

# THE HUMANISTIC TRADITION

THIRD EDITION

Gloria K. Fiero



2

Medieval Europe  
and the World  
Beyond

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THIRD EDITION

## 2 Medieval Europe and the World Beyond

Gloria K. Fiero



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## THE HUMANISTIC TRADITION, BOOK 2

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### *Front cover*

Main image: Head of Theodora, detail of *Empress Theodora and Retinue*, ca. 547 C.E.  
Mosaic. San Vitale, Ravenna. Photo: © Dagli Orti, Paris.  
Insets: (top) Red-figure *kylix* showing man and youth debating. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1952 52.11.4. Photograph © 1984 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.  
(center) Sandro Botticelli, detail of *Birth of Venus*, after 1482. Tempera on canvas, full image 5 ft. 9 in. × 9 ft. ½ in. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Scala, Florence.  
(bottom) Detail of *Seated Buddha*, from the Gandharan region of Northwest Pakistan, ca. 200 C.E. Gray schist, 51 × 31 in. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Leonard Hanna, Jr. Bequest. CMA 61.418.

### *Frontispiece*

*The Battle Rages*, detail from the Bayeux Tapestry, eleventh century. Wool embroidery on linen, depth approx. 20 in., entire length 231 ft. Ville de Bayeux, France.  
Photo: By special permission of the City of Bayeux.

# Preface

"It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!" exclaimed Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, as she watched the Cheshire Cat slowly disappear, leaving only the outline of a broad smile. "I've often seen a cat without a grin, but a grin without a cat!" A student who encounters an ancient Greek epic, a Yoruba mask, or a Mozart opera—lacking any context for these works—might be equally baffled. It may be helpful, therefore, to begin by explaining how the artifacts (the "grin") of the humanistic tradition relate to the larger and more elusive phenomenon (the "cat") of human culture.

## The Humanistic Tradition and the Humanities

In its broadest sense, the term *humanistic tradition* refers to humankind's cultural legacy—the sum total of the significant ideas and achievements handed down from generation to generation. This tradition is the product of responses to conditions that have confronted all people throughout history. Since the beginnings of life on earth, human beings have tried to ensure their own survival by achieving harmony with nature. They have attempted to come to terms with the inevitable realities of disease and death. They have endeavored to establish ways of living collectively and communally. And they have persisted in the desire to understand themselves and their place in the universe. In response to these ever-present and universal challenges—*survival, communality, and self-knowledge*—human beings have created and transmitted the tools of science and technology, social and cultural institutions, religious and philosophic systems, and various forms of personal expression, the sum total of which we call culture.

Even the most ambitious survey cannot assess all manifestations of the humanistic tradition. This book therefore focuses on the creative legacy referred to collectively as *the humanities*: literature, philosophy, history (in its literary dimension), architecture, the visual arts (including photography and film), music, and dance. Selected examples from each of these disciplines constitute our *primary sources*. Primary sources (that is, works original to the age that produced them) provide first-hand evidence of human inventiveness and ingenuity. The primary sources in this text have been chosen on the basis of their authority, their beauty, and their enduring value. They are, simply stated, the great works of their time and, in some cases, of all time. Universal in their appeal, they have been transmitted from generation to generation. Such works are, as well, the landmark

examples of a specific time and place: They offer insight into the ideas and values of the society in which they were produced. The drawings of Leonardo da Vinci, for example, reveal a passionate determination to understand the operations and functions of nature. And while Leonardo's talents far exceeded those of the average individual of his time, his achievements may be viewed as a mirror of the robust curiosity that characterized his time and place—the age of the Renaissance in Italy. *The Humanistic Tradition* surveys such landmark works, but joins "the grin" to "the cat" by examining them within their political, economic, and social contexts.

*The Humanistic Tradition* explores a living legacy. History confirms that the humanities are integral forms of a given culture's values, ambitions, and beliefs. Poetry, painting, philosophy, and music are not, generally speaking, products of unstructured leisure or indulgent individuality; rather, they are tangible expressions of the human quest for the good (one might even say the "complete") life. Throughout history, these forms of expression have served the domains of the sacred, the ceremonial, and the communal. And even in the waning days of the twentieth century, as many time-honored traditions have come under assault, the arts retain their power to awaken our imagination in the quest for survival, communality, and self-knowledge.

## The Scope of the Humanistic Tradition

The humanistic tradition is not the exclusive achievement of any one geographic region, race, or class of human beings. For that reason, this text assumes a global and multicultural rather than exclusively Western perspective. At the same time, Western contributions are emphasized, first, because the audience for these books is predominantly Western, but also because in recent centuries the West has exercised a dominant influence on the course and substance of global history. Clearly, the humanistic tradition belongs to all of humankind, and the best way to understand the Western contribution to that tradition is to examine it in the arena of world culture.

As a survey, *The Humanistic Tradition* cannot provide an exhaustive analysis of our creative legacy. The critical reader will discover many gaps. Some aspects of culture that receive extended examination in traditional Western humanities surveys have been pared down to make room for the too often neglected contributions of

Islam, Africa, and Asia. This book is necessarily selective—it omits many major figures and treats others only briefly. Primary sources are arranged, for the most part, chronologically, but they are presented as manifestations of *the informing ideas of the age* in which they were produced. The intent is to examine the evidence of the humanistic tradition thematically and topically, rather than to compile a series of mini-histories of the individual arts.

### Studying the Humanistic Tradition

To study the creative record is to engage in a dialogue with the past, one that brings us face to face with the values of our ancestors, and, ultimately, with our own. This dialogue is (or should be) a source of personal revelation and delight; like *Alice in Wonderland*, our strange, new encounters will be enriched according to the degree of curiosity and patience we bring to them. Just as lasting friendships with special people are cultivated by extended familiarity, so our appreciation of a painting, a play, or a symphony depends on close attention and repeated contact. There are no shortcuts to the study of the humanistic tradition, but there are some techniques that may be helpful. It should be useful, for instance, to approach each primary source from the triple perspective of its *text*, its *context*, and its *subtext*.

