the images of hundreds of textbooks?

## Evidence

Let us first remove some misconceptions and clear the ground a little to enable us to look again at man's early

religious history. Even if it were conclusively proved that God created man by some process of mutations and selection, it would not follow that the process was a chance one. The Christian insists that, whatever methods were used—and the scientists should be encouraged to find out what they were—God planned the creation of man and he carried it out in accordance with his own purposes.

Science's function is to describe processes, but it cannot pronounce on the purpose of things. Physicists and biologists have a right to say that in looking at matter and life scientifically, no evident purpose is discovered. They overstep their limits if they go on to require faith in pure chance as opposed to faith in a creator. In any decision which may have to be made between faith in God or in 'blind chance', the science of evolution is strictly neutral, and cannot be anything else.

As scientists recognize their limitations, it is also important for Christians not to go beyond what is written in the first book of the Bible. Genesis man is not defined in terms of bone structure, or brain-size, tool-using, agriculture, social organization, or even artistic ability. Adam is the first creature who can talk back to his Creator, worship him, and choose among alternative ideologies. Any previous hominids, cave dwellers, Neanderthals, etc., who might have walked upright for thousands or millions of years, were by this definition animals who did not have what was required to make them in the image of God.

## Sacrifice

According to the Bible, the first true man is a monotheist, and when he falls into sin, he seeks restoration through animal sacrifice. The theory of the evolution of religion suggests that man is an animal taking a long time to become divine. The Bible describes a human couple made in the image of God, who degenerated into what we are now. The question at issue is the real nature of man, not the names of Adam and Eve.

There is one more piece of ground to clear before we begin our dig down

through the mound of religious history. Even though we may accept that early man was a monotheist and practised animal sacrifice, we should not expect prehistory to give us any proof of this type of religion. Whether animals were sacrificed to God or not cannot be known from their bones. God required altars to be of earth or uncut stones, whereas elaborate altars indicate a developed priestly system. Since earth crumbles and stones are used in building, most of the early altars will be unrecognizable even if they are found.

Nor does the true monotheist use idols or images. Idolatry always indicates that monotheism has degenerated into polytheistic confusion. The fact that the dead were buried in various ways does not affect the evidence either way. We should not therefore expect any evidence of religion till it is well past the original stage. By the time a professional priesthood develops, and temples, idols and elaborate altars leave their archaeological evidence, literature has begun and we are on surer ground.

### Ancient literature

As we consider some of the evidence which illustrates the biblical view of the origin of religion, it would be foolish to claim the case is proved. Since we have no way of examining the religion of the first true man, and actually true religion is never examinable, the matter is unlikely ever to be proved either way. All we can do is to show that an original monotheism gives an explanation of many historical facts which are very intractable on the evolution of religion hypothesis.

If we could look down on the ancient world in about 1500 BC, we would see ordinary men and women still offering animal sacrifice as their normal way of approaching God or the gods. The earliest literature of India, the Sanskrit *Vedas*, picture the nomadic Aryan tribes who fought their way eastwards across the Indus and Ganges plains. The head of the tribe offered animal sacrifice with the same simplicity as Abraham.

When they settled in India, the

Aryans developed a regular priesthood, and the *Vedas* are the hymns which the priests chanted as the sacrificial smoke ascended to God. The hymns address God under various names such as 'the sun', 'the heavenly one' and 'the storm', but the interesting thing is that, whatever name they gave to God, they worshipped him as the supreme ruler of the universe. This practice is called henotheism. God has several names, just as Christians today have several names for God, but the names do not indicate different gods. They are different facets of one God.

Henotheism changes into polytheism when the names of God are so personified that various gods are separated, and they begin to disagree and fight among themselves. The later Vedic literature has certainly become polytheistic by, say, 1000 BC, but the earliest Aryans must have been monotheists.

### Gods and myths

The original Creator-God of the Aryans was known among all the Indo-European nations. His first name was Dyaus Pitar ('divine father') which is the same as the Greek Zeus Pater, the Latin Jupiter or Deus, the early German Tiu or Ziu, and Norse Tyr. Another name was 'the heavenly one' (Sanskrit *varuna*, Greek *ouranos*), or 'the friend' (Sanskrit *mitra*, Persian *mithra*). By metaphor and simile other names were added. God is called 'the sun', 'the powerful one', 'the guardian of order'. The sacred fire (Sanskrit *agni*, Latin *ignis*, Greek *hagnos*), common to all early sacrificial worship, had a peculiar fascination and was soon endowed with divine qualities.

Gradually story-tellers embellished their tales with love and jealousy and war and drunkenness, and so the mythologies appeared. The earth became God's bride, attracted worship to herself as 'the queen of heaven', and added sex to worship in her fertility cults. Where there are no written scriptures, and no prophets to apply God's truth, degeneration into polytheism is the rule of religion. Even the great monotheistic relig-

ions, Judaism, Islam and the Christian church, all give evidence that a pure monotheism can quickly be corrupted. The emergence of mythological polytheism among the Greeks and Aryans is proof of the inventiveness of the bards, but no evidence against a primitive monotheism.

The early Semites of Babylonia, Assyria, Syria and Phoenicia also practised animal sacrifice in their approach to God. Instead of adding mythological families and friends and enemies to the Creator, the Semites tended to nationalize him into a tribal deity. He was the one who helped the nation in war. The Babylonian Bel vied with the Syrian Rimmon, while the prophets of Israel had to keep pointing out that there could be only one Creator-God, not Ammon's Molech, and Moab's Chemosh, and Israel's Yahweh as one among many.

Israel was always monotheistic, though she was often tempted to think of the Lord as a lord among many local lords (Canaanite Baal meant 'lord' or 'husband'). Much has been written about the names of God, but whether he was called Elohim ('the mighty one') or Yahweh ('he was, he is, he will be') or Adhonay ('the Lord'), he was One. A thousand years later Muhammad proclaimed the same truth about Allah, though in Islam also 'the One' has many names. It is interesting that Islam, true to its Semitic origin, considered Allah as the conquering Arab tribal god.

