

THEMATIC REVIEW SHEET #2: Ideas & Power – Religion

- From earliest times, ideas have been used to explain and justify the unequal distribution of power among individuals and groups or to sanction and legitimize the power of rulers and states. Politics and religion are both ways of systematically constructing power, and the expression of symbolic systems through religious ritual has been as effective and important a means of imposing order on the world as administrative systems or military force.
- In early dynastic states political authority was associated with religious beliefs and practices (Shang China, Egyptian pharaohs, Mayan rulers).
- In contrast to the use of ideas to further power, as in early theocracies, religious ideas could also be used to contest the established order of things and to challenge the power of rulers and states.
- As Buddha, Abraham, and Zoroaster challenged the dominant religious traditions of their times, thinkers in Greece and China envisioned new social and political orders – thinkers compelled by circumstances to consider how best to achieve social and political order.
 - competitive Greek city states / democracy in Athens / Socrates and Plato
 - warring states in China / the ideal of hierarchy rooted in past institutions / Confucius
- Legalists ridiculed the Confucian emphasis on ethical values and ritual as the means of achieving a harmonious society, arguing that only “strict laws and harsh punishments” could ensure social order and the stability of the state.
 - provided the ideological underpinnings for the first unified empire in China, the Qin, and for its successor, the Han, which rejected the harshest ideas of Legalism in favor of the ideals of Confucianism but adopted the form of the Legalist state with central authority vested in the emperor
- Unlike Roman emperors, Han rulers were not deified; rather they were seen as standing at the pinnacle of human society.
- Hellenistic influence - After the demise of Alexander and his empire in West Asia, the imperial tradition was extended by his successors in various forms throughout West, Central, and South Asia, as well as in North Africa.
 - rulers of Mauryan and Gupta Empires were god-kings, associated with either Buddhism or Hinduism
 - earlier examples, the Egyptian pharaohs (role was to maintain cosmic order) & Chinese emperors (Mandate of Heaven)

THE UNIVERSAL RELIGIONS of BUDDHISM, CHRISTIANITY, and ISLAM:

- were proselytized by their followers
- were adapted to different cultural settings
- were used to provide religious sanctions for rulers
- Unlike Buddhism, both Christianity and Islam used military power to conquer and convert peoples and created their own governments. Buddhism did not become the engine of empire that Christianity, and especially Islam, did
- As all 3 of these religions were introduced into different cultures and societies, they underwent significant adaptations to indigenous belief systems at the same time that they dramatically altered the religious ideals and values of peoples around the globe.
 - As Buddhism expanded into Southeast Asia, it interacted with both Hinduism and indigenous belief systems in varying political contexts, from empires to city states.
 - Islam spread into Africa, where it flourished alongside African belief systems in the West African Mali Empire and in East African coastal port cities.
- Religions have many dimensions and operate on many different levels. They can be addressed to the spiritual concerns of the individual and to the maintenance of the family or community, as well as to legitimizing a ruler's authority or the state's power.
 - Christianity: personal relationship of an individual with God and the communal character of religious practice -- political force of the Papacy
 - Islam: the “community of true believers” forms the basis of Muslim identity, reinforced by such practices as individual daily prayer and the once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca -- in theory, this community transcends the secular state
- Religion can be a powerful political force, just as politics can shape religious experience, belief, and practice.
- Religion can just as effectively challenge structures of power as validate and reinforce them. As Confucianism was used to sanction the power of the emperor and the state, Daoism could be used to challenge that power.

ORDER: IDEAS --> POLITICAL STRUCTURE + ECONOMIC SYSTEM + SOCIAL ORGANIZATION