*The Text:* The *text* of any primary source refers to its *medium* (that is, what it is made of), its *form* (its outward shape), and its *content* (the subject it describes). All literature, for example, whether intended to be spoken or read, depends on the medium of words—the American poet Robert Frost once defined literature as “performance in words.” Literary form varies according to the manner in which words are arranged. So poetry, which shares with music and dance rhythmic organization, may be distinguished from prose, which normally lacks regular rhythmic pattern. The main purpose of prose is to convey information, to narrate, and to describe; poetry, by its freedom from conventional patterns of grammar, provides unique opportunities for the expression of intense emotions. Philosophy (the search for truth through reasoned analysis) and history (the record of the past) make use of prose to analyze and communicate ideas and information. In literature, as in most kinds of expression, content and form are usually interrelated. The subject matter or the form of a literary work determines its *genre*. For instance, a long narrative poem recounting the adventures of a hero constitutes an *epic*, while a formal, dignified speech in praise of a person or thing constitutes a *eulogy*.

The visual arts—painting, sculpture, architecture, and photography—employ a wide variety of media, such as wood, clay, colored pigments, marble, granite, steel, and (more recently) plastic, neon, film, and computers.

The form or outward shape of a work of art depends on the manner in which the artist manipulates the formal elements of color, line, texture, and space. Unlike words, these formal elements lack denotative meaning. The artist may manipulate form to describe and interpret the visible world (as in such genres as portraiture and landscape painting); to generate fantastic and imaginative kinds of imagery; or to create imagery that is nonrepresentational—without identifiable subject matter. In general, however, the visual arts are spatial, that is, they operate and are apprehended in space.

The medium of music is sound. Like literature, music is durational: It unfolds over the period of time in which it occurs. The formal elements of music are melody, rhythm, harmony, and tone color—elements that also characterize the oral life of literature. As with the visual arts, the formal elements of music are without symbolic content, but while literature, painting, and sculpture may imitate or describe nature, music is almost always nonrepresentational—it rarely has meaning beyond the sound itself. For that reason, music is the most difficult of the arts to describe in words. It is also (in the view of some) the most affective of the arts. Dance, the artform that makes the human body itself a medium of expression, resembles music in that it is temporal and performance-oriented. Like music, dance exploits rhythm as a formal tool, but, like painting and sculpture, it unfolds in space as well as time.

In analyzing the text of a work of literature, art, or music, we ask how its formal elements contribute to its meaning and affective power. We examine the ways in which the artist manipulates medium and form to achieve a characteristic manner of execution and expression that we call *style*. And we try to determine the extent to which a style reflects the personal vision of the artist and the larger vision of his or her time and place. Comparing the styles of various artworks from a single era, we may discover that they share certain defining features and characteristics. Similarities (both formal and stylistic) between, for instance, golden age Greek temples and Greek tragedies, between Chinese lyric poems and landscape paintings, and between post-modern fiction and pop sculpture, prompt us to seek the unifying moral and aesthetic values of the cultures in which they were produced.

*The Context:* We use the word *context* to describe the historical and cultural environment. To determine the context, we ask: In what time and place did the artifact originate? How did it function within the society in which it was created? Was the purpose of the piece decorative, didactic, magical, propagandistic? Did it serve the religious or political needs of the community? Sometimes our answers to these questions are mere guesses. Nevertheless, understanding the function of an

artifact often serves to clarify the nature of its form (and vice versa). For instance, much of the literature produced prior to the fifteenth century was spoken or sung rather than read; for that reason, such literature tends to feature repetition and rhyme, devices that facilitate memorization. We can assume that literary works embellished with frequent repetitions, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Hebrew Bible, were products of an oral tradition. Determining the original function of an artwork also permits us to assess its significance in its own time and place: The paintings on the walls of Paleolithic caves, which are among the most compelling animal illustrations in the history of world art, are not "artworks" in the modern sense of the term but, rather, magical signs that accompanied hunting rituals, the performance of which was essential to the survival of the community. Understanding the relationship between text and context is one of the principal concerns of any inquiry into the humanistic tradition.

*The Subtext:* The *subtext* of the literary or artistic object refers to its secondary and implied meanings. The subtext embraces the emotional or intellectual messages embedded in, or implied by, a work of art. The epic poems of the ancient Greeks, for instance, which glorify prowess and physical courage in battle, suggest that such virtues are exclusively male. The state portraits of the seventeenth-century French ruler Louis XIV carry the subtext of unassailable and absolute power. In our own century, Andy Warhol's serial adaptations of soup cans and Coca-Cola bottles offer wry commentary on the supermarket mentality of postmodern American culture. Identifying the implicit message of an artwork helps us to determine the values and customs of the age in which it was produced and to assess those values against others.

### Beyond *The Humanistic Tradition*

This book offers only small, enticing samples from an enormous cultural buffet. To dine more fully, students are encouraged to go beyond the sampling presented at this table; and for the most sumptuous feasting, nothing can substitute for first-hand experience. Students, therefore, should make every effort to supplement this book with visits to art museums and galleries, concert halls, theaters, and libraries. *The Humanistic Tradition* is designed for students who may or may not be able to read music, but who surely are able to cultivate an appreciation of music in performance. The clefs that appear in the text refer to the forty-five Music Listening Selections found on two accompanying cassettes, available from the publishers. Lists of suggestions for further reading are included at the end of each chapter, while a selected general bibliography of humanities resources appears at the end of each book.

