Development of a Civilization: Religion

Words to know:
anthropomorphism: Attributing human shape or form to nonhuman things, such as the gods.
astrology: The study of the movement of the planets and stars in relation to one another in order to predict future events.
cuneiform: Sumerian writing, so-called because of its wedge-shaped marks.
deity: A god or goddess.
maat: Divine order and justice; a central concept in the religion of ancient Egypt.
monotheism: Belief in one supreme being.
pantheon: A collection of deities.
polytheism: Belief in many gods.
pyramid: A stone tomb constructed to house a deceased pharaoh of Egypt.
theocracy: A form of government in which God or some supreme deity is the ruler. God's laws are then interpreted by a divine king or by a priest class.
ziggurat: A stepped foundation or structure that held a shrine or temple in the Mesopotamian religion.

Origin of Religion - Ancient Foundations
The origin of religion can generally be traced to the ancient Near East and classified in three basic categories: polytheistic, pantheistic and monotheistic. Atheism is really a modern belief that resulted from the "Enlightenment" period of the 18th century.

Origin of Religion - Important Dates in History:
- C. 2000 BC: Time of Abraham, the patriarch of Israel.
- C. 1200 BC: Time of Moses, the Hebrew leader of the Exodus.
- C. 1100 - 500 BC: Hindus compile their holy texts, the Vedas.
- C. 563 - 483 BC: Time of Buddha, founder of Buddhism.
- C. 200 BC: The Hindu book, Bhagavad Gita, is written.
- C. 2 to 4 BC - 32 AD: Time of Jesus Christ, the Messiah and founder of Christianity.
- C. 32 AD: The Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- C. 40 - 90 AD: The New Testament is written by the followers of Jesus Christ.
- C. 570 - 632 AD: Time of Muhammad, who records the Qur'an as the basis of Islam.

Ancient Religions of Egypt and Mesopotamia
Organized religion had its beginnings in ancient Mesopotamia (in what is now modern Iraq) and in Egypt more than five thousand years ago. The religious systems in these areas blended political with spiritual elements in a type of government known as a theocracy, or rule by divine guidance. In such a government, deities (gods and goddesses) are the supreme religious and civic leaders. Their will is carried out by a priestly class or by a
Mesopotamian theocracies took the form of city-states ruled by patron gods or goddesses. The god's desires and wishes were interpreted by political leaders called ensi and by a priestly class. In Egypt religion and the state were also bound together. The national leader, the pharaoh, was considered a living god and was the vital link between humanity and the rest of the gods.

A major difference in outlook, however, marked the two religions. In Mesopotamia the forces of nature were more chaotic, more likely to cause catastrophes, such as disastrous flooding. As a result, the gods were seen as unpredictable beings of extraordinary power who had to be kept content by priests. People were at the mercy of the gods, so the job of humanity was to carry out their wills and make them happy. In Egypt, where nature was less destructive, the gods were seen as kind and generous and generally well-disposed toward humanity. Egyptians believed that their gods had created Egypt as a sort of refuge of good and order in a world filled with chaos and disorder.

Both religions were polytheistic, meaning they recognized many gods. These gods had certain similarities in both traditions. Many gods and goddesses personified elements of nature. In the Mesopotamian pantheon, or collection of gods, the most important were the trio of the sky god, An (or Anu); the god of storm and the earth, Enlil; and the water god, Ea (or Enki). These were followed in importance by a second triad comprised of the moon god, Nanna (or Sin); the sun god, Utu (or Shamash); and the goddess of fertility and war, Inanna (also called Ishtar). In the later stages of Mesopotamian civilization the local god Marduk became head of the pantheon.

These ancient religions affected every aspect of life in the ancient Near East, from spirituality to farming, from medicine to the rule of society. As such, they were not simply a part of a person's life but ordered and shaped that person's life every day. Membership was not a choice as it is in modern religions. Rather, religion was a fact of life for everyone. Each person had favorite gods or goddesses to whom they prayed and sacrificed.

History and Development

Mesopotamia, a word made up from two Greek words meaning "between the rivers," is an ancient name for an area encompassed by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. It stretches from the Persian Gulf in the south to the mountains of Armenia in the north and covers most of modern-day Iraq. Mesopotamia had a much different climate when it was first settled about eight to ten thousand years ago. At that time it was a land of marshes and grassland rather than desert as it is now. Humans began intensive farming in the area as early as 3,000 BCE. From the earliest times farming depended on irrigation, a way of watering crops that relied on bringing water to the fields through man-made ditches or canals. Anthropologists (scientists who study humans and their relations to various factors) believe that local tribes came together to dig the needed canals. The semi-nomadic (wandering) way of life the tribes followed was altered, and they settled in large communities near the canals. Eventually these communities became the first cities. City-
states like Ur and Lagash had become powerful forces in the region by about the middle of the fourth millennium BCE.

