RELIGION IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

As with many cultural advancements and inventions, the "cradle of civilization" Mesopotamia has been cited as the birthplace of religion. When religion developed in Mesopotamia is unknown but the first written records of religious practice date to c. 3500 BCE from Sumer. Mesopotamian religious beliefs held that human beings were co-workers with the gods and labored with them and for them to hold back the forces of chaos which had been checked by the supreme deities at the beginning of time. Humans were created, in fact, for this very purpose: to work with and for the gods toward a mutually beneficial end. The claim of some historians that the Mesopotamians were slaves to their gods is weak because it is quite clear that the people understood their position as co-workers. The gods repaid humans for their service by taking care of their daily needs in life and maintaining the world in which they lived. These gods intimately knew the needs of the people because they were not distant entities who lived in the heavens but dwelt in homes on earth built for them by their people; these homes were the temples which were raised in every Mesopotamian city.

Temple complexes, dominated by the towering ziggurat, were considered the literal homes of the gods and their statues were fed, bathed, and clothed daily as the priests and priestesses cared for them as one would a king or queen. In the case of Marduk, for example, his statue was carried out of his temple during the festival honoring him and carried through the city of Babylon so that he could appreciate its beauty while enjoying the fresh air and sunshine. Inanna was another powerful deity who was greatly revered as the goddess of love and war and whose priests and priestesses cared for her statue and temple faithfully. She was so popular her worship spread across all of Mesopotamia from the southern region of Sumer. She became Ishtar of the Akkadians (and later the Assyrians), Astarte of the Phoenicians, Sauska of the Hurrians-Hittites, and was associated with Aphrodite of the Greeks, Isis of the Egyptians, and Venus of the Romans.

The temples were the center of the city's life throughout Mesopotamian history from the Akkadian Empire (c. 2334-2150 BCE) to the Assyrian (c. 1813-612 BCE) and afterwards. The temple served in multiple capacities: the clergy dispensed grain and surplus goods to the poor, counseled those in need, provided medical services, and sponsored the grand festivals which honored the gods. Although the gods took great care of humans while they lived, the Mesopotamian afterlife was a dreary underworld, located beneath the far mountains, where souls drank stale water from puddles and ate dust for eternity in the "land of no return". This bleak view of their eternal home was markedly different from that of the Egyptians.
**EGYPTIAN RELIGION**

Egyptian religion was similar to Mesopotamian belief, however, in that human beings were co-workers with the gods to maintain order. The principle of harmony (known to the Egyptians as *ma'at*) was of the highest importance in Egyptian life (and in the afterlife) and their religion was fully integrated into every aspect of existence. Egyptian religion was a combination of magic, mythology, science, medicine, psychiatry, spiritualism, herbology, as well as the modern understanding of 'religion' as belief in a higher power and a life after death. The gods were the friends of human beings and sought only the best for them by providing them with the most perfect of all lands to live in and an eternal home to enjoy when their lives on earth were done.

The first written records of religious practice in Egypt come from around 3400 BCE in the Predynastic Period of Egypt (6000-3150 BCE). Deities such as Isis, Osiris, Ptah, Hathor, Atum, Set, Nephthys, and Horus were already established as potent forces to be recognized fairly early on. The Egyptian Creation Myth is similar to the beginning of the Mesopotamian story in that, originally, there was only chaotic, slow-swirling waters. This ocean was without bounds, depthless, and silent until, upon its surface, there rose a hill of earth (known as the ben-ben, the primordial mound, which, it is thought, the pyramids symbolize) and the great god Atum (the sun) stood upon the ben-ben and spoke, giving birth to the god Shu (of the air) the goddess Tefnut (of moisture) the god Geb (of earth) and the goddess Nut (of sky). Atum had intended Nut as his bride but she fell in love with Geb. Angry with the lovers, Atum separated them by stretching Nut across the sky high away from Geb on the earth. Although the lovers were separated during the day, they came together at night and Nut bore three sons, Osiris, Set and Horus, and two daughters, Isis and Nephthys. Osiris, as eldest, was announced as 'Lord of all the Earth' when he was born and was given his sister Isis as a wife. Set, consumed by jealousy, hated his brother and killed him to assume the throne. Isis then embalmed her husband's body and, with powerful charms, resurrected Osiris who returned from the dead to bring life to the people of Egypt. Osiris later served as the Supreme Judge of the souls of the dead in the Hall of Truth and, by weighing the heart of the soul in the balances, decided who was granted eternal life.

