Polytheism

Both nomadic and early agricultural peoples often held to a belief in many gods or goddesses, or polytheism. Among the oldest forms of polytheism are ancestor worship and the veneration of spirits. The ancient river valley civilizations in the Eastern Hemisphere as well as the early civilizations in the Americas believed in numerous gods and goddesses representing spirits or objects of nature. Other examples include totemism (identification of the self with animal symbols), shamanism (a belief in spirit worlds, common in Central Asia, Siberia and the Americas), “dreamtime” (a spiritual concept peculiar to the Australian aborigines), Shinto (native to Japan), and animism (a worship of life forces prevalent in Africa, the Pacific Islands, and parts of Asia). The Greeks and Romans also believed in an array of deities who represented natural phenomena but at the same time took on humanlike qualities.

Pantheons

Some civilizations developed elaborate pantheons of gods, each of whom had a distinct personality and function. Among the best-known are the Sumerian-Babylonian deities, shared by many peoples of the ancient Middle East; the Egyptian gods, whose worship was bound up with ritual preparation for the afterlife; the Olympian deities worshipped by the Greeks (and, in modified form, by the Romans); the Vedic gods of ancient India; the Teutonic and Norse gods worshipped in northern Europe; and the “celestial bureaucracy” of deities venerated in China.

Partial Monotheism: Zoroastrianism

Most of the polytheisms faded away, remaining as bodies of myth and legend. A few, like Hinduism and some forms of Buddhism, survive as major religions. One faith that represents a partial commitment to monotheism (worship of a single god or goddess) is Zoroastrianism, founded in ancient Persia by the priest Zoroaster (also Zarathustra), sometime in the 500s B.C.E. Basing his teachings on a collection of texts called the Avestas, Zoroaster proposed the worship of only one god, Ahura Mazda, the “wise lord.” Later, Ahura Mazda’s son Mithra was venerated as well. The enemy of Ahura Mazda was Ahriman, the god of darkness. Zoroastrianism flourished in Persia until the 600s C.E., when the expansion of Islam drove it out. It lingers today mainly in India, among the small religious community known as Parsis. However, basic concepts from Zoroastrianism are thought by most religious historians to have played a role in shaping later Jewish thought and early Christianity.
Zoroastrianism
(Source: Meredith, Susan, and N. J. Hewetson. The Usborne Book of World Religions. Usborne, 2005.)

Background
This monotheistic religion was a product of ancient Persian civilization. Many scholars think it possible that the early Hebrews got their ideas of monotheism from Zoroastrianism, though no direct link has been established.

Followers were called Parsis which meant “Persian.” Many were forced from Persia with the arrival of the Muslims in the 7th and 8th centuries and traveled to the Bombay area of India where a small community of Parsis still live.

Founder
Zarathustra is believed to have lived around 600 BCE though many think he may have lived as early as 1500 BCE.

Core Beliefs
➢ The world was originally perfect but became a cosmic battleground between the forces of good and evil. People have to choose to live a good or evil life. Those who choose good, simple lives will go to heaven and be united with God, but those who choose evil will go to hell.
➢ Zoroaster predicted that one day the earth would be restored to perfection again.
➢ Purity is of great importance and any form of decay should be avoided.
➢ Death with its bodily decay is seen as the temporary victory of evil.
➢ Death rituals include “towers of silence” where the dead are placed on towers so that the flesh can be consumed by birds, because the earth should not be contaminated with decaying flesh and cremation is not possible since fire is sacred.

Zoroastrianism

When the Aryan peoples set out southward from their original homeland in the vicinity of the Caspian Sea, one branch migrated into India while another established itself in ancient Iran. The earliest literature of these people was a collection of seventeen hymns called the Gathas. These hymns were reputedly authored by Zarathustra, the founder of the Zoroastrian faith. Later included in the Avesta, a wider canon of Zoroastrian sacred lore, the Gathas represent a profound theological and cosmological shift in the belief system of the Indo-Aryans instigated by the prophet, Zarathustra.