**Religion in Sumer**

The first center of civilization was in the south, in what was called Sumer. There, farming villages became a series of a dozen powerful city-states, including Ur, Uruk, Lagash, Umma, Eridu, and Nippur. At times they were in competition with each other, and at other times they banded together to fight common enemies. The earliest written records of the first Sumerian societies also date from about this time (c. 4,000 BCE). It is significant that these records, written in the form of clay tablets, were about the operation of temples. Thus, already by the time of the first real towns and cities in human history, Mesopotamian religion had already become well organized. Various clay tablets have been found with details of the religion, as well as sacred vessels and architectural remains of temples. These all help to give an overview of the religion.

The environment of Mesopotamia largely shaped its religion. Unlike the Nile River in Egypt, which rises and falls slowly on a very predictable schedule, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers could and often did rise quickly and violently, causing disastrous flooding. Because of this, the Mesopotamians felt that nature was dangerous and far beyond the control of mere humans. The earliest Mesopotamian deities thus represented different aspects of nature and were honored in hopes of winning their favor. For instance, Anu, the god of the sky, might have been worshipped to keep violent storms from damaging the crops. Hursag, the goddess of mountains and foothills, would be invoked by priests to stop an invasion of barbarian tribes. Deities were often represented as human beings and some symbolic natural object. Once given human form, a process called anthropomorphism, the gods were then grouped in families.

Mesopotamian gods were worshipped in temple complexes that formed the center of every city. Built of mud bricks, these tall, conical structures were stepped, or built in receding tiers on platforms of different shapes. These platforms were crowned at the top by a shrine or a temple. The whole complex was called a ziggurat, and averaged about 150 feet (45.7 meters) in height. Ziggurats stretched tower-like toward the sky, forming a bridge between Earth and heaven, like the mountains that were sacred to the Sumerians. Each Mesopotamian city had at least one temple complex, and each complex was dedicated to the worship of a single deity.

**How Did the Mesopotamian & Egyptian Religious Systems Differ?**

In the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt, religion was essential to life and life was inseparable from religion. Religious laws and customs governed the day-to-day existence of all citizens, whatever their rank in society. Both Mesopotamia and Egypt were governed by theocracies, where kings were believed to rule by divine right. However, their systems reflect the different social and geographical characteristics of each area.
Mesopotamia covered the region known as Sumer, in southern Iraq between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, and extended north and east to parts of modern-day Syria, Turkey and Iran. Records of Mesopotamian life date from around 4000 B.C., when the Sumerians developed cuneiform writing as well as mathematical and scientific skills. Much of the area was marshy and subject to unpredictable floods, droughts and storm damage, which could ruin harvests and livelihoods. Consequently, the dominant religious concern in earliest times was the power of nature and the need to appease the gods who controlled it.

Mesopotamian Gods and Priests

Mesopotamian city-states had patron gods or goddesses, who were seen as the supreme controllers of law, weather and fertility. The gods’ wishes were interpreted by priests and kings, known as “ensi,” who gained access to divine power and responsibility by marrying their god’s priestesses. The three most important gods were Enlil, the god of storm and earth; Anu, the sky god; and the water god Ea or Enki.

The Nile provided Egypt with food, water, transport and trade. Its floods were predictable and partly controllable, enabling a steady, well-planned way of life. In effect, it allowed the Egyptians to maintain a stable, autocratic state 600 miles long. The religious system reflected a more orderly, optimistic view of life than in Mesopotamia, and the richly furnished tombs and stately funeral rites suggest they were planning for an equally prosperous afterlife. Egyptians wrote in pictorial hieroglyphics rather than cuneiform, and their records date from around 3000 B.C. Plentiful supplies of stone and slave labor enabled them to leave pyramids and tombs as evidence of their belief in perpetual life. This is in contrast to the Mesopotamians, who left less grand architecture but wrote down epic myths that indicate concern with the quality of life before, rather than after death.

Egyptian Gods and Priests

As in Mesopotamia, the supreme lawgivers in Egypt were the gods, ruling through the pharaoh. Whereas Mesopotamian rulers were interpreters of divine law and acted on behalf of their city-state, pharaohs were seen as living gods in their own right with authority throughout Egypt. They had power to ensure prosperity and fertility by controlling the waters, and to translate divine order and justice into earthly laws. The king of the gods was Amen, also called Amon or Amun, later joined by Ra (or Re), the sun god, in the cult of Amen-Ra. Osiris was god of the Nile and of the dead. His consort Isis was the moon goddess and archetypal mother of creation. Other principal deities in the pantheon included the sky god Horus, son of Isis and Osiris; and Thoth, the god of knowledge. Around 1570 B.C., the pharaoh Akhenaton tried to introduce a monotheistic religion, but his successor Tutankhamen restored the traditional pantheon. When the absolute power of the pharaoh began to break down due to insurgencies around 2100 B.C., divine kingship became more concerned with protecting the people in the name of Ra than in the name of total supremacy.