### Cities and science

The Semites were not the first rulers of the Middle East. An interesting people called the Sumerians had a city-state civilization which flourished before 2500 BC. They were related to the Indus Valley people of north India, whose great cities flourished till they were ousted by the invading Aryans about 1500 BC. Little is known about the religion of the Indus Valley people as their script has not yet been deciphered but, like the Sumerians, they were already polytheists. Sumerian gods lied and fought and lusted against each other resulting in a gradual decadence and collapse of their civili-

zation. They were an easy prey to Semites in the west, and invading Aryans in India, just as a later Hindu polytheism was conquered by Islam in the eleventh century AD.

We cannot prove the Sumerians were originally monotheists before their decadence into crude polytheism, but it could be argued that their science and civilization was the product of a time when they knew An, the one Creator-God of heaven. It is a fact of history that polytheism has always weakened a nation, whereas monotheism invigorates and unifies.

### Case-histories

If this interpretation of history is

*The sacrifice of animals to the gods still plays an important part in Hinduism.*



correct, then it is obvious that some of the Semites and Indo-Europeans must have retained a monotheistic faith when other nations had already long degenerated into polytheism. The Egyptian priesthood, for example, continued the practice of animal sacrifice, but polytheism predominated until Akhenaten reinstated a kind of monotheism for a few years. The Minoan civilization of Crete also had animal sacrifice at the centre of its religion, but a degenerate view of the gods is evident before its overthrow.

The earliest religious history of China is very hard to study. The Chinese script, not being phonetic, gives us no linguistic clues to the names of God. In the sixth century BC the joint attack of Taoism and Confucianism virtually obliterated the ancient Chinese priestly and sacrificial worship. We can dimly trace, however, the supreme sky-god who was worshipped as Shang-ti or Hao-Tien. He was approached through the Kiao, Hsian and Hsien sacrifices. These were offered in the open air and, like the biblical sacrifices, included killing an animal, sprinkling its blood, and burning the carcass on an altar. In spite of successive waves of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and early Christianity, Chinese sacrificial worship continued in temples here and there until the communists took over.

So the case for an original monotheism and worship through animal sacrifice, with subsequent degeneration into polytheism, is by no means proved. But it is certainly much easier to fit it into the recurring cycles of history than a gradual upward evolution of religion. Where documented case-histories are available, as among the early Aryans and Hebrews, the evidence for degeneration is strong.

The whole of biblical history, and the subsequent history of the Christian church, illustrates that God reveals himself as Creator, provides a way of forgiveness and fellowship through sacrifice, and all sacrifices have their meaning and fulfilment in the death of Jesus Christ. The Bible and church history also furnish many

tragic illustrations of man's inveterate desire to add deities which are less demanding, and turn sacrifice or the communion service into a bribe to force God's hand.

## Priests and priestcraft

Why was the emergence of priestcraft as an institution common to ancient India, China, Egypt, classical Greece and Rome, many other civilizations, and even the medieval Christian church?

First we must try to picture worship based on animal sacrifice in its simplest form. To modern man the very idea of animal sacrifice conjures up revolting images of dark, superstitious rites and gory victims. It is important to realize that before the rise of Jainism and Buddhism in the sixth century BC men were meat-eaters, as they still are in most parts of the world. If animals are to be eaten, they have to be killed, and most races have agreed that the blood should be drained out from the carcass. This happens in our Western civilization in thousands of slaughterhouses. We turn away our eyes, but for early man each 'sacrifice' had a spiritual significance. When we read of thousands of animals being sacrificed by Solomon, we could simply paraphrase 'he gave a big feast for all the people'. In both Greek and Hebrew the same word is used for sacrifice and killing animals.

The important thing about animal sacrifice in the Bible is that God used the joyous occasions of eating meat as visual aids to teach spiritual truths. There is nothing more primitive or obnoxious about attaching spiritual truths to animal sacrifice than to bread and wine. The animal sacrifices looked forward to Christ's death and resurrection just as the Christian communion services look back. That a wide variety of spiritual meanings was attached to animal sacrifice is evident from the Old Testament books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. These various rites can be seen as different facets of the death of Christ and the same facets of his death are now expressed in the communion service or eucharist.

## Myths and Symbols

Douglas Davies

If we had just heard a moving piece of music, we would find it strange if someone asked us whether the music were true or false. Music, we might reply, is neither true nor false. To ask such a question is inappropriate. Most people know that music can, as it were, speak to them even though no words are used. In fact, some of the great symphonies can affect us almost more deeply than any number of words, while choral works such as Handel's *Messiah* can produce an effect greater than the text alone could ever do.

As with music so with people. The question of what someone 'means' to you cannot fully be answered by saying that he is your husband or she is your wife, because there are always unspoken levels of intuition, feeling and emotion built into relationships. The question of 'meaning' must always be seen to concern these dimensions as well as the more obviously factual ones.

### Myths

Myths take many forms depending on the culture in which they are found. But their function is always that of pinpointing vital issues and values in the life of the society concerned. They often dramatize those profound issues of life and death, of how man came into being and of what his life is really about, of how he should conduct himself as a citizen or husband,

as a creature of God or as a farmer, and so on.

Myths are not scientific or sociological theories about these issues. They are the outcome of the way a nation or group has pondered the great questions. Their function is not merely to provide a theory of life which can be taken or left at will; they serve to compel a response from man. We might speak of myths as bridges between the intellect and emotion, between the mind and heart—and in this, myths are like music. They both express an idea and trigger off our response to it.

