

RELIGION IN THE MIDDLE EAST



A street scene in Bethlehem



Dome of the Rock and Wailing Wall, Jerusalem

The area of the Fertile Crescent and thereabouts, known today as the Middle East, has often been referred to as "The Cradle of Civilization." It is no wonder, then, that religion — a major influence on cultures — has played such a prominent role in that region throughout history, and continues to do so today.

Unlike most of the West, where there has developed over time a separation of the powers of church and state, the peoples of the Middle East have long encouraged and, at times, demanded religious interplay in such vital areas as government, economy and education. The ancient Israelites may have had their kings, but those kings were usually advised in all matters by the High Priest. Under the Ottoman Empire, the heads of each religious community were made responsible for their own community's taxation, schooling, and (for the most part) civil and religious law. Today, the governments of such countries as Lebanon, Israel and Saudi Arabia are very much based upon and/or tied to religion.

Those religions and sects which exist in the Middle East today are many and varied, and some of their names surface in the news frequently. Almost all, however, derive from the three great monotheistic religions born there hundreds and thousands of years ago. If we are to understand the peoples and cultures of that important region, as well as their problems, we must be better acquainted with the different faiths which have driven them — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Perhaps, then, we may begin to help bridge those differences.

JUDAISM: ONE GOD WHO IS JUST AND GOOD

Judaism, the oldest known religion in the Western world, was also the first to acknowledge only "one God who is just and good," and served as the springboard from which later came both Christianity and Islam. Unlike the latter faiths, however, Judaism's representation in the world is relatively small in terms of numbers (just over 14 million). Its influence through the centuries has been substantial, nonetheless. As observed even 2,000 years ago by the Roman geographer Strabo, "it is not easy to find any place in the habitable world that has not yet received this nation and in which it has not made its power felt."

Origin and History

Judaism had its earliest roots in the covenant which God is said to have made with His biblical prophet, Abraham, thousands of years ago. According to the Jewish holy scripture, the "Torah" (consisting of the first five books of the Old Testament), God chose Abraham for his faithfulness and promised to bless him and his posterity if they would accept and follow Him as the one true God. That promise was later renewed with Abraham's son, Isaac, and his grandson, Jacob (renamed Israel), as well as others who were called by God as prophets.

The Torah goes on to describe the development of ancient Israel's people into a veritable theocracy. Its writings and teachings were compiled by a succession of prophets from Abraham to Jeremiah, and range from the poetic creation story to detailed instructions concerning temple construction and dietary laws. Indeed, the Torah served to bind the twelve tribes of Israel together. As expressed by Saadia, the "Gaon" (Rector) of the Rabbinical College of Sura, "Israel is a people only by virtue of the Torah."

According to biblical tradition, most of Israel's descendants were eventually scattered and lost through war and conquest. When King Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and took the tribe of Judah to Babylon in captivity, however, the Jews somehow remained a people, intact with most of their teachings and practices. But enslaved as they were and without access to their temple for priesthood rites of worship, the people of Judah eventually lost their ancient priesthood. Thereafter, they formed small groups for worship and the study of Jewish law. These came to be known in time as "synagogues" (from a Greek word meaning "to bring together") and have endured through the centuries to this day.



Engraving by Gustave Dore

Beliefs and Practices

As with other religions, Judaism has suffered some schism and fragmentation during its long history, but that which binds all Jews — Orthodox, Reformed, and Conservative alike — is the importance of the Torah. It instructs almost every aspect of a Jew's life. A remarkable legend exists among Jews which reveals their dedication to this holy book:

As the Israelites stood assembled at the foot of Mt. Sinai to enter into their solemn Covenant with God, there suddenly descended from heaven and remained suspended miraculously over their heads, an apparition of "The Book" and, beside it, one of "The Sword." "Choose!" commanded the Bat Kol (the "Daughter of the Voice" [of God]) from Heaven. "You can have one or the other, but not both — either The book or The Sword! If you choose The Book, you must renounce The Sword. Should your choice be The Sword, then The Book will perish." The Rabbinic weaver of this morality then concluded exultantly that the Israelites made the most memorable decision in the history of mankind: They chose The Book! "Thereupon, the Holy One — blessed be He! — said to Israel: "If you keep what is written in The Book you will be delivered from The Sword, but should you fail to keep it, in the end The Sword will destroy you."

— Nathan Ausubel, *The Book of Jewish Knowledge*

The Torah contains a total of 613 commandments, but the prophet Micah summarized them all in three: "To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God." Later the great Jewish sage, Hillel, was asked to be even briefer. . . as if he were "standing on one foot." The renowned teacher of ethics replied, "And what is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow men," adding that "The rest [of the Torah] is merely commentary."

Along with the Torah, observant Jews pay great heed to the "Talmud," a collection of many treatises dwelling on Rabbinic laws and organizations, traditions, customs, rites and ceremonies, and civil and criminal laws.

Despite all of these writings, there was no fixed creed of Jewish belief until the 13th century when the great Jewish sage, Maimonides, wrote a code of 13 articles. Over half of these articles detailed the Jewish belief in the one true God as creator of all and the only being worthy of worship. The remaining articles specified faith in the prophets, the unchangeability of the law, the coming of the Messiah, and the revival of the dead at some future point.

