Chapter Two. New Directions

Eventually the beliefs that had served people well enough for a very long time began to lose their credibility. The displacement of the old gods, however, was a long and drawn-out affair, beginning almost unnoticed in the seventh and sixth centuries BC and culminating a thousand years later in a spasm of violence against all but one of the old gods and against what was left of their establishments. By the time Muhammad died in 632 most of the old gods were gone. And much of the world had embraced the great religions that are still familiar today: Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The Afterlife and the Soul

The shift from the old gods to the new religions had much to do with the mystery of life and death. In the old view, which began as far back in the paleolithic period as we can probe and which in most of the ancient world persisted long after 1000 BC, a person was indistinguishable from his or her body. This perception corresponded exactly to common sense, but had as its corollary a belief that physical existence continued - although in an obviously less attractive way - when the person died and was buried. The dead went down into the ground, into the Underworld, and there joined all those who had preceded them in death. What was left of a person, as the Greeks in Homer's time saw it, was merely his or her *psychē*, which meant not "soul" but "ghost." All that the *psychē* or ghost had in the Underworld was the grave itself, along with whatever his or her family had placed alongside the body in the grave. The grave goods - clothes, pottery, a few metal artifacts, some of them decorative and others utilitarian - provided the deceased with a dim semblance of the material comforts that he or she had enjoyed in life. Occasionally, when a king or a noble died the survivors might slaughter a team of horses, or even a concubine and a few servants, to accompany the deceased into the Underworld. But those companions were scant comfort, and everyone knew that even the most fortunate of the dead would find little joy in the Underworld. Existence there was just as material as life here, and just as dependent on physical goods, but there was only earth to eat and dirty water to drink.

In short, so far as most people believed, the Afterlife was sad and shadowy, perhaps not to be dreaded but certainly not to be welcomed. As Homer told it, when Odysseus made his journey to the Underworld and there met the ghost of Achilles, the ghost assured Odysseus that it was better by far to be a serf in the land of the living than to be king of all the dead. The Greek term for the Underworld was *Hades,* and the Hebrew word was *Sheol*. When a man died in Israel or Judah he was "gathered to his fathers" in *Sheol*. How *Sheol* was imagined can be seen in the advice that the author of Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) 9:10 gave to his contemporaries: "Whatever task lies to your hand, do it with might; because in Sheol, for which you are bound, there is neither doing nor thinking, neither understanding nor wisdom" (OSB). In the Germanic languages spoken in pre-Christian times the word *hell* likewise was simply the destination for the dead, all the dead, irrespective of their virtues and vices (the word *hell* was related etymologically to the word *hole*, and signified merely the hole in the ground into which the dead person was lowered).

India

A very different view of the Afterlife began in India. Ca. 1500 BC the Indus valley had been conquered by Aryan speakers from western Iran. Probably the Aryans had worshiped a few chthonic and local gods at home, but when they left home to conquer a far-off land the only gods who could accompany them were sky gods: *devas*, a word cognate with the Latin *dei* and meaning something like “bright ones.” With their gods now all in heaven, and with their traditional burial grounds a thousand miles away, the Aryan rulers of India seem to have come to believe in a celestial or heavenly Afterlife at least for themselves, although perhaps not for their subjects.

The new belief was bound up with a new funerary ritual. Initially the Aryan conquerors inhumed their dead under a barrow, but soon they abandoned inhumation in favor of cremation. Cremation was costly and was especially difficult in regions with little timber to fuel a fire of sufficient intensity to burn the corpse. During the Harappan civilization that had flourished in western India during the third and early second millennium BC Indians always buried their dead, and for most Indians inhumation continued long after the arrival of the Aryans. But the practice of cremation spread south and east from the Panjab, and by the early first millennium BC had reached the Ganges valley (Erdosy 1995, pp. 10-11). In the hymns of the Rig-veda cremation is clearly preferred, although other rites were still common, and in historical times cremation has been the standard practice for all Hindus. In the second millennium BC the Aryan survivors would gather up the bones and ashes of the deceased and place them in a burial urn, but eventually the practice was to throw the bones into the Ganges or another great river.

