

THE SIXTH CENTURY B.C. RELIGIOUS REVOLT: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CAUSES AND REPERCUSSIONS

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The world today is marked by numerous different religions all seeking to provide explanation and remedy to the condition of suffering that man finds himself in. Systems of belief that still thrive today, such as classical philosophy, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Atheism, Vedantic Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, all have their roots in the period of the sixth century B.C., a time of great turmoil on a worldwide scale. The best historical and archaeological evidence points to the fact that man was originally monotheistic but that the period between 2000 and 500 B.C. saw a near-universal degeneration of that religion into polytheism and ritualism administered and controlled by a powerful aristocracy of priests. The aforementioned religions and philosophies, which still thrive to one degree or another today, were all birthed through a revolt against this aristocracy. It is only reasonable to speculate about the possibility of some over-arching explanation for this sudden explosion of such enduring faiths. This paper will provide a broad overview of the basic tenets of each system which subsequently arose and briefly attempt to explore the potential causes of this revolt.

Original Monotheism and the Degeneration into Ritualism and Priestcraft

The model of original monotheism posits that the original religion of man was that of the worship of one personal God, who was often called a “sky-God,” who had great knowledge and power, created the world and humans, and holds humans morally accountable to Him. According to the model, humans became alienated from the one true God, who consequently provided a

method of reconciliation through animal sacrifice.¹ This model argues that fetishism, animism, polytheism and the like are degenerations from an original monotheism.

Catholic anthropologist Wilhelm Schmidt provided the scholarly documentation to bolster the claims of original monotheism.² The eminent archaeologist William F. Albright said of Schmidt that “there can no longer be any doubt that [he] has successfully disproved the simple evolutionary progression first set up by the positivist Comte, fetishism – polytheism – monotheism, or Tylor’s animism – polytheism – monotheism.”³ Evidence of the worship of a sovereign “sky-God” exists in cultures all over the world. Romanian scholar Mircea Eliade, not himself an original monotheist, nevertheless documents an almost universal belief in a celestial divine Creator.⁴

Between the approximate dates of 2000 and 500 B.C., however, mankind’s religion degenerated into magic and ritual dominated by what author Robert Brow calls “priestcraft,” or an elite aristocracy who “owned” the religion and controlled the people. Brow finds the greatest example of this in the Hindu Brahmins, the professional and hereditary priesthood who were in charge of all sacrificial duties and who could alone procure the favor of the gods for the benefit of not just individuals but of governments also.⁵ By the time of the Rig-Veda (c.1500 B.C), Dyaus Pitar, the original “sky-God,” had already been usurped by a pantheon of gods. As the number of gods increased, so did the complexity of the rituals and consequently the power and

¹ Winfred Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998): 32-33

² *Ibid.*, 33.

³ William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1940), 171.

⁴ Corduan, 23; Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: World Publishing, 1972), 38; see also Acts 14:17.

⁵ Robert Brow, *Religion: Origins and Ideas* (Great Britain: InterVarsity Press, 1966), 21.

control of the priests.⁶ This priestcraft did not only take root in Indian religion. The civilizations in Egypt and Mesopotamia also became subject to a priestly aristocracy that exhibited suffocating control over all.⁷ Further east, we find the same pattern in the ancient religion of the Chinese.⁸

Thus, from the Near East to the Far East, the cradle of ancient civilization, the religion of man had grossly degenerated from a more or less pure monotheism into a ritualistic polytheism. This degeneration necessitated the rise of a powerful priestcraft to expertly “[facilitate] the spiritual observances of the common people.”⁹ In fact, the “more complicated the forms of worship, the more essential it was to have the expert.”¹⁰ By about 600 B.C, however, revolt and upheaval on a world-wide scale brought about permanent changes among the world’s religions.

Worldwide Religious Reform during the Sixth Century B.C.

The sixth century B.C. witnessed a worldwide religious reform with repercussions still felt today over nearly the entire globe. Bertrand Russell refers to the sweeping religious revival in Hellas that gave rise to the conflict between science and religion.¹¹ John Hick labels this century the “axial period in which the seminal moments of religious experience occurred in each of the four principle centres of civilization – Greece, the Near East, India, and China – out of

⁶ Corduan, 192-193, 197.

⁷ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), 4, emphasis added.

⁸ Corduan, 282-283; Brow, 16-17.

⁹ Corduan, 36.

¹⁰ Raymond Hammer, *Roots: The Development of Hindu Religion*, R. Pierce Beaver and others, eds., *Eerdmans’ Handbook to World Religions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman’s Publishing, 1983), 175.

