

# The Religion of the Ancient Greeks

The Hebrews had produced the idea that men are equal before one God. Other areas of the ancient world produced views of man all their own. The peoples of the Indian subcontinent emphasized the pain and misfortune that result when a man seeks worldly goals. They insisted that man must overcome himself by renouncing his worldly desires. Through the teachings of Confucius, the Chinese adopted the view that men count for less as individuals, and that order in society is first in importance. This order is established and maintained by a hierarchy of social standing and a set of interpersonal relationships that reflect that hierarchy.

The ancient Greeks, on the other hand, believed that man was just a victim of the whims and follies of the many gods who fought, loved, and jealously vied for power up on Mount Olympus.



... Certain of the gods were universal to all the Greeks. Gradually the most important ones were grouped together into a council, or **Pantheon**, that met on snow-covered **Mount Olympus** in Thessaly. These gods were pictured in human form, and they resembled human beings in every way {anthropomorphism} except that they had superhuman powers and immortality.

**Zeus** was the king of the gods. He was represented by the storm and the lightning. the rainbow and eagle were his messengers, the thunder was his voice. **Hera** was his wife, the embodiment of wifely and motherly virtue. She was closely associated with the rites of marriage. **Athena**, the patron goddess of Athens, sprang full-grown from the head of Zeus. She embodied wisdom and virtue. **Apollo**, the great god of the sun, light, music, and healing, the ideal of manly beauty had a sister, **Artemis**, a huntress, the goddess of the woods and the moon. **Aphrodite**, born out of the sea foam, was the goddess of love and beauty, while **Demeter**, the great Earth Mother, watched over seed-time and harvest. **Poseidon**, brother of Zeus, ruled the waters; **Ares** was the god of war and battle. **Dionysus** was the god of spring and the vine; **Hermes** carried the messages of the gods, and **Hephaestus** was their blacksmith. **Hades** ruled the underworld, the world of the dead. This group of gods was known as the **Olympiads**.

Beside the Olympic gods, the gods whose exploits Homer had fixed forever in the minds of the Hellenes, there were many local gods presiding over household and daily activities who were closely associated with the immediate locality. In addition, **Nymphs** and **Satyrs** lived in the mountains, forests, seas, and streams. The **Muses** presided over music, dancing, poetry, song, science, art, and history. The **Fates** ruled human destiny, while the **Furies** pursued those who murdered or committed sacrilege.

Worship was not a private affair in ancient Hellas; it was the concern of the whole community. The gods were honored at an open altar in ceremonies that had been handed down for generations. Prayers and hymns were said, choruses were sung, and sacrifices of meat and wine were offered. The gods were also honored in special festivals, of which the great **Olympic Games** were the most famous. the worship of the gods was part of one's civil duty! Atheism {the belief in no god(s)} was not really non-belief to the ancient Greeks--it was non-participation. Because religion and worship were so much an affair of state, and participation in religious festivals and games was a responsibility as well as an honor, private feelings had little room for expression. In time, the **mystery religions** arose to fill this need. The person who wished to belong to the religion took part in a sacred procession and sacrifice and in greatest secrecy participated in the enactment of a highly emotional ritual performance in which his feelings were aroused and swept up, sometimes through drink, drugs, and intense dancing. Men and women, freemen and slaves, were followers of the mystery religions.



The Hellenic idea of life after death was dismal in the extreme. In the shadowy underworld of Hades, life was always gloomy and gray. Everyone went to Hades in Homer's Greece, but later poets sand of the Isles of the Blessed in the **Elysian Fields** at the western end of the earth, where great heroes lived happily throughout eternity. They also spoke of **Tartarus**, a prison house locked by gates of bronze and iron, as far below Hades as earth is of heaven, for evil souls who had committed great crimes. Not until the mystery religions grew more elaborate and important was the hope of salvation held out to the ordinary man.

