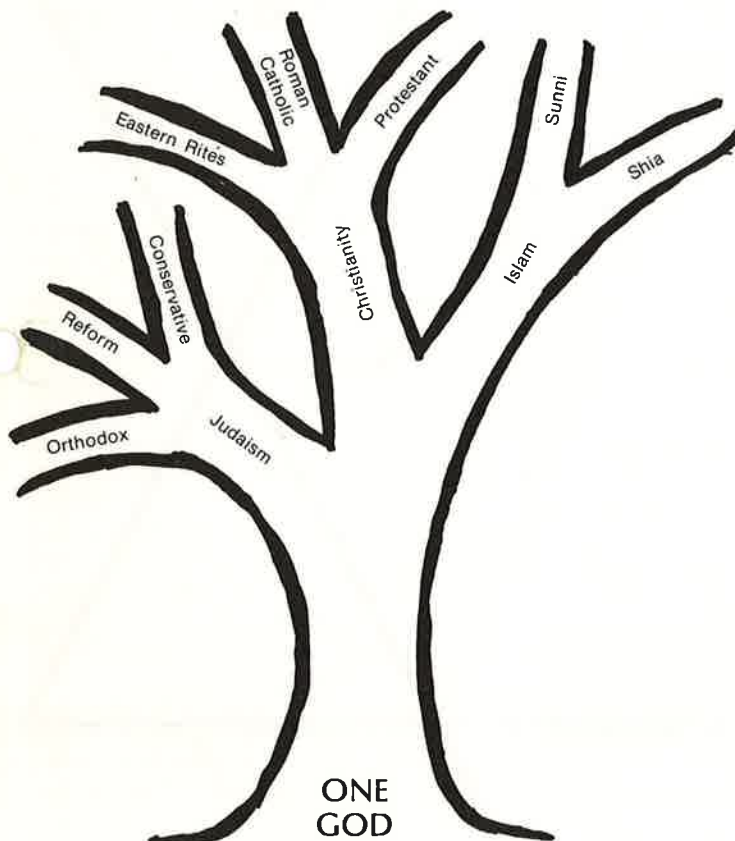


RELIGION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Two years ago, issue #37 of ANERA's Newsletter focused on religion in the Middle East. Because of your interest and the numerous requests for additional copies of that issue, ANERA felt it again appropriate to address the subject during this holy season.



Religion may be defined as a combination of the relationship between an individual and a supreme being (or power) and a code of social justice revealed by the supreme being for communities and individuals to live by. This supreme being is usually termed God.

Three of the world's major religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all sprang from the soil of the Middle East. Judaism is basic to both Christianity and Islam. God revealed His code of social justice in Judaism. Christians consider their faith to be a second revelation of this code of social justice sent by God through His Son Jesus Christ. Building upon both Christianity and Judaism, followers of Islam believe their religion to be a third revelation of God's ultimate code of social justice toward which both Judaism and Christianity were striving.

In addition to their common roots, the three religions share many of the same beliefs and moral principles: the belief in One God (*Yahveh* in Hebrew, *Allah* in Arabic), the attainability of heaven, the importance of good works on earth and of love for one's neighbor.

Each of the three has special reverence for sites of worship in Palestine—in many cases these are the same sites. Jerusalem is the prime example; it is the most holy city for Jews and Christians and one of three holy cities in Islam.

The followers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are likewise all "Peoples of the Book," that is, the revelations received from God are written statements: the *Old Testament* or *Torah*, the *Talmud*, the *Bible*, and the *Koran*. The books share many of the same stories, especially those relating to the prophets of the *Old Testament*.

The original followers of the three religious faiths were also all Semitic peoples who spoke, wrote, and read closely related languages. The Israelites of Judaism used Hebrew; the language of Christ was Aramaic; the *Koran* of Islam is written in Arabic. All of these languages are of the Semitic family and are ultimately derived from the same root or source.

As each of the three great religions grew in separate ways, so did divisions within each, as represented in the tree above. The various sub-branches represent important variations in liturgy and doctrinal interpretation, but all basically share the same common principles.