¹¹ Russell, 22-23.

which the higher religions have come.”¹² Brow says that this sixth century revolt “shattered the power of the old religions.”¹³

Major international upheaval was transpiring simultaneous to the religious turmoil, as Assyria fell to the Babylonians in 612 B.C., and subsequently Babylon fell to the Medes and Persians in 538 B.C. The commercial cities of the West underwent important economic and political developments during this period.¹⁴ To the east in India, similar movements were taking shape. Thomas Berry notes that “in India this was the period of the Upanishads, of Mahavira, and of Buddha [and] the classical formulations of the Eurasian world were being established.”¹⁵ Indeed, this epoch in man’s history witnessed a time of great turmoil and discontent with the traditional religions as ritualism and the oppression of the priestcraft had run its course. The world was in a religious crisis and as we will see, many voices arose from this sea of turmoil that offered various answers to the pitiful condition man found himself in. This is the period that produced the foundations of Greek philosophy in the West, Judaism in Palestine, Zoroastrianism in Persia, Vedantic Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Materialism in India, and Daoism and Confucianism in China. There were, in fact, five great types of reform that took root in this period, all of which remain to this day. Only one of these reforms, Judaism, was a return to monotheism. The other four, Ethicism, Atheism, Monism and Buddhism, all sought refuge in

¹² John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaith ed., *Christianity and the World Religions* (Great Britain: Fount Paperbacks, 1980), 182.

¹³ Brow, 27. Aware of the significance of this watershed century, Brow devotes a whole chapter to the subject in this book.

¹⁴ Russell, 24.

¹⁵ Thomas Berry, *Religions of India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 119-120. Berry also comments that “in the midst of all this vital activity India was having its most intense experience of the sorrow inherent in the human condition ... (and that) a life solution was needed, a solution that would be true liberation.” 121.

vain philosophy, human effort, or mysticism, far removed from the worship of a sovereign God as found in Israel.¹⁶

The Reform of Monotheism - Judaism

According to the Hebrew Scriptures, Israel was to be the one nation that remained true to God (Deut. 6:4-5). Though the Gentiles turned their back on the one true God and degenerated into polytheistic ritualism, Israel was to be a light and a witness to the nations of the “sky-God” who they knew personally by His covenant name Yahweh. Approximately 500 years after God originally called Abram out of a pagan background, and after years of bondage and slavery in Egypt, God raised up the prophet Moses through whom He rescued Israel from their oppression and delivered to them the moral, civil, and ceremonial laws by which God was to be worshipped and the nation was to be governed. Israel’s flight from Egypt and subsequent wanderings in the Sinai peninsula proved to be a foreshadowing of their future tendency to be like the Gentiles and “play the harlot” with other gods (e.g. Exod. 32).¹⁷ After being established in the land of Canaan through the leadership of Joshua, Israel quickly degenerated into idolatry as Joshua’s God-fearing generation died out (Judg. 2:10-17). This idolatry allowed for the rise of a corrupted priesthood who abandoned the pure worship of Yahweh for a more earth-bound ritualism (Judg. 17:13; 18:4; 1 Sam. 2:12-17). In the tenth century B.C., a relatively short-lived reformation took place namely because of the influence of King David. His son and successor Solomon, however, was eventually led astray to the worship of other gods (1 Kings 11:1-4).

¹⁶ Brow, 36.

¹⁷ All scripture references are taken from the *Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV)*. Copyright 1990, 1995, by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

At the time of Solomon's death around 930 B.C., the kingdom was divided into the northern Israel and southern Judah. The people of the northern kingdom would never return to pure monotheism despite the efforts of such prophets as Elijah and Isaiah (e.g. 1 Kings 18:16-40). Instead, the northern kingdom provoked God with 200 years of near unbroken idolatry despite the pleadings of God to abandon their polytheism and ritualism (see 1 Chron. 5:25; Hos. 9:1; Is. 1:11-17). Eventually, in fulfillment of His promise to judge the nation if they would not repent, God sent Assyria against Israel and in 722 B.C. they were carried into a captivity from which they would never return en masse (2 Kings 17:6-7).

The southern kingdom of Judah fared only slightly better, benefiting from several righteous kings who brought temporary reform to the wayward nation. The provocation of King Manasseh, however, irreversibly aroused God's anger against His people (2 Chron. 33:12-13; 2 Kings 23:26). Even the sweeping reform of Manasseh's grandson Josiah could not prevent the eventual demise of the nation. Judah, like Israel, had degenerated into a nation of ritualistic idolaters like all the nations around them had done centuries before. Judah failed, just like Israel, to be a monotheistic light to the polytheistic Gentile nations that surrounded her. In 586 B.C. God made good on his promise to disperse them for their spiritual harlotry by bringing the Babylonians against them to carry them off to exile (2 Kings 24:2).

By the end of the seventy years of exile when the Jews were first permitted by Cyrus to return to their land, Israel had been forever purged of her spiritual harlotry. Despite their many continuing problems, "monotheistic faith...was no longer at risk in Jewish society."¹⁸ The exile forever changed the face of Israel, necessarily causing a break from Israel's tribal past.¹⁹ It is

¹⁸ Corduan, 50.

