

qualities. Some early peoples practiced a form of polytheism called **animism**, or a belief that gods and goddesses inhabited natural features. Animism was widespread among many societies in Africa and in the Pacific islands of Polynesia. **Shamanism**, a form of animism, expressed a belief in powerful natural spirits that were influenced by shamans, or priests. Shamanism remained a common practice in Central Asia and the Americas.

Hinduism

Hinduism is a belief system that originated in India from the literature, traditions, and class system of the Aryan invaders. In contrast to other world religions, Hinduism did not have a single founder. As a result, the precepts and values of Hinduism developed gradually and embraced a variety of forms of worship. Hinduism took the polytheistic gods of nature that had been central to the worship of the **Brahmins**, or priests, then changed their character to represent concepts.

According to Hindu belief, everything in the world is part of a divine essence called Brahma. The spirit of Brahma enters gods or different forms of one god. Two forms of the Hindu deity are Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer. A meaningful life is one that has found union with the divine soul. Hinduism holds that this union is achieved through **reincarnation**, or the concept that after death the soul enters another human or an animal. The person's good or evil deeds in his or her personal life is that person's *karma*. Those who die with good *karma* may be reincarnated into a higher caste, whereas those with evil *karma* might descend to a lower caste or become an animal. If the soul lives a number of good lives, it is united with the soul of Brahma. Upon achieving this unification, or **moksha**, the soul no longer experiences worldly suffering.

Hinduism goes beyond a mystical emphasis to effect the everyday conduct of its followers. The moral law, or **dharmā**, serves as a guide to actions in this world. *Dharma* emphasizes that human actions produce consequences and that each person has obligations to the family and community.

The Hindu religion reinforced the Indian caste system, offering hope for an improved lifestyle in the next life, especially for members of the lower castes. Those of the upper castes were encouraged by the prospect of achieving *moksha*. Hinduism also extended the Aryan custom of venerating cattle by considering cattle as sacred and forbidding the consumption of beef.

In time, Hinduism became the principal religion of India. Carried by merchants through the waters of the Indian Ocean, Hindu beliefs also spread to Southeast Asia, where they attracted large numbers of followers. During the first century C.E., there were already signs of Indian influence in the societies of the islands of the Indian Ocean and in the Malay peninsula. Some rulers in present-day Vietnam and Cambodia adopted the Sanskrit language of India as a form of written communication.

Buddhism

The second major faith to originate in India was Buddhism. In contrast to Hinduism, Buddhism had a founder in an Indian prince named Gautama, born about 563 B.C.E. Troubled by the suffering in the world, Gautama spent six years fasting and meditating on its cause. After he determined that suffering was the consequence of human desire, he began traveling to spread his beliefs. At this time Gautama became known as the "Buddha," or the "enlightened one."

Although later followers would consider Buddha a god, Buddha did not see himself as a deity. Rather, he stressed the existence of a divine essence. Buddhism sought self-control and stressed the equal treatment of peoples from all walks of life. The Buddhist faith, therefore, opposed the caste system.

Buddhism shared with Hinduism the concept of reincarnation but in a different perspective. Buddhist belief held that a series of reincarnations would lead the faithful follower to ever higher levels toward the ultimate goal, which was *nirvana*, or a union with the divine essence.

The popularity of Buddhism emerged from its acceptance of men and women from all ranks of society. At first Buddhism spread through the efforts of monks and nuns who established religious communities in northern India. Located along trade routes, Buddhist monasteries served as lodging for traders, who learned of the teachings of Buddhism through contact with Buddhist monks and nuns. Contact with Hellenistic culture produced the Gandhara Buddhas, a syncretic sculpture combining the symbol of the Buddha with the exaltation of the human body typical of Hellenistic culture. In time, merchants carried the doctrines of Buddhism along the Silk Roads and other trade routes. Initially, Buddhist popularity was strengthened when the Mauryan emperor Ashoka adopted its beliefs. The faith, however, did not enjoy a long-term period of popularity in India because of opposition from Hindu Brahmins and the later promotion of Hinduism by Gupta emperors. Buddhism spread along the trade routes to become popular in Southeast Asia and East Asia, especially in Sri Lanka, Japan, Korea, and China. In China, Buddhism blended with Confucianism to reinforce the concept of patriarchal families. As it spread to other locales, Buddhism developed the belief of *bodhisattvas*, which held that, through meditation, ordinary people could reach *nirvana*.

Confucianism

Out of the disorder of the Era of Warring States after the fall of the Zhou dynasty came a number of philosophies designed to create order in China. Among these philosophies was Confucianism, named after its founder Confucius, or Kúng Fu-tse (551–478 B.C.E.). Confucius believed that the source of good government was in the maintenance of tradition; tradition, in turn, was maintained by personal standards of virtue. These included respect for the patriarchal family (**filial piety**) and veneration of one's ancestors.

Confucius also believed that governmental stability depended on well-educated officials. To this end, he required his followers to study history and literature from the Zhou dynasty to determine the value of these subjects for government officials. Some of the students of Confucius compiled his sayings into the *Analects*, a work which also served to educate the Chinese bureaucracy or government officials. The Han dynasty appreciated Confucian philosophy because it supported order and submission to the government. The civil service examination that developed during the Han dynasty was based on the *Analects* and the course of study developed by Confucius. The Confucian values of veneration of one's ancestors and respect for the patriarchal family, as well as good government staffed by a responsible, well-educated bureaucracy, became basic traditions that defined Chinese culture.

Daoism

Another philosophy that developed in response to the Era of Warring States was Daoism. Its founder was Lao-zi (or Lao-tsu), who is believed to have lived during the fifth century