Sometimes myths can form an extensive series, interlinking with each other and encompassing many aspects of life, as has been shown for the Dogon people of the River Niger in West Africa. On the other hand, they may serve merely as partial accounts of problems such as the hatred between men and snakes, or the reason for the particular shape of a mountain.

One problem in our understanding of myths lies in the fact that Western religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—are very concerned with history. They have founders and see their history as God's own doing. This strong emphasis upon actual events differs from the Eastern approach to religion, which emphasizes the consciousness of the individual. Hinduism and Buddhism possess a different approach to

history, and hence also to science.

In the West, the search for facts in science is like the search for facts in history, but both these endeavours differ from the search for religious experience in the present. In the West, history and science have come to function as a framework within which religious experiences are found and interpreted, and one consequence of this is that myths have been stripped of their power to evoke human responses to religious ideas.

The eminent historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, has sought to restore this missing sense of the sacred to Western man by helping him to understand the true nature of myths. The secularized Westerner has lost the sense of the sacred, and is trying to compensate, as Eliade sees it, by means of science fiction, supernatural literature and films. One may, of course, keep a firm sense of history and science without seeking to destroy the mythical appreciation of ideas and beliefs.

### Symbols

Religious symbols help believers to understand their faith in quite profound ways. Like myths, they serve to unite the intellect and the emotions for the task of discipleship. Symbols also integrate the social and personal dimensions of religion, enabling an individual to share certain commonly-held beliefs expressed by symbols, while also giving him freedom to read his own private meaning into them.

We live the whole of our life in a world of symbols. The daily smiles and grimaces,

handshakes and greetings, as well as the more readily acknowledged status symbols of large cars or houses—all these communicate messages about ourselves to others.

To clarify the meaning of symbols, it will help if we distinguish between the terms 'symbol' and 'sign'. There is a certain arbitrariness about signs, so that the word 'table', which signifies an object of furniture with a flat top supported on legs, could be swapped for another sound without any difficulty. So the Germans call it *Tisch* and the Welsh *bwrdd*.

A symbol, by contrast, is more intimately involved in that to which it refers. It participates in what it symbolizes, and cannot easily be swapped for another symbol. Nor can it be explained in words and still carry the same power. For example, a kiss is a symbol of affection and love; it not only signifies these feelings in some abstract way; it actually demonstrates them. In this sense a symbol can be a thought in action.

Religious symbols share these general characteristics, but are often even more intensely powerful, because they enshrine and express the highest values and relationships of life. The cross of Christ, the sacred books of Muslim and Sikh, the sacred cow of Hindus, or the silent, seated Buddha—all these command the allegiance of millions of religious men and women. If such symbols are attacked or desecrated, an intense reaction is felt by the faithful, which shows us how deeply symbols are embedded in the emotional life of believers.



The power of symbols lies in this ability to unite fellow-believers into a community. It provides a focal point of faith and action, while also making possible a degree of personal understanding which those outside may not share.

In many primitive societies the shared aspect of symbols is important as a unifying principle of life. Blood, for example, may be symbolic of life, strength, fatherhood, or of the family and kinship group itself. In Christianity it expresses life poured out

in death, the self-sacrificial love of Christ who died for human sin. It may even be true that the colour red can so easily serve as a symbol of danger because of its deeper biological association with life and death.

Symbols serve as triggers of commitment in religions. They enshrine the teachings and express them in a tangible way. So the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper in Christianity bring the believer into a practical relationship with the

otherwise abstract ideas of repentance and forgiveness. Man can hardly live without symbols because he always needs something to motivate his life; it is as though abstract ideas need to be set within a symbol before men can be impelled to act upon them. When any attempt is made to turn symbols into bare statements of truth, this vital trigger of the emotions can easily be lost.

*In Bali the myths and legends of Hinduism are re-enacted each year in dramatic dances. Here Hanuman the monkey-god had come to help the prince Rama rescue his wife from the demon-king Ravana. Behind is the Barong, a friendly dragon.*

Even before Moses we find four aspects of sacrifice which were common knowledge to the Hebrew patriarchs, the Aryans of India, the ancient Greeks, and probably many other races.

- The most common was the sacrificial *fellowship meal*, whenever men sat down to eat joyfully before God.

- An extension of this was the idea of a *covenant*, based on eating together, witnessed by the blood of the animal. The covenant might be between two men or tribes, or between men and God.

- Then there were occasional whole burnt offerings, usually presented by a king or patriarch to indicate *worship, consecration, or thanksgiving to God*.

- And when there was known sin, or a flagrant breaking of the moral order, a *sin offering* or expiatory sacrifice was required.

The earliest sacrificial worship was conducted by the head of the family or tribe. In settled conditions the development of a regular priesthood was inevitable, especially with the growth of cities and the increasing pomp of a royal court. There were dangers, but nothing inherently wrong, in having a full-time or even a hereditary priesthood. Moses appointed his own brother Aaron as the head of a hereditary, exclusive line of priests. His own tribe, the Levites, became full-time attendants on the service of God, and were supported by the tithes of the other tribes.

Similarly in the settled conditions of city life, the building of permanent facilities for sacrificial worship was acceptable to God. A temple with altars for large numbers of people, together with the attendant buildings, was required in the reign of Solomon. It is interesting, however, that the argument of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews goes back to the mobile tabernacle rather than the elaborate temple. There were certainly great dangers in the use of temple and elaborate altars, as there were in the development of a full-time priesthood, and the prophets constantly had to fight priestly rapacity and the misconceptions of the people. Where there were no

prophets, priesthood and temple worship always degenerated into the ugliness of priestcraft.

### Ritual

The clearest documented account of this degeneration appears in the history of the Brahmin priesthood of India. The earliest group of Vedic hymns called the *Rig Veda* were first collected in an oral form, say about 1500 BC, as the Aryan tribes were invading north-western India. The collection may have been the work of the first regular priests. At this time sacrifice could still be offered by any Aryan, and priesthood was by inclination, probably on a part-time basis. Under settled conditions the power of the priests tended to increase. They suggested that unless the right sacrifices were offered the gods would be displeased, and therefore only highly trained priests could learn the prayers and rituals which were necessary.

