

Religion: Three Religions, One God



The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, with the gold Dome of the Rock sitting just behind.

Three of the world's major religions -- the monotheist traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam -- were all born in the Middle East and are all inextricably linked to one another. Christianity was born from within the Jewish tradition, and Islam developed from both Christianity and Judaism.

While there have been differences among these religions, there was a rich cultural interchange between Jews, Christians, and Muslims that took place in Islamic Spain and other places over centuries.

Judaism: A brief history

Judaism is the oldest surviving monotheistic religion, arising in the eastern Mediterranean in the second millennium B.C.E. Abraham is traditionally considered to be the first Jew and to have made a covenant with God. Because Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all recognize Abraham as their first prophet, they are also called the Abrahamic religions. While there was always a small community of Jews in historic Palestine, in 73 C.E. the Roman Empire dispersed the Jews after an insurrection against Roman authority. Most Jews then lived in Diaspora, as minorities in their communities, until the founding of the state of Israel in 1948.

When Jews from all over the world came to settle in modern Israel, they found that various subcultures had developed in different areas with distinctive histories, languages, religious practices, customs, and cuisine.

Judaism in Israel and America

There is great difference of opinion among Israeli Jews over the role Jewish religious law should play in the state. Until recently, Orthodox Judaism was the only form of the religion formally and legally recognized in Israel. Although less conservative branches of Judaism now have partial recognition, Orthodoxy remains dominant politically and legally.

Many Israeli Jews describe themselves in terms of their degree of observance of Jewish law. About half call themselves secular; about 15 to 20 percent see themselves as Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox; and the rest describe themselves as traditionally observant, but not as strict as the Orthodox.

In the United States, debate over the necessity of observing Jewish law has led to the development of three major movements. Orthodox Jews believe that Jewish law is unchanging and mandatory. Conservative Jews argue that God's laws change and evolve over time. Reform and Reconstructionist Jews believe that these laws are merely guidelines that individuals can choose to follow or not. In addition, there are many Jews in the United States who are secular or atheist. For them, their Judaism is a culture rather than a religion.

What Jews believe

Jews believe in one god and his prophets, with special respect for Moses as the prophet to whom God gave the law. Jewish law is embodied in the Torah and the Talmud (collected commentary on the Torah completed in the fifth-century C.E.).

Judaism is more concerned with actions than philosophy. In other words, observance of rules regulating human behavior has been of more concern than debates over beliefs in the Jewish tradition. According to Orthodox Judaism, Jewish law, or *halakhah*, includes 613 commandments given by God in the Torah, as well as rules and practices elaborated by scholars and custom. Jewish law covers matters such as prayer and ritual, diet, rules regulating personal status (marriage, divorce, birth, death, inheritance, etc.), and observance of holidays (like Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement; and Passover, the feast celebrating the exodus of the Jews from slavery in Egypt).

Judaism's views of Christianity and Islam

Jews do not believe in the prophets after the Jewish prophets, including Jesus and Muhammad. Therefore, they do not subscribe to the idea that Jesus was the Messiah and the son of God, nor do they believe in the teachings of Islam.



An Orthodox Jewish man prays at the Western Wall in Jerusalem



Reading from the Torah

Christianity: A brief history



An aerial view of Istanbul, Turkey, formerly Constantinople

Christianity started as an offshoot of Judaism in the first century C.E. Until the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 324 C.E., early Christian communities were often persecuted. It was then that the Roman Empire became the Holy Roman Empire, and its capital relocated from Rome to Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey). The development of Christian groups derived from major and minor splits.

The Orthodox Church and its patriarch split away from the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope in 1054 C.E. because of political and principle differences. In the 16th century, Martin Luther, upset at the corruption of the Catholic hierarchy, led a reformation movement that led to the development of Protestantism. Christian missionaries proselytize (convert) all over the world, and there are large populations of Christians on every continent on Earth, although the forms of Christianity practiced vary.

Christianity in the Middle East

Many early Christian saints lived in the Middle East. Christians in the Middle East today include Copts, Maronites, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, Assyrians, and Protestants. These groups have different languages, rituals, and customs, and different leaders who direct their faith.

