

# Prehistoric religion, Origins and Overlaps

History of Idea

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S2020-006

No one can say when or where the idea of religion originated, what we can trace is that the production of images and religion developed in tandem. If we

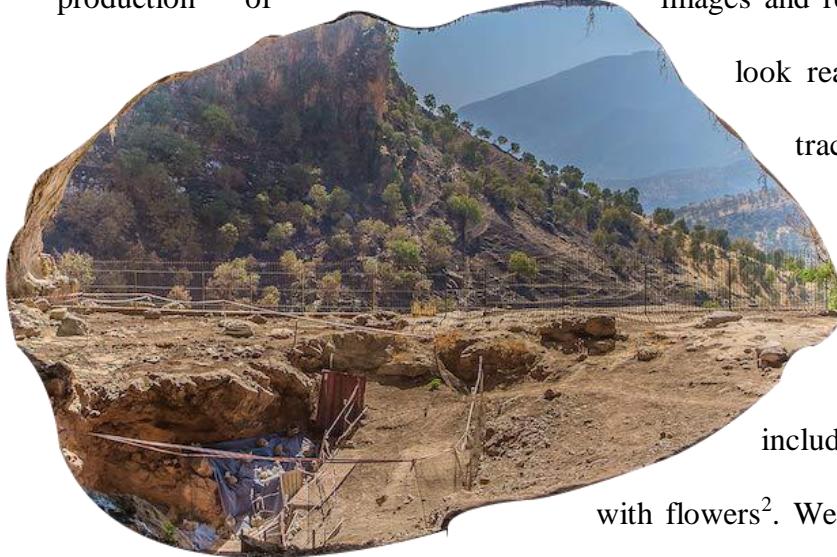


Figure 1- Shanidar Cave excavation site. Image via Cambridge University.

look really far back in time, we can find traces of religious systems forming in the shape Neanderthal burials<sup>1</sup>. In Shanidar Cave in Iraqi Kurdistan, we see traces of ritual burials including a skeleton found to be buried with flowers<sup>2</sup>. We cannot talk about the intent or the

thought that went behind this. As sentient beings, we paint our ancestors in a similar image as us but at

point, man rationalized the unseen world through the embodiment of beings that can be termed as God. God for early man took shape of their fear of the unknown.

Shaping God in the image of Man, made the unseen far more familiar<sup>3</sup>. What is certain though is that man has created many Gods in History. Today the Idea and function of God in many cultures is shifting but to understand this shift we may have to look at its origin.

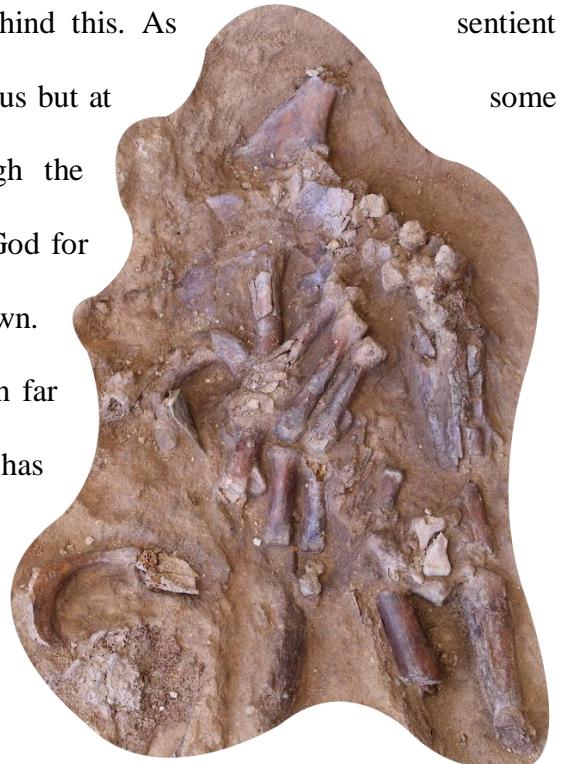
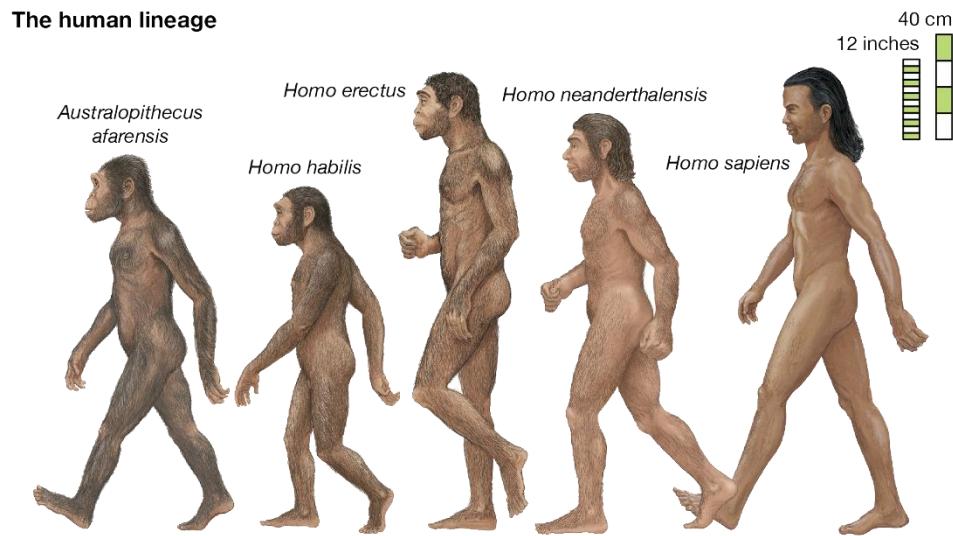


