

Comparing and Contrasting the Ancestors of the West with Christianity

Zarathustra and Jesus

According to the sacred stories of Zarathustra and Jesus, as well as those of the Buddha, Muhammad, and others, the key figures set out on a spiritual quest or undergo some type of spiritual experience that culminates in their becoming founders of religious traditions. For each of them, this is said to have occurred at about the age of thirty. Although the details of their stories differ, they all concur with psychological insights that suggest that the decade of the thirties is a time in which people evaluate their lives, and ultimately find a path that is consistent with their deepest (or highest) values.

Human Destiny

Zoroastrianism links people's fate in the afterlife to the morality of the life they lived on earth. The afterlife is a result of judgment on the ethical character of the life that has been lived. Christianity also recognizes the importance of morality but emphasizes the role of God's grace. Zoroastrianism and Christianity also teach the resurrection of the dead.

Homer, on the other hand, recognizes no link between the afterlife and ethics, consigning all to the dreariness of Hades. Nor did the early Romans hope for a blessed afterlife. Neither offers any concept of grace.

Greco-Roman Polytheism and Christian Monotheism

There is a striking contrast between the many deities of the early Greeks and Romans and the God of Christianity. First of all, there is the sheer number: the many deities of polytheism and the One God of Christianity (as well as of Judaism and Islam). However, the difference is about much more than arithmetic. The real difference is that in polytheism, sacred power is scattered, diffused among the many deities, while monotheism concentrates it all in one figure. There are many deities who require worship in polytheism, and only one in Christianity. Unlike the Judeo-Christian (and Muslim) God, the Greco-Roman deities are not omniscient or omnipotent.



Humanity and Divinity

Among the early Greeks, divinity is quite human, or anthropomorphic. The gods and goddesses argue, have spouses, consorts, and families, and engage in questionable behavior not usually thought appropriate for divinities. The early Romans thought of their deities in vague terms, not anthropomorphically. The God of Christianity is not an anthropomorphic deity, but neither is this God depicted in vague terms. This God is portrayed as always remaining a God of justice and mercy. However, this God willingly becomes fully human—while simultaneously remaining fully divine—to better relate to human beings.

Trinity and Triad

Jupiter (Jove), one of the most powerful among the Roman deities, was one member of a triad that also included Juno, the goddess of women, and Minerva, the goddess of handicrafts. Christianity describes God as a Trinity of three Persons in one God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These three Persons are one God, however, and not three separate deities.