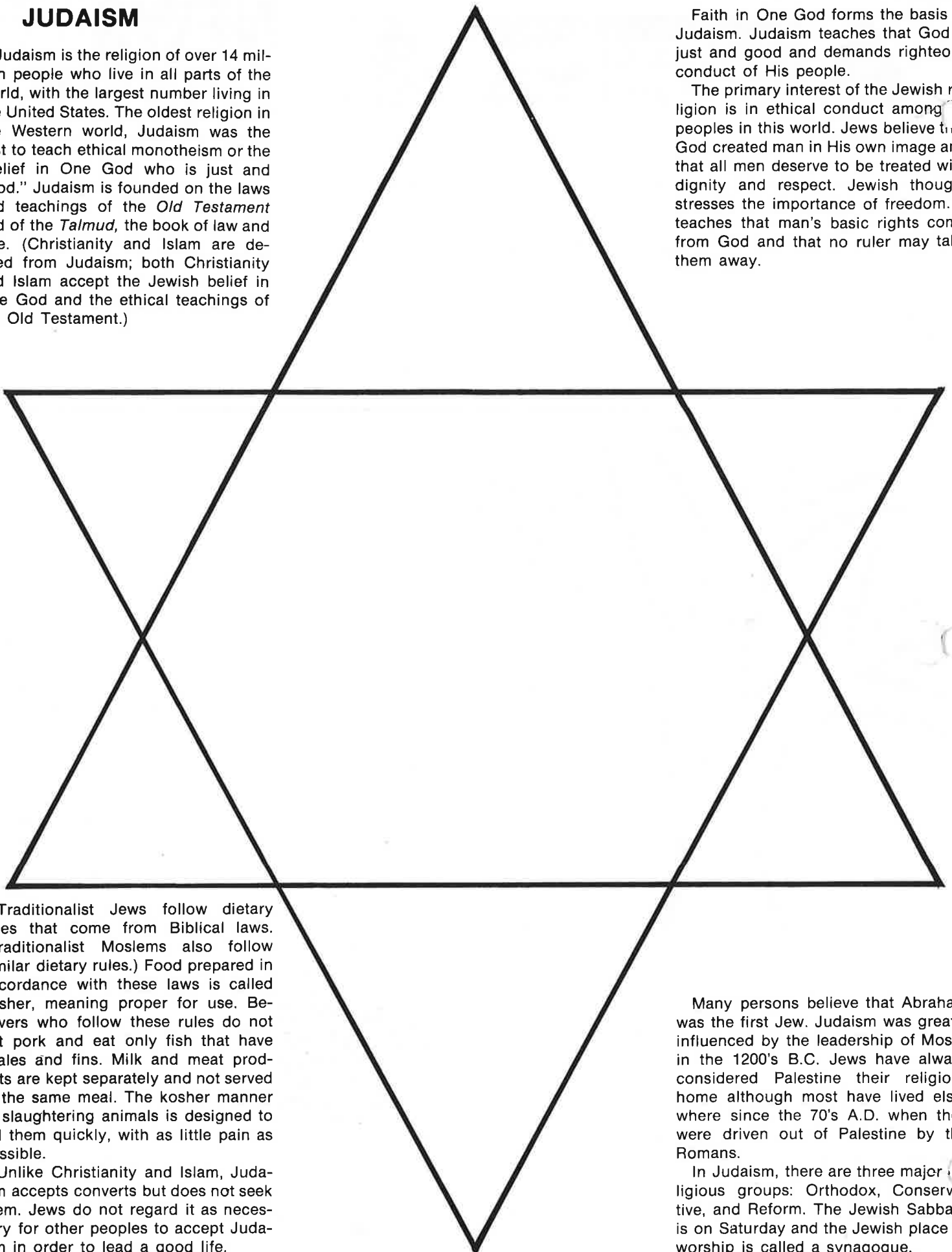
The factual information which follows is necessarily brief and can not reflect the full vitality of the role religion plays in the personal lives of individuals. A more lengthy explanation of Islam is given because presumably Americans are more familiar with Judaism and Christianity than they are with Islam.

