



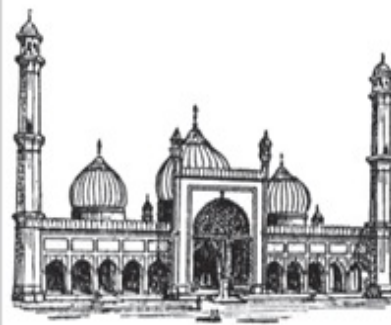
BUDDHISTS BELIEVE THEY REACH NIRVANA NOT THROUGH DEATH BUT THROUGH ENLIGHTENMENT, WHICH MEANS TRAVERSING THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH. THIS INCLUDES THE THREE PARTS OF MORALITY, MEDITATION, AND WISDOM AND INSIGHT.



# RELIGION 101

FROM **ALLAH** TO **ZEN BUDDHISM**, AN EXPLORATION OF THE **KEY PEOPLE, PRACTICES,** AND **BELIEFS** THAT HAVE SHAPED THE RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD

A  
*CRASH COURSE*  
IN THE  
**HISTORY OF  
RELIGION**



ALLAH IS THE ARABIC WORD FOR “THE GOD,” ONE WHO IS BEYOND ALL HUMAN PERCEPTION—NEITHER MALE, FEMALE, DUAL, OR PLURAL. ALLAH IS SIMPLY ONE.

THE HEBREW ALPHABET CONSISTS OF TWENTY-TWO CONSONANTS, FIVE OF WHICH ASSUME A DIFFERENT FORM WHEN THEY APPEAR AT THE END OF A WORD. HEBREW IS GENERALLY WRITTEN WITHOUT VOWEL SOUNDS AND IS READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT.



Peter Archer, MA, MLitt

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# INTRODUCTION

Religion has, for 5,000 years, been an essential part of the human condition. Spiritual beliefs of all kinds have sought to shape the human psyche and leave a lasting imprint on our souls.

In the pages of this book, you'll stroll through the temples of the Greeks and Romans, marvel at the soaring spires of medieval Christian cathedrals, stand astonished before the graceful minarets of the Blue Mosque in the ancient city of Istanbul, and gaze in wonder at the Borobudur Buddhist temple in Indonesia. You'll read about saints and sinners, heroes and heretics, and the great thinkers, visionaries, and mystics who shaped our spiritual landscape.

Religion is a complicated subject, partly because there are so many shades of religious belief and partly due to the difficulty of actually defining what religion is.

*The Concise Oxford Dictionary* characterizes it as “the belief in a superhuman controlling power, especially in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship.” That’s a pretty loose definition and it covers a lot of ground.

Today, there are five major religious traditions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. There are countless smaller groups, some of which are subsections of these five and others that have no connection to them. While we can’t possibly cover all of them, this book will be a crash course in the main elements of world religion.

Religion has also been a huge source of conflict, from the Crusades of the Middle Ages to the terrorist attacks of September 11,

2001. By understanding one another's belief systems and respecting them, we can avoid such fanaticism ourselves and recognize it when it appears in others.

Religion has created complex philosophies, profound and moving literature, and works of art that dazzle and awe us with their magnificence. These endure, even when the religious beliefs that produced them are no longer actively pursued. Through religion's astounding cultural legacy, we can continue to appreciate it and its contribution to the world.

So get ready for a long, fascinating journey down the path of spiritual enlightenment.



# CHAPTER 1

## EARLY RELIGIONS

The earliest religious rituals seem to have arisen simultaneously with the development of communities of humans. The cave paintings in Lascaux in France, for example, which were the product of bands of hunters and gatherers, may well have had a religious significance; it's been argued by anthropologists that they are often found in the most remote areas of the caves — where the strongest magic resided. It's possible that creating an image of an animal (particularly an animal that was in the process of being hunted) was an appeal to the Divine to give good fortune to the hunter in his quest for food.

