

ISLAM

How did Islam begin?

Islam is a monotheistic faith centered around belief in the one God (Allah). In this regard, it shares some beliefs with Judaism and Christianity by tracing its history back to the patriarch Abraham, and ultimately to the first prophet, Adam. All the prophets preached the same universal message of belief in one God and kindness to humanity. The last in the series of prophets, according to Muslims, was Muhammad.

Muhammad was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia around 570 CE. He worked first as a shepherd and then as a merchant. He was not happy with the people around him because of superstitions and social and economic injustice. The people were worshipping many gods and had forgotten the message of prophet Abraham to worship one God. Muhammad loved to pray and meditate in the mountains. On one of those occasions, in the year 610 CE, when he was about 40 years old, he received a revelation from God through the angel Jibril (Gabriel). He continued to receive messages from God throughout his life and he began preaching to others what he had learned. His main message is that there was no other God but Allah and that people should lead their lives in a way that was pleasing to Allah.

How many Muslims are there?

Islam spread quickly first throughout Arabia and surrounding countries and then throughout the world. There are 1.2 billion Muslims in the world with 7 million in the United States. Only about 18% of Muslims are Arabs and live in the Middle East. The countries with the largest Muslim populations are Indonesia and India. There are two basic groups of Islam: the Sunnis (about 80% of the world's Muslims) and the Shi'ites (about 20% of the world's Muslims). Although they share the same basic beliefs, they disagree on who was the rightful leader of Islam after Muhammad's death.

What does Islam mean?

Islam is an Arabic word which means "surrender, submission, commitment and peace." Thus, Islam can be defined as a path to attain complete peace through voluntary submission to the divine will.

Who is Allah (God)?

"Allah" is simply the Arabic word for God. He is the same universal God worshipped by people of all faiths. The word "Allah" is sometimes preferred over God because it is neither masculine nor feminine. Also, there is no plural for "Allah."

What do Muslim's believe?

Muslims have six major beliefs.

- Belief in one God (Allah).
- Belief in the Angels.
- Belief in the holy books sent to all the prophets including Torah that was revealed to the prophet Moses, Bible that was revealed to the prophet Jesus, and Qur'an (Koran) that was revealed to the prophet Muhammad.

- Belief in all the prophets sent by God including Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Although Muslims believe in Isa or Jesus they don't think of Jesus as the Son of God the way Christians do.

- Belief in the Day of Judgment and life after death. The best reward for performing good deeds is getting closer to God.

- Belief in divine decree. This means that God is all-powerful and nothing can happen without His permission, however, he has given human beings freedom to choose whether to be good or bad. In the end, everyone will be questioned about how they lived in this life.

What are the Five Pillars of Islam?

These are guides for daily life for putting the beliefs of Muslims into practice.

- Shahadah (declaration of faith)—to bear witness or testify that there is no god except one God (Allah) and Muhammad is His prophet or messenger.

- Salat (ritual prayer)—the five daily prayers are performed at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and night. The prayers are offered in Arabic language and facing the direction of Mecca.

- Zakah (alms tax) –Giving 2.5% of one's wealth to the poor and needy.

Sawm (fasting)—Muslims fast during the daylight hours in the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar called Ramadan. The purpose is to remind people of the goodness of what they have and to show equality with the poor. Ramadan is a time for study and self-discipline.

- Hajj (pilgrimage): Muslims believe in making a pilgrimage to Mecca to the Ka'bah at least once in their lifetime. The Ka'bah is believed to have been built by Ibrahim (Abraham) and one of his sons. Muhammad restored it to worship Allah. For this reason it is a very sacred place to Muslims.

What is the final revealed scripture (a sacred text) for Muslims?

Muslims believe that the last revealed scripture sent by God is the Qur'an or Koran. It is the speech of God revealed in the Arabic language to Muhammad during his mission of twenty-three years. The Qur'an was written down by scribes and memorized during the lifetime of Muhammad. The Qur'an emphasizes moral, ethical and spiritual values with the aim of establishing justice for everyone. Many Muslims try to learn to read the Koran in its original language, Arabic. It is not uncommon for Muslims to memorize whole chapters of it. They read part of it every day. The Sunnah is a record of Muhammads words and deeds. The Sunnah is used to help interpret the Koran. There is also instruction in it on belief, worship and behavior.