¹⁹ Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 82.

during this period that the “Second Commonwealth of Israel” or “Judaism” arose.²⁰ Ordinary Jews, compelled to remain distinct from their “host” nations, were “disciplined into the regular practice of their religion. Circumcision...was insisted upon rigorously...[and] the concept of the Sabbath...became the focus of the Jewish week.”²¹

While in exile, they had no temple in which to perform the sacrifices, so instead, “houses of prayer, called synagogues, were established...the rabbi grew in importance...and simultaneously the priests lost importance.”²² The scribe took on immense importance as Israel “turned to their writings – their laws, and the records of their past.” Indeed, “for a time ... [the scribes] were more important than the priests, who had no temple to underline their glory and indispensability.”²³

Though the post-exilic prophet Malachi records God’s continuing complaints against His covenant-breaking people, there is a renewed spirit of brokenness in Judaism not evident just prior to the sixth-century exile (2 Chron. 36:15-16). Both Ezra and Nehemiah record occasions of repentance and brokenness as the people became acutely aware of the consequences of their sins and the sins of their fathers (see Ezra 3:11-13, 10:1; Neh. 8:3-6, 9:6, 34, 38). Though Judaism would eventually digress into a highly legalistic religion that rejected its Messiah some 500 years later, they did undergo a monotheistic reform in the sixth century B.C. and were forever purged of their habitual descent into spiritual harlotry.

²⁰ Geoffrey Cowling, *Story of a Nation*, Eerdmans’ Handbook, 280.

²¹ Johnson, 83.

²² Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Handbook of Today’s Religions* (San Bernardino: Here’s Life Publishers, 1991), 366.

²³ Johnson, 82.

The Three Reforms of Ethicism

Zoroastrianism

Although the possible dates for Zoroaster are disputed among scholars, placement in the sixth century B.C. is the most common. Also debated is whether Zoroaster was a monotheist or a dualist.²⁴ Corduan argues that Zoroaster was monotheistic; others are not as convinced.²⁵ Brow contends that at the very least, “it is certainly hard to believe that Israel’s Monotheism had no influence on him.”²⁶ Historian Edwin Yamauchi remarks that the monotheistic interpretation faces the problem of explaining the origin of evil in Zoroastrian thought.²⁷ Despite any debate about his ultimate cosmology, however, it is abundantly evident that Zoroaster preached the worship of Ahuramazda, “the wise lord.”²⁸ Ahuramazda is at least closely associated with the God of original monotheism, being the all-knowing Creator who is the author of moral standards.²⁹

Brow labels Zoroaster a “Unitarian” reformer who “opposed the ancient Persian priesthood and the sacrificial worship which they conducted.” He defines Unitarianism “as a stress on God as Creator and Lord without the sacrificial element of biblical Theism. This means that man stands directly before God in his own righteousness.”³⁰

²⁴ Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 438.

²⁵ Corduan, 118-119; Dean C. Halverson general editor, *The Compact Guide to World Religions* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996), 15. Halverson categorizes Zoroastrianism as a “Competing Dualism.”

²⁶ Brow, 56.

²⁷ Yamauchi, 437.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 417-418.

²⁹ Corduan, 119.

³⁰ Brow, 55-56.

Yamauchi writes that “Zoroaster preached an ethical dualism, teaching that each man must choose between righteousness and the Lie.”³¹ So even if Zoroaster’s reform was not purely monotheistic, it was undoubtedly a reaction to ritualism.

Zoroaster’s ethicism rejected any priestly privileges.³² He preached a personal religion in which all, including women and priests, had a personal responsibility to choose between good and evil, a choice with grave eternal consequences.³³ Ahuramazda himself could not intervene in a person’s salvation which was based solely on autonomously made ethical decisions.³⁴ But not only is one’s personal destiny sealed by the ethical choices he makes, but the very cosmic victory of Ahuramazda is at stake.³⁵

A good summary statement of the ethicism of Zoroaster is “good thought, good word, good deed.”³⁶ Zoroastrianism continues to be practiced to this day with about 189,000 adherents, mainly in Iran.³⁷

Jainism

Born into India’s warrior class, Jainism’s founder Mahavira began preaching in the fertile religious soil of Vedic Hinduism’s intense despair over the human condition.³⁸ Like Zoroaster and Confucius, his reform was one of ethicism.³⁹ His biography strikingly resembles that of Gautama Buddha’s, and many scholars have assumed a common legend.⁴⁰ Also like Gautama, he

³¹ Yamauchi, 417-418.

³² Brow, 55.

³³ John Hinnells, *The Cosmic Battle: Zoroastrianism*, Eerdmans’ Handbook, 81.

³⁴ Yamauchi, 443.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 439, emphasis added.

³⁶ George W. Braswell Jr., *Understanding World Religions* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 142.

³⁷ Corduan, 113.

³⁸ Berry, 120-121; Myrtle Langley, *Respect for All Life: Jainism*, Eerdmans’ Handbook, 207.

³⁹ Brow, 31.