The smoke of the cremating fire carried the dead Aryan up to the heavens, to the “World of the Fathers” (one notion seems to have been that the heavenly home was the moon), whereas everyone else at death went down to the “House of Clay,” a gloomy place which certainly was underground (Basham 1967, p. 237). For an Aryan who had been guilty of great wrongs, however, cremation was insufficient to bring him to the World of the Fathers, and he joined the masses in the House of Clay. The World of the Fathers may have been something of a Valhalla, where the dead heroes spent their eternity in feasting, wenching, and chariot racing. Despite the anticipation of such carnal pleasures, belief in a heavenly Afterlife carried with it the corollary that a person must in some fundamental sense be separable from, or distinct from, his or her body. Vedic Sanskrit had a word - *ātman* - that meant something akin to both “self” and “soul,” and the Aryans seem to have believed that when an Aryan hero died and his body was burned his *ātman* ascended to the World of the Fathers.

Some time around 700 BC a few mystics in the Ganges valley of eastern India took all of this a few steps further. The new teachings appear in some of the earliest of the Vedic Upanishads. The various Hindu sects today have inherited more than a thousand Upanishads, and of these only a few more than a hundred (108 according to an oft-quoted enumeration) were transmitted through the millennia with the Vedic corpus and are accepted by all Hindus as *shruti*, or sacred literature. Even most of these “canonical” Upanishads are relatively late, and scarcely more than a dozen predate the great expansion of Buddhism in the third century BC. These twelve or thirteen early Upanishads are prose homilies that for Hindus signify and provide the *Vedanta*, or “End of the Veda.” Hindus see them, that is, as explaining or extracting the “true” meaning from the Vedas (which on the surface are tedious hymns and prayers to accompany sacrifices to an obsolete pantheon), much in the way that the Talmud and the New Testament provide the "true" meaning of Leviticus for Jewish and Christian readers. Like the four Vedas, the Upanishads were orally composed in Vedic Sanskrit (through most of the first millennium BC nobody in India was literate), but at a much later stage of that language's development than that at which the Rig-veda was composed. Of the Upanishads that underlie the *Vedanta* the earliest may date to the eighth or seventh century BC. They purport to be the teachings of famous sages who withdrew to the forest for contemplation and who there attracted a circle of hearers. The word *upanishad* meant "session" or "those who sit near," and suggests a community of teacher and students.

The mystics' principal concern was with the *ātman* and its fate after death. A few Indians resigned themselves to the pessimistic conclusion that death is the end of everything: there is no Afterlife at all, and the *ātman* perishes in the air just as the body perishes in the fire. But this materialist view seems to have been shared by only a tiny sect, the followers of Ajita Keshakambalin, who according to tradition was a contemporary of the Buddha (Basham 1967, p. 296). The mystics went off in an opposite direction. They looked forward to an ultimately blissful destination for the *ātman*, although not to the riotous World of the Fathers that had earlier been envisaged. And they prefaced the *ātman*'s ultimate bliss with an intermediate and difficult sojourn: the transmigration of the *ātman*. At death, they taught, a person's *ātman* enters another body, newborn, and pays for the evil *karma* (deeds, action) done in the preceding life. When you die your *ātman* may enter another human, or an animal, or even a fish or an insect.