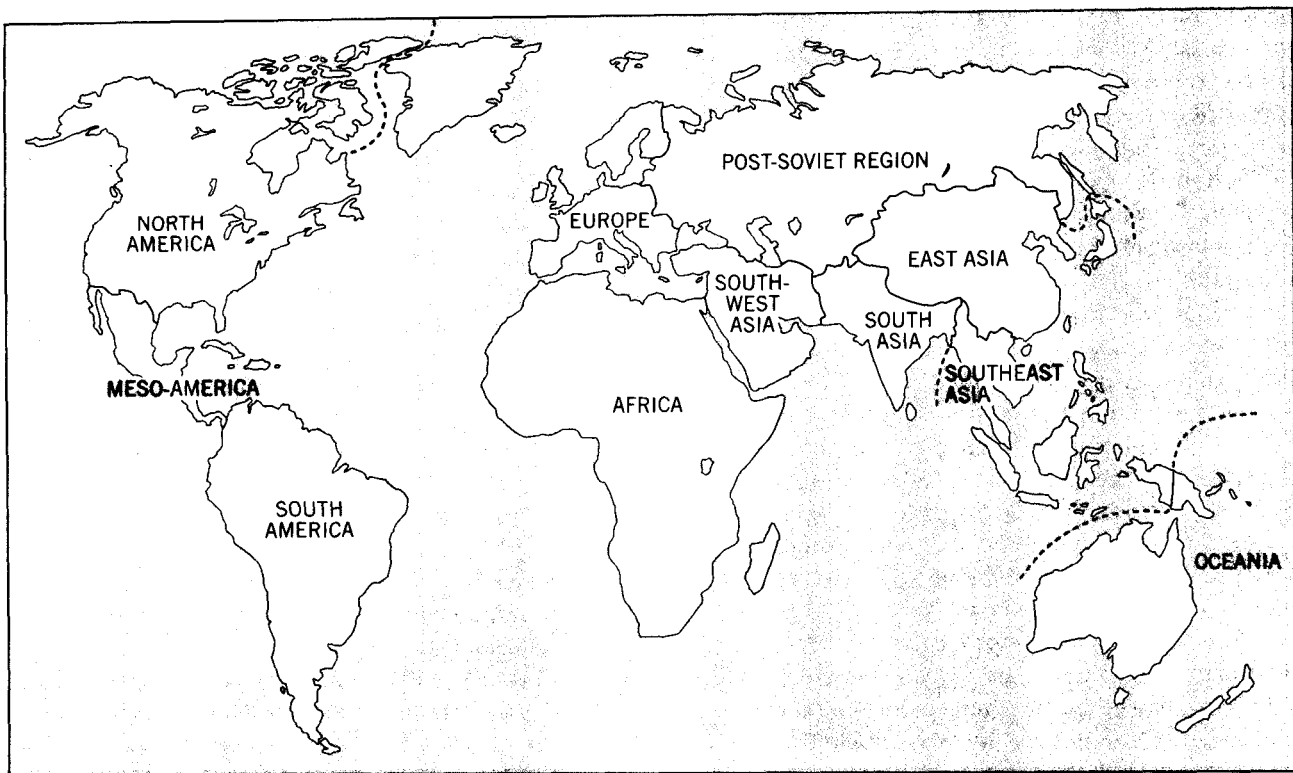
### The Third Edition

On the threshold of the new millennium, this third edition of *The Humanistic Tradition* brings increased attention to the theme of global cross-cultural encounter and, in particular, to the interaction of the West with the cultures of Islam, East Asia, and Africa. In this connection, a full chapter has been devoted to the Islamic World, and the chapter on ancient Rome has been expanded to provide parallels between the cultures of the Roman Empire and Han China. Chapter 1 now includes a carefully chosen selection of creation myths. There are new readings from *Beowulf*, Christine de Pisan, Murasaki Shikibu, Ibn Battuta, Hernán Cortés, Jonathan Swift, Mary Shelley, and Alice Walker. Excerpts from the *Iliad* (in chapter 4) appear in the 1990 English translation by Robert Fagles. Sufi poetry, the transatlantic slave trade, Japanese theater, and contemporary computer art add new perspectives to this, the latest version of the text.

The third edition also features two new study aids, both of which are designed to facilitate an appreciation of the arts in relation to their time and place: *Science and Technology Boxes*, which appear throughout the chapters, list key scientific and technological developments that have directly or indirectly affected the history of culture. *Locator Maps* (keyed to the map that appears on p. xii) assist readers in linking specific cultural events with the geographic region in which they occurred. This edition also expands on the number of color illustrations and large color maps, rennumbers the Readings by book, and updates the Suggestions for Reading and Selected General Bibliography. Finally, in the transcription of the Chinese language, the older Wade-Giles system has been replaced by the more modern Hanyu Pinyin.

### A Note to Instructors

The key to successful classroom use of *The Humanistic Tradition* is *selectivity*. Although students may be assigned to read whole chapters that focus on a topic or theme, as well as complete works that supplement the abridged readings, the classroom should be the stage for a selective treatment of a single example or a set of examples. The organization of this textbook is designed to emphasize themes that cut across geographic boundaries—themes whose universal significance prompts students to evaluate and compare rather than simply memorize and repeat lists of names and places. In an effort to assist readers in achieving global cultural literacy, every effort has been made to resist isolating (or "ghettoizing") individual cultures and to avoid the inevitable biases we bring to our evaluation of relatively unfamiliar cultures.



Keymap Indicating Areas Shown as White Highlights on the Locator Maps.

## Acknowledgments

Writing *The Humanistic Tradition* has been an exercise in humility. Without the assistance of learned friends and colleagues, assembling a book of this breadth would have been an impossible task. James H. Dormon read all parts of the manuscript and made extensive and substantive editorial suggestions; as his colleague, best friend, and wife, I am most deeply indebted to him. I owe thanks to the following faculty members of the University of Southwestern Louisiana: for literature, Allen David Barry, Darrell Bourque, C. Harry Bruder, John W. Fiero, Emilio F. Garcia, Doris Meriwether, and Patricia K. Rickels; for history, Ora-Wes S. Cady, John Moore, Bradley Pollack, and Thomas D. Schoonover; for philosophy, Steve Giambrone and Robert T. Kirkpatrick; for geography, Tim Reilly; for the sciences, Mark Konikoff and John R. Meriwether; and for music, James Burke and Robert F. Schmalz.