⁴⁰ Langley, *Jainism*, Eerdmans’ Handbook, 208; Corduan, 252.

rejected the caste system, thus removing himself from the pale of Hindu orthodoxy.⁴¹

Mahavira probably attracted many followers who were simply seeking insulation from the Brahmin sphere of influence.⁴²

Mahavira's teaching was not about gods. Though he believed that the gods exist, he saw no role for them in one's quest for enlightenment.⁴³ Mahavira, because of his Hindu roots, held firmly to the beliefs of *karma* and *samsara*.⁴⁴ His ethicism was simply a reformed way of attaining *moksha*, not through ritualism as in the Vedic Hinduism he reacted against, but through right knowledge, right faith, and right conduct.⁴⁵ Priest, sacrifices, and even God are not necessary; Jainism stressed moksha, or release from the cycled of birth-death-rebirth, through good deeds.⁴⁶

Mahavira did not believe in one universal world soul, or monism.⁴⁷ In contrast to Vedantic Hinduism, Jainism affirmed a plurality of beings with each soul being seen as an entity in its own right.⁴⁸ In step with his extreme view of plurality, Mahavira introduced to India the concept of *ahimsa* (no harming). Killing *anything* resulted in an unwanted accumulation of bad karma. Thus, Jains were the first to require vegetarianism.⁴⁹

Since even *good* karma "bound the individual to the cycle of rebirth . . . [Mahavira] taught a complete withdrawal from the world, involving withdrawal from worldly affairs and the

⁴¹ Braswell, 138; Ninian Smart, *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969), 23. Smart qualifies Indian orthodoxy as "not in subscribing to such a particular doctrinal belief, but rather in accepting the validity of the Hindu scriptures." Also, "orthodoxy goes together with, not so much correct belief, as right practice."

⁴² Corduan, 253.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 257. Note similarity to Buddhism again.

⁴⁴ McDowell and Stewart, 297.

⁴⁵ Langley, *Jainism*, Eerdmans' Handbook, 208. Note similarity to Zoroastrianism.

⁴⁶ Brow, 31.

⁴⁷ Corduan, 253.

⁴⁸ Hammer, *Hindu Religion*, Eerdmans' Handbook, 177-179.

⁴⁹ Brow, 31.

practice of severe austerities.”⁵⁰ The final objective of Jainism “is that of complete quietude of inward existence, the attainment of supreme wisdom, and a corresponding power over the entire order of reality.”⁵¹ It is virtually impossible to attain moksha apart from becoming a monk and accepting the vows of non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, chastity, and renouncing all love for anything or any person.⁵² It is reported that Mahavira and his followers even renounced *clothing*, although that is disputed among the present-day Jains who number roughly five million, mostly in India.⁵³

Confucianism

In Confucius’ day, China stood at a crossroads, similar to that of sixth-century India and Persia.⁵⁴ After centuries of feudalism and wars among competing states agitated by regionalistic polytheism, Confucius sought a unifying religion that would take the place of the ritualistic one that had evolved. Brow remarks that “in the sixth century BC the joint attack of Taoism and Confucianism virtually obliterated the ancient Chinese priestly and sacrificial worship.”⁵⁵

Over the centuries, Chinese religion had degenerated from the worship of the one God *Shang-ti* to a ritualism controlled by the priests. Confucius did not seek to restore the ancient religion as much as he sought to restore the unity and order to his nation that it had formerly enjoyed.⁵⁶ He found in the ancient Chou period, an “almost ideal time of Chinese unity, peace,

⁵⁰ Braswell, 138.

⁵¹ Berry, 124-125.

⁵² Brow, 49; Langley, *Jainism*, Eerdmans’ Handbook, 215.

⁵³ Corduan, 252.

⁵⁴ H.G. Creel, *Confucius and the Chinese Way* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 12.

⁵⁵ Brow, 16-17.

⁵⁶ Creel, 143.

and justice.”⁵⁷ Though his memory of the glory of the Chou dynasty was likely exaggerated, there seems to have been at that time a considerable degree of political morality. It was a return to that political morality and national unity that Confucius sought. And he sought it through ethicism, “a rigid conservatism [imbued] into Chinese society that included social stratification and codes governing dress, ritual and communication.”⁵⁸

Though Confucius and Lao-zi, founder of Daoism, were rough contemporaries, their philosophies greatly differed. As explained by author John Berthrong, “The great Taoist religion is, in many ways, the opposite of Confucianism. Confucianism seeks to perfect men and women within the world, a goal of the secular as sacred. Taoism prefers to turn away from society to the contemplation of nature, seeking fulfillment in the spontaneous and ‘trans-ethical’ ...The goal of the Confucian was to become a sage, a servant of society. The goal of the Taoist was to become an immortal (*a hsien*).”⁵⁹

Confucius is best known for his moral philosophy, which is nevertheless grounded in his inherited religion,⁶⁰ yet he paid little attention to spiritual matters. He did, however, find great value in “ceremony and ritual...so that an individual at whatever age and state of life would know exactly what was expected and what to do.”⁶¹ Confucianism was a “civil religion” based upon an ethical code which sought to [steer] a middle course between the quietism of the Daoists, the authoritarianism of the legalists and the personalism of the Mohists.” Corduan notes

⁵⁷ Creel, 13.

⁵⁸ Corduan, 296.

⁵⁹ John Berthrong, *Sages and Immortals: Chinese Religions*, Eerdmans’ Handbook, 251.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁶¹ Braswell, 72.

that “Confucius wanted all people to return to the basic model of an ideal state as it was supposedly lived out in a golden age a long time ago under the original ideal emperor.”⁶²

The core concept in Confucianism is the concept of *ren*, or seeking the welfare of other people. A correspondent teaching, *li*, is the principle of doing the right thing at the right time. An ideal society results with the proper combining of *ren* and *li*. Thus, in contrast to Daoism’s passivity, action is necessary to attain the Dao.⁶³

Confucianism endures today, along with Buddhism, Daoism, and tradition, as one of four ingredients that makes up Chinese popular religion, thus directly affecting over one-fifth of the world’s population.