In any case, the early Upanishads taught that the *ātman* eventually enters absolute bliss, but that in doing so it ceases to exist as an *ātman* and discovers itself as *Brahman*, the very essence of the world's reality. The forest sages taught, in other words, that the "self" is not a permanent entity, but a temporary phenomenon. What my senses identify as my "self" - my *ātman*, which is the "me" behind or apart from my body - is not a self at all but a microcosmic expression of *Brahman*, the very essence of the world's reality. The *ātman*, or self, is thus unreal, an illusion of our physical senses, and what alone is real is *Brahman*. The Upanishads do not present *Brahman* as God, but as an impersonal and ineffable reality that "fills all space and time. This is the ground beyond and below all forms and phenomena, and from it the whole Universe, including the gods themselves, has emerged" (Basham 1967, p 250). In contrast to *Brahman* the perceptible and sensible objects of the material world are reduced to mere appearances, what Greek philosophers would call *phainomena*, and we can only apprehend reality by thinking past the appearances. Something similar to this doctrine of the early Upanishads was expressed in Plato's dialogues. In more recent times it has echoes in Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*.

Unlike Plato and Schopenhauer, the forest hermits of India were speaking not to an educated reading public but to illiterate disciples. What the hermits taught was neither philosophy nor religion, but was of fundamental importance for both. The hermits promised that once a person understood the identity of his or her self with *Brahman* the person would be suffused in a profound peace, having come to a correct understanding of the sensible world and having gained an unshakeable serenity in the tumultuous world of appearances.

The Upanishad acceptance and welcoming of the annihilation of the self has for two and a half millennia distinguished Indian from Western religious and philosophic thought. Taking their cue from Plato, Christian theologians from Origen to modern times have enhanced the self by equating it with a "soul," which - far from being annihilated at death - is eternal. In India too, however, the Upanishad doctrine was not something that most people found satisfying without qualification. It was therefore invariably accompanied by the belief in transmigration. This belief was comforting because it guaranteed punishment for evildoers. If at death the *ātman* of the bad person and the good person alike simply dissolves into the bliss of *Brahman*, then there is little incentive for the bad person to improve his or her behavior.

The new ideas about the Afterlife had a deeply unsettling effect on religion in India. By 500 BC speculation about the identity of one's *ātman* with *Brahman* had created both Jainism and Buddhism, and as the great majority of Indians began to borrow from the new teachings their traditional Vedic religion began to be transformed into Hinduism. Siddhārtha Gautama, who was to become the *Buddha* ("enlightened one" or "awakened one") is supposed to have been born in 563 BC. And Vardhamāna, the *Mahāvīra* or "Great Man" who founded Jainism, is supposed to have been the Buddha's contemporary. Espousing the belief in transmigration, Buddhists and Jainists preached the virtue of *ahimsa*, or non-violence, to be applied not just to people but to all living and conscious beings. The broom was the symbol of Jainism, the Jainist sweeping the path in front of him as he walked, lest he tread upon the ants or other tiny creatures in his path.

Both Buddhism and Jainism were essentially atheistic: that is, they disregarded the old Vedic gods and presented a view of reality in which the gods played no part. Hinduism, in contrast, was theistic. In assimilating the Upanishad teachings about *ātman* and *Brahman*, and the more popular teachings about transmigration, Hinduism retained the old Vedic gods and added a considerable cast of new ones. Hindus regard the four Vedas as true and sacred texts, but Buddhists and Jainists do not. For our purposes it is especially remarkable that the Buddhist and Hindu traditions were able to live side by side without conflict or even, it seems, competition. Buddhists and Jainists undoubtedly perceived themselves as more enlightened than the average Indian, but did not attack the old gods and did not feel compelled to convert the theists to their own views. On the other side, although the traditionalists (whose religious system would over the centuries become Hinduism) may have found Buddhism and Jainism somewhat difficult to understand, they seem to have regarded Buddhists and Jainists as morally admirable and not as a threat to the Vedic tradition.