JUDAISM

Judaism is the religion of over 14 million people who live in all parts of the world, with the largest number living in the United States. The oldest religion in the Western world, Judaism was the first to teach ethical monotheism or the "belief in One God who is just and good." Judaism is founded on the laws and teachings of the *Old Testament* and of the *Talmud*, the book of law and lore. (Christianity and Islam are derived from Judaism; both Christianity and Islam accept the Jewish belief in One God and the ethical teachings of the Old Testament.)

Faith in One God forms the basis of Judaism. Judaism teaches that God is just and good and demands righteous conduct of His people.

The primary interest of the Jewish religion is in ethical conduct among peoples in this world. Jews believe that God created man in His own image and that all men deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Jewish thought stresses the importance of freedom. It teaches that man's basic rights come from God and that no ruler may take them away.



Traditionalist Jews follow dietary rules that come from Biblical laws. (Traditionalist Moslems also follow similar dietary rules.) Food prepared in accordance with these laws is called kosher, meaning proper for use. Believers who follow these rules do not eat pork and eat only fish that have scales and fins. Milk and meat products are kept separately and not served at the same meal. The kosher manner of slaughtering animals is designed to kill them quickly, with as little pain as possible.

Unlike Christianity and Islam, Judaism accepts converts but does not seek them. Jews do not regard it as necessary for other peoples to accept Judaism in order to lead a good life.

Many persons believe that Abraham was the first Jew. Judaism was greatly influenced by the leadership of Moses in the 1200's B.C. Jews have always considered Palestine their religious home although most have lived elsewhere since the 70's A.D. when they were driven out of Palestine by the Romans.

In Judaism, there are three major religious groups: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. The Jewish Sabbath is on Saturday and the Jewish place of worship is called a synagogue.

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is the religion founded on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and had its beginnings in Palestine. Christianity has spread throughout the world and is the prevailing religion in the Western Hemisphere. Christians make up the largest religious group in the world, numbering more than one billion followers. The Christian Holy Book is the *Bible*, composed of the Old and New Testaments.

The three great divisions of Christianity today are the Protestant denominations, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Eastern Orthodox Church. The weekly Christian holy day is Sunday, when Christians attend worship services in churches.

The Christian Church has long been active in providing relief assistance as well as support for the Palestinians.

The **National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.** established the Church World Service which is the relief, rehabilitation, and development agency of the National Council of Churches' Division of Overseas Ministries. Major contributors to the Church World Service include the **Christian Church**, the **Presbyterian Church (South)**, the **Protestant Episcopal Church**, the **Reformed Church in America**, the **United Methodist Church**, and the **United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.**

The Church World Service, in turn, is a chief contributor to the educational and medical relief programs of the **Near East Ecumenical Committee for Palestinian Refugees (NEECPR) of the World Council of Churches.** NEECPR is the major world-wide channel for the ecumenical response to the Palestinians.

ANERA receives contributions each year from a number of local churches throughout the United States. In addition, the following denominations conduct individual programs assisting the Palestinians within the Middle East:

- **Catholic Relief Services**
- **Catholic Near East Welfare Assoc.**
- **Lutheran World Relief**
- **Mennonite Central Committee of the Mennonite Church**
- **Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention**
- **United Presbyterian Church (U.S.A)**

Christianity centers on the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Christians believe that Jesus Christ was the Messiah or the promised deliverer of the Jews referred to in the *Old Testament*.

Jesus Christ taught the ideal of a Kingdom of God without national or racial boundaries—a Kingdom where God came first and spiritual blessing were shared by all. Christians believe that God's will is the tie that binds together the Kingdom of God on earth and in heaven; those who do the will of God are part of the Kingdom whether they are in this world or the next.

Jesus Christ preached that God's will is active good will: God is love. Christianity stresses love for others and the brotherhood of man, absolute truth, activity, sincerity of deed, courage, and joy.

The first believers in Christ were Jewish by birth and training, and at first they were considered a sect of Judaism. The followers of Christ first received the name Christians at Antioch, Syria, where one of the first Christian communities outside of Palestine developed.