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#### **SUPPLEMENTS FOR THE INSTRUCTOR AND THE STUDENT**

A number of useful supplements are available to instructors and students using *The Humanistic Tradition*. Please contact your sales representative or call 1-800-338-3987 to obtain these resources, or to ask for further details.

##### **Audiocassettes**

Two ninety-minute audiocassettes containing a total of forty-five musical selections have been designed exclusively for use with *The Humanistic Tradition*. Cassette One corresponds to the music listening selections discussed in books 1–3 and Cassette Two contains the music in books 4–6. Each selection on the cassettes is discussed in the text and includes a voice introduction for easier location. Instructors may obtain copies of the cassettes for classroom use by calling 1-800-338-3987. Individual cassettes may be purchased separately; however, upon the request of instructors who place book orders, Cassette One or Two can be packaged with any of the six texts, so that students may use the musical examples *along with* the text.

##### **Slide Sets**

A set of fifty book-specific slides is available to qualified adopters of *The Humanistic Tradition*. These slides have been especially selected to include many of the less well-known images in the books, and will be a useful complement to your present slide resources. A larger set of two hundred book-specific slides is available for purchase. For further information, contact your McGraw-Hill representative.

##### **Instructor's Resource Manual**

The Instructor's Resource Manual is designed to assist instructors as they plan and prepare for classes. Course outlines and sample syllabuses for both semester and quarter systems are included. The chapter summaries emphasize key themes and topics that give focus to the primary source readings. The study questions for each chapter may be removed and copied as handouts for student discussion or written assignments. A Test Item File follows each chapter along with a correlation list that directs instructors to the appropriate music examples, slides, transparencies, and software sections of the other supplements. A list of suggested videotapes, recordings, videodiscs, CD-ROMs, and their suppliers is included.

##### **MicroTest III**

The questions in the Test Item File are available on MicroTest III, a powerful but easy-to-use test generating program. MicroTest is available for DOS, Windows, and Macintosh personal computers. With MicroTest, an instructor can easily

select the questions from the Test Item File and print a test and answer key. You can customize questions, headings, and instructions and add or import questions of your own.

##### **Humanities Transparencies**

A set of seventy-one acetate transparencies is available with *The Humanistic Tradition*. These show examples of art concepts, architectural styles, art media, maps, musical notation, musical styles, and musical elements.

##### **Culture 3.0 CD-ROM**

*Culture 3.0* CD-ROM is a unique Macintosh reference tool that emphasizes the interaction of varied disciplines. It contains 40 historical maps, 120 signature melodies, 50,000 hypertext links, and 170 essays on topics ranging from Greek gods and goddesses to the Cold War. Thirty-two CultureGrids are arranged chronologically from the biblical era to the twentieth century, organizing people, places, and events by country, discipline, and generation. (*Culture 2.0* is also available in a seven-disk set for Mac and IBM.)

##### **Student Study Guides, Volumes 1 and 2**

Written by Gloria K. Fiero, two new Student Study Guides are now available to help students gain a better understanding of subjects found in *The Humanistic Tradition*. Volume 1 accompanies books 1–3 and Volume 2 accompanies books 4–6. Each chapter contains: a Chapter Objective; a Chapter Outline; Key Terms, Names, and Dates; Vocabulary Building; Multiple Choice Questions; and Essay Questions. Many chapters also contain a Visual/Spatial Exercise and Bonus Material. At the end of each Part, Synthesis material helps students draw together ideas from a set of chapters.

##### **The Art Historian CD-ROM, Volumes 1 and 2**

This flexible two-volume series on dual platform (Mac and Windows) CD-ROMs is designed to supplement introductory level art history education. Volume 1 covers ancient and medieval art, and Volume 2 covers Renaissance to modern art. The images included on the CD were gathered from over three hundred museums, galleries, and private collections throughout the world, and the text and test questions were written by current scholars from universities across the United States. With *The Art Historian*, students may listen to multimedia presentations, review full-color high-resolution images, and test their knowledge with flashcards and essay questions. *The Art Historian* is flexible, allowing students to take notes, compare two images on the screen at the same time, and create personalized collections of images for study and review. With *The Art Historian*, we place the power of multimedia *and* art at your fingertips.