With the rise of settled societies between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, we find the systematic worship of deities and particular powers ascribed to them. Mesopotamian religion was often dark and gloomy. The hero Gilgamesh in the epic poem of the same name does not look forward to any blessed afterlife; rather, he believes that the afterlife will be full of suffering and sorrow. This may well reflect the tenuous nature of Mesopotamian society.

By the time of the rise of ancient Greece, religious rituals and beliefs were well established, and a special order of people — priests — had been set aside to serve as intermediaries between ordinary people and the gods. The gods of Greece were seen as neither

especially benevolent or evil. They just ... *were*. Often they embodied natural phenomena:

<b>GOD</b>	<b>DOMAIN</b>
Zeus	Lightning
Apollo	The Sun
Artemis	The Moon
Poseidon	The Oceans and Seas
Others reflected human concerns and products:	
Aphrodite	Love
Ares	War
Demeter	Grain
Athena	Wisdom
Hestia	The Hearth
Dionysus	Wine and Drunkenness

Unlike later religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam), the gods were unconcerned with ethical issues. At most, they might punish pride, particularly if it took the form of blaspheming against them. But oftentimes their motivations were unknowable to humans.

*To mourn avails not: man is born to bear.  
Such is, alas! the gods' severe decree:  
They, only they are blest, and only free.*  
— Homer, *The Iliad* (trans. Alexander Pope)

People prayed to the gods not for divine guidance but so that either the gods would grant favor to them or — more often — that the gods would leave them alone.

Almost all ancient societies were polytheistic. Even the Jews, who worshiped a single god, Yahweh, did not initially deny the existence

of other gods. They were merely exclusive in their worship. Other societies such as the Greeks, the Romans, and the Egyptians worshiped a broad pantheon of gods and seem to have frequently borrowed gods from one another. In the world of the Mediterranean and the East, myths and stories circulated freely, spreading religious beliefs across Europe and Asia.

# THE RITES OF DIONYSUS

## The God of Disorder

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The ancient Greeks were polytheists (that is, they worshiped many gods). These included Zeus, lord of all the gods and bringer of thunder; his wife Hera, goddess of marriage; Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty; her brother Ares, god of war; and Dionysus, god of wine and revelry.

The religious rites of Dionysus were different from those held to honor other Olympian deities. Traditional rites honored the gods and goddesses in temples specially built for that purpose. Dionysus wandered among the people, and his cults celebrated him in the woods. In Dionysian festivals, worshipers became one with the god. This god loved people; he loved dance; and he loved wine. His festivals were like big parties.

Dionysus was usually accompanied on his travels by the Maenads, wild followers whose name means “madwomen.” The Maenads carried a *thyrsus*, a symbol of Dionysus, and incited people to join Dionysus’s cult and participate in his rites. Although everyone was invited, women were the most eager participants in Dionysian festivals.

## What Was a Thyrsus?

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A *thyrsus* was a long pole or rod covered in grapevines or ivy, adorned with grapes or other berries, and topped with

a pinecone. It was a symbol of fertility and a sacred object in Dionysian rites.

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Dionysus was the god of wine, and his rituals celebrated this drink. It was believed that wine gave people the ability to feel the greatness and power of the gods. Through wine, his worshipers achieved the ecstasy they needed to merge with the god. One of Dionysus's names was Lysios, which meant "the god of letting go." But the excesses of his festivals often led to frenzy and madness.

Dionysian rites were usually held at night. Women dressed in fawn skins, drank wine, wore wreaths of ivy, and participated in wild dances around an image of Dionysus (believed to be the god himself). Sometimes the women would suckle baby animals such as wolves or deer, and sometimes they would hunt down an animal, tear it to pieces, and devour the raw meat. Occasionally, the crazed women would tear apart a man or a child in their rites.

## **Wine in Ancient Greece**

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The Greeks have been cultivating grapes for winemaking since the late Neolithic period. As Greek society expanded, so too did its trade in grapes and wines. By the time classical Greek civilization was at its height in the fourth century B.C., the Greeks were exporting and importing wine from as far away as Spain and Portugal.