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) deserves special mention for its outstanding work among the Palestinian refugees and for its courageous efforts in promoting peace in the Middle East.

The American Friends Service Committee is a non-sectarian corporation which, although independent of the Society of Friends, developed from the philosophy of the Quaker way of living. AFSC began its work with Palestinian refugees in 1948 when it was requested by the United Nations to set up and administer an emergency relief program for refugees in the Gaza Strip. This program continued until May, 1950, when UNRWA took over. AFSC now operates a variety of programs which include the operation of preschool centers for Palestinian children in Gaza, the publication of the study, *Search for Peace in the Middle East*, and the operation of a legal aid program for Palestinians being evicted from their homes in Jerusalem.

ISLAM

Islam is one of the world's largest religions, with more than 500 million followers in all parts of the world. The largest Moslem communities exist in the Middle East Africa, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Soviet Asia, and Indonesia; in Europe, Islam is the principal religion of European Turkey, Albania, and the Bosnia-Herzegovina region of Yugoslavia.

Islam is the faith communicated by God to Mohammed in the A.D. 600's. The word "Islam" means peace and submission and is usually taken to mean peace through submission to God. Moslems (followers of Islam) believe there is One God and that Mohammed was His Prophet. (Those who do not understand Islam have referred to the religion as Mohammedanism and those who follow it as Mohammedans; this is offensive to Moslems as such terms give the incorrect impression that Moslems worship Mohammed.)

The Holy Book of Islam is the *Koran*, which resembles the *Bible* and the *Talmud*. The *Hadith*, which is a collection of the sayings and doings of the Prophet Mohammed, explains and elaborates the teachings of the *Koran*. Palestine (and especially Jerusalem) is important to Moslems as the location of religious sites sacred to Islam.

Islam has two main sects: Sunni and Shi'a. Friday is the weekly holy day of Islam, and the Moslem place of worship is called a mosque.

Islam teaches the absolute unity and power of God, the Creator of the whole universe. It also teaches that God is just and merciful and wishes man to repent and purify himself while on earth so that he can return to Paradise after death. Therefore, God sends prophets with sacred books to teach man his duty to God and to his fellowman. Mohammed was the last of the prophets; Jesus, Abraham and the *Old Testament* prophets were his predecessors. (Moslems believe in the Virgin Birth of Jesus, but not that he is the "Son of God" as in the Christian religion.)

Marriage in Islam is a sacred bond of relationship between man and woman. Islam allows limited polygamy but only subject to certain conditions; each wife must be treated equally. It is highly unusual for a husband to have more than one wife. Both men and women have full right to divorce but only as a last resort. A wife may sue her husband for misuse of her property. Islam does not discriminate on the basis of sex and teaches that men and women are equally important.

Moslems pray five times daily: at dawn, at noon, in the afternoon, at nightfall, and in the evening. A crier or *muezzin* announces prayer time from the *minaret* or tower of the mosque.

The *Koran* stresses the virtues of faith in God and man, patience, kindness, honesty, impartial justice for members of all faiths and social classes, industry, honor, courage, and generosity. Since Islam is built upon Judaism and Christianity and the three faiths have their roots in the Middle East, Moslems regard Christians and Jews as their cousins.

The *Koran* forbids the representation of human and animal figures, so orthodox Islamic art rarely pictures living beings. The *Koran* also denounces usury, games of chance, and the consumption of pork and alcohol. Islam teaches that there is no compulsion for war in religion and permits war only in defense against aggression.

CHRISTMAS IN BETHLEHEM

"And Joseph went. . . unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem. . . to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. . . And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; . . ." St. Luke 2:4-7

Almost 2 millennia later, the birth of Christ described by St. Luke is still celebrated in Christian communities around the world. For the 30,000 Palestinian Christians and Moslems who are today Bethlehem's people, Christmas is a time for both personal and public celebration.

Visitors and religious leaders from all over the world come to Bethlehem to celebrate Christ's birth. Special religious celebrations and civic ceremonies take place on December 24 with most of the visitors leaving the city at the conclusion of the public festivities in the early morning hours of December 25.