The Reform of Atheism

In sixth-century Indian philosophy, orthodoxy was defined not such much in subscribing to particular doctrinal tenets as much as accepting the inspiration of the Vedas and the caste system.⁶⁴ The Carvaka philosophy challenged the ritualistic, priest-centered Vedic Hinduism that depended so heavily on those tenets. Author Thomas Berry provides the following summation of Carvaka philosophy:

The Carvaka philosophy...was committed to unmitigated materialism. It was thoroughly opposed to any religious or spiritual attitude, to any ascetic discipline. According to this doctrine, only the phenomenal world exists. There is no noumenal world, hence no liberation from the present life experience. Any bliss that man hopes for must be achieved within the context of life just as it is perceived. The idea of any true moral virtue is absent from this tradition. There is no satisfying basis for asceticism or any form of self-denial; there is only the emotional experience of the senses to be enjoyed while man is upon earth.⁶⁵

⁶² Corduan, 293.

⁶³ Ibid., 293-294.

⁶⁴ Smart, 23.

⁶⁵ Berry, 123-124.

This materialistic, anti-religious philosophy denied such long-held Indian beliefs as the existence of God, rebirth, and the efficacy of ritual.⁶⁶ Unlike many of the other reform movements of the sixth century, Carvaka lacked any charismatic leadership. This was an era of speculative ferment in which materialistic doctrines, as a backlash against the established religious order, could at least temporarily flourish without charismatic leadership.⁶⁷

The three main tendencies of this militant materialism were an anti-religious (anti-Vedic) sentiment which sought to undermine traditional theological beliefs, a naturalistic speculation about the physical world, and a philosophical skepticism used to support anti-religious arguments.⁶⁸ The things and events in the world could be explained according to the elements of earth, water, fire and air, which is remarkably similar to early Greek philosophy.⁶⁹ Though this materialism did not endure long in religiously-inclined India, its revolt against the priestcraft foreshadowed the Epicureans in Greece and the Western atheists of our day and provided for some an escape from ritualism.⁷⁰

The Three Reforms of Monism

Vedantic Hinduism

Vedic Hinduism, based on the Vedas, developed around 1500 B.C. in a mixture of the indigenous Indus Valley people with the conquering Aryan people. Between the years 800 and 500 B.C., the Vedantic scriptures, the *Upanishads*, were composed.⁷¹ Whereas a “way of works”

⁶⁶ Smart, 31.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 31,70.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 70.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 71; Russell, 43.

⁷⁰ Brow, 29.

⁷¹ All references to the Upanishads are from *The Upanishads: Translations from the Sanskrit*, With an Introduction by Juan Mascaro (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965).

based on rituals administered by the professional priests characterized the Vedic phase of Hinduism, the phase known as the “way of knowledge,” emphasized union with the One, Brahman, gained through wisdom (*jnana*).⁷² Like Carvaka materialism, Vedantic Hinduism has no one charismatic figure to look to as the leader of the movement.

Brahman, the impersonal “world soul” occupies the central place in upanishadic thought.⁷³ While the ultimate goal was still release from *samsara* into the blissful state of *nirvana*, no longer was ritual seen as the best method to gain moksha. Rather, the *Upanishads* taught “liberation from the human condition through a saving vision. This enables man to realize his identity with Brahman, the Absolute Reality, Supreme Truth, Complete Bliss.”⁷⁴ One must discover that there is but one Ultimate Reality, Brahman. All else is *maya*, or illusion.⁷⁵ By gaining this wisdom, one comes to realize that his “true self,” or *atman*, is identical to Brahman. The recurrent phrase in the *Upanishads* is “*tat tvam asi*,” or “Thou art that.” In other words, the “deepest subjective reality of man is identical with the final objective reality...To deny Brahman is to deny a person’s own being.”⁷⁶ When that knowledge is gained, the devotee becomes one with Brahman and attains moksha, thereby ending the cycle of birth-death-rebirth.⁷⁷ Yoga was the discipline developed to gain moksha.⁷⁸

Vedantic Hinduism is *monistic*. It recognizes only one true Being: Brahman.⁷⁹ All else just appears to be real, but it is in fact illusion. Author David Burnett explains that in

⁷² Corduan, 190, 198; David Burnett, *Clash of Worlds: A Christian’s Handbook on Cultures, World Religions, and Evangelism* (Nashville: Oliver-Nelson Books, 1992), 75-76.

⁷³ Berry, 25.

⁷⁴ Berry, 24, 30; Braswell, 27; see Kena Upanishad part 1 and 2.

⁷⁵ Corduan, 198; Katha Upanishad part 4.

⁷⁶ Berry, 25-26; Taittiriya Upanishad 2.6.

⁷⁷ Katha Upanishad 2.6.

⁷⁸ Brow, 33.