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The wine and tumultuous dancing took worshipers to a state of ecstasy, in which they felt the power of the gods. Religious ecstasy was often heightened by sexual ecstasy. The nights were wild and the followers frenzied — and anything was possible.

## **Dionysus Takes a Wife**

Ariadne, daughter of the Cretan king Minos, was in love with the great hero Theseus. When Theseus came to Crete to kill the Minotaur (a terrifying monster), Ariadne fell in love with him at first sight. Unfortunately, the feeling wasn't mutual.

Ariadne helped Theseus achieve his quest, thus alienating herself from her father. She ran off with Theseus, who promised to marry her when they reached Athens. On their journey, they stopped at the island of Naxos. As Ariadne lay sleeping on the shore, Theseus sailed away and left her.

She awoke alone and friendless on a strange island, abandoned by her lover. But Dionysus saw her and was struck by her beauty. He fell in love with her instantly and made her his wife. Some myths say the couple resided on the island of Lemnos; others say he took his bride to Mount Olympus.

## **Offspring of the God**

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Ariadne and Dionysus had many children, including:

- Oenopion
- Phanus
- Staphylus
- Thoas

Oenopion became the king of Chios. Phanus and Staphylus accompanied another Greek hero, Jason, on his quest for the Golden Fleece. Thoas became the king of Lemnos.

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## **Madness Unleashed**

Although the Dionysian rites were popular, not everyone accepted them. Some held that Dionysus wasn't truly a god, a claim that stirred his wrath. Just as Hera had punished Dionysus with madness, he punished those who offended him in the same way. Then, he'd watch the afflicted mortal destroy himself.

Dionysus, though a good-time guy, had a short temper and a creative imagination. His punishments were cruel and brutal — and not just for the one being punished. Sometimes, innocent bystanders also got hurt.

## **The Madness of King Lycurgus**

Lycurgus, king of Thrace, banned the cult of Dionysus in his kingdom. When he learned that Dionysus and his Maenads had arrived in Thrace, Lycurgus tried to have Dionysus imprisoned, but the god fled to the sea, where he was sheltered by the nymph Thetis. The king's forces did manage to capture and imprison some of Dionysus's followers.

In retaliation, Dionysus inflicted Lycurgus with madness. With the king unable to rule, the imprisoned followers were released. But that wasn't the end of the story.

The mad Lycurgus mistook his son for a vine of ivy, a plant sacred to Dionysus. In a rage, the king hacked his own son to death. To make matters worse, Dionysus plagued Thrace with a drought and a famine. An oracle revealed that the drought would continue until Lycurgus was put to death. The starving Thracians captured their king and took him to Mount Pangaeus, where they threw him among wild horses, which dismembered and killed him. Dionysus lifted the drought, and the famine ended.

## **A God Imprisoned**

In Thebes, the young king Pentheus banned Dionysian rites. In defiance of the king's decree, Dionysus lured the city's women (including Pentheus's mother and aunts) to Mount Cithaeron, where they took part in a frenzied rite. Pentheus refused to recognize Dionysus's divinity and had Dionysus imprisoned in a dungeon. But the dungeon couldn't hold Dionysus; his chains fell off, and the doors opened wide to release him.

Next, Dionysus convinced the king to spy on the rites held on Mount Cithaeron, promising him spectacular sights and a chance to witness sexual acts. Pentheus hid himself in a tree as Dionysus had instructed. The women taking part in the rites saw Pentheus in the tree and mistook the king for a mountain lion. In a wild frenzy and led by Pentheus's own mother, the women pulled him down and tore him to pieces.



# **THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES**

## **The Mysterious Heart of Greek Religion**

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Among the most enduring of Greek myths was that of Demeter and her daughter Persephone.

Hades, god of the Underworld — the realm of the dead — noticed Persephone as she gathered flowers on a plain in Sicily. He was immediately overwhelmed by her beauty, and without bothering to court her he bore her off to his underground realm.