The Coptic Church, the dominant form of Christianity in Egypt, arose from a split in the Church in 451. The Egyptian government supports the Copts' rights to worship and maintain their culture, but there has been some violence against the community by extremist Muslims.



The Maronite Church was started in the fifth century by followers of a Syrian priest named Maroun. The Maronite Patriarch, based in Lebanon, guides his followers in the teachings of Maroun and other saints. Maronites are still one of the most powerful political communities in Lebanon.

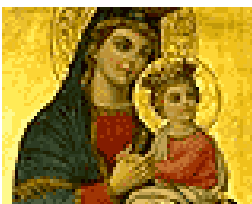
There are also Christian communities of different sects living today in Syria (10 percent of the population), Jordan (6 percent), the West Bank (8 percent), and Iraq (3 percent), with smaller percentages in other Middle Eastern countries.

The establishment of Lebanon as an independent state is announced on the steps of a Maronite church, Lebanon, 1920.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, many Christians from what is now Syria and Lebanon (then the Ottoman Empire) emigrated to the United States and other countries. Although Christians are a minority in the Middle East today, more than 75 percent of Americans of Arab descent are Christian.

What Christians believe

Christianity developed out of the monotheistic tradition of Judaism; Jesus, its founder, was a member of the Jewish community in Roman Palestine. Its holy scriptures are the Old Testament (the Jewish Torah with additions), and the New Testament (written by the followers of Jesus after his death and containing the life story of Jesus and other early Christian writings).



A Christian painting depicting Mary with the baby Jesus]

Christians believe that God is revealed through three dimensions: the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. Jesus is considered the son of God, born to the virgin Mary and come to Earth to offer redemption for mankind's sins. After Jesus was crucified and executed by the Roman Empire, he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. This event is celebrated at Easter, while the birth of Jesus is celebrated at Christmas. Christians believe in an afterlife where those who have lived a good life will reside in heaven with God, and those who have lived an unrepentant life of sin will be punished in hell.

Christianity's views of Judaism and Islam

Although Christianity developed out of Jewish texts, Christians do not follow Jewish law. Instead, they believe that the ritualistic Jewish law was abolished in favor of a universal gospel for all of humanity and the Christian teaching, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Relationships between Jewish and Christian communities have often been difficult, particularly in Christian Europe. There, Jewish communities were often subject to discrimination and violence at the hands of Christians.

Christianity has also had a problematic relationship with Islam. Christians do not accept Muhammad as a prophet. While many Christians in the Middle East converted to Islam during and after the seventh century, the Church hierarchy in Rome and Constantinople considered Islam to be both a political and religious threat. The Crusades were an unsuccessful attempt to reverse the Islamic conquest of the eastern Mediterranean and the holy places of all three monotheistic religions.

Islam: A brief history



Pilgrims surround Kaaba, the holiest temple in Islam, at the center of the ancient shrine of Mecca.

Islam arose in the early seventh century C.E. in the settled desert community of Mecca (in present-day Saudi Arabia). It developed from both the Judeo-Christian tradition and the cultural values of the nomadic tribes of Arabia.

Islam expanded into areas controlled by the Byzantine Empire (largely Greek-speaking and Orthodox Christian, but with a diverse population) and the Sassanian Empire (Persian-speaking, and also diverse). By the mid-eighth century, Islam had spread west into North Africa and Europe, and east into Central Asia. Over the centuries, Islam continued to grow in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. As Islam expanded, the new Islamic societies adapted and blended many of the customs they encountered. As a result, Muslims in different areas of the world created for themselves a wide array of cultural traditions.

The culture of Islamic Spain, for example, was so cosmopolitan that some Christian and Jewish parents complained that their children were more interested in developing their knowledge of Arabic than in learning Latin or Hebrew. Many elements of Islamic society became integral parts of medieval and Renaissance European culture, like the notion of chivalry, and certain forms of music and poetry.

On the eastern end of the Islamic world, many Indonesians converted to Islam between the 15th and 17th centuries. Preexisting animist beliefs were often incorporated into the local practice of Islam.