Some specialization began, and a school of singing priests (Udgatri) arose who chanted the special hymns for each sacrificial occasion. Their collection of 1,225 hymns (the *Sama Veda*) were all from the *Rig Veda*, except for seventy-five new ones. Then a third book called the *Yajur Veda* was produced by a class of priests who did the actual offering of sacrifice. Their collection was mainly the ritual formulae muttered in a low voice during the various stages of the sacrifice.

Thus by about 900 BC there were at least three groups of priests with their own special duties and training schools. The priests had leisure to study and teach, and knowledge brought power. It was only natural that the priestly schools should produce notes and commentaries on their books (the same kind of thing happens today). The material is called *Brahmanas*, which includes explanation of the hymns, the rituals of sacrifice and the duties of the priests. The study of this material produced an elaborate scholasticism.

By the time of the *Brahmanas* (about 800-700 BC), the Brahmins had become a hereditary priesthood in charge of all sacrificial duties, for

which they were paid fees by the people. The Brahmins were now suggesting that by the right sacrifices, which they alone could offer, they could procure the favours of the gods, various temporal blessings, and a good place in heaven. Gods, men, governments, all were under priestly control.

### Priestcraft and magic

About the same time as the *Brahmanas*, a fourth *Veda* was compiled called the *Atharva Veda*. Because of its lateness and the low ethical quality of its contents, this *Veda* is still not recognized in some parts of south India. The *Atharva Veda* has 6,000 stanzas, of which 1,200 are taken from the *Rig Veda*. Most of the remaining stanzas consist of charms and incantations for magical purposes. This shows how easily priestcraft degenerates into magic. Once sacrifice becomes a meritorious act which forces God to give blessings, it can be used to obtain benefits for oneself and harm for one's enemies. Obviously we are now only one stage removed from the medicine man. He still uses sacrifice, but it is directed to spirits instead of to God, and all ethical or worship content has disappeared.

The progress of modern cultural anthropology indicates that virtually all primal tribes still use animal sacrifice, and there is growing evidence to show that their sacrificial practices are a degeneration from one of the ancient priesthoods, just as those are a degeneration from the original religion of man.

As we shall see, there were great movements of revolt against priestcraft in the sixth and fifth centuries BC. The resulting great world religions and the rise of Christianity largely obliterated animal sacrifice as a significant stream in the history of religion. Before leaving the subject, however, we must note how prevalent priestcraft was in all civilizations, and how it even threatened to throttle the Christian church.

The essence of priestcraft is the rise of a group of people who claim to control access to God, and who suggest that the offering of sacrifice is a

meritorious act which forces God to grant favours. Priestcraft always takes away the joy of worship. It stifles individual piety, truth and justice, and divorces morality from religion. Its tragedy is that it forces honest and true men to fight against God, since God appears to be the ally of the priests. This explains the strange alliance of poets, philosophers, Marxists, continental freemasons, humanists, pietists, university students, and the middle-class conscience against that 'opium'.

### Government and religion

Many learned treatises have described early religion before 3000 BC, but without written records such dogmatism is guesswork based on less than one per cent of the evidence. If all our modern books were destroyed, what would an archaeologist be able to make of our religion from our ruins and graves? A creator-god worshipped through animal sacrifice leaves no archaeological evidence. We must therefore confine ourselves to civilizations which have left written documents.

The most ancient religion accessible in a deciphered script is that of Sumer. Hundreds of documents list sacrifices to the gods at the temples of Ur, Nippur and other cities. By about 2500 BC we know that the city temples had acquired vast lands, and there was a fierce rivalry between the priests and the government. Already Enlil, the god of creation, had been joined by numerous other gods who lied, lusted and fought against each other. A corrupt priestcraft serving degenerate gods heralded the overthrow of this city-state civilization by Semites from Babylonia.

The Babylonians also had an elaborate priesthood with vast temples and hordes of temple servants. The main difference was that the priests were mostly of the royal family, and the supreme head was a priest-king. This may reflect the original nomadic practice of having the head of the tribe act as priest. For the Babylonians the supreme god was An (who corresponded to the Semitic El, Hebrew Elohim and Arabic Allah), but many extra divinities were

absorbed from the conquered Sumerians.

Where the priesthood is a department of state and the high priest is also king, the running battle between government and religion is avoided. It is also possible that the vicious effects of priestcraft are tempered by the need to maintain an ordered government. On the other hand, when religion has become a department of government, a seeker after the city of God, like Abraham, has no alternative but to leave. The Bible pictures Abraham as a man who abandoned the city-state religion of Ur to follow and serve God. Wherever he stopped, he built an altar of uncut stones and worshipped with the primitive simplicity of animal sacrifice.

### Priesthood

In Egypt we find the priesthood of the sun-god Re overshadowing the king from about 2400 BC. This was followed by a revolt of the barons who divided Egypt into a collection of warring states, and brought the priests under control. After the expulsion of the Hyksos in about 1570 BC, Egypt attained her greatest political power. The secret was that, instead of one powerful priesthood, there were several (the priesthoods of Amun, Ptah, and Re) which the pharaohs played off against each other. That the priesthood had degenerated to magic not far removed from the medicine man is evidenced both from Egyptian records and from the account of the Exodus in the Bible.