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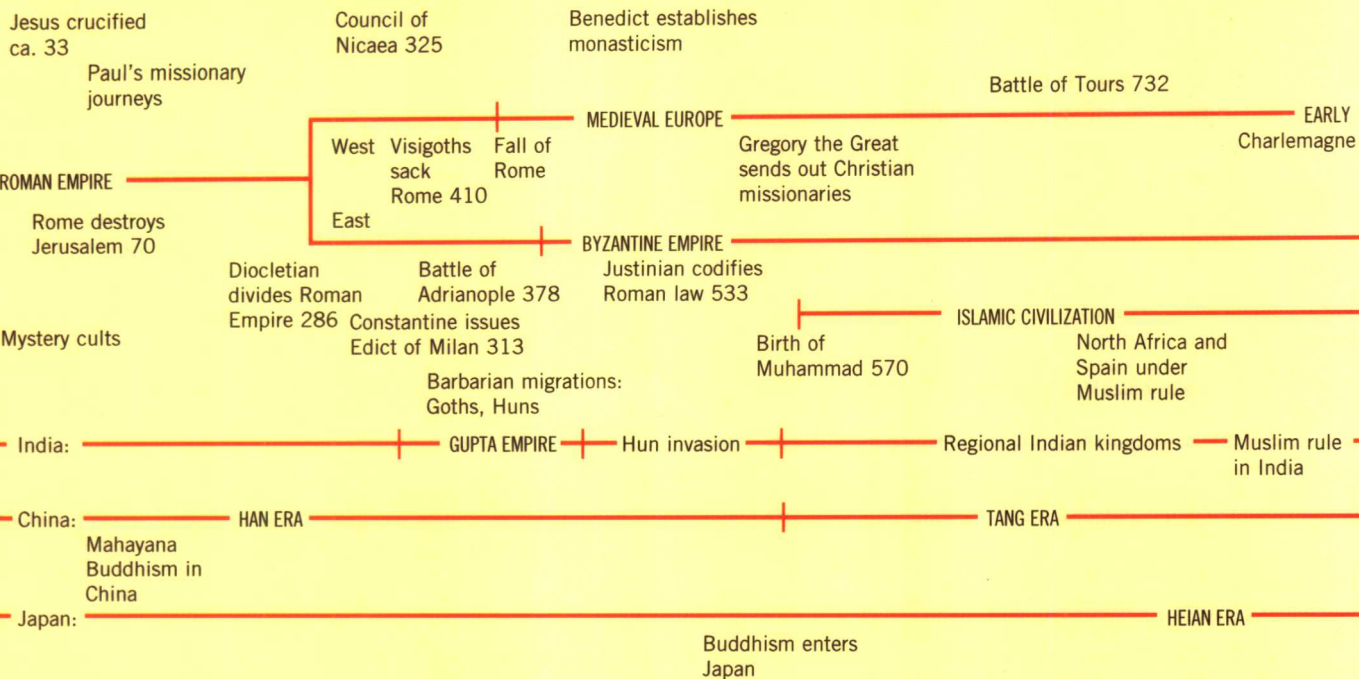
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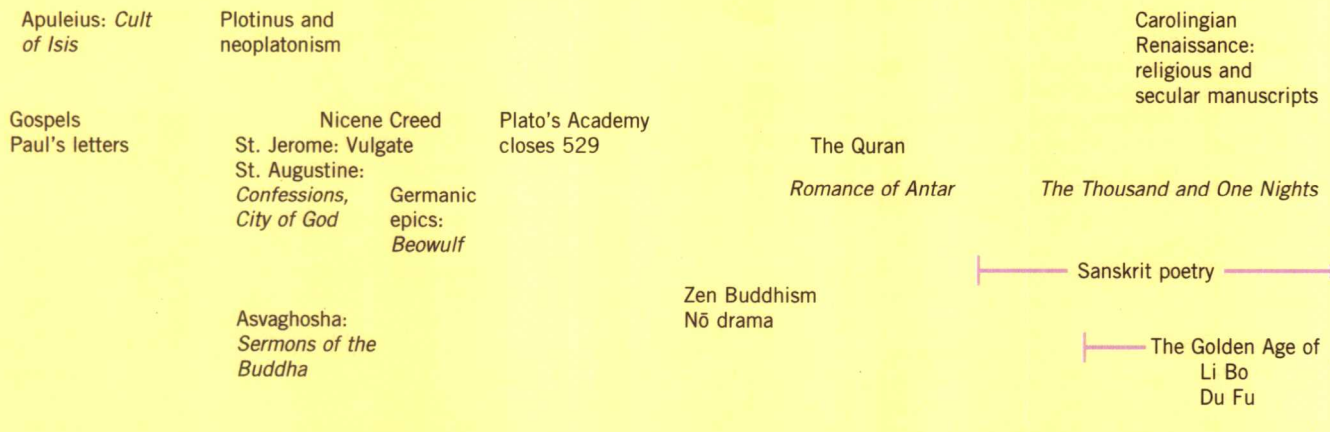
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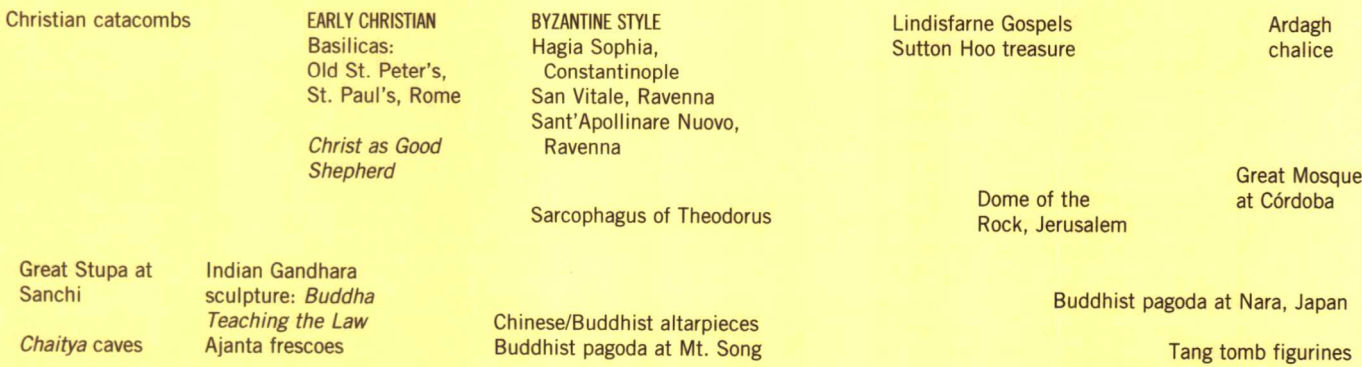
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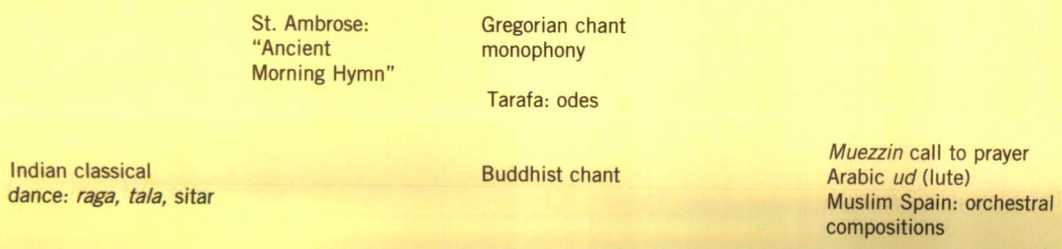
LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY



VISUAL ARTS AND ARCHITECTURE



MUSIC AND DANCE



900

1000

1100

1200

1300

1400

Viking invasions

Norman Conquest of England 1066

First universities founded in Europe

Rise of towns and guilds

Philip IV ruler of France

MIDDLE AGES expands his empire

HIGH MIDDLE AGES

Split between the Roman Catholic and the Greek Orthodox Church

Christian Crusades 1094-1204

Establishment of Franciscan order

Medieval papacy at its height

Boniface VIII: *Unam Sanctam* 1302

Harun-al-Rashid expands the Abbasid Empire

Baghdad becomes important center

Mongols conquer Baghdad 1258

Delhi sultanate

SONG ERA

Block printing invented

Movable type invented

Introduction of paper currency

Marco Polo reaches China ca. 1275

HEIAN ERA

Rise of the samurai

KAMAKURA SHOGUNATE

Lindau Gospels

*Song of Roland* transcribed

Abelard: *Sic et Non*

MEDIEVAL SCHOLASTICISM

*Troubadour* and *trouvère* lyrics

Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*

Avicenna: *Canon of Medicine*

Ibn Zaydun: "Two Fragments"  
Ibn Abra: "The Beauty-Spot"

Medieval romance  
Chrétien de Troyes: *Lancelot*  
Mystery and miracle plays  
Morality play: *Everyman*

Dante: *Divine Comedy*

World's earliest printed book: *Diamond Sutra*

Sufi poetry: "Empty the Glass of Your Desire," "The Man of God," "The One True Light"

Chinese poetry  
Bo Zhu-yi

Japanese novels, short stories:  
Murasaki: *Tale of Genji, Diary*

Vidyakara: *Treasury of Well-Turned Verse*

Song Dynasty: painted album leaves and scrolls

Chinese novels, short stories, popular theater:  
Luo Guanzhong: *Three Kingdoms*

Carolingian Abbey Church  
St.-Gall  
Chapel at Aachen

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Pilgrimage church: St.-Sernin  
Gislebertus at Autun Cathedral  
Norman architecture:  
Dover Castle  
Bayeux Tapestry

GOTHIC STYLE  
St.-Denis Abbey Church  
Chartres Cathedral  
Notre Dame of Paris  
Notre Dame of Amiens  
Ste. Chapelle, Paris

Cimabue: *Madonna Enthroned*  
Martini: *Annunciation*

Chinese landscape painting:  
Li Cheng: *A Solitary Temple*  
Chinese porcelains

China's first manual on architecture

Hindu temple: Kandariya Mahadeo  
Chola bronzes:  
*Shiva, Lord of the Dance*

Buddhist deity in wood: *Kichijoten*  
*Samurai* armor  
Takanobu: *Minamoto no Yoritomo*

Court of the Lions, Alhambra

Jokei: *Kongorikishi*

Nō mask: *Ko-omote*

Antiphons, tropes, sequences

Organum/early polyphony  
*The Play of Herod*

Bernart de Ventadour: *troubadour* songs

Leonin: *Magnus Liber Organi*

Pérotin: 3- and 4-part polyphony

*Estampie*

*Jongleurs: chansons de geste*

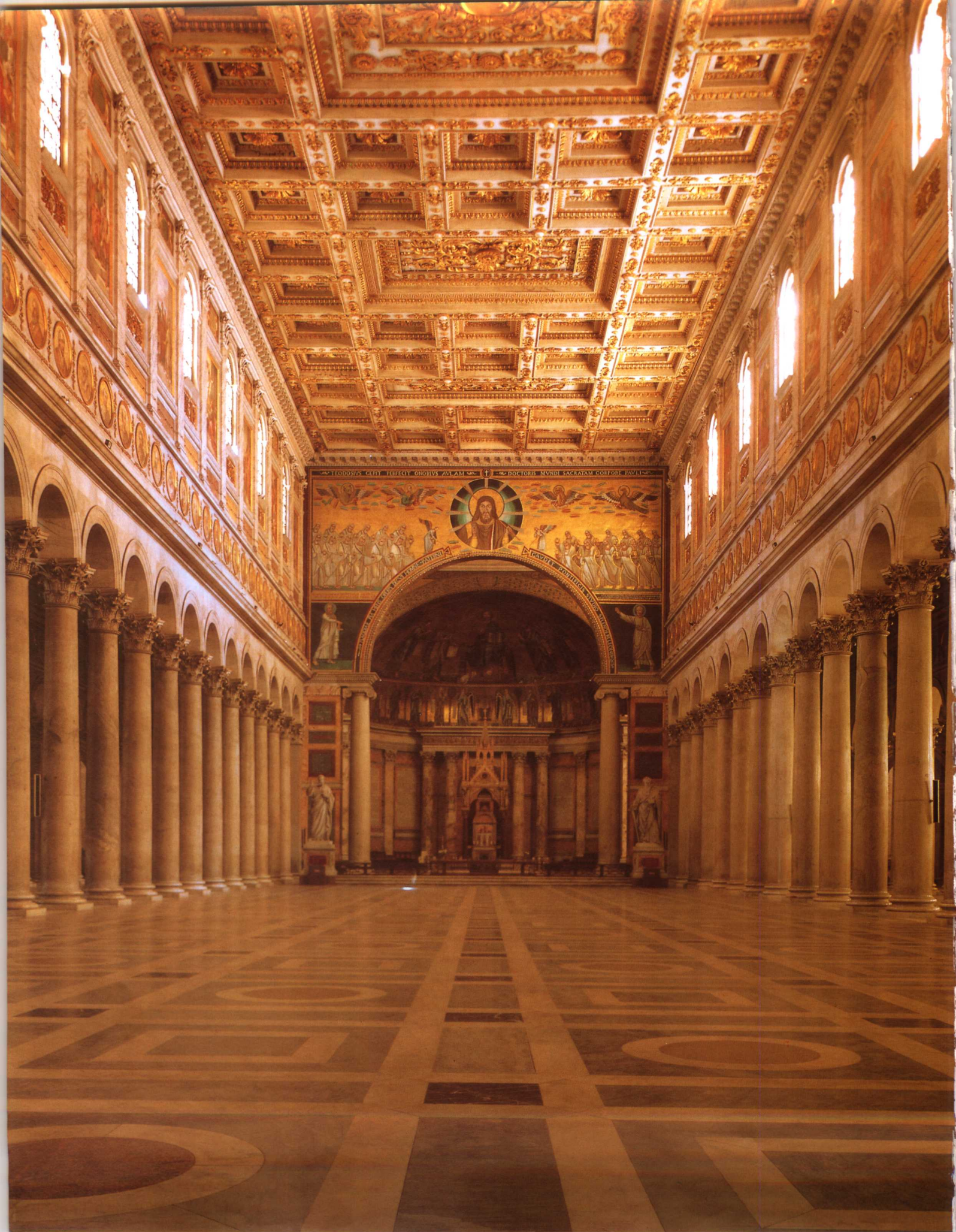
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Motets

