

Zoroaster and Buddha: Explaining Suffering

Why does evil exist in the world? The "Western" Zoroaster and the "Eastern" Buddha answer this question quite differently. What are some implications of their answers for our understanding of world history?

Why do people suffer? Why does evil exist in the world? These questions, asked by millions of people throughout human history, have helped inspire most of humanity's great philosophies and religions. While the questions are simple, the answers which thinkers have given to them are often complicated—and certainly varied.

During the sixth century before the birth of Christ, several important attempts were made to explain suffering and evil. Chinese sage Kung Fuzi (Confucius, 551–479 B.C.E.) believed that suffering was caused by people's failure to love and respect one another properly. The system of ethics he devised to remedy this lack of mutual respect helped mold Chinese civilization for over two thousand years. In this same, very creative period, other men offered religious answers to the problem of suffering. Two notable seekers of truth were Zoroaster (ca. 628–551 B.C.E.), a Persian nobleman and founder of a religion known as Zoroastrianism, and Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 560–480 B.C.E.), an Indian known later as the Buddha and founder of Buddhism. These two men offered specific and very different answers to our questions about suffering and evil. Their ideas also deserve our attention because their respective philosophies represent two ways of looking at the world—one of which can be called "Western" and the other "Eastern."

It may seem unusual to refer to Zoroaster, or Zoroaster (the Greek version of his name, by which he is usually known), as a Westerner, since he was born not far from the modern Iranian capital of