Upon discovering her daughter's abduction, Demeter could not be consoled; she was beside herself with fury, pain, and grief. She abandoned Mount Olympus and her duties as a goddess. Without Demeter's attention, the world was plagued by drought and famine. Plants withered and died, and no new crops would grow.

### **Demeter's Travels**

In her grief, Demeter wandered the countryside. Sometimes she encountered hospitality; other times she met with ridicule. For example, a woman named Misme received Demeter in her home and offered her a drink, as was the custom of hospitality. Thirsty, Demeter consumed her drink quickly, and the son of Misme made fun of her, saying she should drink from a tub, not a cup. Angry with his rudeness, Demeter threw the dregs of her drink on the boy, turning him into a lizard.

## **Religion 101 Question**

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The Roman name for Demeter was Ceres. Since she was the goddess of grain, what English word do you think comes from "Ceres"?

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## **Cereal**

In Eleusis, Demeter transformed herself into an old woman and stopped to rest beside a well. A daughter of King Celeus invited her to take refreshment in her father's house. Demeter, pleased with the girl's kindness, agreed and followed her home.

At the king's house, Demeter was met with great hospitality from the king's daughter and the queen. Although Demeter sat in silence and would not taste food or drink for a long time, eventually a servant, Iambe, made her laugh with her jokes.

Demeter became a servant in the house of Celeus along with Iambe. The queen trusted Demeter and asked her to nurse her infant son Demophon. In caring for this baby, Demeter found comfort only a child could give her and decided to give the boy the gift of immortality. To do this, Demeter fed him ambrosia (the sacred food of the gods) during the day and, at night, placed him in the fire to burn away his mortality. But the queen saw the child in the fire and screamed in horror and alarm. Angry at the interruption, Demeter snatched the child from the flames and threw him on the floor.

Demeter changed back into her true form and explained that she would have made the boy immortal, but now he'd be subject to death like other humans. Then, she ordered the royal house to build her a temple and taught them the proper religious rites to perform in her honor. These rites became known as the Eleusinian Mysteries.

## **Still a Mystery: Eleusinian Rites**

The Eleusinian Mysteries were the most sacred ritual celebrations in ancient Greece. The people of Eleusis built a temple in Demeter's honor, where the Eleusinian Mysteries were observed.

The cult was a secret cult, and so it was considered a mystery religion, in which only initiates could participate in rituals and were sworn to secrecy about what happened during those rituals. At Eleusis, stipulations existed about who could be initiated. For example, any person who had ever shed blood could not join the cult. Women and slaves, however, were allowed to participate, even though other sects excluded these groups.

## **Other Mystery Religions**

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Besides the Eleusinian Mysteries, ancient mystery religions included the Dionysian cults, the Orphic cults, the Cabiri cults, and the Roman Mithraic cults. These cults were popular and received government support. Starting around the fourth century A.D., however, the spread of Christianity diminished interest in the ancient mystery religions.

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The Eleusinian initiates took their pledge of secrecy seriously and were careful to honor it. In fact, they did such a good job of maintaining silence that today's scholars do not know what happened in the Eleusinian rites, although there are many theories. There were two sets of rites: the Lesser Mysteries (which corresponded with the harvest) and the Greater Mysteries (which corresponded with the planting season and took ten days to complete). The Lesser Mysteries were probably held once a year,

while the Greater Mysteries may only have been celebrated every five years.

## **Persephone's Return**

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After wandering for a long time, Demeter consulted Zeus on the best way to retrieve her daughter. Because of the vast famine caused by her grief, the chief of the gods took pity on her and on the world's people and forced Hades to return the stolen girl. However, the Fates had decreed that if anyone consumed food in the Underworld, he would be condemned to spend eternity there. Persephone had eaten six (some say four) pomegranate seeds and was thus condemned to spend that number of months each year with Hades. During her absence, her mother mourned for her, and the earth was cold and barren. When Persephone returned to the surface, Demeter celebrated, and the earth became warm and fertile with crops.

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