Figure 2-Shanidar Z's left hand being uncovered in Shanidar Cave. Image via Graeme Barker / EurekAlert.

<sup>1</sup> Watson, Peter. 2006, Ideas: a history of thought and invention, from fire to Freud, Harper Perennial.

<sup>2</sup> Pomeroy, E., Bennett, P., Hunt, C., Reynolds, T., Farr, L., Frouin, M., . . . Barker, G. (2020). New Neanderthal remains associated with the 'flower burial' at Shanidar Cave. *Antiquity*, 94(373), 11–26. doi:10.15184/aky.2019.207

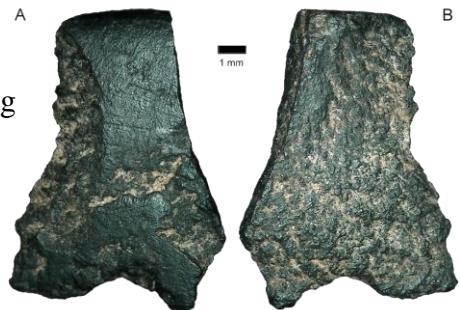
<sup>3</sup> Armstrong, Karen. 1994. A history of God: the 4000-year quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. New York: Ballantine Books.



*Figure 3 An artist's depiction of five species of the human lineage.*

To rationalize the physical world, its phenomenon's, and the unseen, man gave it a form that is both familiar but embodies the otherness inherent in the experience of the unknown. The Idea of God and representing something through a visual medium developed in tandem<sup>4</sup>. Looking back through history, the evolution of the human brain lead to new ways of thinking that started from bipedalism and lead to developing physiological changes that encouraged speech<sup>5</sup>. Man was an inventor; making tools, axes, spearheads out of rock and bone, and our humanness is embedded in how we utilize objects to help us.

At some point, we start seeing a shift in these patterns of making. Suddenly the objects being produced become more abstract in nature, veering towards art, their purpose unknown. Cave art is the earliest evidence that suggests the formation of systems in ancient humans, even before written



*Figure 4- An axe fragment under a microscope, Credit: Stuart Hayswns*

<sup>4</sup> Bell, Julian. *Mirror of the World: a New History of Art*. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Watson, Peter. 2006, *Ideas: a history of thought and invention, from fire to Freud*, Harper Perennial.

language was invented. We have seen evidence of adornment and beautification; we have seen burials, caves and statues. All of this suggests that early man had the cognitive ability to reflect upon his surroundings, enough to conjure images of god in their mind. We see a keen observation of the natural world; early man had the ability to observe but also translate that information through memory on to surfaces or bring those details out in objects.

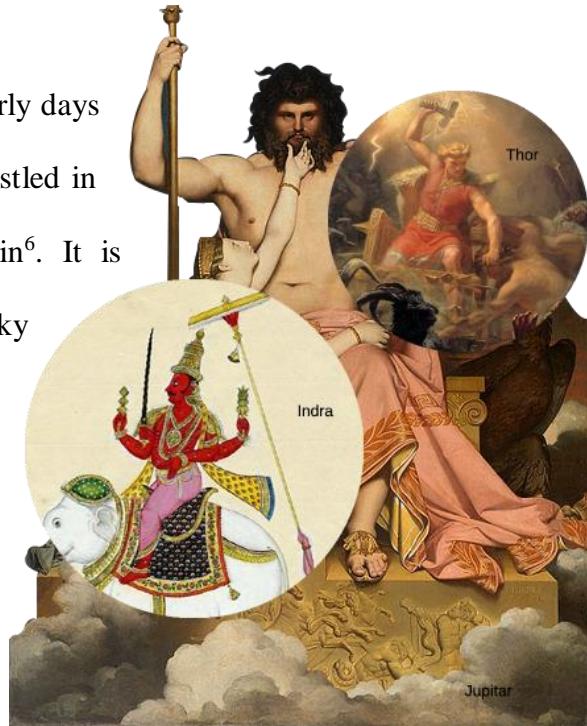


Figure 5- The recovered shells.Credit...Courtesy of Drs. Marian Vanhaeren and Francesco d'Errico



Figure 6- female and male swimming reindeer - late Magdalenian period, approximately 12,500 years old found at Montastruc, Tarn et Garonne, France

It is suggested by academics that man in his early days believed in one god. Termed the Sky God, a god nestled in heaven, which many African tribes still believe in<sup>6</sup>. It is interesting to look at the semiotics behind this; the sky being endless and vast, bringing light, rain and ice. It is also vast and unexplainable from the perspective of early man and so it becomes a symbol. This symbol fed into the imagination of the early man and gave them a sense of power, to overcome the fear of the unknown. There are many versions of the sky god, Zeus, Neptune, Indra, Thor being some. Today



<sup>6</sup> Armstrong, Karen. 1994. A history of God: the 4000-year quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. New York: Ballantine Books.

scientists look towards contemporary anthropology to decode the origin of religion, looking at the



*Figure 7-Holy Ghost panel in the Great Gallery, Horseshoe Canyon*

cave painting traditions of African tribes that culturally died out in the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to colonization. Talking to these tribes, anthropologists have discovered the presence of shamanistic rituals that result in drawings<sup>7</sup>. We cannot say that this is exact method or motivation that has lead early humans to make images, human behavior in the most basic sense remains the same so we also cannot discredit this. Seeing the Unseen and representing the unknown through images is a motivation that is attributed to prehistoric cave art. Whatever the motivation, prehistoric art is a sign of complex behavior outside natural instinct and here we see complex Ideas forming. The systems early man developed lead to the Idea of religion and art developed in tandem.

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<sup>7</sup> Bell, Julian. *Mirror of the World: a New History of Art*. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2010.

As humans progressed and developed agriculture and settlements, the nature of religion also shifted. Now you came across the presence of mother goddesses, complex rituals of sacrifice and veneration of the dead as evidence is found through reconstructed skulls found in Jericho. The presence of the mother goddess, a symbol of fertility seems to be of great importance to early humans. The survival of the species was dependent on reproduction and growth of crops.