⁷⁹ Katha Upanishad 4; Maitri Upanishad 6.17.

upanishadic, monistic Hinduism “there is no absolute morality. This does not mean that Hindu philosophers would deny morality, but stress the pursuit of the “Three Aims” – religious merit, wealth, and pleasure.”⁸⁰

Vedanta did not reject the caste system, so of course only those of the highest birth could hope that their next death would be their last. Those whose previous sins determined their rebirth into a lower caste must be careful to not accrue any bad karma that would further aggravate their near-hopeless life situation. Of course, one can build up “good karma,” not by doing good deeds like helping old ladies cross the street but by strictly adhering to the rules of their caste. This led to the notion of passivity and non-violence.⁸¹

Out of the near 800 million Hindus in the world today, many still practice Vedanta, though its popularity has been surpassed by the more popular “way of devotion,” a post-Christian development.

Daoism (Taoism)

Daoism, allegedly founded by Lao-zi, sprung up alongside Confucianism in the embattled China of the sixth-century B.C. Lao-zi was reportedly the author of the *Dao-de-jing*, “the book of the way and its power.”⁸² It is more likely, however, that Lao-zi’s wisdom recorded in the book was written after his death by his followers.⁸³

The concept of the Dao, or “the way,” has long been a belief in Chinese thought. Daoism, as noted earlier, sought to achieve the Dao in ways often opposite from its rival, Confucianism.

⁸⁰ Burnett, 78.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² All references to the *Tao Te Ching* (TTC) are to *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, translated with an introduction by D.C. Lau (London: Penguin Books, 1963).

⁸³ Corduan, 286.

As Corduan notes, “The point of Daoism is that...[the Dao]...cannot be found, [either] through words [or] through actions. It must reveal itself. Anything that anyone does or says only obscures the Dao.”⁸⁴ Again, in contradistinction to Confucius’ civil religion, Daoism teaches that “the more a government does, the worse the situation becomes.”⁸⁵

Metaphysically, Daoism is considered by Dean Halverson as a “balancing dualism” rather than a monism. The point of Daoism, he says, is to live in alignment with the ways of nature. God, in this system, is not the impersonal “One” of Hinduism but “two opposing but interacting and balancing forces.”⁸⁶ Brow, on the other hand, identifies four philosophical categories within the spectrum of monism, absolute and modified pantheism, and absolute and modified monism. He contends that Daoism should be considered somewhere between an absolute and a modified pantheism, thus within the spectrum of monism.⁸⁷ At the very least, Daoism can be considered a “practical monism.” It seeks a return to the state of the “uncarved block,” or becoming one with nature apart from trying to manipulate one’s condition.⁸⁸ The art of becoming one with nature is called *wu-wei*, or “actionless action.”⁸⁹ The Dao will manifest itself when people “abandon all attempts to force a better life for themselves or for society” and thereby “natural harmony, for people and society” will result.⁹⁰ Daoism, like Confucianism and Buddhism, is one of the ingredients that comprises popular Chinese religion and survives as such to this day.

⁸⁴ Corduan, 286; TTC, Book 1, XVI 37; XIX 43a,44; XXIX 66.

⁸⁵ Corduan, 287; TTC Book 1, XVII 39.

⁸⁶ Halverson, 15; TTC Book 1 II 5; XXVIII 63; Book 2 XLII 94.

⁸⁷ Brow, 80-81.

⁸⁸ Corduan, 287; TTC, Book 1, XXXVII 81.

⁸⁹ Corduan, 287; TTC, Book 2, LVII 133.

⁹⁰ Corduan, 288.

Parmenides' Monism

The religious reform of the sixth-century was also experienced in Asia Minor and Greece. Bertrand Russell notes that the Milesian school, the earliest Greek philosophy, “was brought into existence by the contact of the Greek mind with Babylonia and Egypt.”⁹¹ Author Eduard Zeller comments that sixth-century B.C. Greece witnessed the “emancipation of the individual” from the oppression of established religions.⁹² Similar to what was occurring in other movements, the established priestcraft of the day was overturned and *individuals* began to take on greater importance. In Greece, this emancipation led to what Zeller calls a “curious twilight of religion and philosophy.”⁹³ He writes that, “Religion seemed to have entered upon a critical stage. The old popular cults no longer satisfied the new strong emotions and the necessity for a personal relation between the individual man and his God made itself felt.”⁹⁴ It was in the early 600’s that the prophet Epimenides, whom the Apostle Paul quoted in Titus 1:12, made his appearance. Zeller explains that “[Epimenides], like other similar figures of these times, was credited with ecstatic trances during which he was supposed to receive divine revelations.... Spirit-conjuring, too, a practice which was quite foreign to the Homeric world...achieved in this time wide-spread popularity....Thus the ground was prepared for a *new religion independent of the traditional cults*, which came from abroad, from Thrace or Lydia and won an entrance to the Greek world.”⁹⁵

Parmenides made his entrance in the late sixth century, making him a contemporary of Buddha, Confucius, Lao-zi, Mahavira, Zoroaster, and many of the Hebrew prophets.

⁹¹ Russell, 28.

⁹² Eduard Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1962), 27.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30, emphasis added.