Iran and Greece

In lands to the west of India, and within a few generations after the Upanishads began to circulate, prophets in other languages began to proclaim a *metaphysical* (literally, "beyond the physical") reality, the transmigration of souls, and the rewards and punishments that awaited good people and bad in the Afterlife. The influences from India were indirect, muffled and often faint in the western lands. The Upanishads' denial of the reality of "self" was never carried westward from India, nor was its atheistic complement. From Iran to Europe and North Africa the old gods remained in place (although with diminished credibility) for another thousand years, until all but Yahweh were demoted to the rank of demon, while Yahweh became God or Allāh. Theism was therefore never seriously challenged in the lands west of India, although anthropomorphic polytheism was eventually replaced by anthropomorphic monotheism. The religious changes in the Near East and the Mediterranean were less abrupt and much slower in coming than they were in India. But over the centuries the changes in the west were perhaps as profound as those that brought to an end the old Vedic religion.

Zarathustra, or "Zoroaster" as the Greeks distorted the name, probably was born in eastern Iran ca. 600 BC (some specialists date him, for what seem to me inadequate reasons, as early as the middle of the second millennium BC). He composed his hymns, or Gathas, in the Avestan language, which in his time may have been in use only for religious purposes, the everyday vernaculars of Iran having evolved by ca. 600 BC to something akin to Old Persian. Zarathustra's Gathas denounced blood sacrifice and promoted the worship of one high god, Ahura Mazda. They warned that after death comes a judgement, and that in the Afterlife followers of "the Lie" would be tormented, while followers of "the Truth" enjoyed eternity in Paradise. The English word *paradise* in fact comes, via Greek, from the ancient Avestan word *pairi-daēza*. In the sixth century BC the center of political and military power in Iran was in the west, in the high tableland that ran along the Zagros mountain chain, and Zarathustra may have left eastern Iran for the more advanced and hospitable societies of Media and Persia. Among the most important converts of this self-declared prophet of Ahura Mazda were evidently the parents of Darius, who was to become king of Persia in 521 BC. Like the old Aryan gods, Ahura Mazda was very much anthropomorphic and anthropopathic, although - as a god of heaven - he was appropriately winged. Again like the other Aryan gods, Ahura Mazda was not an image. The Persian kings did not hesitate, however, to portray him symbolically in their sculpted reliefs. In these reliefs, as for example on Darius' tomb at Naqsh-i Rustam, the royal sculptors represented Ahura Mazda "as a person rising from a winged disk alongside a lunar crescent" (Briant 2002, p. 211).

In the third quarter of the sixth century BC, on the Aegean island of Samos, another prophet began his career. This was Pythagoras, whose name meant "Spokesman of the Pythian (Apollo)." Exactly what Pythagoras taught is much debated, because he wrote nothing. He founded a community in which his teachings were revered and passed down, but they were also much revised by later generations of Pythagoreans. The prophet seems to have given to the word *psychē* a new meaning. For Homer a *psychē* was a ghost or a wraith of a person who had died. For Pythagoras a *psychē* was something that you had already in this life, that survived after you died, and that is conventionally translated into English as "soul." In life, said Pythagoras, the *psychē* is entombed in the body, and at death it is released. Then the soul either enters into eternal bliss or - as is the case for most people, who have not lived a life of Pythagorean purity - it begins a series of transmigrations during which it is progressively purified. Pythagoras left his native Samos ca. 529 BC and settled in Kroton, a Greek city in southern Italy, where he established his religious community.

Fascinating as are these new doctrines about the Afterlife, and however consequential they were to be for the development of the great religions, it is obvious that they were not very popular in the sixth century BC. Zarathustra, Pythagoras and even the Buddha and the *Mahāvīra* were relatively unknown in their own time. Their fame was to come later, as the movements they had started evolved and grew. In Greece, doctrines about the immortality of the soul were for long looked upon as gross superstition, the stuff of the mumbo-jumbo poetry that devotees ascribed to such mythical figures as Orpheus and Musaios, or to Pythagoras himself. In the fourth century BC Plato gave the doctrines intellectual respectability, but even then they were mostly restricted to the small circle of students in his Academy. Within a century of Plato's death the Academy itself abandoned his doctrines about the soul and began its long skeptical phase, that of the "Middle Academy." From the first century BC onward, however, the Academy and then the wider world of Greek philosophy interested itself again in the soul, and by the third century CE philosophers spoke of few things other than the soul and its destiny. Altogether, the replacement of the old ideas of the Afterlife by the new was a very long process, continuing all through the period of Greco-Roman antiquity and beyond. How the new ideas spread, what new forms they took, and what profound consequences they had, will be recurring topics in this book.

The old gods' loss of credibility

As people began to see their destiny in (and to focus their hopes on) a non-material existence in the Afterlife, their dependence on the old gods also began to diminish. The old gods were, after all, concerned with the community, with temporal life, and with the material world. The image gods of the Near East and the Mediterranean were themselves material and were the first to lose their credibility, although initially for only a very few skeptics in the communities over which the gods had so long presided. Toward the end of the sixth century BC the prophet Deutero-Isaiah, a Judahite living in Mesopotamia, made sport of Marduk and Nabu, the Babylonians' great image gods: from one and the same tree, the prophet observed, woodcutters and carpenters make furniture and firewood, and with what is left over they make for themselves a god which they then proceed to worship (Isaiah 44:9-20).

Several Greek contemporaries of Deutero-Isaiah found the worship of images no less ludicrous. Herakleitos of Ephesos was baffled that his fellow citizens could regard statues as gods and could "pray to these statues, as if one were to have a conversation with houses."[1] Even more insistent in his criticism of the image gods was Xenophanes of Kolophon. Ca. 500 BC he wrote a long poem which is no longer extant, but which was frequently quoted by Christian writers of the second and third centuries because it furnished them with exactly the ammunition that they needed in their attack upon the gods of the Hellenes. Xenophanes contended that the Olympians and all the other anthropomorphic deities worshiped by the Hellenes and their neighbors were nothing more than human creations, and not very good creations at that: even before they were carved from wood or cast in bronze the Olympian gods were flawed, because Homer and Hesiod had invented them that way.

Ca. 450 BC a new breed of intellectuals - the sophists - appeared in Athens and a few other Greek cities. The sophists claimed (perhaps correctly) to be able to teach rich young men how to succeed personally and politically, and a few sophists became very rich and famous. The sophists' profession was made possible by a very important development in Greek society: the emergence of prose and of fluent literacy. A narrow elite, that is, was now able to read books, and prose writers were able to communicate with these readers at a more abstract level than had been possible before. Until the early fifth century BC Greek society had been based on oral (and usually poetic) communication, and the ability to read a book was restricted to a very few professionals. In Periklean Athens, however, the reading of books became not only profitable but - for the upper class - almost indispensable. The difference can be seen in the histories written by Herodotos and Thucydides. Herodotos' work was meant to be read aloud in public, and to be understood and appreciated by everyone in the assembled crowd. Thucydides' history, contrarily, was meant to be purchased by a wealthy man and to be read - and pondered - in private.

Fluent literacy heralded a cognitive revolution. In earlier times, wisdom for the Hellenes came in the form of poetry, and of easily memorized proverbs or maxims. This was traditional wisdom, passed down orally from one generation to the next. The prose writer sacrificed much of the beauty and emotional power of language, but this was offset by a great gain in clarity of thought and expression. The reader, in turn, could read and re-read a difficult sentence as many times as was necessary to understand it. The reading public in Greek society was always a minority, and even a small minority (probably fewer than one man in ten, and one woman in twenty, was able to read fluently). But the existence of a reading public was of extraordinary importance in the intellectual history of Greece and of the Western world.

As a result of the reading revolution, and the teachings of the sophists, upper-class Hellenes in the last decades of the fifth century BC became more outspokenly critical of the traditional gods. Contempt for traditional piety was characteristic of some of the leading Athenians - Euripides, Alkibiades, Kritias, Thucydides - and some writers began speculating about the origins of the Greek gods. Kritias suggested that the entire pantheon may have been invented by the decent but weak masses, who needed some "bogey-men" to frighten the strong and ruthless aristocrats (like himself) into moral behavior. The most famous instance of the division between the ordinary Athenian and the intellectual elite was the trial and execution of Sokrates. In 399 BC Sokrates was charged with "corrupting the young men of Athens, and not believing in the gods in which the city believed." Found guilty by a jury of 501 citizens, Sokrates was forced to drink the hemlock.

In India and Iran the old gods were invisible, but they were just as much concerned with the material world and just as dependent upon sacrifices as were the image gods of the Near East and the Mediterranean world. In Vedic religion the great gods - Indra, Varuna and the rest - required almost endless sacrifices. These Vedic deities were dismissed entirely by Buddhists and Jainists. They are retained in Hinduism, but very much in the background of the later gods (Brahmā, Shiva and especially Vishnu). In Iran the rest of the old Aryan gods were demoted by Zarathustra to the rank of *daevas*, and he worshiped only Mazda, the Ahura, whose prophet he claimed to be.[2] Zarathustra, however, was far ahead of his contemporaries, and for many Iranians the various *daevas* continued as gods until the third century CE.

Some of the more important of the new gods were celestial. The sun and moon had been regarded as divine all along, but in the seventh and sixth centuries BC they began to take on a new importance. The only one of the old Vedic gods who remained prominent in later centuries was Mitra, who in parts of India and in Iran became something of a sun-god. The Iranian Ahura Mazda may have also had solar connections (his name meant "the Bright God"). In addition to the sun and the moon, the five planets visible without a telescope - Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn - were seen as gods, and increasingly as important gods. These "wandering stars" played the key roles in astrology, a pseudo-science that began at Babylon ca. 750 BC and was more or less refined by the end of the fifth century BC. Together the sun, moon and five planets became the seven celestial gods from whom our week derives: the day of the sun, of the moon, of Mars (Tiu for Germanic speakers), of Mercury (Woden), of Jupiter (Thor), of Venus (Freya) and of Saturn. In the seventh and sixth centuries BC the astrologers' gods were concerned mostly with communities or kings. By the end of the fifth century, however, Babylonian scholars had created horoscopic astrology, and with this "science" the stars' concern was broadened from the ruler to the average individual: astrologers declared that every person's destiny was determined by the stars under which he or she was born. In the fourth century BC astrology began to attract a following in Egypt and in the Mediterranean world, and by the second century CE it was taken very seriously by most people in the Roman Empire, from illiterate peasants to emperors and philosophers.

Metaphorically, some of the image gods were themselves relocated to heaven. Worshipers who found it difficult to believe that the image itself was a god could console themselves with the knowledge that the *real* Zeus or Osiris or Athena was in heaven, and that the statue in the temple was only a symbol of the god. In the long run, however, such rationalization could not salvage the iconic cults. When worshipers on glimpsing an image could no longer feel themselves transported to the very presence of divinity, the image became redundant, along with the temple in which it was housed.

The image cults, as remarked above, were remarkably durable, and the *Gotterdämmerung* or "twilight of the gods" that began in the sixth century BC lasted to the fifth, sixth and - in a few places - even to the seventh century CE. By the 390s CE, however, skepticism was widespread and strong enough that whole communities could agree that the cult-statues were not gods at all, but "idols" inhabited by demons. The image cults were then denounced as "idolatry," the demons neutralized by exorcism, and the images themselves were torn apart. Monotheists pried loose and collected the gold, silver and ivory, and then burned the wooden core of the "pagan idol." When finally even the Parthenon came under attack by Christians in Athens, the Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus (411-485) reported that Athena appeared to him in a dream, asking him to give her shelter because she had been evicted from the home in which she had lived for a millennium.