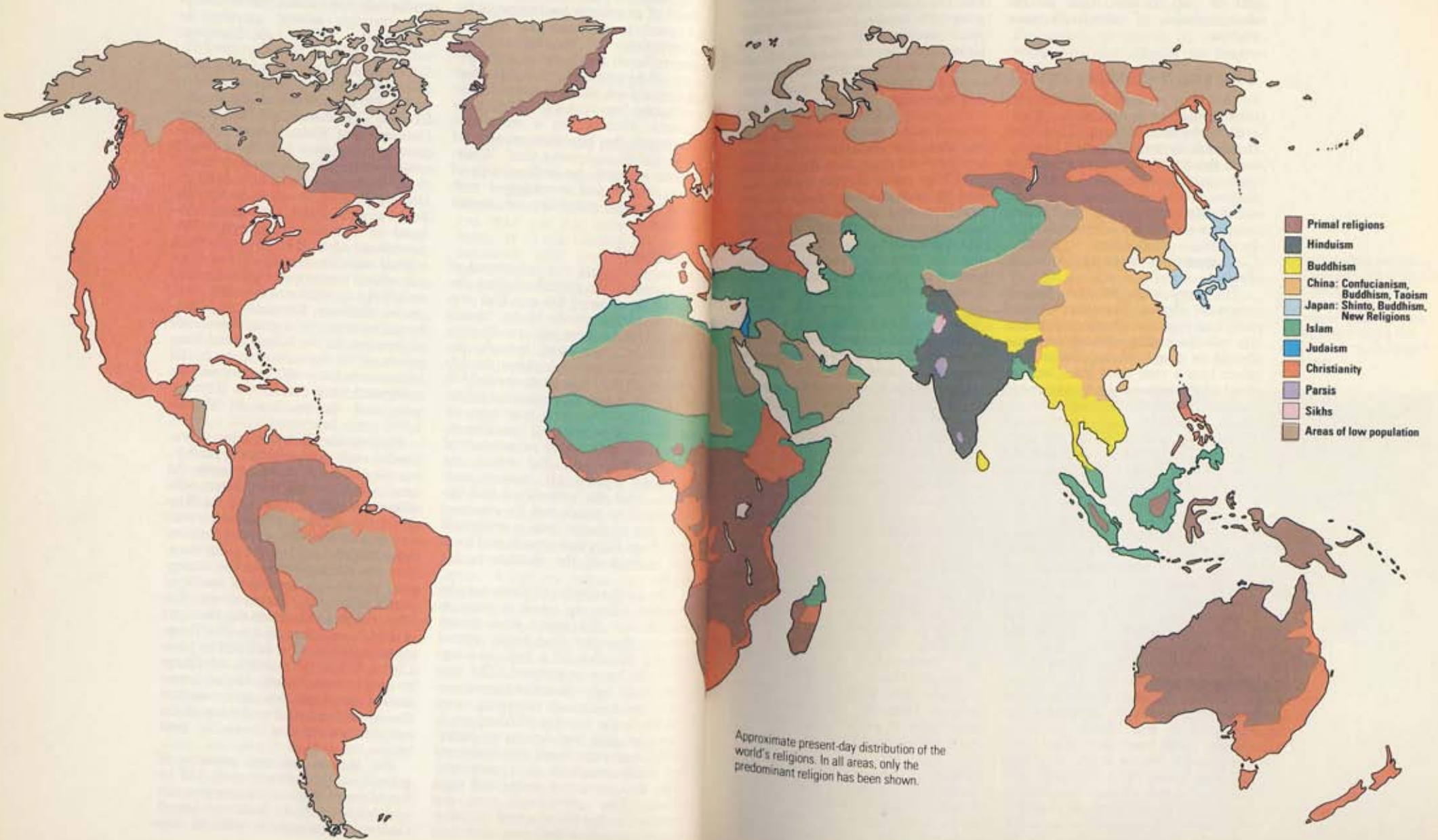
The early religion of Crete may be clarified when the linear A script is deciphered. We know from Greek sources, however, that it was centred on the sacrifice of a bull and was attended by a priesthood. The earliest Greek epics describe animal sacrifice on numerous occasions, very similar to the worship of Abraham in Palestine and the Aryans in India. The Greek priesthood was weakened by being attached to a particular deity at a particular shrine and none other. The priesthood was not necessarily hereditary, and no intellectual qualifications nor elaborate

teaching were required. The priesthood was often laughed at, but its scattered weakness meant that the Greek thinkers never engaged the ancient religion in open battle. The supreme place of Zeus indicates that before the inventive period of Greek mythology, the creator was worshipped through animal sacrifice as among the other Indo-European nations.

The only other ancient priesthoods of which we have written evidence before 500 BC are the Persians and the Chinese. Zoroaster of Persia and Confucius of China were contemporaries, and they both proclaimed ethical religions in opposition to the degenerate priesthood and polytheism which existed before them. We know as little about the Magi priesthood of Persia as about the Wu priesthood of China. Both practised animal sacrifice, presumably without any ethical content, and both failed to satisfy the questions of thinking men. As we shall see, Zoroaster and Confucius were part of a great movement of freedom for the human mind from priestcraft in the sixth century BC. Its importance for world history may be compared with that of the Renaissance and Reformation in Europe 2,000 years later.

Passing over the many other priesthoods, such as the Roman Flamens, who sacrificed white lambs on the ides of the month, the Aztecs, who offered human victims, and the Nordics and Germans, whose altars were overthrown by the early Christian missionaries, we must briefly mention the phenomenon of the emergence of the vast system of medieval priestcraft within Christendom. The New Testament letter to the Hebrews makes it clear that all the Old Testament sacrifices were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. From the death of Christ onwards there could be no more animal sacrifices looking forward to the cross; the bread and wine of the communion service were to look back.

But just as the true meaning of animal sacrifice always tended to be transformed into a meritorious act which had merit in itself and forced God to be gracious, so with the com-



Approximate present-day distribution of the world's religions. In all areas, only the predominant religion has been shown.

munion service. Then, gradually, it was suggested that without a properly ordained priest a communion service was not valid. Meanwhile the services became more elaborate and required special training. By the end of the Middle Ages all the characteristics of priestcraft were evident.