Islamic communities

Within Islam, there are many different communities. Many of these divisions, like the Sunnis and Shiites (Shiites), originate in political and religious differences in the community. Adherents of Islam may be more or less observant, conservative or liberal.

Who are the Sunnis?

The great majority of the world's more than 1.5 billion Muslims are Sunnis - estimates suggest the figure is somewhere between 85% and 90%. In the Middle East, Sunnis make up 90% or more of the populations of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Sunnis regard themselves as the orthodox branch of Islam. The name "Sunni" is derived from the phrase "Ahl al-Sunnah", or "People of the Tradition". The tradition in this case refers to practices based on what the Prophet Muhammad said, did, agreed to or condemned. All Muslims are guided by the Sunnah, but Sunnis stress its importance.

Sunni life is guided by four schools of legal thought, each of which strives to develop practical applications of the Sunnah.

Who are the Shia?

Shia constitute about 10% of all Muslims, and globally their population is estimated at between 154 and 200 million. Shia Muslims are in the majority in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Azerbaijan and, according to some estimates, Yemen.

Shia are also guided by the wisdom of Muhammad's descendants through his son-in-law and cousin, Ali. Deaths of Islamic leaders gave rise to the Shia concept of martyrdom (to die for your beliefs). In early Islamic history, the Shia were a movement - literally "Shiat Ali" or the "Party of Ali". They claimed that Ali was the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad as leader of the Muslim community following the prophet's death in 632.

Ali was assassinated in 661 after a five-year caliphate (Islamic state) that was plagued by civil war. His sons, Hassan and Hussein, were denied what they thought was their legitimate right of accession to the caliphate after Ali's death. Hassan is believed to have been poisoned in 680 by Muawiyah, the first caliph of the Sunni dynasty, while Hussein was killed on the battlefield by the Sunni in 681.



Whirling dervishes playing musical instruments and dancing, Istanbul, photograph c. 1922 [

What Muslims believe

Muslims believe that Allah (the Arabic word for God) sent his revelation, the Quran, to the prophet Muhammad in the seventh century C.E. to proclaim it to mankind. The Quran contains verses in Arabic that tell Muslims to worship one god, and explains how they should treat others properly.

Observant Muslims practice five principles (pillars) of Islam: orally declaring their faith (*shahadah*); praying five times a day (*salat*); fasting in the daylight hours during the month of Ramadan (*sawm*); giving a share of their income for charity (*zakat*); and making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime if they can afford it (*hajj*). Many Muslims also observe dietary rules, in origin similar to those of Judaism, that forbid certain foods (like pork), outlaw alcohol, and dictate how animals should be slaughtered for food.

The Muslim calendar is lunar, and shifts in relation to the solar calendar. Just as Christians count years starting with the year of Jesus's birth, Muslims count years beginning with Muhammad's move from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E. Major Muslim festivals include Id al-Fitr (the Fast-Breaking Festival, celebrated at the end of Ramadan) and Id al-Adha (the Festival of Sacrifice, the commemoration of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Ishmail which takes place during the month of pilgrimage).

Muslims believe in a Day of Judgment, when righteous souls will go to heaven and wrongdoers will go to hell.

Islam's views of Judaism and Christianity

Islam sees Judaism and Christianity as earlier versions of Islam, revelations given within the same tradition by Allah but misunderstood over time by their followers. Muslims see Islam as the final, complete, and correct revelation in the monotheistic tradition of the three faiths.



A 19th-century copy of Islam's holy book, the Quran, hand-copied in Arabic, open to its first chapter, the Fatiha

The Islamic tradition recognizes many of the Jewish and Christian prophets, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (although he is not considered to be the son of God). Many non-Muslims mistakenly believe that Muhammad is the equivalent of Jesus in the Islamic tradition; in fact, it is the Quran that stands in the same central position in Islam as Jesus does in Christianity. Muhammad himself is not divine, but a prophet chosen by God to deliver his message and an example of godliness to emulate.

Jews and Christians are specifically protected in the Quran as Peoples of the Book, reinforcing their spiritual connection to Islam by virtue of having been given revelations from God. The Islamic legal tradition has upheld the rights of Jews and Christians to maintain their beliefs and practices within their communities in Islamic lands.