Similar to the religion of the Vedic Aryans, the religion of the Indo-Aryans of Iran and Afghanistan was a nature-oriented polytheistic faith officiated by a priestly class whose principal ritual practice involved tending the sacred fire. Some of its teachings were later transformed by Zarathustra. The many deities were organized into a hierarchy of divinities who served the one god, Ahura Mazda, in his eternal struggle against the forces of darkness. Zarathustra's reform brought a new monotheistic faith that is often regarded as having had a pronounced influence on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. While it is difficult to map the full extent of Zoroastrian influence, we may note many beliefs shared with the Abrahamic religions: a source of evil that works in opposition to God's will, clearly defined notions of heaven and hell, the existence of angels and demons, foretelling of a coming messiah, resurrection of the body, and final judgment.

Direct linkages of Zoroastrianism to Vedic religion are well established not only on linguistic grounds but also in priestly rites and regalia (such as the kusti, the “sacred thread” of Zoroastrian priests), and most clearly in the direct naming of divine beings who appear in both the Avesta and the Vedas. For example, the Asura, the "old" gods of the Vedas, are called Ahura ("Lord") in the Avesta. Other Vedic deities found in the Avesta include Vayu (the wind-god); Indra (the rain-god), and Varuna (the Vedic sky-god, who protected the social order, enforced the cosmic law, and is sometimes thought to be the basis of Ahura Mazda himself). But Indra, like some other gods mentioned in the Vedas, becomes despised in the hymns of the Avesta.
MITHRA
Perhaps the most intriguing shared deity is Mithra. Zoroastrians believed Mithra to be a divine judge, a guardian of crops and cattle and witness to sacred oaths. He was sometimes associated with the sun. In the Avesta, Mithra's name means "contract, ally or bond." In Sanskrit the name "Mitra" means "oath, treaty and friendship," and he was the Vedic god of friendship and social obligation.

About a century after Alexander the Great's conquest of Persia, the Parthians rose to power and maintained dominance in the region (B.C.E. 247-226 C.E.). Mithra became their chief deity. During this era of Greek influence Mithra's association with the sun led to his equation with the Greek god Apollo as an all-seeing god of truth. By the first century B.C.E. Mithraism had spread so vigorously throughout the Roman empire that it might well have become the dominant religion of Europe and the Middle East had it not been displaced by Christianity after Constantine. To the Zoroastrians, Mithra remained an (albeit important) servant of the one god, Ahura Mazda.

ZOROASTER OR ZARATHUSTRA
In Greek, the Persian name "Zarathustra" was rendered as "Zoroaster." It is from the Greek name of this prophet that the religion of his followers takes its name. Zarathustra was a religious reformer who lived in Iran perhaps in the sixth century B.C.E. Born into a priestly family, he married and had children. He then spent ten years in prayer and meditation roaming the mountains. When he was 30 years old he was wading in the river Dairya when he saw a wondrous light. An angelic being named "Good Thought" appeared before him and carried his soul to the Court of Ahura Mazda. There, Zarathustra realized that Ahura Mazda ("Lord of Wisdom") was the one eternal, uncreated God, beyond all others.

Upon his return, Zarathustra set out to reveal to a polytheistic society a new monotheistic cosmology. After the conversion of a local king, he made great inroads in converting a population sometimes hesitant to accept his radical new beliefs. Zarathustra is said to have lived to the age of 77, when an assassin stabbed him in the back as he was deep in prayer.

BELIEFS AND PRACTICES
Zarathustra's religious reforms went beyond monotheism. Zoroastrian cosmology is built around an ethical dualism, pitching the universal forces of good and evil against each other in a cosmic struggle. These two forces are the twin offspring of Ahura Mazda. He offers all of creation a choice regarding how to live, but cherishes truth and goodness above all. One of his twins came to embody truth; the other embraced falsehood. All must make a similar choice, deciding where they stand in the divine struggle. In this way, ethics and human destiny are irrevocably linked in the teachings of Zarathustra. This passages is from Yasna 30 in the Gathas:

Hear with your ears the best things. Reflect with clear purpose, each man for himself, on the two choices for decision, being alert indeed to declare yourselves for Him before the great requital.
Truly there are two primal Spirits, twins renowned to be in conflict. In thought and word, in act they are two: the better and the bad. And those who act well have chosen rightly between these two, not so the evildoers. And when these two Spirits first came together they created life and not-life, and how at the end Worst Existence shall be for the wicked, but (the House of) Best Purpose for the just man. (30.2-4)

When death comes, all souls must cross over the "Bridge of the Separator." It is a wide road for the righteous, but for the wicked it narrows to the width of a knife's edge. The wicked invariably fall into the abyss of torment below, while the righteous pass on and achieve heaven (the "House of Purpose").

