

National Geographic Concise History of World Religions: An Illustrated Time Line

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The Concise History of World Religions is a fantastic journey with National Geographic, following the rise and fall of faiths across centuries and around the world. It's a book as beautiful as it is useful, as authoritative as it is entertaining. A book to buy, to give, to treasure.



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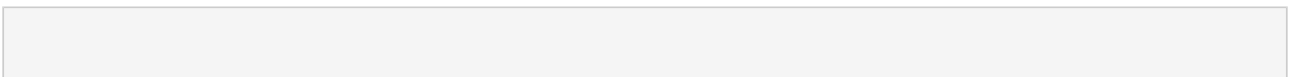
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Editorial Review

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The roots of religion lie in humanity's quest to comprehend the world and our place within it. How did we get here and what is the purpose of our lives? Is there an agency that controls them? Almost as soon as our ancestors became conscious of being human, they began to attempt to influence events in the world around them through magic. Some 30,000 years ago a prehistoric artist painting animals on the walls of Chauvet Cave in France added a curious figure with the lower half of a human and the upper half of a buffalo. Archaeologists suggest that this "sorcerer" may have played some part in rituals intended to ensure the success of the hunt; they believe that the cave paintings themselves probably had a similar purpose. Clearly, the community that created the Chauvet paintings—the oldest-known cave paintings in the world—believed in the existence of some kind of power that lay beyond the visible and the rational.

Such a belief lies squarely at the base of all modern and ancient faiths. Religion goes beyond magic to propose the existence of deities that have a direct influence on the course of human lives, for better or for worse. Not only that: faith depends on the belief that human intervention can change the behavior of these gods or spirits through propitiation—the act of worship—or through right belief and good conduct. Over time, the rituals of worship have become highly complex. Some involve making the gods happy with offerings and sacrifices; others with hymns and prayers; others by confessing and repenting sins.

The precise nature of the first religions is lost in prehistory. From comparison with later "undeveloped" faiths, however, they likely combined elements of magic with rites of supplication and invocation, possibly involving dancing and music. Such rituals were intended to help worshipers leave the confines of their own existence to come into contact with a more universal, supernatural level of being. Certain individuals who were felt to be particularly adept at communicating with the spirit world began to act as intermediaries between worshipers and their gods. Soon, these priests became the guardians of ritual and often the arbiters of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. The sites of worship, too, became more regular. Originally such sites were simply points in the landscape associated with the supernatural—a hilltop, say, or a particularly majestic tree—but increasingly buildings were constructed to house artifacts and images sacred to a deity or deities. As their design became more standardized, these temples became the focal points of worship; often they were the largest, most striking structures within a community.

Meanwhile, people began to explain elements of the world that they could not understand by telling stories about the actions of gods and goddesses. These myths mutated as cultures came into contact and their religions evolved, but the stories reflected the environments from which they emerged and came to embody the core values and beliefs of a people. In India, where the oldest of today's religions emerged between 2500 and 1500 B.C., there were many gods. The three major Hindu gods—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—are all embodiments of aspects of the origin of everything: Brahman.

In the Nile Valley, the myths of the ancient Egyptians told of animal-headed deities who controlled various aspects of life but whose equally important role was to preside over the afterlife. For the Greeks, the gods who lived high on Mount Olympus resembled their own aristocratic rulers, who were patrician, flush with power and given to self-indulgence, feuding, deception, and petty jealousies. The Romans inherited gods not only from the Greeks but also from the outer reaches of their empire, including esoteric cults from the east. Among the cults of the east were the beliefs of the peoples who lived in what would become known as the Holy Land. There, among the Judaeans, prophets preached the special bond that their rulers had made with

the almighty: an exalted status as chosen people in return for acknowledgment of the one true God. This monotheistic faith—Judaism—combined belief with politics, a combination that has remained popular. Around the start of the millennium Judaism would produce another religion dedicated to only one God, but this faith appealed also to non-Jews: Christianity.

Meanwhile India had also given birth to another religion that would endure for many centuries; this time one without gods. The teachings of Siddhartha Gautama provided individuals with a set of moral guidelines by which to live and a goal that was not union with a supernatural deity but a state of being beyond happiness or suffering, known as nirvana. The faith later developed the idea of bodhisattvas, semidivine figures who helped believers accomplish their own nirvana.

Like Hinduism, Buddhism incorporated the idea of reincarnation: individuals were reborn as higher or lower beings (even as animals), depending on their conduct during their previous incarnation, until the soul achieved a final escape. In the west, meanwhile, religions took their cue from the religions of Egypt, Greece, and Rome, arguing that death was the start of an afterlife in which the soul would receive either divine rewards in return for a good life or punishment for not following the path of right conduct.

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