

THE 3 MONOTHEISTIC RELIGIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East is the ancient home of three of the world's major religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all monotheistic religions. *Mono* is the Greek root for single, and *Theos* is the Greek root for god, so *monotheism* means believing in a single god. Not only are all three religions monotheistic, they are all related to each other as well. Christianity and Islam grew out of Judaism.

JUDAISM



Abraham is considered the 'father' of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is believed that Abraham lived sometime around 2000 - 1500 BCE. Around this time, these 3 religions believe that Yahweh (God) spoke to Abraham and told him to believe in only one God.

Judaism is the world's oldest monotheistic religion. Someone who believes in *Judaism* is called a *Jew*. Jews believe God has spoken to other people too. These people are known as prophets and include Sarah, Moses, Isaiah, and Ezekiel.

The holiest book in Judaism is called the *Torah*. The Torah is believed to have been given to Moses around 1300 BCE. The Torah is written in Hebrew. Modern Jews who live in Israel still speak Hebrew. Jews who live in other countries try to learn Hebrew so that they can read their holy books in the original language. The person who leads religious services is known as a *rabbi*. The Jewish place of worship is known as a *synagogue*. The holiest city to Jews is *Jerusalem*. The two holiest times of the year are *Yom Kippur*, a day of atonement (making up for sins/wrongdoings) and fasting (not eating) and *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish new year.



Jews believe that they are the chosen children of God. They believe that God is all-knowing and all-powerful. They believe He will reward the faithful and punish the sinful. They believe a *Messiah* (or savior) is yet to come. They also believe that the land of Israel was given to them by God and is theirs by religious right. Though it is possible to convert to Judaism, traditionally, one had to be at least born to a Jewish mother to be a Jew.



As a part of their religion there are certain things you can and cannot do. Jews must eat *kosher*, which means not eating certain foods like pig products or lobster and that meat must be killed and cooked a special way. Traditionally, Jews are expected to dress modestly and include special items of clothing.

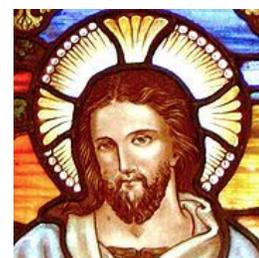
Both men and women wear their hair at least partially covered. There are different roles for men and women during worship services. Today, there are different *sects* (groups) of Jews. Orthodox Jews are very conservative and follow all the old requirements of the religion. Reform Jews are much more modern and are less likely to wear the traditional clothing and keep their hair covered at all times. They also allow women a larger role in religious services.



CHRISTIANITY



Christianity is a religion that grew out of the Jewish faith. It is the world's largest religion. The founder of Christianity is *Jesus Christ*. He is believed to be born to the line of David, a Jewish king from around 1000 BCE. Jesus Christ died around 27 - 33 CE. A *Christian* believes in *Christianity*. Christians believe that Jesus was the *Messiah*, a savior sent by God to die for the salvation (saving) of people's souls. Christians also believe that He is the Son of God.

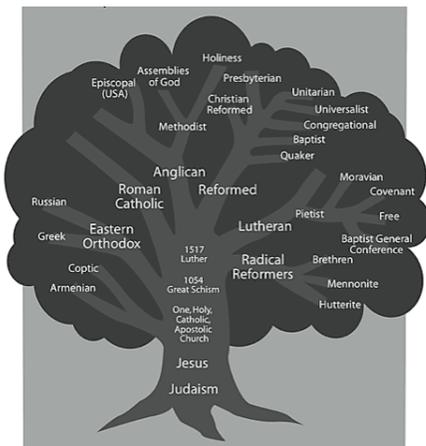


The holy book of the Christians is called the *Bible*. The first part of the Bible is called the Old Testament and is shared with Jewish holy tradition. The second part is called the New Testament and is from newer texts written after Jesus died. There are many sects of Christianity. What the person who leads a religious service is called depends on one's sect. Religious leaders may be called *priests*, *pastors*, or *ministers*. A place of worship is called a *church*. The holiest city in Christianity is *Jerusalem*. The holiest day for Christians is *Easter*. It is when Jesus is believed to have been resurrected (brought back to life) after dying for people's sins.

Christians believe that anyone may become a Christian by being baptized (washed with holy water) and saying that you believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that He died for people's sins (wrongdoings). They believe that God is all-knowing and all-powerful. They believe that faithful people will go to Heaven, and the unfaithful will be punished in Hell. Christians believe in trying to live their life like God wants them to, forgiving others, giving help to the poor, and trying to do good things.