As part of choosing the righteous life, Zoroastrians pray five times a day (perhaps because of Islamic influences). They may also go to the Fire Temple and have the priest recite special prayers. Temple priests, who maintain strict ritual purity, are clad in white and even cover their mouths with a special cloth so as not to desecrate the purity of the sacred fire with their breath. In these temples the sacred fire, a symbol of divine presence, power, and purity, is kept continuously burning.

The funerary practices of Zoroastrians are especially interesting. The deceased is clad in white holy vestments and a sacred cord and then wrapped in white linen. After friends and relatives pass by the body to pay their respects, it is carried to the top of the "Towers of Silence." These round funerary towers, traditionally placed on the tops of hills, expose corpses to vultures that circle in the sky above. After a few days the bones are gathered and deposited in a well-like structure.

MODERN ZOROASTRIANISM
The New York Times reported in 2006 that Zoroastrians numbered less than 190,000, but other estimates count fewer than 100,000 adherents. Approximately three-quarters of them live in India where they are called "Parsi." They are descendants of a mass migration of Zoroastrians to the Indian state of Gujarat in the century following the Islamic conquest of Iran in 651 C.E.. This community thrived in India and quickly rose to prominence. Because of their small numbers they are a fairly insular community even though respected in wider society for their philanthropy and trustworthiness in business. They denounce marriages outside the faith and seek no converts. Nevertheless, small communities of Zoroastrians have flourished in many places around the world.
Judaism
The First Monotheistic Faith

Judaism emerged among the Middle Eastern people known as the Hebrews (the terms Jews and Jewish were not commonly used until the 900s B.C.E.). It is generally considered to have been the world’s first monotheistic faith – that is, the first to devote itself to the worship of one deity alone. Along with Christianity, which grew out of it, Judaism forms a key part of the Western world’s ethical, intellectual, and cultural foundation.

The Hebrews traced their origins back to Abraham, who migrated from Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean about 2000 B.C.E. According to Judaic tradition, the patriarch Abraham, of the Sumerian city Ur, entered into a covenant with the god YHWH (often rendered as Yahweh or Jehovah). The history of this covenant relationship became the basis of the Torah, or the Hebrew scriptures. YHWH swore to make the Hebrews his “chosen people” and to lead them to the “promised land” of Canaan (present-day Israel). Abraham’s leadership was carried on by his son Isaac and grandson Jacob (who took the name Israel and whose sons are considered to be the founders of Israel’s Twelve Tribes).

Because of a serious famine in the land of Canaan, the descendants of Abraham migrated to Egypt, which had escaped famine. There the Hebrews remained for about 430 years, part of this time serving as slaves under the pharaohs. The Exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses was marked by the giving of the Ten Commandments (revealed to him on Mount Sinai), or moral law of the Hebrews. This exodus is remembered in the celebration of Passover, the most important holiday in the Jewish faith. Returning to the land of Canaan, or Palestine, they established a theocracy, or a government ruled directly by God.

After years of observing the governments of neighboring kingdoms, the Hebrews established the kingdom of Israel about 1000 B.C.E. under Saul. During the rule of Saul’s successor, David, Jerusalem became the capital of Israel. Many of the religious songs known collectively as the Psalms are attributed to him. Solomon (David’s son) increased Israel’s prosperity by taking advantage of its location at the crossroads of Middle Eastern trade routes. In Jerusalem, Solomon dedicated to YHWH the great Temple, the heart of Jewish religious life for centuries (the temple was destroyed twice – first by the Babylonians and later by the Romans).

After Solomon’s death, the Hebrew kingdom split into two lands: Israel and Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. Its inhabitants were scattered throughout the far reaches of the Assyrian empire, constituting the first Jewish diaspora, or exile. The southern kingdom, called Judah, endured until 586 B.C.E. Conquered by the Chaldeans (from approximately the same territory as the Babylonian Empire), the people of Judah were carried off into captivity in Babylon. When Cyrus conquered the Chaldeans and allowed the Jews to return to Palestine 70 years later, Palestine remained under Persian rule until it became the province of Judea under the Roman Empire in 63 C.E. In 132 C.E., after they rebelled against Roman rule, the Jews were spread throughout the Roman Empire in a second diaspora.