## The sixth-century revolt

In the sixth century BC there was a tidal wave of revolt against the priestcraft of the ancient world. This wave shattered the power of the old religions, though their cults continued to exist as backwaters for centuries. Seven world religions appeared within fifty years of each other and all continue to this day: Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, Vedanta Monism, Taoism.

The wave seems to have had its origin in Persia. Zoroaster's actual teaching remains obscure. Scholars are still discussing whether he was a dualist or a monotheist. Some have given him a very early date, but the most likely seems to be some time in the first half of the sixth century. He must certainly have influenced Cyrus, who overthrew the Babylonian Empire in 539 BC, and sent the first group of Jews back to Palestine to rebuild their temple. By the time the temple was completed in 516 BC, four religious giants in India and China, Buddha, Mahavira (founder of Jainism), Confucius and Lao-Tse, had dared to question the authority of the Brahmin and Chinese priests. Socrates (470–399 BC) came at least a hundred years after Zoroaster, but he was preceded by Pythagoras (flourished about 530 BC), who first brought the new ideas of the sixth-century religious revolt into Greece.

The first causes of this great movement are probably as complex as the Renaissance and Reformation in Europe 2,000 years later. One obvious possible source is the preaching of Isaiah (about 740 BC onwards) and the other eighth-century prophets of Israel, with the refrain from Jeremiah and Ezekiel a century or so later. Certainly we can find most of the

ethical emphases of Zoroaster, Buddha (about 563–483 BC), Mahavira (599–527 BC) and Confucius (551–479 BC) in the great prophets.

It is hard to believe that the prophets were heard by no one else but Israel and Judah. Isaiah's language was intelligible without translation in cities all over the Fertile Crescent. The transmission of religious ideas, especially when they were so revolutionary, would be exceedingly rapid. By the time it takes us to write and publish a book, the ancient world would have gossiped the ideas far more extensively. The number of major cities from Athens to China were comparatively few, and all were cosmopolitan with several languages spoken by the various national groups who lived there. Religious teachers and their disciples travelled constantly and, most important of all, people had the time and interest to listen to them.

## The revolt in India

Whatever the cause of the tidal wave, the actual force of its impact can be seen most clearly in India. The sequence of the *Vedas*, and *Brahmanas*, the *Upanishads*, and the writings of the early Buddhists and Jains give us a picture of what happened with a clarity which is unequalled except in the Bible. From a study of the sixth-century revolt in India, we can postulate with some degree of certainty what must have happened in other parts of the ancient world.

As we have seen, Indian life was dominated by the Brahmin priests. From the primitive simplicity of animal sacrifice 1,000 years before, they had developed an elaborate system of ritual. Specialization into various schools with their own literature, the leisure to study, and access to weighty books, all enabled them to increase their hold on the common people. They, and they only, could offer sacrifice, and their sacrifices and magical prayers were so powerful that men and even gods had to submit to them. Economically their rapacious demands had become intolerable. For every occasion of birth, puberty, marriage, war, death, or transgression of the ritual laws, the

Brahmins demanded *dakshina* (money gifts).

All these might have been tolerated, but when they insisted on interfering in politics, the pressure of discontent among the second caste of warriors, nobles and kings increased till a revolt was inevitable. The actual spark may or may not have come from Israel via Persia, but it is significant that the revolt was simultaneous in both India and China. It took several different forms.

## Atheism

Some of the warrior caste became atheists (*charvakas*). They said that since God did not exist, the whole system of priests, sacrifices and the mumbo-jumbo Vedic prayers was all nonsense. The first recorded example of true atheism is in Jerusalem, 'The fool says in his heart, "There is no God"' (Psalm 14:1). It is interesting that the second should be a vigorous group of atheists in India five centuries before Christ.

Of course, in the ancient world it was impossible just to declare athe-

ism. The atheist had to state his way to salvation. Since there is no God, what must man do? The answer that the *charvakas* gave was that the only good that man knows is happiness, so the highest good was to do what made one truly happy. In this modern opinion they preceded the Epicureans of Greece by two centuries and our atheists by twenty-four.

## Buddhism

Buddha, who lived around 563–483 BC, was a prince of this second or warrior caste. The first written accounts of his life are at least two hundred years after his death, and scholars agree that the two main forms of Buddhism existing today have moved far from their founder's teachings. Certain facts, however, do seem established. The tradition is that he was shocked into seeking the meaning of life by the sight of a leper, an old man and a corpse. He practised austerities for many years till he attained the illumination he was seeking. He certainly knew about the

*Hindu priests still carry out the age-old rituals of the Vedic scriptures. Chanting hymns in Sanskrit, these priests are performing a fire ritual to ensure a good harvest.*



religion offered by the Brahmin priests, and rejected this decisively. He seems to have been an atheist, or at least to have abandoned the usual worship of the gods. He had no time for animal sacrifice, Brahmin priests, or even the caste system.

Buddha's doctrine was simple and down to earth. The cause of all unhappiness is desire. The lust for power, success, money, sex, comfort and other bodily pleasures causes all the ills of life. Salvation (*nirvana*) is therefore the losing of all desire. It is not necessary to become a hermit or stop doing the necessities of life, but it is essential to have no passion in doing them. The practising Buddhist tends as a result to develop a quiet, serene type of personality, but the desire for the good of others and the passion for social justice is eradicated along with the desires for self. Jesus expected us to love our neighbours as ourselves. Buddha denied love for self so that practical love for others was also lost. The main sects of Buddhism vary enormously in their basic practices and philosophy, and they will be looked at in their own section. Here we have only noted that Buddha fits exactly into his time and the movement of revolt against priestcraft that swept the ancient world.