CHRISTIANITY

How did Christianity begin?

Christianity traces its beginning to the miraculous birth, adult ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, known as Jesus Christ. Over 2000 years ago in Palestine (today's Israel), Jesus was born into a humble Jewish family. His mother was a young peasant woman named Mary. Christians believe that his father was the Holy Spirit of God, making Jesus both fully human and fully divine. His earliest followers came to believe that he was the Messiah, or messenger, sent by God to free God's people from slavery, sin, and death. God sent his son Jesus in human form so that people would better understand God as a caring and loving parent. Jesus lived and experienced the suffering of humans. Jesus healed the sick and told stories, or parables, and preached sermons that taught what God wanted people to do – to love God with all their hearts and love their neighbors as themselves. Jesus taught by example. By being loving and forgiving himself, Jesus taught others to be loving and forgiving - especially toward those who were considered outcasts in society. This is the central message and style of Jesus' teaching. During his adult ministry, Jesus built up a loyal following, led by his twelve disciples. But Jesus also made enemies among the religious and political leaders of his time. In the end, these powerful leaders were so threatened by Jesus' growing following that the Roman governor sentenced Jesus to death and had him crucified. The third day after Jesus' death, his followers found his tomb empty and discovered that he had been raised from the dead. Christians believe that the painful sacrifice of Jesus' life on the cross shows how much God loves God's people. Jesus paid with his life on Earth for the sins of the world. Christians believe that in raising Jesus' from the dead, God showed that Jesus' message of love and forgiveness was more powerful than death, and that believing in Jesus and following the example of his life and his teaching would lead to eternal life after death. The resurrection (rising from the dead) is the sign of God's salvation offered to all people.

After his resurrection, Jesus Christ's followers spread his message throughout the world, creating the Christian Church. Today there are about two billion Christians living all over the world.

What do Christians believe?

Christians believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God – fully human and fully divine – and that through believing in him and following his teachings they can inherit eternal life. Christians believe that Jesus died for humanity, that God raised him from the dead, and that Jesus will come again at the end of time. In addition, Christians believe in the Trinity, or the three parts of God: God the Father or Creator, God the Son (Jesus) or Redeemer, and God the Holy Spirit or Sanctifier. The Holy Spirit is God's presence in the world.

The essence of Jesus' teaching comes from his summary of the Jewish law he grew up with:

- Love God with all your heart, soul and mind.
- Love your neighbor as yourself.
- Christians also seek to follow the ten commandments God gave Moses to give the Israelites:
- Worship no other God but me.
- Do not make images to worship.
- Do not misuse the name of God.
- Observe the Sabbath Day (Sunday, for Christians). Keep it Holy.
- Honor and respect your father and mother.

- Do not murder.
- Do not commit adultery.
- Do not steal.
- Do not accuse anyone falsely. Do not tell lies about other people.
- Do not envy other's possessions.

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What are the sacred texts of Christianity?

The sacred text of Christianity is the Holy Bible. The Christian Bible has two parts: the Old Testament which is essentially the Hebrew scriptures of Jesus' time; and the New Testament which contains writings about Jesus Christ and about the early church. The four gospels (a word meaning 'good news') of the New Testament are accounts of Jesus' life and teaching, of his death and resurrection. The New Testament also contains the Acts of the Apostles, which describes the early growth of the Christian church; the letters of Paul and other important leaders in the early church; the Letter to the Hebrews; and the Book of Revelation. The New Testament teaches that salvation comes through believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in following his teachings. It teaches that salvation is a gift God extends freely through Jesus Christ to all people.

Why are there so many different kinds of Christians?

From its beginning with a tiny group of Jesus' followers, Christianity has spread all over the world. Today, it is practiced by two billion people. As with any large group, Christianity has experienced many different interpretations, disagreements and struggles for power over the centuries. These have led to the growth of many different branches of Christianity interpreting the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in different ways. There are three basic streams of Christianity: Orthodox, Protestant and Roman Catholic.

JUDAISM

How did Judaism begin?

Judaism began about 4000 years ago with the Hebrew people in the Middle East. Abraham, a Hebrew man, is considered the father of the Jewish faith because he promoted the central idea of the Jewish faith: that there is one God. At the time many people in the Middle East worshipped many gods. It is said that Abraham and his wife Sarah, who were old and childless, were told by God that their children would be as plentiful as the stars in the sky and that they would live in a land of their own -- the Promised Land. This gradually came true.

Abraham's son, Isaac had a son, Jacob, also called Israel. In this way the descendants of Abraham came to be known as the Israelites. God promised the Israelites he would care for them as long as they obeyed God's laws. While still traveling, the Hebrews lived in Egypt where they were enslaved. Moses, a Hebrew, was chosen by God to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt. Moses led the Hebrew people out of the Sinai Desert toward the promised land. At Mt. Sinai, God gave Moses the Law which would guide the Israelites to today. The laws were called the Ten Commandments and form the basis of the Torah, the book of Jewish law.

It took many years for the Israelites to finally get to what they thought was the Promised Land - Canaan. After some fighting the Jews established the Israelite kingdom. After many years, Canaan was conquered by the Assyrians, the Babylonians and then eventually the Romans. The Israelites once again found themselves enslaved, this time by Babylonians. The Israelites were then taken over by Romans who destroyed much of what had been built in Jerusalem by the Israelites. Most of the Jews were scattered all over the region and eventually moved from place to place to avoid persecution which continues to this day. The dispersion of the Jews is called the Diaspora.

The worst persecution of the Jews was during World War II by the Nazis who murdered more than six million Jews or a third of the world's Jewish population. This was called the Holocaust. Beginning in the 1880's Jews began returning to their homeland in growing numbers, this time to avoid persecution where they lived. After World War II, many Jews believed that for the Jewish people and culture to survive, Jews needed to live in their own country where all Jews from anywhere in the world would have the right to live and be citizens. In 1948, Palestine was divided up and a Jewish state of Israel was formed in the land that was once called Canaan, surrounded by countries with predominantly Muslim populations. Since Muslims also claimed rights to the land where the Jews were living, there was conflict, which continues to this day in the Middle East.

Today nearly fourteen million Jewish people live all over the world. Approximately half of them live in the United States, one quarter live in Israel, and a quarter are still scattered around the world in countries in Europe, Russia, South America, Africa, Asia and other North American and Middle Eastern countries. Anyone born to a Jewish mother is considered a Jew.

What do Jewish people believe?

Jewish people believe in the Torah, which was the whole of the laws given to the Israelites at Sinai. They believe they must follow God's laws which govern daily life. Later legal books, written by rabbis, determine the law as it applies to life in each new place and time.

The Ten Commandments, as written in the Torah, are:

- Worship no other God but me.
- Do not make images to worship.
- Do not misuse the name of God.
- Observe the Sabbath Day (Saturday). Keep it Holy.
- Honor and respect your father and mother.
- Do not murder.
- Do not commit adultery.
- Do not steal.
- Do not accuse anyone falsely. Do not tell lies about other people.
- Do not envy other's possessions.

There are three basic groups of Jewish people who have a different understanding of the interpretation of the Torah.

- Orthodox Jews believe that all of the practices in the Torah which it is practical to obey must be obeyed without question.
- Conservative and Reform Jews believe that the ancient laws and practices have to be interpreted for modern life with inclusion of contemporary sources and with more concern with community practices than with ritual practices.
- Reform Jews also allow everyone to sit together, men and women, and both Hebrew and the local language are spoken in services.

What are the sacred texts of the Jewish people?

The Tenakh is the ancient collection of writings that are sacred to the Jews. They were written over almost a thousand years from 1000 to 100 BCE. The word Tenakh comes from the three first letters of the three books included in this text: the Torah, plus the Nev'im (prophets) and the Ki'tuvim (writings, which include histories, prophecies, poems, hymns and sayings).

The Torah is written on scrolls and kept in a special cabinet called the aron hakodish, the holy ark, in synagogues. The Torah is read with a pointer called a yad (hand) to keep it from being spoiled. Each week, one section is read until the entire Torah is completed and the reading begins again.

The Talmud is also an important collection of Jewish writings. Written about 2000 years ago, it is a recording of the rabbis discussion of the way to follow the Torah at that time. Later texts, the Mishnah Torah and the Shulhan Aruch, are recordings of rabbinic discussions from later periods.