In the face of their conquerors, all of whom were polytheistic, the Jews, guided by prophets and rabbis (“teachers”), remained true to their monotheistic worship. They also came to believe that a savior, or Messiah (“anointed one”), would someday appear to free them from oppression. Unlike other religions of the period, notably Buddhism and Christianity, Judaism was not a missionary religion. Although the Jews had lived in Babylon for seventy years, with some Jews remaining after most of the former captives returned to Palestine, they did little to attempt to convert non-Jews. From the Jewish faith, however, would come another major world religion: Christianity.

In addition to its emphasis on worshipping a single god, Hebrew scripture outlines a strict code of conduct and places a high premium on righteous behavior. The same can be said about the Talmud (“Instruction”), the main collection of Jewish laws. Among the ancient Hebrews, legal practices operated on a retributive principle – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – that was common throughout the ancient Middle East. Dietary restrictions were strict, as were rules governing sexual practice. Although women were respected in the home, Hebrew society as a whole was patriarchal. As did most people of the eastern Mediterranean, the Hebrews practiced slavery on a limited basis, but Jewish scripture also insisted upon charity, social responsibility, and concern for the poor.
Christianity

Historically and philosophically, Christianity is a child of Judaism. The relationship between the two faiths has often been troubled, but always intimate. Both religions, in the form of the Judeo-Christian tradition, have formed the bedrock of Western culture for two millennia.

A key element of Judaism was the belief that God had promised to send the Jews a Messiah, or a savior from their sins. Some of the early Jews felt that that promise was fulfilled when Jesus was born in the Roman province of Judea about 4 to 6 B.C.E. As an adult, Jesus and his 12 disciples, or followers, went throughout the land of Judea, preaching the forgiveness of sins. Jesus taught devotion to God and love for fellow human beings. He earned a reputation of wisdom and the power to perform miracles, i.e., heal the sick. He maintained that charity, compassion, and forgiveness were of paramount importance. He reinforced this message in the Sermon on the Mount ("Blessed are the poor in spirit...") and in what came to be known as the Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"). Jesus was also called Christ, meaning "anointed."

When Jesus' teachings were feared as a threat to Roman and Jewish authority, cooperation between both Jewish and Roman leaders led to his trial (he was charged with blasphemy and treason) and death by crucifixion. Jesus' resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven fueled the zeal of his early followers. Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection are told in the Four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) written by his apostles.

The network of Roman roads facilitated the spread of Christianity throughout the empire. Missionaries, traders, and other travelers carried the Christian message of forgiveness of sins and an afterlife in heaven for those who believed in Jesus as their savior from sin. The greatest missionary of the early Christian church was Paul of Tarsus. A Roman citizen, he undertook three missionary journeys throughout the Roman Empire in the first century C.E. Accounts of Jesus’ life in addition to the missionary efforts of Paul and other followers of Jesus are found in the New Testament of the Christian Bible.

Several Roman emperors considered Christianity a threat to their rule. Although some, such as Diocletian, persecuted the Christian church, it continued to grow. Christians, much like the Jews, refused to honor the state cults or to worship the emperor as a god, and as a result, were often subject to campaigns of persecution. In 313, the Roman Emperor Constantine changed the position of earlier Roman emperors regarding Christianity. In the Edict of Milan he permitted the practice of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 381 under the Emperor Theodosius.

After its adoption as the state church of Rome, Christianity in the west began developing an organization under the leadership of the bishop of Rome, or pope. In addition to priests who served local churches, monks and nuns withdrew from society to devote their time to prayer and meditation. As it spread throughout the Roman world, Christianity gained popularity because of its appeal to all social classes, especially the poor. Jesus had been concerned with the growing cosmopolitan nature of Jewish society and preached a simple message of love and compassion. These ideas appealed to the lower class, the urban population and women. Women received new status as Christianity taught that men and women were equal in matters of faith.