The Egyptian afterlife was known as the Field of Reeds and was a mirror-image of life on earth down to one's favorite tree and stream and dog. Those one loved in life would either be waiting when one arrived or would follow after. The Egyptians viewed earthly existence as simply one part of an eternal journey and were so concerned about passing easily to the next phase that they created their elaborate tombs (the pyramids), temples, and funerary inscriptions (the Pyramid Texts, the Book of the Dead) to help the soul's passage from this world to the next. The gods cared for one after death just as they had in life from the beginning of time. The goddess Qebhet brought water to the thirsty souls in the land of the dead and other goddesses such as Selket and Nephthys cared for and protected the souls as they journeyed to the Field of Reeds. An ancient Egyptian understood that, from birth to death and even after death, the universe had been ordered by the gods and everyone had a place in that order.
This principle of order is also paramount in the world's oldest religion still being practiced today: Hinduism (known to adherents as Sanatan Dharma, Eternal Order). Although often viewed as a polytheistic faith, Hinduism is actually henotheistic. There is only one supreme god in Hinduism, Brahma, and all other deities are his aspects and reflections. Since Brahma is too immense a concept for the human mind to comprehend, he presents himself in the many different versions of himself which people recognize as deities such as Vishnu, Shiva, and the many others. The Hindu scriptures number the gods at 330 million and these range from those who were known at a national level (such as Krishna) to lesser known local deities.

The primary understanding of Hinduism is that there is an order to the universe and every individual has a specific place in that order. Each person on the planet has a duty (dharma) which only they can perform. If one acts rightly (karma) in the performance of that duty, then one is rewarded by moving closer to the supreme being and eventually becoming one with god; if one does not, then one is reincarnated as many times as it takes to finally understand how to live and draw closer to untion with the supreme soul. This belief was carried over by Siddartha Guatama when he became the Buddha and founded the religion known as Buddhism. In Buddhism, however, one is not seeking union with a god but with one's higher nature as one leaves behind the illusions of the world which generate suffering and cloud the mind with the fear of loss and death. Buddhism became so popular that it traveled from India to China where it enjoyed equal success.

In ancient China, religion is thought to have developed as early as c. 4500 BCE as evidenced by designs on ceramics found at the Neolithic site of Banpo Village. This early belief structure may have been a mix of animism and mythology as these images include recognizable animals and dragons. By the time of the Xia Dynasty (2070-1600 BCE) there were many anthropomorphic gods worshipped with a chief god, Shangti, presiding over all. This belief continued, with modifications, during the period of the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BCE) which developed the practice of ancestor worship.

The people believed that Shangti had so many responsibilities that he had become too busy to handle their needs. It was thought that, when a person died, they went to live with the gods and became intermediaries between the people and those gods. Ancestor worship influenced the two great Chinese belief systems of Confucianism and Taoism, both of which made ancestor worship core tenets of their practices. In time, Shangti was replaced with the concept of Tian (heaven) a paradise where the dead would reside eternally in peace. In order to pass from one's earthly life into heaven one had to cross the bridge of forgetfulness over an abyss and, after looking back on one's life a last time, drink from a cup which purged all memory. At the bridge, one was either judged worthy of heaven - and so passed on - or unworthy - and slipped from the bridge into the abyss to be swallowed up in hell. Other versions of this same scenario claim the soul was reincarnated after drinking from the cup. Either way, the living were expected to remember the dead who had passed over the bridge to the other side and to honor their memory.
RELIGION IN MESOAMERICA

Remembrance of the dead, and the part they still play in the lives of those on earth, was an important component of all ancient religions including the belief system of the Maya. The gods were involved in every aspect of the life of the Maya. As with other cultures, there were many different deities (over 250) all of whom had their own special sphere of influence. They controlled the weather, the harvest, they dictated one’s mate, presided over every birth, and were present at one’s death. The Mayan afterlife was similar to the Mesopotamian in that it was a dark and dreary place but the Maya imagined an even worse fate where one was constantly under threat of attack or deception by the demon lords who inhabited the underworld (known as Xibalba or Metnal). The dread of the journey through Xibalba was such a potent cultural force that the Maya are the only known ancient culture to honor a goddess of suicide (named Ixtab) because suicides were thought to by-pass Xibalba and go straight to paradise (as did those who died in childbirth or in battle). The Maya believed in the cyclical nature of life, that all things which seem to die simply are transformed, and considered human life just another part of the kind of pattern they saw all around them in nature. They felt death was a natural progression after life and feared the very unnatural possibility that the dead could return to haunt the living.

It was possible that a person would hang on to life for any of a number of reasons (the chief being improper burial) and so ceremonies were performed to remember the dead and honor their spirit. This belief was also held by Mesoamerican cultures other than the Maya such as the Aztec and Tarascan. In time, it developed into the holiday known today as The Day of the Dead (El Dia de los Muertos) in which people celebrate the lives of those who have passed on and remember their names.