Questions about sacrifice

Along with the old gods, sacrifice as the central act of worship also began to lose its credibility. Sacrifice made most sense when the ox or sheep was slaughtered right in front of the god's house, and when the meat was roasted on an altar so close to the temple that the god inside could surely savor the aroma. Gods as high in the sky as the sun and the moon were less likely to partake of the sacrificial meal, and also less likely to need it. The most pronounced movement away from sacrifice was seen in India. Because they did not believe in the gods at all Buddhists and Jainists saw no purpose in sacrifices, and because of their reverence for life and consciousness both systems advocated the vegetarian diet that would eventually be adopted by Hindus also (the belief in reincarnation undoubtedly discouraged the eating of meat, since you would have had no way of knowing whether the ox you were about to butcher might be hosting the *ātman* of one of your great-grandparents). By the third quarter of the first millennium BC the Vedic religion, which had been centered squarely on sacrifice, was being reinterpreted and reshaped into Hinduism. The major animal sacrifices were progressively abandoned, and in their place Hindu worshipers offered to the new gods - Vishnu, Shiva, Brahmā (a personal god, not to be confused with the abstract Brahman), Kali and Prajapati - sacrifices of flowers, cakes, and *ghee*. In Greece the pre-Socratic philosophers found no point in the sacrifices that their fellow Hellenes made to the Olympians, but made no effort to stop the practice. Far more outspoken was the Iranian prophet Zarathustra. A main theme in Zarathustra's Gathas is the condemnation of sacrificing cattle or other animals: Ahura Mazda had no desire for sacrificed meat but wanted right conduct, acceptance of Truth, and justice.

It should not be surprising, however, that sacrifices continued to be performed long after 500 BC. Most people, and evidently even the great majority, continued to believe that sacrifices worked. City-dwellers were less sure about that than people living in the country, but even in the first and second centuries CE many urbanites still believed that sacrifices were efficacious. For others the sacrifice became simply a festive occasion, a time for eating meat and enjoying a holiday, whereas meaningful religious experiences were sought elsewhere.

In the Mediterranean lands and in Europe people living in the country - *pagani* - continued their sacrificial traditions to the fifth and sixth centuries CE, because for them the slaughter of a large animal was necessarily a community event. In cities and towns, meat markets (*macella*) made it their business to butcher animals, to distribute the meat to the public in a timely fashion, and to make some money on the transaction. By the first century BC it often happened that when animals were slain and offered for sacrifice at a temple in a large city only a small part of the meat was consumed by worshipers who had gathered for the occasion: the rest of it was taken from the altar to the meat markets, where it could be retailed to citizens who had no interest in attending the sacrifice. In villages and among nomadic tribes no meat markets were to be found, and for these people a religious holiday was almost synonymous with the killing of an ox.

Sacrifices remained essential to the cults of the old gods, but both the cults and the tradition of sacrifices declined slowly and steadily, from the sixth and fifth centuries BC to the end of antiquity. In the fourth century CE the Roman Emperor Julian, an apostate from the Christian church, tried to revive the sacrificial customs of the early Greeks and Romans, but to no avail. City dwellers who were nostalgic for the old custom did turn out to watch, but most townspeople found the sacrifice disgusting rather than uplifting. Thirty years later, in 393, the emperor Theodosius, a devoted Christian, banned sacrifices throughout the Roman Empire. The edict could hardly be enforced, and occasionally and surreptitiously sacrifices continued to be offered. But by Theodosius' time the vitality of the sacrificial religion, along with the credibility of the gods for whom the sacrifices were made, was long gone.

Monotheism?

Polytheism was a necessary corollary of belief in the image gods. That is, if Egyptians believed, for example, that the image of Set in the temple at Avaris was a god, they could hardly deny that the image of Amon in the temple at Karnak and the image of Neith in the temple at

Sais were also gods. If you believed that any of these statues was a god, you pretty much had to believe that all of them were. Distinctions were inevitably made: Amon at Karnak was certainly a much greater god than Sobk in his temple at Crocodilopolis. But ancient polytheism was an expansive creed, and when a traveler from a distant land entered a city he had never seen before he would quickly make the acquaintance of gods whose names he had never heard. On seeing their precincts he might have concluded that these were not so impressive as the gods in his native land, but he would not have doubted that these too were gods. Thus did polytheism and the worship of images go hand in hand.