After the fall of the western Roman Empire, Christianity spread to northern Europe, the Balkans, and Russia. However, doctrinal disagreements, geographic separation and the passage of time cause the Western and Eastern churches to grow apart after the 500s C.E.. In the Great Schism of 1054 C.E., the Western and Eastern churches broke with each other formally. Eastern Orthodoxy remained the faith of the Byzantine Empire, and was adopted by most Christians in the Middle East, Russia, Ukraine, and much of Eastern Europe. Roman Catholicism remained the favored form of Christianity in western Europe. During the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church provided Europeans with a sense of religious unity, preserved Latin manuscripts from the Roman era, and exerted a tremendous sway over secular and political affairs.

Christianity also spread to Mesopotamia, Iran, and even parts of India. Over time, the Southwest Asian Christians and the Western (or Roman) Christians grew apart. Southwest Asian Christians followed a form of the religion called Nestorian Christianity. The form continued to spread across the Silk Roads into Central Asia, India and China.

Another form of Christianity developed in Northern Africa and is called Coptic Christianity based on the Coptic language they use. Coptic Christian kingdoms existed in Ethiopia since the sixth century and the religion still thrives in Egypt and Ethiopia today.
Christianity

Background
During the reign of Augustus in a remote province of Judea around 4-6 BCE another of the world's great classical religions came into being when an itinerant preacher was born to a common Jewish carpenter – Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus grew up in Judea and around the age of 30 he went into the wilderness to fast and pray. During the fasting in the desert he overcame being tempted by the devil. He emerged from the wilderness and began to preach a message about the kingdom of god calling people to repentance and salvation based on a message of love. According to the gospel accounts Jesus ministry was filled with miraculous occurrences, compassion for the outcasts, and strong condemnation for the established religious organization.

His preaching angered the established Jewish religious leaders and Roman officials thought that his action and claims were seditious. In about 30 CE he was trialed by a Roman court and sentenced to death by crucifixion.

Founder-biography
Jesus of Nazareth called the Christ (Christ means “anointed one”)
Other notable personalities: the twelve disciples, the Apostle Paul

Sacred Texts
Bible
➢ Consists of two parts.
➢ First is the Old Testament, which chronicles the history of the ancient Jews and their covenant with a single God.
➢ Second is the New testament, which contains the four gospels detailing the life and ministry of Jesus as well as a multitude of letters written by Paul and other disciples to the churches in Asia Minor

Core beliefs/basic doctrines
➢ Jesus as the Son of God entered the human experience through the immaculate conception and the virgin birth
➢ Trinity: God the Father, Jesus the Son, the Holy Spirit each composing a unique part of the God-head with Jesus being the human incarnation of the one true God.
➢ Jesus message was of love and forgiveness with a focus on everlasting life for those who believe.
➢ Jesus as the Son of God was crucified to pay the penalty for the sin of humankind
➢ Jesus is believed to have been resurrected from the dead giving him supremacy over life and death
➢ Salvation for the believer is gained through faith in Christ’s death and resurrection

Impact on Society
➢ His disciples and followers believed that Jesus had resurrected from the dead and they continued to proclaim the message that Christ had preached – they became known as Christians
➢ Initially the religion was persecuted and many attempts were made by Roman leaders to crush the followers and stamp out its influence but early church leaders such as the apostle Paul continued to go from city to city telling people about Christ and the religion continued to grow
➢ Eventually Christianity would be embraced by the Emperor Constantine and be made the official religion of Rome
➢ Christianity is commonly accepted as one of the causes of the fall of the Roman Empire. The message of love and forgiveness, the call for equality among all people was a shift from the highly militaristic and self-indulgent final centuries of the Empire. The message of Christ provided spiritual comfort and hope for people at just the time when the established polytheistic religion had widely been discounted.

Spread/growth
Like Buddhism, Christianity was spread readily along the established trade routes of the Roman Empire. The Roman road system made travel from location to location very easy. Preachers such as Paul and the twelve disciples went from city to city and met in local Jewish synagogues and city centers preaching about Jesus and gaining a following.

Christianity would eventually rise to be the cornerstone religion of Western Civilization and spread through most of the known world.
Three main branches:
1. Roman Catholicism
2. Eastern (Greek) Orthodox
3. Protestants (including but not limited to: Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals)