



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

<http://bookofmormoncentral.com/>

A Review of Ancient Religions III

Author(s): B.H. Roberts

Source: *The Truth, The Way, The Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology (2nd Edition)*

Editor(s): John W. Welch

Published: Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1996

Page(s): 143–152



BYU Studies is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to BYU Studies and to scholarly research on The Book of Mormon. Archived by permission of BYU Studies.

<http://byustudies.byu.edu/>

A Review of Ancient Religions III

The religions of India. We next turn to the religions of Asia, and consider first the ancient faiths of India.

The Vedas. The knowledge of the Hindu faiths is to be derived from the Vedas, which means “knowing,” or “knowledge.” This name is given by the Brahmans, the priests of the cultus, not to one work, but to the whole body of their ancient sacred literature, comprising more than a hundred books, grouped into four classes.^a The Greek equivalent of Vedas is, “I know”; and in the English “wise” or “wisdom.”¹

The Vedas are based upon the conception of a universal spirit pervading all things. God they held to be a unity; and according to the teachings of the Vedas, there is but one deity, the supreme spirit, the Lord of the universe, whose work is the universe, the god above all gods, who created the earth, the heavens, and the water.^b The world was considered an emanation of God, and therefore a part of him; it is kept in a visible state by his energy and would instantly disappear if that energy were for a moment withdrawn; even as it is, it is undergoing unceasing changes, everything being in a transitory state. In these perpetual movements the present can scarcely be said to have any existence, for as the past is ending, the future has begun. In such a never ceasing career, all material

In this chapter, Roberts summarizes materials from his *Seventy's Course in Theology: Hinduism*, *Seventy's Course in Theology* 3:93-98; Buddhism, 3:98-100; and Chinese religions, 3:101-4.

^aThe four Hindu vedas are the Rig-veda, Sama-veda, Yajur-veda, and Atharva-veda. See “Vedas,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* 15:214-17.

¹Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop* 1:8.

^bThe earliest elements of the Vedas are thoroughly polytheistic, describing gods of the archaic Indo-European pantheon, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, “Vedism and Brahmanism,” 15:217-42. Hindu Monism, as described here by Roberts, did not begin to develop until the period of the Upanishads (700-300 B.C.), and did not reach its full expression until Shankara (A.D. 788-820); *Encyclopedia of Religion*, “Vedanta” 15:207-14. See Alain Danielou, *The Gods of India: Hindu Polytheism* (New York: Inner Traditions, 1985).

things are “flowing” and their forms continually changing, and returning through revolving cycles to similar states. For this reason it is thought we may regard our earth and the various celestial bodies as having had a moment of birth, as having a time of continuance in which they are passing onward to an inevitable destruction and that after the lapse of countless ages a similar progress will be renewed and a similar series of events will occur again and again.²

Brahmanism. The Hindu religion may be summed up in the word pantheism. God is one, because he is All. The Vedas in speaking of the relation of nature to God make use of the expression that he is the material as well as the cause of the universe, “‘the Clay as well as the Potter.’ They convey the idea,” continues Draper,

that while there is a pervading spirit existing everywhere of the same nature as the soul of man, though differing from it infinitely in degree, visible nature is essentially and inseparably connected there-with; that as in man the body is perpetually undergoing changes, perpetually decaying and being renewed, or, as in the case of the whole human species, nations come into existence and pass away, yet still there continues to exist what may be termed the universal human mind, so for ever associated and for ever connected are the material and the spiritual. And under this aspect we must contemplate the Supreme Being, not merely as a presiding intellect, but as illustrated by the parallel case of man, whose mental principle shows no tokens except through its connexion with the body; so matter, or nature, or the visible universe, is to be looked upon as the ⟨corporal⟩ [corporeal] manifestation of God.³

It should be observed, however, that pantheism has two general aspects; first, the pantheism that sinks all nature into one substance and one essence, and then concludes that the one substance or essence is God. This undoubtedly is the view of the old Hindu faiths, sometimes referred to as “purest monism.” That is, the one substance theory, and is regarded by some philosophers as the purest theism. The existence of one God truly, since as stated above by Draper, “God is one, because he is all.” Second, the other form of pantheism expands the one substance into all the varieties of objects that we see in nature, and regards those various parts expanded into nature as gods. This leads to the grossest kind of idolatry, as it did in Egypt—at least among the common people of that country. Under this form of pantheism men have worshipped various objects in nature, the sun, moon, stars; in fact anything and

²Most of this paragraph is quoted from Draper, *Intellectual Development of Europe* 1:58–59.

³Draper, *Intellectual Development of Europe* 1:59–60.

everything that bodied forth to their minds some quality of power or attribute of the deity. This is the pantheism of Egypt as contrasted with the pantheism of India.

Hindoo triads. In some of the Vedic hymns some find a conception of a trinity of deities. The matter is somewhat confused because of frequent changes in the names of the triad, but resolves itself to at least this: Agni, god of fire, becomes Brahma; Surya, the sun-god, becomes Vishnu; and Indra, the atmosphere-god, becomes S[h]iva. These constitute what is called the “tri-murti,” and are generally said to represent one god, as creator, preserver, and destroyer. A verse in their honor stands as follows:

“In those three persons the one God was shown—
Each first in place, each last—not one alone;
Of Siva, Vishnu, Brahma, each may be
First, second, third, among the Blessed Three.”⁴

Not much importance, however, is to be attached to these triads; there seems to be several of them, and the significance is chiefly fanciful.^c

Buddhæism. From India came Buddhism, established by Siddhartha, or Gautama, who assumed the title Buddha, meaning “the enlightened.” He was born between 562–552 B.C.^d He is said to have passed his youth in opulence, was married, had a son who later became a member of his cult. At the age of 29 Gautama left parents, wife, and son for the spiritual struggle of a recluse. After seven years he believed himself possessed of perfect truth and assumed the title of “Buddha.”^e He passed through a long period of doubt as to whether to keep for himself the knowledge he had won or share it with others. Love of others is said to have triumphed and he began to preach, first at Benares. He did not array himself against the old religion of India. His doctrines are said to be rather the outgrowth of Brahmanical schools. His special concern was to produce salvation from sorrow, which he

⁴Dobbins, *Story of the World's Worship*, 216.

^cThe Hindu Triad—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—is of fundamental importance in modern forms of Hinduism.

^dOn the Buddha, see H. W. Schumann, *The Historical Buddha* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Arkana, 1989); and Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, *The Life of the Buddha: Ancient Scriptural and Pictorial Traditions* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1992). On Buddhism, see B. Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and articles on Buddhism in *Encyclopedia of Religion* 2:319–560.

^eThe Buddha's Enlightenment is said not to come through reason, but through spiritual power and meditation. On the Buddha's Enlightenment, see Karetzky, *The Life of the Buddha*, 83–153; and Schumann, *The Historical Buddha*, 53–60.

saw to be inseparably connected with individual desire and life; and hence the main object of his teaching was to rid men of desire, and induce a state of mind of perfect rest and peace, which is difficult to distinguish from a state of mental coma, acquiescence of all the senses. This is the “Nirvana” of Buddhism generalized. There are those, however, who insist—from its many forms and interpretations of the faith in many lands—upon interpreting Nirvana to be annihilation—nihilism pure and simple.⁵ It is difficult to believe that any one would hold to the “hopeless despairing doctrine of annihilation,” since that would be to believe that nonexistence is to be preferred to existence, even an existence which might give more happiness than sorrow. Edwin Arnold, in his *Light of Asia*, represents Gautama as saying:

If any teach NIRVANA is to cease,
Say unto such they lie.
If any teach NIRVANA is to live,
Say unto such they err; not knowing this,
Nor what light shines beyond their broken lamps,
Nor lifeless, timeless bliss.⁶

Speaking of one who has entered the state of Nirvana, Arnold further represents the teaching of Gautama to be—

No need hath such to live as ye name life;
That which began in him when he began
Is finished: he hath wrought the purpose through
Of what did make him Man.

Never shall yearnings torture him, nor sins
Stain him, nor ache of earthly joys and woes
Invade his safe eternal peace; nor deaths
And lives recur. He goes

Unto NIRVANA. He is one with Life,
Yet lives not. He is blest, ceasing to be.
OM, MANI PADME, OM! the Dewdrop slips
Into the shining sea!⁷

Nirvana: Is it or is it not annihilation? To the refinement of metaphysical minds this may not spell annihilation even to the individual soul, since that soul may be held to be “one with life,” though he

⁵The subject is discussed at length by Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop* 1:276–87. Cf. Dobbins, *Story of the World's Worship*, 517; and also Browne, *This Believing World*, 134–50.

⁶Arnold, *Light of Asia*, 187–88.

⁷Arnold, *Light of Asia*, 179–80.

“lives not”; and though the “dewdrop slips into the shining sea,” and that particular dew drop shall not again recur, yet the sea remains, and the dew drop remains with it. This may not be annihilation for the “dew drop,” yet for all practical purposes it is so close akin to it, that it is not worthwhile to dispute about the difference.

As a religion Buddhism is inadequate to all human needs;^f it rises from mystery and ends in silence. It is a bridge suspended in midair; one end seemingly lodged on shrouded mists, and the other lost in darkness. A bridge, the existence of which is a misfortune; since it serves no purpose. Worse it is than a bridge of sighs; for under the best phases of Buddhist teaching, it is a bridge of torture that leads to no assured advantage to those who traverse its painful distance, and the best that can be hoped for is to escape from it: “he is blest, ceasing to be!”

Of the understanding of things, the universe, the sympathetic versified presentation by Edwin Arnold represents the thought to be:

Measure not with words
 Th’ Immeasurable; nor sink the string of thought
 Into the Fathomless. Who asks doth err,
 Who answers, errs. Say nought! . . .
 Pray not! the Darkness will not brighten!
 Ask Nought from the Silence, for it can not speak!⁸

Gautama set forth four alleged “noble thoughts” on which his doctrine rests: (1) existence is suffering; (2) cessation of pain is possible through (and only through) the suppression of desire—the desire for existence with the rest; (3) the way to this is “the knowledge and observance of the good law of Buddha,” which may be said to be a highly moral law with self-suppression as its objective; and (4) the attainment of Nirvana—the ending of conscious existence.⁸

^fRoberts’s negative views on Buddhism were common in the early twentieth century. Recent studies, such as the sources noted above, provide more positive and sympathetic interpretations which explain why the religion is followed by hundreds of millions and has been so successful in eastern Asia.

⁸Arnold, *Light of Asia*, 171–72.

⁸Roberts’s presentation of the Four Noble Truths should be supplemented. The Buddha presented his basic doctrine in his first Sermon (c. 528 B.C.) at the Deer-Park at Isipatana (now Sarnath) near Benares (Varanasi). “In brief, these are that suffering is inherent in life, that suffering and repeated lives [reincarnation] are caused by craving, that craving and thus suffering can be destroyed, and that the Holy Eightfold Path is the course leading to this.” Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 23. The Holy Eightfold Path includes: right views, resolve, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. See Schumann, *The Historical Buddha*, 64–65, for a translation of part of this sermon. An English translation of this sermon is in Karetzky, *The Life of the Buddha*, 155–64.

The morality of Buddhism. Whatever may be said of these alleged “four great truths” and the whole Buddhist system, as a religion, in effect, Buddhism writes down the universe and conscious personal existence, itself, as a failure. And yet its following is estimated to be from three hundred fifty to five hundred millions of human beings! It has the most numerous following of any of the religions. While disappointing as a religion, however, Buddhism stands high as a system of morals, and it is this, doubtless, which commends it to its numerous following. Buddhism as a religion, and as a political fact, was a reaction from Brahmanism, though it retained much of that more primitive form of faith and worship.

“The morality which [Buddhism] teaches,” says Max Müller,

is not a morality of expediency and rewards. Virtue is not enjoined because it necessarily leads to happiness. No; virtue is to be practiced, but happiness is to be shunned, and the only reward for virtue is that it subdues the passions, and thus prepares the human mind for that knowledge which is to end in complete annihilation. There are ten commandments which Buddha imposes on his disciples. They are—

1. Not to kill.
2. Not to steal.
3. Not to commit adultery.
4. Not to lie.
5. Not to get intoxicated.
6. To abstain from unseasonable meals.
7. To abstain from public spectacles.
8. To abstain from expensive dresses.
9. Not to have a large bed.
10. Not to receive silver or gold.⁹

These ~~duties~~ ***precepts*** were enjoined upon all; those who specifically entered the religious life as teachers, their duties were more severe, and their lives of self denial even more rigid than these moral precepts imply.

The philosophy which presented such a moral code to its devotees, think what you will of it as a religion, is entitled to the respect of mankind.

Religions of China. China has a population—all divisions—of 400,800,000, and three general systems of Religion. These are Buddhism,

⁹Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop* 1:244.

Confucianism and Taoism. The state tolerates all three and a Chinaman may be at the same time an adherent of all three of the national religions. The mass of the Chinese people accept the three and see no inconsistency in so doing. It is somewhat as if Americans or Englishmen were at the same time Protestants, Romanists, and Sceptics. The Chinese support the priests of all these religions, worship in all their temples, and believe in the gods of all.

Buddhism. Of Buddhism we have already sufficiently spoken. That faith early penetrated China; one missionary is mentioned in the Chinese annals as early as 217 B.C. It was not, however, until the year 66 A.D. that Buddhism was officially recognized by the government as a third state religion in China.^h

Confucianism. The most influential teacher of the Chinese, however, is Confucius, 551–478 B.C.ⁱ He was not a “prophet” in the sense that he presented himself as a teacher sent of God, in fact he laid no claims to a supernatural knowledge of God or of the hereafter. He said nothing of an infinite spirit, and but little of a future life. His cardinal precepts were obedience to parents and superiors, and reverence for the ancients and imitation of their virtues. He himself walked in the old paths, and added the force of example to that of precept. On one occasion he was asked how the “spirits could be served?” To which he made answer, “If we are not able to serve man, how can we serve the spirits?” On another occasion he said to his followers, “Respect the gods and keep them at a distance.” He gave the Chinese the golden rule, stated in the negative way however, as follows: “What you don’t want others to do to yourself, do not do to others.” The influence of Confucius has been greater than that of any other teacher so far as mass of followers is concerned, excepting Christ and Buddha. The influence, however, can scarcely be accredited to a religion, but to the

^hRoberts here alludes to two legendary incidents in the history of Buddhism in China. The first is the 217 B.C. visit to China of Buddhist missionary Shih Li-fang, who was supposedly sent by the Indian emperor Ashoka (268–239 B.C.). In the second, the Han emperor Ming (A.D. 58–75) is said to have had a dream in which the Buddha commanded him to send envoys abroad to learn of Buddhism. These events are generally considered legendary. See Kenneth Ch’en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 27–31. Although there were Buddhist influences during the later Han dynasty, the significant spread of Buddhism in China occurred only in the age of crisis in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., following the collapse of the Han empire.

ⁱOn early Chinese religion and thought, see “Chinese Religions,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* 3:257–323; and Frederick W. Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of China*, 2d ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989). On Confucius and Confucianism, see *Encyclopedia of Religion* 4:15–42; and Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. Dim C. Lau (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1979).

force of merely human moral precepts. Confucianism speaks to moral nature, it discourses on virtue and vice, and the duty of compliance with the law, and the dictates of conscience. Its worship rests on this basis: the religious veneration paid to ancestors—for that is the worship of the system—is founded on the duty of filial piety, the moral sense of the Chinese is said to be offended if they are called on to resign this custom.

*Taoism.*⁹ Taoism is accounted materialistic, and yet it approaches more nearly to religious concepts than the doctrines of Confucius; its notion of the soul is of something physical, “a purer form of matter.” The soul is supposed to gain immortality by a physical discipline, a sort of chemical process which transmutes it into a more ethereal essence, and prepares it for being transferred to the regions of immortality. The gods of Taoism are also very much what might be expected of a system which has such notions as these of the soul. It looks upon the stars as divine, it deifies hermits, and physicians, magicians and seekers after the philosopher’s stone, and the plant of immortality. Max Müller, in his *Science of Religion*, sums up the character of the religions of China proper in the following paragraph. He describes the religion as:

[A] colorless and unpoetical religion, a religion we might almost venture to call monosyllabic, consisting of the worship of a host of single spirits, representing the sky, the sun, storms and lightning, mountains and rivers, one standing by the side of the other without any mutual attraction, without any higher principle to hold them together.¹⁰

In addition to this, we likewise meet in China with the worship of ancestral spirits, the spirits of the departed, who are supposed to retain some cognizance of human affairs, and to possess peculiar powers which they ~~may~~ exercise for good or evil. This double worship of human and natural spirits constitutes the old and popular religion of China, and it has lived on to the present day, at least in the lower ranks of society, though there towers above it a more elevated range of half religious and half philosophical faith, a belief in two higher powers, which, in the language of philosophy, may mean “form and matter,” in the language of ethics, “good and evil” but which in the original language of religion and mythology are represented as “Heaven and Earth”!

⁹On Taoism and Lao-tzu, see *Encyclopedia of Religion* 14:288–332; Max Kaltenmark, *Lao Tzu and Taoism*, 2d ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969). On the foundational scripture of Taoism, the Tao Te Ching, see Robert G. Henricks, *Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching* (New York: Ballentine, 1989).

¹⁰Müller, *Science of Religion*, 61.

It is true that we know the ancient popular religion of China from the works of Confucius only, or from even more modern sources. But Confucius, though he is called the founder of a new religion, was really but the new preacher of an old religion. He was emphatically a transmitter, not a maker. He says himself, "I only hand on; I cannot create new things. I believe in the ancients, and therefore I love them."¹¹

Spiritual touches: Reflection on ancient religions. Such was the ancient religion of China and such, to a very large extent, is the religion of China today. And one can not find in it as a religion, whatever may be accorded to its moral qualities, much that commands our respect; and yet now and then, there arises from the Chinese classics, a touch of spirit conception that would lead one to think that this great body of people had not been left without some streakings of the morning light of a high spirituality. For instance: A Chinese writer of the 13th century, 1279, A.D., in fact, Wan-Tien-Hsiang, had opposed Kublai-Khan, the Tartar conqueror.^k Hsiang was imprisoned by the Tartar conqueror for three years, and in his prison he wrote as follows:

In all that is or ever was,
Or ever yet will be,
There "Is" what shapes the sun and stars,
And makes the land and sea.

In man "Its" spirit; but un-named
In earth and sea and air,
Below us and above, around—
Behold, "Its" everywhere.

And though in harmony and peace
"It's" not perceived by men,
When storm and stress the nations shake,
We all can see "It" then.

. . . O "It" pervades
The sky, sun, land and sea;
From all eternity has been
And ne'er can cease to be.¹²

¹¹Müller, *Science of Religion*, 61–62.

^kKhubilai Khan (1215–94) was Great Khan of the Mongols from 1260–94, and conqueror of southern China; see Morris Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Wen T'ien-hsiang (1236–83) was the most important civilian official at the southern Sung court at Hangchow. He was captured by the Mongols, and when he refused to cooperate with the new rulers of China, he was executed. See William Andreas Brown, *Wen T'ien-hsiang: A Biographical Study of a Sung Patriot* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1986). David C. Wright of the BYU history department assisted on this note.

¹²[Roberts here quotes from Wen's "Song of Uprightness" (*Cheng-ch'in ke*). David C. Wright identified this quote.]

A fine recognition of God as universal spirit among those, whom Christians call heathens!

This completes our brief review of the world's chief religions outside of those which may be more especially considered as directly the result of revelation, meaning the Hebrew and Christian faiths. Of course, our review could only be cursory, and yet some such review is necessary to the completeness of our theme, and in order to get before the reader the reports of those who have been "seekers after God." It perhaps will have occurred to the reader that at bottom all these religions have much in common, that certain characteristics tend to unite their several cults into one source of origin, and to point to one objective unity. One could easily conceive of them as but the broken rays of light from some noble sun of truth of an antiquity greater than these systems, if such they may be called. They seem, however, to be as detached stones that have broken off and rolled away from some ancient wall in which they once found orderly place. In other words they are fragments from the primitive revelation given to ancient patriarchs of antediluvian days and early postdiluvian days of which the Bible speaks. This the source of those truths, spiritual and moral, found in these religions, and which constitutes such truth, and beauty and virtue as they possess, and this is not inconsiderable, since it certainly may not be thought to be the purpose of an Intelligence dominant in the universe to permit the light of truth to enter into total eclipse with any part of the human race. More consistent is it with right reason—which is but intelligence in action—to accept the light-giving and inspiring thought of the ancient American scripture, the Book of Mormon, where it says: "Behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have" (Alma 29:8).

And, of course, that which "he seeth fit they should have" is that measure of the truth suited to their capacity and their development. This we shall hope, will grow more apparent as the general theme unfolds.

Further references recommended by Roberts for this lesson: Clarke, *Ten Great Religions*; standard presentations in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Roberts found Müller's presentation "acceptable" and Arnold's "sympathetic."