### Ethicism

A contemporary of Buddha, also a prince of the warrior caste, was Vardhamana Mahavira (599–527 BC). His reaction against the amorality of priestcraft was to stress the need for good deeds. Priests and sacrifices and even God were unnecessary, since this world had an inbuilt, ruthless moral order which automatically rewarded goodness and punished evil. Salvation was therefore attained by destroying the evil of one's heart through doing good. The details of his philosophical system, called Jainism, were only recorded nearly 1,000 years later, and are held by a small fraction of the people of India.

An interesting fact is that Mahavira's ethical system for the first time required vegetarianism to the extent that no animal life was to be harmed. Jainism gave to India the word

*ahimsa* (no-harming), which was taken up and used with a very different meaning by Gandhi. Originally it was connected with the sacredness of all animal and insect life, which is very hard to practise in the modern world, though it was professed by Albert Schweitzer in Africa.

If we omit the inclusion of respect for animal life as part of his system of ethics, it is obvious that Mahavira's 'way' was similar to that of his predecessor Zoroaster in Persia, and his contemporary Confucius (551–479 BC) in China. All three were first and foremost preachers of ethics. The desire to do what is right and good, quite apart from any doctrines about God, is a recurring theme in the history of philosophy. Aristotle (384–322 BC) and the Stoics of Greece, the high-principled Chinese, Roman and English 'gentleman', the modern humanist, and many liberal Jews, adhere to this religious genus. I have called ethicism a type of religion because it has a 'way' enforced by a real conscience, and an experience of feeling right or righteous. Whether or not God exists, the devotee has an assurance that all is and will be well. There are many examples of this kind of thinking in nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernism in the West.

### Monism

We have looked briefly at three types of revolt against an intolerable priestcraft. They all agreed in their rejection of animal sacrifice, the priests who controlled it and even the God to whom the sacrifices were directed. Because of this direct attack on Brahmanism and the caste system, the three forms of revolt were excommunicated from Hinduism for over 2,000 years. Now that the Brahmins have found other ways of establishing their position through education and the key positions in India, Buddhism, Jainism and even atheism have been readmitted as accepted paths within Hinduism. Protestantism has also come perilously close to including ethicism and even atheism as acceptable 'ways' within the Christian fold.

We must now look at a fourth kind

of revolt, which is philosophically far more important, and may in this century become the main threat to Christian theism. Monism is a type of thinking which first appeared in the Hindu *Upanishads* (teachings for a disciple). Over 200 of these writings exist. The main group belongs to our period in the sixth century BC, although some are much later additions.

The writers of the *Upanishads* did not seek to banish the gods and priests and sacrifices, but offered a parallel and deeper way of union with the absolute. The sacrifices are spiritualized, and God is given a new meaning. He is no longer a theistic Creator, but the absolute, the deepest self, ultimate reality, or what modern writers call 'the ground of all being'. Priests and sacrifices were suitable for the uninitiated, but the true monist had a direct access to the absolute which bypassed the need for ritual. The discipline developed to attain this union with the absolute was called yoga. It is still widely practised in India, and is now being vigorously propagated in the West.

The extensive literature of Hinduism describes the various types of monism in the greatest detail. Our task here is to note that this type of religion has appeared again and again in the history of the world. The four main monistic positions can be set out as follows, though there are refinements and sub-divisions for each of these:

#### Pantheism

- Absolute pantheism: Everything there is is God.
- Modified pantheism: God is the reality or principle behind nature.

#### Vedanta

- Modified monism: God is to nature as soul is to body.
- Absolute monism: Only God is reality. All else is imagination.

The Chinese teacher Lao-Tse (born about 550 or 600 BC) was a contemporary of Confucius, and obviously belongs to the same wave of revolt against priestcraft. He insisted on freedom from elaborate



ritual and regulations. He rejected the man-made restraints typical of ethicism, so that Confucius found him incomprehensible. Positively he recommended conformity to the way (Tao) of the universe. Of the four kinds of monism, Taoism would appear to have been closer to pantheism or modified pantheism than to the typical Vedanta type of Hindu monism. Instead of a stress on meditation, it was more a seeking to be natural, or at one with the course of nature. But in any case, Taoism was certainly monistic as opposed to the ancient theism and polytheism of China.