On Christmas Day, the people of Bethlehem begin their own personal celebrations of Christmas much as it is celebrated throughout the world. . . as a time for Christians to attend church and quietly renew their faith. . . as a time to be with family and friends, to exchange gifts, and eat special holiday foods. Santa Claus and Christmas trees are also very much a part of the celebration.

Aside from the public celebrations, there are 3 things which make Christmas in Bethlehem a little different from its celebration in the United States. Religiously, Christmas may be celebrated 2 and 3 times each year because in the Middle East, different branches of the Christian religion have established different dates for the actual day when Christ was born. For example, the Greek Orthodox Church in the Middle East follows the old church calendar and this year will celebrate Christmas on January 6, 1978. Secondly, it is common in the Middle East for friends of different religions to visit one another on their special religious holidays. So, in Bethlehem, Moslem families will participate in the Christmas festivities at the homes of their Christian friends.

And finally, Christmas in Bethlehem will be celebrated under the watchful eye of Israeli soldiers armed with machine guns, looking down from the tops of Bethlehem's buildings. The city is under military occupation. But there is hope that the message of Christmas will one day soon come true for the Palestinian people of Bethlehem.

ANERA IN BETHLEHEM

Because Bethlehem has been a city of pilgrimage over the centuries, one of the chief vocations of Palestinians in Bethlehem has been that of artist or artisan. The fashioning of religious objects out of local materials such as mother-of-pearl (which now comes from the Red Sea and Australia) and olive wood, began in the 15th and 16th centuries; gradually the work of Bethlehem's people became known throughout the world. Today, there are many small shops in Bethlehem where religious as well as contemporary art is still formed from mother-of-pearl, olive wood, marble, and metal.

However, for reasons mainly due to conditions of military occupation, it is becoming difficult for Palestinians of Bethlehem to earn a living in their traditional vocation. Therefore, all of ANERA's projects in Bethlehem try to strengthen the community through educational and vocational training.

Arab Women's Union of Bethlehem—

Founded in 1947, the Arab Women's Union of Bethlehem is one of many Arab Women's Unions on the West Bank primarily concerned with the development of women in the respective communities. An ANERA grant of \$15,290 two years ago, enabled the Arab Women's Union of Bethlehem to open a School of Fine Arts with courses in painting, sculpting, and drawing for 17 promising local craftspeople. The School of Fine Arts is the only one of its kind on the West Bank and its graduates are virtually assured of better jobs in the Bethlehem area.

Bethlehem Charitable Societies—This year ANERA will assist in establishing a factory-workshop to train 15 young men of Bethlehem in the design and metal production of religious articles and contemporary jewelry. The project is sponsored by the Committee for Rehabilitation of the Bethlehem Charitable Societies and the trainees will be reviving traditional designs and techniques of Moslem and Christian craftspeople which have been preserved through the ages. The young men will earn an income during their training and upon graduation will readily be able to secure jobs to support themselves and their families. The sale of the trainees' products will enable the workshop to also become self-supporting after its second year of operation.

Last year ANERA made a grant of

\$1,155 to the Committee for Rehabilitation for its revolving loan fund. The loan fund is for small businesspeople, craftspeople, and farmers to assist them in the purchase of tools, equipment, livestock, etc. These people would otherwise not be able to obtain the funds necessary to begin or expand their small businesses. The loans are repaid in small monthly installments; nearly all of the previous loans have in fact been repaid.

Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy—Since 1967, the Congregation of the Sisters of our Lady of Mercy has operated a sewing and knitting training project for young women of the Bethlehem area. This project trains the young women in useful skills so they can earn an income either through part-time work at home or full-time work in the small shops of the Bethlehem area. In 1976-77, 70 women participated in the 8-month training course. ANERA provided a grant of \$6,000 for the purchase of equipment for the dressmaking/tailoring course.