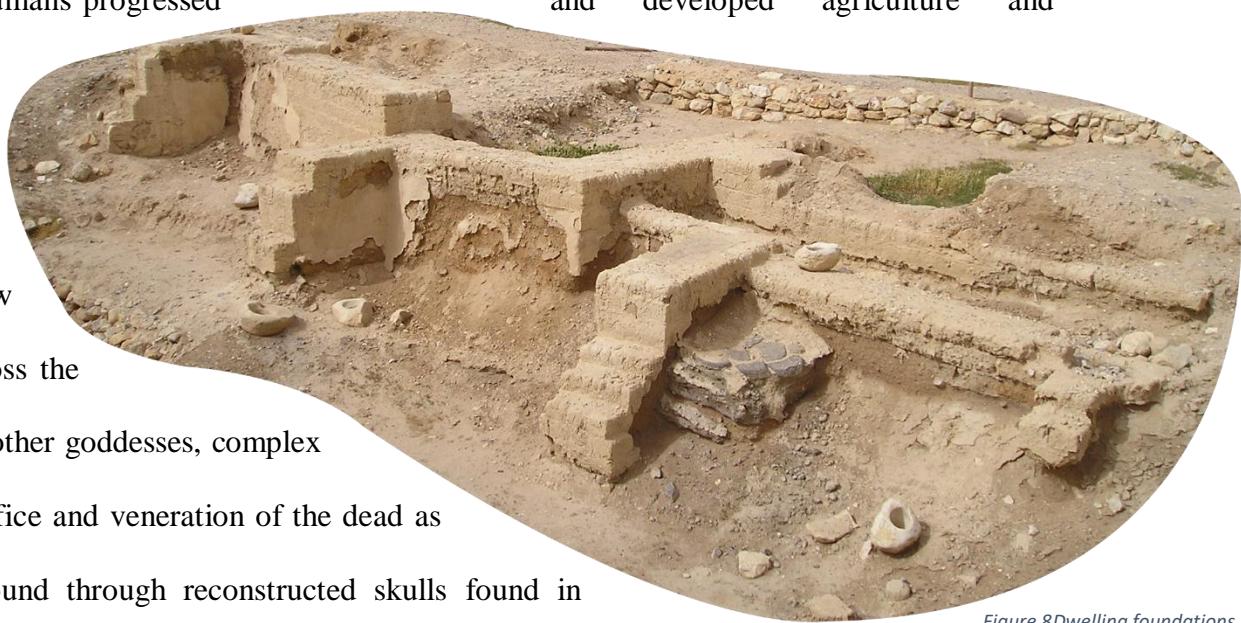


Figure 8 Dwelling foundations unearthed at Tell es-Sultan in Jericho



Figure 10- Isis, Ishtar, Inana, Aphrodite

Karen Armstrong talking about the mother goddess states, "she was called Inana in ancient Sumeria, Ishtar in Babylon, Anat in Canaan, Isis in Egypt and Aphrodite in

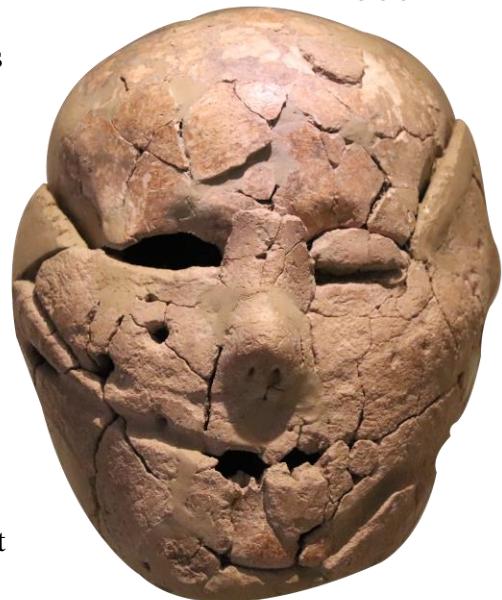
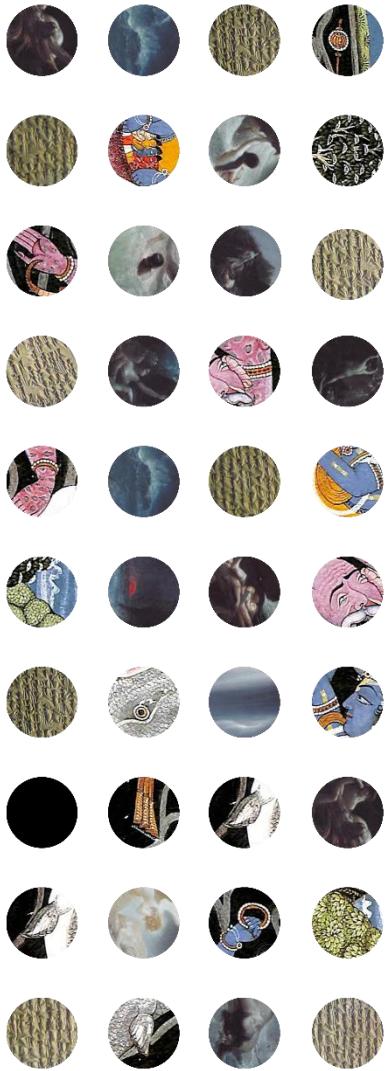


Figure 9 - Plastered skull, Tell es-Sultan, Jericho, c. 9000 BC

Greece, and remarkably similar stories were devised in all these cultures to express her role in the spiritual lives of the people". Because fertility was something Humans had little control or

<sup>8</sup> Armstrong, Karen. 1994. A history of God: the 4000-year quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. New York: Ballantine Books.



'Deluge'

understanding of, their devotion to the mother goddess developed various representations in every culture.

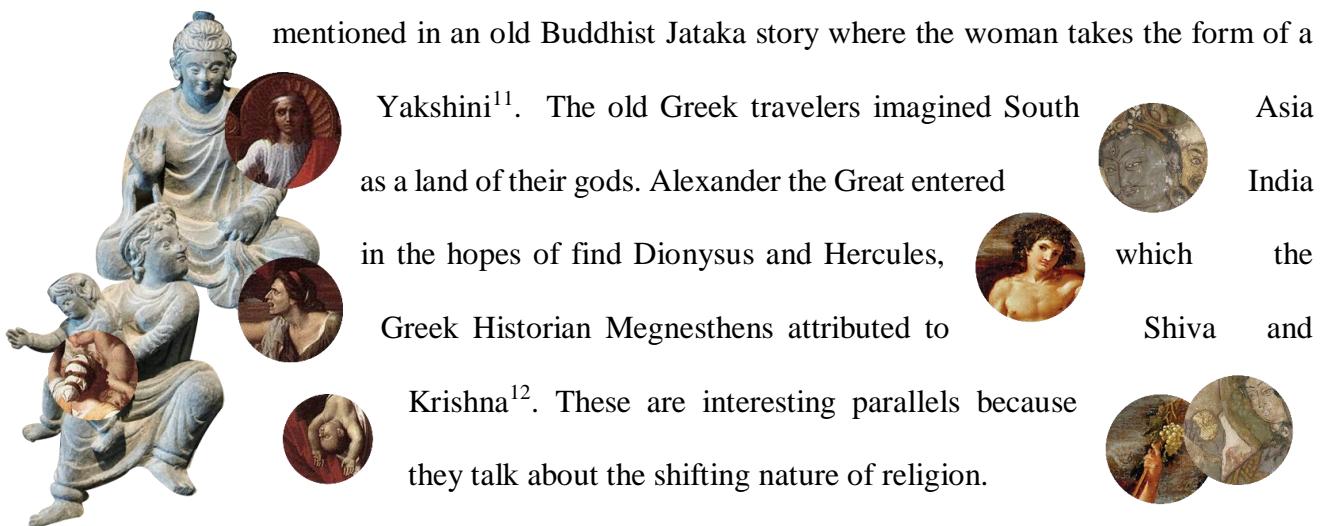
As societies developed even further, the Mother Goddess is replaced by other systems and beings of worship. It has been human nature to imagine in being new Gods and Goddess in history. The pantheon of gods is ever expanding and today we cannot put a number to it but collectively every religion brought with it a set of beliefs driven by faith in the unknown creating systems of culture and morality.

Today religious segregation has made the world a much more divided place. However, looking back, we can find traditions and practices that are much more integrated than we can imagine. A very interesting example of this is the story of the deluge, the flood that prompted the story of Noah's Arc in the Old Testament. The story is also present in the epic of Gilgamesh, an ancient Mesopotamian piece of literature<sup>9</sup>. The Deluge can also be traced to post-

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<sup>9</sup> MacGregor, Neil. *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. Place of publication not identified: Penguin, 2015.

Vedic stories called the Puranas, in the shape of Matsya, which is a fish form of Vishnu<sup>10</sup>. Looking at another Old Testament overlap is the story of Solomon's Judgement in which a demon and a women fight over an infant child who they both claim is theirs. This story is also



*Figure 11 - Solomon's Judgment Juxtaposed with Buddha*

Religious Ideas and Practices travelled along trade routes and conquests. The Idea of pilgrimages comes from pre-Islamic pagan religions of the Middle East<sup>13</sup>. Hippocrates has mentioned fasting in 5<sup>th</sup> century BC as a cure for many Illnesses. Buddha's emaciated form is iconic. What we need to understand is that religion is a much older, much more integrated Idea stemming from basic human instinct.

*Figure 12 - Dionysis and Shiva*

<sup>10</sup> Rawlinson, Hugh George. *Intercourse between India and the Western World*. Place of publication not identified: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1926.

<sup>11</sup> Stoneman, Richard. *The Greek Experience of India: from Alexander to the Indo-Greeks*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Stoneman, Richard. *The Greek Experience of India: from Alexander to the Indo-Greeks*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> MacGregor, Neil. *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. Place of publication not identified: Penguin, 2015.



Figure 13- Hercules and Karishna

Today, many of the major religions of the world come from an Abrahamic tradition<sup>14</sup>. Abraham is said to have come from Ur in Mesopotamia and settled in Canaan (Israel) around twentieth and nineteenth century BC. Abrahams sacrifice for God lead to the formation of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We can trace various traditions, teachings and Ideas back to Abraham though the concept of creationism states that Adam was the first human and we are all connected since our inception. We can continue to

unpack this further

but first we

must understand that the Idea of religion from its beginning served particular purposes, to fill in major gaps in our knowledge of this world, as a code of conduct, for morality and structure in society. Religion continues to inspire us; from

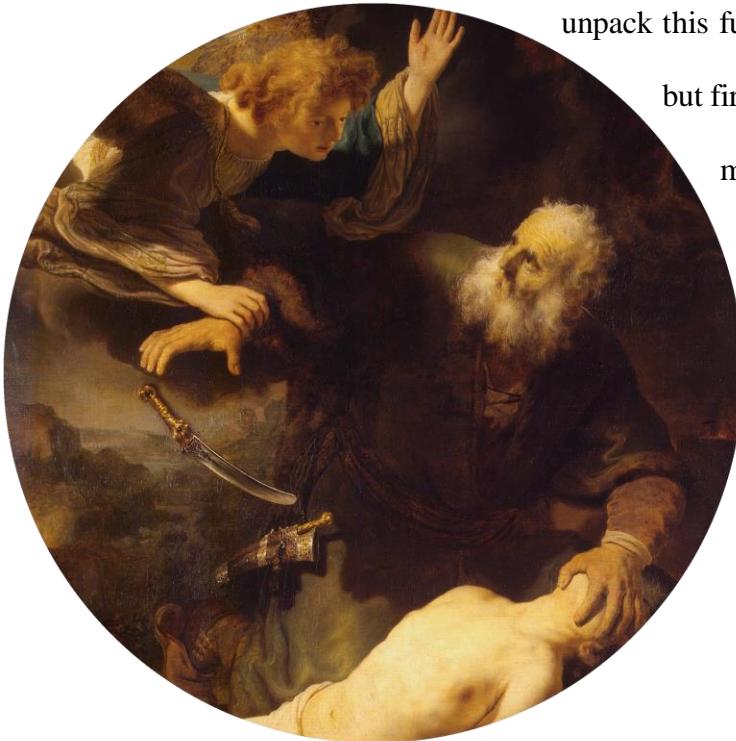


Figure 14- Rembrandt: Abraham's Sacrifice

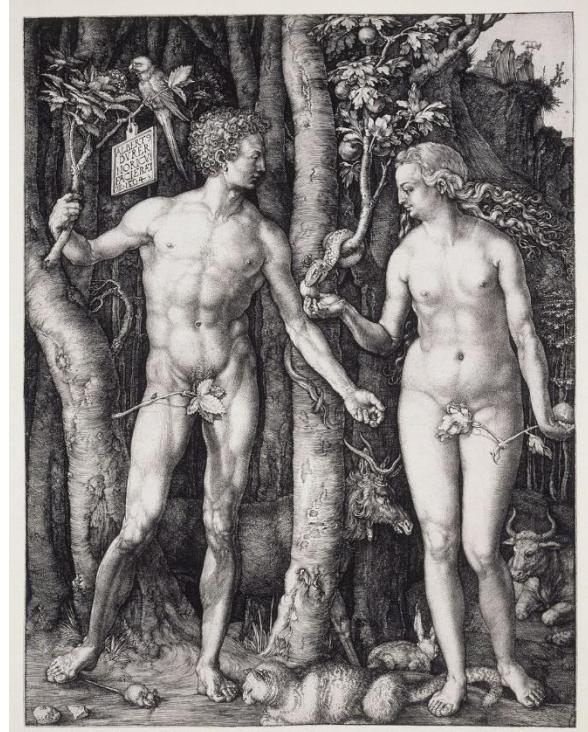


Figure 15 - Albrecht Dürer: Adam and Eve

<sup>14</sup> Armstrong, Karen. 1994. *A history of God: the 4000-year quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. New York: Ballantine Books.

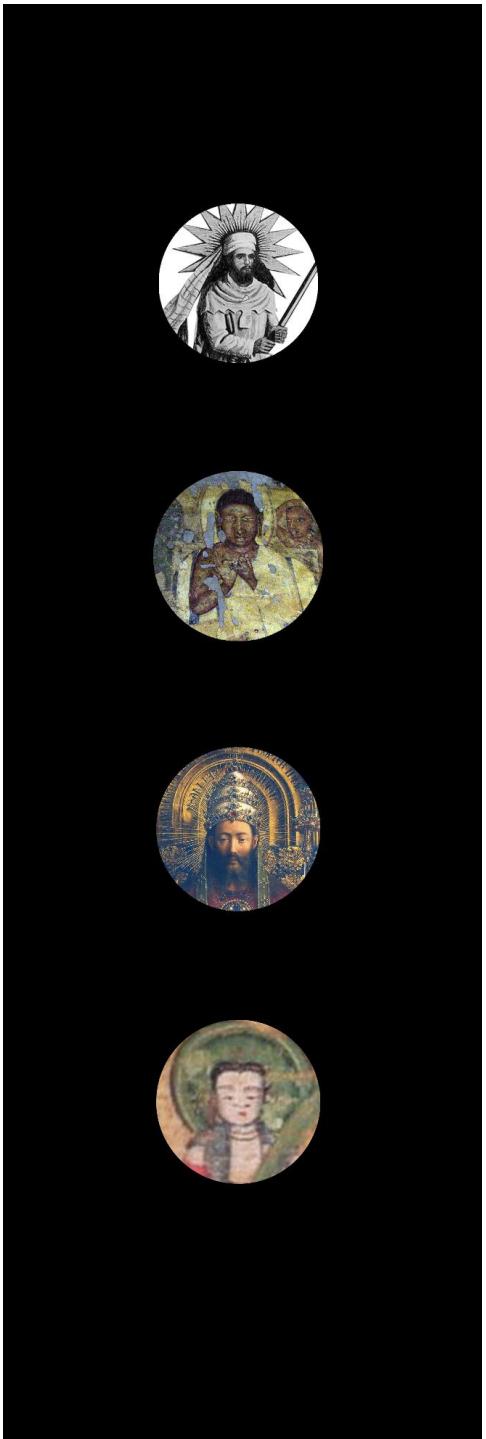


Figure 16 – Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Mani

Art to conflict but one thing to understand is that the roots of religion are embedded in basic instincts. The Prophet Mani from Manicheism in 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE states “Wisdom and deeds have always from time to time been brought to mankind by the messengers of God. So in one age they have been brought by the messenger called Buddha to India, in another by Zaradusht to Persia, in another by Jesus to the West. Thereupon this revelation has come down, this prophecy in this last age, through me, Mani, the messenger of the God of truth, to Babylonia.”<sup>15</sup> The connectedness of religion is something we cannot doubt, regardless of our faith or beliefs.

We cannot say what is right or wrong, but what is certain is that religion became a catalyst from immense change in Human society. Religion inspired art and politics, language, morality and invention. Religion was the Idea that gave man its humanity, and though the function of religion is changing in modern times, the sentiment or feeling behind it is retained in our memories and actions.

<sup>15</sup> J. Kennedy, The Gospels of the Infancy, the Lalita Vistara, and the Vishnu Purana: Or the Transmission of Religious Legends between India and the West (Continued from p. 243), The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, (Jul., 1917), pp. 469-540 Published by: Cambridge University Press  
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