It was not only people who were to be remembered and honored, however, but also a very important deity scholars refer to as the Maize God. The Maize god is a dying-and-reviving god figure in the form of Hun Hunahpu who was killed by the Lords of Xibalba, brought back to life by his sons, the Hero Twins, and emerges from the underworld as corn. The “Tonsured” Maize god or “Foliated” Maize god are common images found in Maya iconography. He is always pictured as eternally young and handsome with an elongated head like a corncob, long, flowing hair like corn silk, and ornamented with jade to symbolize the corn stalk. He was considered so important by the Maya that mothers would bind the heads of their young sons to flatten the forehead and elongate their heads to resemble him.

The Maize god remained an important deity to the Maya even when eclipsed by the greatest and most popular of the gods Gucumatz (also known as Kukulcan and Quetzalcoatl) whose great pyramid at Chichen Itza is still visited by millions of people every year in the present day. On the twin equinoxes of every year the sun casts a shadow on the stairs of the pyramid structure which seems to resemble a great serpent descending from the top to the bottom; this is thought to be the great Kukulcan returning from the heavens to earth to impart his blessings. Even today, people gather at Chichen Itza to witness this event at the equinoxes and to remember the past and hope for the future.
GREEK & ROMAN RELIGION
The importance of remembrance of the dead as part of one’s religious devotions was integral to the beliefs of the Greeks as well. Continued remembrance of the dead by the living kept the soul of the deceased alive in the afterlife. The Greeks, like the other cultures mentioned, believed in many gods who often cared for their human charges but, just as often, pursued their own pleasure. The capricious nature of the gods may have contributed to the development of philosophy in Greece as philosophy can only develop in a culture where religion is not providing for the people’s spiritual needs. Plato consistently criticized the Greek concept of the gods and Critias claimed they were simply created by men to control other men. Xenophanes, as noted above, claimed the Greek view was completely wrong and God was unimaginable. Still, to the majority of the Greeks - and central to the function of society - the gods were to be honored and so were those who had passed over into their realm. Just because a person was no longer living on earth did not mean that person was to be forgotten anymore than one would forget to honor the invisible gods. As with other ancient cultures, religion in Greece was fully integrated into one’s daily life and routine. Historian Mark Cartwright comments on this:

In the ancient Greek world, religion was personal, direct, and present in all areas of life. With formal rituals which included animal sacrifices and libations, myths to explain the origins of mankind and give the gods a human face, temples which dominated the urban landscape, city festivals and national sporting and artistic competitions, religion was never far from the mind of an ancient Greek.

The Greeks consulted the gods on matters ranging from affairs of state to personal decisions regarding love, marriage, or one’s job. An ancient story tells of how the writer Xenophon (430-c.354 BCE) went to Socrates asking whether the philosopher thought he should join the army of Cyrus the Younger on campaign to Persia. Socrates sent him to ask the question of the god at Delphi. Instead of asking his original question, Xenophon asked the god of Delphi which of the many gods was best to court favor with to ensure a successful venture and safe return. He appears to have gotten the correct answer since he survived the disastrous campaign of Cyrus and not only returned to Athens but saved the bulk of the army.

The religion of Rome followed the same paradigm as that of Greece. The Roman religion most likely began as a kind of animism and developed as they came into contact with other cultures. The Greeks had the most significant impact on Roman religion and many of the Roman gods are simply Greek deities with Roman names and slightly altered attributes. In Rome, the worship of the gods was intimately tied to affairs of state and the stability of the society was thought to rest on how well the people revered the gods and participated in the rituals which honored them. The Vestal Virgins are one famous example of this belief in that these women were counted on to maintain the vows they had taken and perform their duties responsibly in order to continually honor Vesta and all the goddess gave to the people.

Although the Romans had imported their primary gods from Greece, once the Roman religion was established and linked to the welfare of the state, no foreign gods were welcomed. When worship of the popular Egyptian goddess Isis was brought to Rome, Emperor Augustus forbade any temples to be built in her honor or public rites observed in her worship because he felt such attention paid to a foreign deity would undermine the authority of the government and established religious beliefs. To the Romans, the gods had created everything according to their will and maintained the universe in the best way possible and a human being was obligated to show them honor for their gifts.
This was true not only for the `major' gods of the Roman *pantheon* but also for the spirits of the home. The penates were earth spirits of the pantry who kept one's home safe and harmonious. One was expected to be thankful for their efforts and remember them upon entering or leaving one's house. Statues of the penates were taken out of the cupboard and set on the table during meals to honor them and sacrifices were left by the hearth for their enjoyment. If one were diligent in appreciating their efforts, one was rewarded with continued health and happiness and, if one forgot them, one suffered for such ingratitude. Although the religions of other cultures did not have precisely these same kinds of spirits, the recognition of spirits of place - and especially the home - was common.