Parmenides' monism took as its starting point Being in contrast to Not-Being. He would say that "Only Being is, Not-Being is not and cannot be thought." Zeller expounds that "from this fundamental idea [Parmenides] derived all his dogmas on the nature of Being. Being cannot have a beginning or cease to be; for it cannot be created from Not-Being or reduced to Not-Being; it was never and never will be, but is now, continuous and undivided. It is indivisible, since it is what it is everywhere the same, and there is nothing by which it could be divided."⁹⁶

Christian apologist Norman Geisler says that for Parmenides, "there cannot be more than one thing (absolute monism). For if there were two things, then they would have to differ. But for things to differ, they must differ either by being or by non-being. But since being is that which makes them identical they cannot differ by being. Nor, on the other hand, can they differ by non-being, for non-being is nothing, and to differ by nothing is not to differ at all. Hence, for Parmenides there cannot be a plurality of beings but only one single indivisible being – a rigid monism."⁹⁷

Bertrand Russell notes that Parmenides "considered the senses deceptive, and condemned the multitude of sensible things as mere illusion. The only true being is 'the One,' which is infinite and indivisible."⁹⁸ Parmenides' historical significance is found in the fact that he invented a form of metaphysical argument that, in one form or another, is to be found in most subsequent metaphysicians down to and including Hegel.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Ibid., 65.

⁹⁷ Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume One: Prolegomena and Bibliology* (copyright by Norman L. Geisler, 2000), 7.

⁹⁸ Russell, 48.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Though Parmenides' monism received opposition from the Atomists, Platonists and Aristotelians, not until Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century was it satisfactorily refuted.¹⁰⁰ The rise of Greek philosophy and Parmenides' monism further attests to the revolt against priestcraft evident in the sixth century B.C.

The Reform of Buddhism

Sixth century B.C. India witnessed a ferment of wandering teachers, subsisting on alms, who tended to form sects or schools of religious thought. At its outset, Buddhism was one such sect.¹⁰¹ Like Mahavira of Jainism, Buddhism's founder Siddhartha Gautama was born into India's warrior class. After rejecting his princely upbringing because of a shocking experience with the reality of human suffering, Gautama set out to find "enlightenment" that would give him answers about how to deal with this universal tragedy. Contrary to both his former life of luxury and Mahavira's extreme asceticism, Gautama discovered a "middle way" that steered clear of all extremes.¹⁰²

Though Gautama adopted from Hinduism the beliefs of samsara, karma, and ultimate reality (*non*-reality in Buddhism), he also differed on several points, not the least of which was his rejection of Vedic authority and the caste system. Instead of Vedantic "ultimate self," Buddha taught the "ultimate *non*-self" (*anatman*). Rather than ultimate reality, he taught ultimate *non*-reality. Vedanta taught that a person had to come to realize his oneness with Brahman. Buddha taught that enlightenment or salvation occurs when one "comes to realize his place of non-self in

¹⁰⁰ Geisler, 8-13.

¹⁰¹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *Introducing Buddhism* (New York: Friendship Press, 1956), 5.

¹⁰² Corduan, 223.

the void. This is nirvana.¹⁰³ In the “non-state” of nirvana, one cannot be said to exist or not-exist.¹⁰⁴

The Hindu gods, though they figured prominently in the story of Buddha’s enlightenment, have no place in Buddhist salvation which is solely the achievement of the individual.¹⁰⁵ Enlightenment is attained by following the four basic truths and the eight-fold path which effectively disjoins the individual from all worldly attachments.¹⁰⁶

Thus Buddha sought release from the ritualism of priestcraft not by turning back to God but by denying reality and teaching his followers to seek the “enlightenment” of realizing their own “self-extinctedness.” Though Buddha rejected the caste system, only those willing and able to renounce normal life and become a monk were “eligible” for nirvana. Later developments in Buddhism opened the door to include a much broader group of devotees, thus increasing its popularity and allowing it to grow into the major worldwide influence it is today.

Locating an Overarching Explanation for the Reform Movements

It is only natural to speculate about the possibility of a singular catalyst for this multiplicity of reform movements. We will explore two different possibilities put forth by a pair of religious philosophers.

First, British philosopher John Hick, well-known for his commitment to religious pluralism, boldly asserts that this worldwide reform is evidence that the Unknowable Real (his

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Berry, 145.

¹⁰⁵ Latourette, 9-11.

¹⁰⁶ Corduan 223-224. The *four basic truths* are 1) to live is to suffer 2) suffering is caused by desire 3) one can eliminate suffering by eliminating desire and 4) desire is eliminated by means of the eight-fold path. The *eight-fold path* consists of 1) the right view 2) the right intention 3) the right speech 4) the right action 5) the right livelihood 6) the right effort 7) the right mindfulness and 8) the right concentration.

term for God) was diffusing revelation about Himself/Itself through various (and contradictory) prophetic voices:

Now in this axial period, some 2 ½ thousand years ago, communication between the continents and civilizations of the earth was so slow that for all practical purposes men lived in different cultural worlds. There could not be a divine revelation, through any human means, to mankind as a whole, but only separate revelations within the different streams of human history. As so it is a natural and indeed an inevitable hypothesis that God, the ultimate divine reality, was in this axial period revealing his presence and his will to mankind through a number of specially sensitive and responsive spirits.¹⁰⁷

Hick speculates that prophetic voices like Zoroaster, Gautama, Mahavira, Lao-zi, and Confucius were all “sensitive and responsive spirits” revealing in various ways to various peoples the presence and will of the “ultimate divine reality.” Many capable authors have refuted the fundamental tenets of Hick’s pluralism and there is no room here to elaborate on the weaknesses of his philosophy.¹⁰⁸ Suffice it to say, however, that just as his pluralism has been demonstrated to be an untenable philosophy, his explanation of this sixth century religious boon is also untenable, for it is founded upon his pluralistic assumptions.

On the other hand, evangelical Robert Brow offers an explanation quite different from Hick’s, one that is much more plausible in light of the evidence. He says that, “the first causes of this great movement are probably as complex as the Renaissance and Reformation in Europe 2,000 years later. One obvious possible source is the preaching of Isaiah (c. 740 BC onwards) and the other eighth-century prophets of Israel, with the refrain from Jeremiah and Ezekiel a century or so later. Certainly we can find most of the ethical emphases of Zoroaster, Buddha, Mahavir, and Confucius in the great prophets.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, Brow (cautiously) advances the theory

¹⁰⁷ Hick and Hebblethwaith, 182-183.

¹⁰⁸ See R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips, *A Particularist View: An Evidentialist Approach*, Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

¹⁰⁹ Brow, 28.

that the Hebrew prophets, the only truly monotheistic voices of the day, are at least a *possible* explanation for this worldwide upheaval. As to Hick's contention that a lack of communication would inhibit such a spread of religious knowledge, Brow comments:

It is hard to believe that the prophets were heard by no-one else but Israel and Judah. Isaiah's language was intelligible without translation in cities all over the Fertile Crescent. The transmission of religious ideas, especially when they were so revolutionary, would be exceedingly rapid...The number of major cities from Athens to China were comparatively few, and all were cosmopolitan with several languages spoken by the various national groups who lived there. Religious teachers and their disciples travelled constantly and, most important of all, people had the time and interest to listen to them.¹¹⁰

Brow's specific mention of the prophet Isaiah is noteworthy as we find in the prophet's writings a message with great international appeal. In his sixty-six chapters, Isaiah makes thirteen references to Babylon, over thirty-five to Assyria and more than forty references to "the nations" in general by which God addresses both the sinfulness that He is going to eventually judge and the blessing He would bring some day in and through the Messiah. Yahweh's injunction is for all the earth to turn to Him and be saved as He is the only God, a command with obvious international implications (Isa. 45:22-25). And though directed specifically at the nation of Israel, God's revelation of His utter contempt for ritualism and worthless sacrifice most certainly became known to the nations who came in contact with Israel during the dispersions (Isa. 1:11-17).

Furthermore, it is obvious that the prophet/statesman Daniel had a profound impact on both the empires of Babylon and Persia. He was a personal advisor to such conquering kings as Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius, and Cyrus. His prophecies about the future of the nations were most certainly widely circulated (e.g. Dan. 2:31-45; 7:1 – 8:27). It is also likely that his

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

contemporary, the exile prophet Ezekiel, also had a wider audience beyond just his Jewish brethren (see Ezek. chap. 25-32).

It should also be pointed out that the Jews continued to exert influence on the nations even after their return from exile. Only a small minority of the Jews actually returned from the Eastern dispersion; the wealthiest and most influential remained in Babylon.¹¹¹ Five hundred years after the exile, “devout men from every nation under heaven” would gather in Jerusalem to participate in the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:5-11). Many of those Jews came from Babylon and Persia, the same region to which they were scattered in the sixth century B.C., and where they had exerted their influence for over five centuries.

God intended for Israel to be a light unto the nations. They were to be a witness to the glory of the one true God. Even in their failure and rebellion and God’s subsequent judgment, God was faithful to make them that light and instructed them to seek the good of the land to which they were being exiled (2 Kings 25:24). Even while being conquered and dispersed, they brought with them the oracles of the Law and the Prophets. As strong as the evidence is, it is hard to dismiss the possibility that the Hebrew prophets and the exiled Jews directly or indirectly stirred up the religious inclinations of the peoples they came in contact with. If that is true, it is apparent from the reform movements that sprung up that the Gentile nations rebelled against the light given them, turning *from* ritualism *but not back to* the original monotheism that they once held. They vainly sought refuge, not in the Creator that their forefathers once worshiped, but in the elementary principles of the creation (Rom. 1:18ff; Col. 2:8).

¹¹¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, new updated edition (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 6, 10-11.

Conclusion

In a state of rebellion against God, mankind digressed from an original monotheism to a ritualistic, priest-controlled polytheism by the sixth century B.C. At that time, the world found itself in religious and political upheaval as the Jews were sent into exile and the nations sought liberation from the oppression of the traditional ritualism. Five types of reform movements, possibly instigated directly or indirectly by the preaching of the Hebrew prophets, issued from this upheaval and the new religions that resulted continue to help shape the world some 2500 years later.