When the iconic cults began to lose their credibility, however, the result was not immediately and not necessarily monotheism. In the long run the populations of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East did embrace religions that were more or less monotheistic: Judaism, Islam, and even trinitarian Christianity, which offered what it described as One God with Three Persons. The Neoplatonist philosophers in the fourth century CE were monotheists, as were Manichees, Gnostics, Zoroastrians and others. On the other hand, in the fourth century BC monotheism was hardly in evidence.

According to the *OED* the word "monotheism" is first attested in the English language in 1660. It came into general use in the 18^{th} century, with the rise of Unitarianism: "monotheism" was then a useful term for distinguishing the belief of Unitarians from the trinitarianism of Christians. None of the ancient languages had a term corresponding either to "polytheism" or to "monotheism." Although classical Greek and Roman philosophers had no word for it, they often thought monotheistically, and by the third century CE most philosophers were de facto monotheists. It is important to remark, however, that for a very long time in Greco-Roman antiquity polytheistic concepts and language continued to be the norm. Xenophanes, the pre-Socratic philosopher whose poem lampooned his fellow citizens' worship of the Olympians, is sometimes regarded as a monotheist but that is going too far. Xenophanes did write "there is one god, greatest among gods and men, like to men neither in body nor in soul... Without toil he sets all into motion, by the thought of his mind." The sentence was congenial for later monotheists, but Xenophanes' language both here ("greatest among gods") and in other fragments from his poem is generally polytheistic.

In the 430s and 420s BC Anaxagoras may have been self-consciously monotheistic, but apparently Sokrates was not. What about Plato? In the second and third centuries CE, as Neoplatonism was emerging, Numenius, Ammonius Saccas, Origen and Plotinus transformed Plato into a thoroughgoing monotheist. The actual Plato, however, was more ambiguous. Like earlier philosophers, Plato did sometimes refer to "the god" - singular - but he more often spoke of "the gods" - plural. Aristotle was similarly ambivalent. A generation later, Zeno, founder of the Stoic school, elevated the World-Soul above the gods, and so gave to Stoicism a quasi-monotheistic veneer. But when Chrysippos, who headed the Stoic school in the third century BC, wrote theology the title of his work was not "The Nature of God," but *The Nature of the Gods*. The same title - *On the Nature of the Gods* - was chosen by Cicero for the three books on the subject that he wrote ca. 45 BC. We may suppose that in such a philosophical work one of the main questions should have been, Is there one God, or are there many? But in Cicero's essay, as apparently in Chrysippos', that question was not even raised. As late as the 160s and 170s CE, Marcus Aurelius spoke instinctively of "the gods" when referring to deity or

Providence.

As we shall see in a later chapter, in the Roman empire the question - "One god or many?" - did become urgent in the third century CE. Hellenistic Judaism had introduced a self-conscious belief in One God but had coexisted quite comfortably with Greco-Roman polytheism. Finally, the apologists and martyrs of New Covenant Christianity made the doctrine confrontational with ancient polytheism. But even in the Judaeo-Christian tradition the evolution from monolatry (or henotheism) to monotheism was a long and uneven process, which in the sixth century BC had barely begun.

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1. For citations from Herakleitos and Xenophanes see David Rice and John Stambaugh, *Sources for the Study of Greek Religion* (1979), pp. 31 ff.

2. In the Avestan language *daeva* became a derogatory term, tantamount to "demon," while *ahura* retained its high status and eventually became synonymous with "God." In Indo-Aryan the words evolved in the opposite direction. Although in the Vedas the term *asura* was used for Varuna and several lesser gods, in Hinduism the word *asura* came to denote a demon, while *deva* continued to denote a god.