Salesian Technical School—The Salesian Technical School of Bethlehem was established in 1863 and offers poor boys in the area general education and vocational training. The School received ANERA grants in 1976 and 1977. In 1977, ANERA's grant of \$50,000 was used partially for scholarships for 170 needy boys of different religious faiths and partially for equipment for the electrical workshop. There is a real need especially for vocationally-trained electricians on

the West Bank and it is expected that upon graduation all the boys will receive jobs enabling them to be self-supporting.

Bethlehem University—Founded in 1973, Bethlehem University is a 4-year degree-granting institution which is helping to meet the pressing needs of young Palestinians for higher education and is now one of only 3 such institutions in the Occupied Territories. The University offers education in professions that will provide employment for graduates in the local economy with emphasis on business administration, hotel management, teaching and social work. In school year 1976-77, 347 students were enrolled full time. ANERA's grant of \$2,000 last year provided scholarship aid for needy students.

Institute Effeta—The Institute, founded in 1971, is a specialized school which teaches children suffering from hearing deficiencies to speak, read, and write, using modern electronic techniques. The Institute provides 6 years of education and training to 69 aurally handicapped children and is the only school of its kind in the Occupied Territories. ANERA granted the Institute \$11,000 in fiscal year 1977 to equip an audiophonic laboratory (which enabled the Institute to add a 7th grade level to its instructional program) and to construct a safe and much-needed outdoor playground for the children.

RELIGION AND CONFLICT

Throughout history, there have been conflicts between peoples of different religions. Sometimes these conflicts have been because of differences in religious beliefs; at other times, these conflicts were for other reasons.

In the Middle East, disagreements among peoples have frequently been described by classifying the parties involved according to their religious affiliation or by linking their religious identity to the conflict. This can be an unfair classification because it can give the impression that the parties are in disagreement over religious beliefs and/or that people of one faith have the same opinion on the issues involved. It is also a misleading classification because of a fundamental difference in attitude between the United States and the Middle East.

Hoping to avoid religious persecution, the United States instituted the concept of "separation of 'church' and state" which means that one's religion is personal and not part of one's political relationship with the state.

However, in the Middle East, religion has both personal and political connotations. In the Middle East it was long ago thought that religious persecution could best be avoided by the "protection of the 'church' by the state." In order to insure the continuation of all the religions and to protect the rights of the people of these religions, Jewish, Christian, and Moslem communities follow their own codes of social justice with regard to many matters normally handled by the government in the U.S.

When the Ottoman Empire gained power in the 15th century, this special protection was formalized in something called the millet system. The leaders of the Jewish, Christian, and Moslem communities (or millets) were both the political and religious representatives of the people in their relationship with the officials of the Ottoman Empire. In matters of taxation, for example, the religious leaders collected the taxes from their communities, giving a portion to the Empire's rulers and keeping a portion for the maintenance of their communities. Decisions made by the religious councils in their sphere of jurisdiction were expected to be obeyed by the rulers of the Empire.

Today, each of the 3 major religions still has the authority to manage internally its own personal status laws, i.e., in matters of marriage, divorce, family law, and the like, while the state now manages civil laws of taxation, criminal justice, etc. In this way, peoples of the 3 faiths have lived peacefully together within Middle Eastern countries and have done so for centuries. (For example, currently 14 predominantly Moslem countries have Jewish populations and nearly all have Christian populations.)

It is important to remember that when one refers to a conflict in the Middle East as being between Jews and Moslems or Christians and Moslems, it is usually not a religious disagreement. Instead, the religious groups are being referred to in their political sense. The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians does not mean that Palestinians are against Judaism or that Israelis are against Christianity and Islam. Israeli Jews and Palestinian Christians and Moslems disagree over political rights of self-determination.

From the Old Testament, Exodus 20:1-5:

And God spake all these words, saying, I am the Lord thy God . . . Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.

From the New Testament, Matthew 22:37-40:

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

From the Holy Koran, Sura (Chapter) XLII:

God is our Lord and your Lord. We have our deeds, and you have your deeds; There is no argument between us and you; God shall bring us together, and Unto Him is the homecoming.

Enclosed is a special Christmas donation for ANERA's work in Bethlehem:

\$15 \$25 \$50 \$100 \$200 \$ Other

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