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# PART I THE SHAPING OF THE MIDDLE AGES

Scholars once described the thousand-year period between the fall of Rome and the age of the European Renaissance as a “dark” age whose cultural achievements fell far short of those of ancient Greece and Rome. Our present understanding of the Middle Ages suggests otherwise. As the following chapters indicate, this was one of the most creative periods in the history of Western culture. During the Early Middle Ages, that is, the first seven centuries of the first millennium of the common era, a transition from classical to Christian culture took place in the West. Elsewhere in the world, the same period witnessed the vitalizing effects of two world religions: Buddhism and Islam. So powerful were these religious faiths—Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam—that by the year 1000, the Eastern hemisphere could be described as being divided among them (Map 8.1).

From the perspective of world history, the transition to the Middle Ages encompassed several significant developments: the decline of classical civilization and the rise of the Christian West; the diffusion of

Germanic tribal peoples into the lands of the Roman Empire; the golden age of Byzantine civilization; the spread of Buddhism from India to China; and, finally, the birth and expansion of Islam in Southwest Asia and beyond.

Chapter 8, “A Flowering of Faith,” examines the climate of religious renewal that resulted in the rise of Christianity in the West and the spread of Buddhism in the East, and compares the spiritual messages of these world faiths. Chapter 9, “The Language of Faith,” surveys the establishment of early Christianity in the Roman West and in Byzantium, traces the transition from classical to Christian modes of expression, and, finally, explores the Buddhist language of faith as evidenced in the art, architecture, and music of India and China. Chapter 10, “The Islamic World: Religion and Culture,” examines the rich cultural heritage of Islam—a religion practiced today by more than a billion people—uncovering the unique contributions of Muslim artists and scholars and evaluating Islam’s role as geographic intermediary between East and West.

# 8

## A Flowering of Faith: Christianity and Buddhism

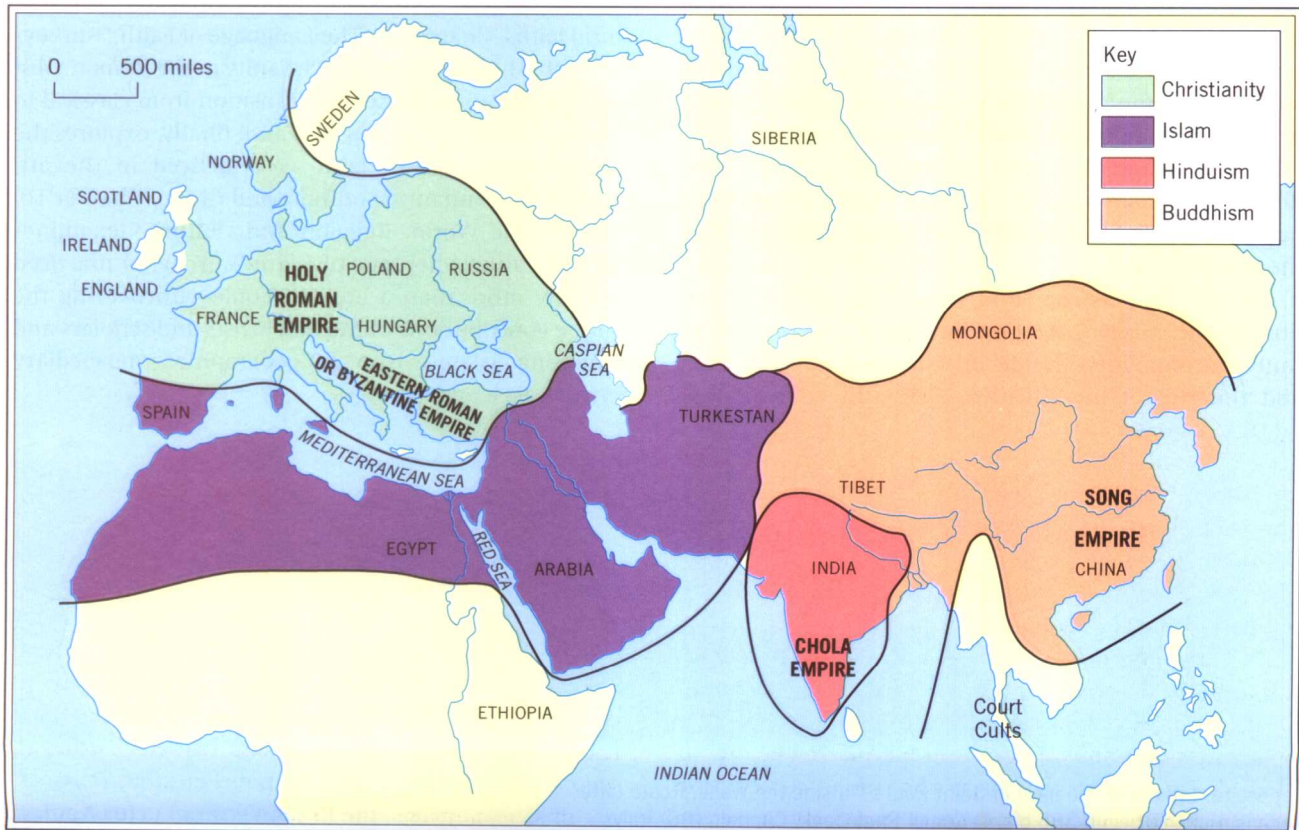
Shortly after the reign of the Roman Emperor Octavian, in the province of Judea (the Roman name for Palestine), an obscure Jewish preacher named Joshua (in Greek, *Jesus*) brought forth a message that became the basis for a new world religion: Christianity. Christianity came to provide an alternative to the secular, rational values associated with classical culture in the West. The pursuit of reason and earthly wisdom gave way to the promise of messianic deliverance and eternal life.

As Christianity began to win converts within the Roman Empire, a somewhat older set of religious teachings was spreading in the East. The message of Siddhartha Gautama, the fifth-century-B.C.E.\* founder of Buddhism,

swept through Asia. By the third century B.C.E., Buddhism had become India's state religion, and by the fifth century C.E., it was the principal religious faith of Han China. The similarities and differences between Buddhism and Christianity offer valuable insights into the spiritual communities of the East and West. While no in-depth analysis of either religion can be offered here, a brief look at the formative stages of these two world faiths provides some understanding of their significance within the humanistic tradition.

\*Dates are designated as B.C.E., "Before the Christian (or common) era," or C.E., "Christian (or common) era."

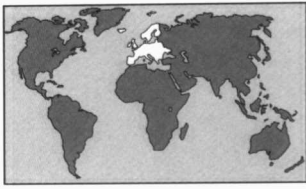
Map 8.1 Distribution of Major Religious Faiths, ca. 1000 C.E.





## The Background to Christianity

### Roman Religion and Religious Philosophies



Roman religion, like Roman culture itself, was a blend of native and borrowed traditions. Ancient pagan religious rituals marked seasonal change and celebrated seedtime and har-

vest. Augury, the interpretation of omens (a practice borrowed from the Etruscans), was important to Roman religious life as a means of predicting future events. The typically eclectic Romans welcomed the gods of non-Roman peoples and honored them along with the greater and lesser Roman gods. They embraced the Greek gods, who assumed Latin names (see Table, chapter 4). Many of the gods protected household and state: Vesta, for instance, guarded the hearth fire, and Mars, god of war, ministered to soldiers. Tolerance for non-Roman cults and creeds contributed to the lack of religious uniformity in the Empire, as well as to wide speculation concerning the possibility of life after death. While Romans might have pictured a shadowy underworld in which the souls of the dead survived (similar to the Greek Hades and the Hebrew Sheol), Roman religion offered neither retribution in the afterlife nor the clear promise of eternal life.

Rome hosted a wide variety of religious beliefs and practices, along with a number of quasi-religious Hellenistic philosophies (see chapter 6). Of these, Stoicism and neoplatonism were the most influential. Stoicism's ethical view of life and its emphasis on equality among human beings offered an idealized alternative to a social order marked by wide gaps between rich and poor, and between citizens and slaves. Neoplatonism, a school of philosophy (developed in Alexandria) that took as inspiration some of the principal ideas in the writings of Plato and his followers, anticipated a mystical union between the individual soul and "the One" or Ultimate Being—comparable with Plato's Form of Goodness. According to Plotinus, a third-century-C.E. Egyptian-born neoplatonist, union with the One could be achieved only by the soul's ascent through a series of levels or degrees of spiritual purification. Neoplatonism's view of the soul as eternal and divine, and its perception of the universe as layered in ascending degrees of perfection, would have a shaping influence on early Christian thought.

Following the decline of the Roman Republic and in the wake of increased contacts with Egypt and Southwest Asia, Rome absorbed a number of uniquely Eastern traditions. Roman emperors came to be regarded as theocratic monarchs and assumed titles such as *dominus* ("lord") and *deus* ("god"). By the second

century, Rome enjoyed a full-blown imperial cult that honored the living emperor as semidivine and deified him after his death. At the same time, widespread social, political, and economic unrest fed a rising distrust of reason and a growing impulse toward mysticism. Among the prevailing religious ideas were those associated with the name Zoroaster. This shadowy Persian prophet (who may have lived any time between 1100 and 600 B.C.E.) taught that life was a cosmic battle between the opposing forces of light and darkness. All human beings took part in this struggle by freely choosing between good and evil, the consequence of which determined their eternal fate. According to Zoroastrian doctrine, a Last Judgment (similar to the Egyptian final reckoning; see chapter 2) would consign the wicked to everlasting darkness and the good to *pairi-daeza*, the abode of beauty and light (from which the English word "Paradise" derives). As such ideas filtered westward, many began to hope for rewards in the hereafter, rather than in their earthly lives. The mystery cults of the Eastern Mediterranean, and, ultimately, Christianity, would respond to these needs.

### The Mystery Cults

In Greece, Egypt, and many parts of Southwest Asia, there had long flourished numerous religious cults whose appeal was less intellectual than that of neoplatonism and far more personal than that of the prevailing Greco-Roman religious philosophies. The promise of personal immortality was the central feature of these cults, called "mystery cults" because their initiation rituals were secret (in Greek, *mysterios*). The cults of Isis in Egypt, Cybele in Phrygia, Dionysus in Greece, and Mithra in Persia, to name but four, had a heritage dating back to Neolithic times. As we have seen in earlier chapters, ancient agricultural societies celebrated seasonal change by means of symbolic performances of the birth, death, and rebirth of gods and goddesses associated with the regeneration of crops. The mystery cults perpetuated these practices. Their initiates participated in symbolic acts of spiritual death and rebirth, including ritual baptism and a communal meal at which they might partake of the flesh or blood of the deity.

The cult of Isis originated in the Egyptian myth of the descent of the goddess Isis into the underworld to find and resurrect her mate Osiris (see chapter 2). Followers of this cult identified Isis as Earth Mother and Queen of Heaven and looked to her to ensure their own salvation (Figure 8.1). Initiation into the cult included formal processions, a ritual meal, purification of the body, and a ten-day period of fasting that culminated in the ecstatic vision of the goddess herself. During the second century C.E., in a Latin novel entitled *The Golden Ass*, or *Metamorphoses*, the Roman writer Lucius Apuleius