Due to the many different sects of Christianity, it is hard to generalize about what people can do, how things get celebrated, and how people should dress. There are some sects of Christianity that expect women to dress modestly and for men and/or women to cover their hair. Some sects have different roles for men and women in worship. The style of worship service can be very different from one type of Christian to another.





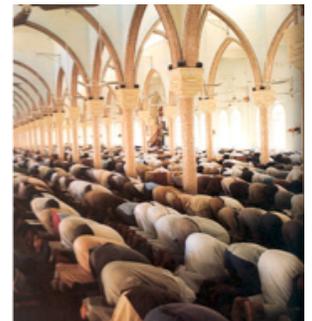
Christianity has changed a lot over time. In the beginning, everyone was Catholic. Islamic empires cut off the Coptic and Armenian branches and those two sects became quite different. The Great Schism cut off the Eastern Orthodox sects. Martin Luther's protests began the Reformation. The Reformation eventually led to MANY types of Protestant groups of Christians.



ISLAM

Islam is a religion that came from both Judaism and Christianity. It is the second largest religion and is growing quickly. The founder of Islam was *Muhammad*, who began the religion in 622 CE. It is believed that he was meditating in a cave and that Allah (Arabic word for God) spoke to Muhammad and made him the final prophet. A *Muslim* believes in *Islam*. Muslims believe that they share a common history with Jews and Christians. Believers of all three religions are called 'People of the Book.' Muslims even believe that Abraham, Moses, and Jesus were prophets of God/Allah, but that Muhammad was the last prophet. He was told the right and true way to worship.

The word Islam means peace, submission, and obedience. When Muslims speak of any of the prophets, especially Muhammad, they say 'Muhammad, peace be upon him' every time to be respectful. The Muslim holy book is the *Koran*, or the *Qur'an*, and it was believed to have been spoken to Muhammad by God. Muhammad then wrote down God's words. The Koran is written in Arabic. Muslims who are not Arabic try to learn the language so that they can read the Koran in its original language. The place of worship is called a *mosque*. Muslims may worship anywhere though. A religious leader is called a *mullah* or an *imam*. The holiest cities in Islam are *Mecca* and *Jerusalem*. The holiest month in the Muslim year is *Ramadan*. Muslims do not eat during daylight for a month to atone (make up for) for the year's sins. The holiest day is *Eid al-Adha*, the Feast of Sacrifice. This celebrates when Allah asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, that he was willing to do so, and then Allah allowed him to sacrifice a ram instead. The holiday reminds Muslims of the importance of following the will of God. It also reminds them of love and blessings of Allah.



Muslims believe in angels, the Day of Judgement, and Heaven and Hell. They believe that you should pray five times a day. They pray facing *Mecca*, the city in which Islam began. Muslims pray

kneeling on small rugs. Men and women pray separately and only men are religious leaders. They believe in giving money to the poor and protecting the innocent. They believe that every Muslim should make a pilgrimage (holy journey) to the city of Mecca at least once in their lives. This journey is called the *hajj*. They also believe that someone can convert to being a Muslim.

As a part of their religion there are certain things you can and cannot do. Muslims must eat *halal*, which means not eating certain foods like pig products or lobster. Meat must be killed and cooked a special way. They also believe you should not drink alcohol. People, especially women, should dress modestly and cover all or a part of their hair. How much Muslim women cover themselves depends on their sect of Islam and the country they live in.

There are two main sects of Islam, *Shi'a* and *Sunni*. The differences between them began right after Muhammad the Prophet died. Sunni Muslims are 90% of all Muslims. They believe that the right person to lead all Muslims can be chosen by a group of religious leaders. Back in 632 CE, a group chose *Abu Bakr* to be the leader after Muhammad. Abu Bakr had been Muhammad's first follower.

Shi'as, or Shiites, are found mainly in Iran and southwest Iraq. Back in 632 CE, they split from the rest of the Muslims because they believed only someone who was related to Muhammad should lead all Muslims. They chose Muhammad's son-in-law, *Ali ibn Abi Talib*, to be the leader after Muhammad. They believe you must have a divine right (from Allah) to rule over Muslims. Violence between Shia's and Sunnis was rare until the 20th century. Colonialism and the Cold War made the differences between the two worse and led to violence and even war.

CONCLUSION

Though some people think that members of these three religions hate each other, that is not true. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share a lot of their history. They love the same God and the religions are peaceful. Conflicts are caused more by history than by the religions themselves. Past massacres, conquests, and colonization caused much of what is seen today as hatred between the religions. The majority of all Jews, Christians, and Muslims desire peace and cooperation. The Middle East and the situation between the three religions is damaged by extremists whose ideas do not match the original beliefs of these religions. What will the future bring for these three religions? That will depend on the young people of the Middle East and the hopes that they have for themselves and their religions.