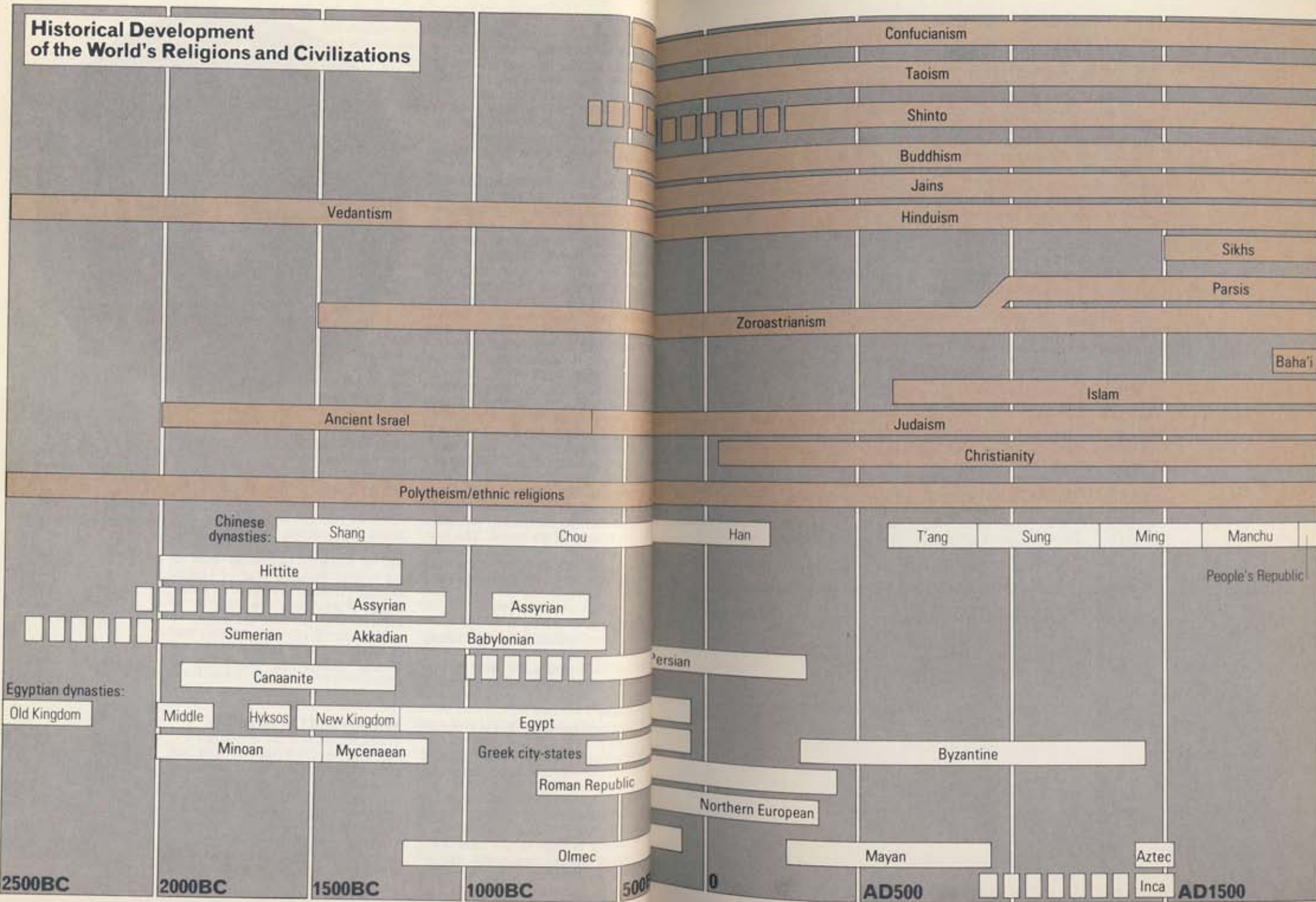
### Monism and Christianity

Monism has since had a long history, not least in Christianity. After the powerful attack from the direction of Gnosticism in the second century, the Christian church had to face a monistic counter-attack from the Neo-Platonists in the third century. Plotinus (about 205–269) made a journey to the East and returned with an arsenal of monistic ideas against

*Confucius, the Buddha and Lao-tzu were all teachers who reacted against the 'priestcraft' of their time. This scene shows an imaginary meeting between them.*



# Historical Development of the World's Religions and Civilizations



# Part Two Ancient Religions

the rapidly-growing Christian church in the Roman Empire. To claim the Greek philosophical heritage he included some ideas from Plato, but his system of contemplation was identical with the yoga of Hindu monism.

Plotinus failed to rally the Roman Empire against Jesus Christ, but he was rediscovered and introduced through the back door many centuries later. An Italian philosopher, Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), represented the first Western monistic reaction to medieval priestcraft, and his pantheism influenced the Jew Spinoza (1632–77). Meanwhile many of the mystics had been influenced by Neo-Platonism through a forgery attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite. Most of the readers of *Pseudo-Dionysius* thought that they were still Christians, but their piety had become strangely Hindu, and one of them, Eckhart (about 1260–1327), was nearly condemned for heresy.

Philosophical monism entered the German church through Johann Fichte (1762–1814), who is described as an ethical monist. He was dismissed from the University of Jena for atheism in 1799, but was later appointed to the University of Berlin. Through G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) one wing of the idealists became the true materialists like Feuerbach (1804–72) and Karl Marx

(1818–83). Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) led a group who had a less materialistic view of reality which was closer to the Hindu Vedanta type of monism. Another who was championed by Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who tried to show that true Christianity is in fact a kind of monism.

The renewed invasion of Eastern religious ideas in our own day by Hindu gurus, Zen masters and Tibetan rituals, is evidence that the struggle of alternative religions and ideologies is as strong as ever.

The chart (below) shows the major religious systems preached in the sixth century BC and the later developments classified under them. Priestcraft was a degeneration from the original religion of man. Atheism, Buddhism, ethicism and monism are the four possible reactions of a thinking man against it, and all are at least twenty-five centuries old.

Obviously all five of these options are very much with us today. Christianity contradicts the major premiss of each of them and offers salvation from outside ourselves altogether, so it is not dependent on our own stumbling attempts at happiness or spiritual fulfilment. But that must be the subject of a later section.

Land of the Aztecs and Incas: America before Columbus	50
Cradle of Civilization: the Ancient Near East	58
Ancient Egypt: Land of the Priest-King	70
Egyptian Temples: Houses of Power	75
Chart: The Gods of Egypt	79
The Cosmic Battle: Zoroastrianism	80
Mithraism: Cult of the Bull	88
The Ancient Religions of Greece and Rome	90
Chart: The Gods of Greece and Rome	102
Secret Knowledge: the Gnostics	110
The Mandaean: Gnostic Survivors	110
Faith of Light and Darkness: Manichaeans	113
The Old Gods: Religions of Northern Europe	114
Chart: The Norse Gods	121
Nomads of the Steppes	122

## Religious systems sixth century BC and their later developments

Ritualism	Atheism	Buddhism	Ethicism	Monism
Salvation by right ritual	Salvation by doing what makes you happy	Salvation by losing all desire	Salvation by right actions	Salvation by union with the Absolute
Brahmanism Priestcraft	Charvakas Epicureans Atheists Existentialists	Buddhism Monasticism	Zoroastrianism Jainism Confucianism Aristotle Stoics Humanists Liberal Judaism	Taoism Neo-Platonists Spinoza Sufis Idealism Unity