Prayer and ritual observance also serve to bind Jews together the world over. Each Saturday, they meet together in their respective synagogues to celebrate the Sabbath under the direction of a Rabbi, who is not a priest but a teacher. Much of their religion is expressed through annual celebration of Judaism's holy days, many of which are tied closely to important historical events. The ram's horn which is traditionally blown to announce the new year on Rosh Hashanah, for example, serves as a reminder of the ram God sent to Abraham to use as a sacrifice in lieu of Isaac.

Perhaps Judaism's most important contribution to world civilization was its development of, and emphasis on, ethical values. The central doctrine in the Jewish religion is that of "the sanctification of life." According to scripture, when God created man He made him in His own image. It follows in Judaism, then, that men and women must live up to this distinction by imitating God in His ethical attributes. A Jew is obliged, therefore, to work tirelessly to improve intellectually

and morally, to seek truth through Torah-study, meditation and self-examination, and to love all human beings "as himself," performing good deeds in their behalf. According

to Judaism, such activity would not only bless the individual and others, but would also help hasten the redemption of the world from evil, oppression, social injustice and war.

CHRISTIANITY: GOD WITH US

When thinking of Christianity, one generally considers the Western Hemisphere where it is the predominant religion. Yet its roots are firmly planted in the Middle East, and large Arab Christian communities continue to thrive there today. Unlike its predecessor, Judaism, and Islam which followed not long after, Christianity asserts that God deigned to dwell among men so that they might learn "a more perfect way." And thus Jesus Christ was called "Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us." Today, His followers make up the largest religious group in the world, numbering over one billion men and women.

History and Development

Some 2,000 years ago, a Jew appeared on the scene in ancient Palestine and began to teach a new kind of faith. He is said to have performed numerous miracles, including bringing the dead back to life, and with seeming authority prophesied to His fellow Jews. As more and more flocked to hear His teachings, the local Jewish authorities began to hear His growing influence.

According to Christian tradition, this Jesus of Nazareth was conceived miraculously of a virgin after she had been overshadowed by the "power of the Highest." Thus, He was called the Son of God. A carpenter by trade, Jesus began His ministry at the age of 30 by being "baptized" (immersed) in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. Immediately thereafter, according to biblical sources, He fasted, prayed and suffered temptations for 40 days as He sojourned in the Judean wilderness alone. Strengthened by this experience, He then began to teach the truth as He knew it.

For three years He is said to have traveled throughout the provinces of Judaea, Samaria and Galilee gathering disciples and preaching love, toleration, repentance and forgiveness. When accused by rabbinical leaders of ignoring the teachings of the ancient Jewish prophets, Jesus replied, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill." Not unlike the later founder of Islam, Muhammad, then, Christ saw His teachings as a completion of what had already taken root.

Whatever His motives or purpose, He was evidently viewed by Jewish and Roman authorities alike as a threat to the status quo for, at the young age of 33, Jesus was arrested, tried and condemned to death by crucifixion. For a brief time, his death caused great confusion and chaos among His followers, even though He, himself, had apparently predicted His demise. In their belief, He was the Jews' promised Messiah who would save the world. But now their Saviour was dead and, afraid for their own lives, His chosen twelve apostles scattered and hid.

Three days after Christ's body had been placed in a tomb, reports began to circulate that the tomb was found empty and that various disciples (including His remaining apostles) had seen the resurrected Lord. According to tradition, Jesus sojourned for 40 days after His resurrection, instructing His apostles and organizing what would then become His church. His last words to His followers before ascending into heaven were said to be as follows:



Painting of Christ by Heinrich Hofman

"All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." (St. Matthew 28: 18-20)

Christ's apparent victory over death greatly encouraged His followers. Led now by the apostle Peter, they proceeded to preach His message far and wide. Some of those disciples most familiar with Jesus and His ministry made written records of His life and teachings which were then compiled as the Gospels. Later, combined with writings of the apostles, these writings formed the Christian New Testament of the Holy Bible.

Overcoming severe initial persecution, Christianity (as the new faith soon came to be called) was eventually embraced by the Roman Emperor Constantine in 323 A.D. Thereafter, it continued to grow steadily beyond territorial or racial limits.

Beliefs and Practices

For centuries after its birth, Christianity was considered an obscure Jewish cult by most observers. After all, its founder was a Jew, and if His teachings did not always mirror those of traditional Judaism, they usually seemed to hinge upon Jewish law in some way. Gradually, however, differences between Judaism and Christianity became apparent enough and conversion to the new faith became so widespread that it was accorded a place of its own as a major world religion.

Whereas Jews were taught to heed the "letter" of the law, Christ emphasized its "spirit." For example, while Moses had taught the people "Thou shalt not commit adultery," Christ maintained further that "whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." His many parables concerned such subjects as faith, responsible use of talents, truth, forgiveness, brotherhood and charity.

Christianity has suffered more schism and division than any other religion. As a result, today there are thousands of

different Christian denominations and sects, making it extremely difficult to define a "Christian" and what he or she believes. As noted by Lewis M. Hopfe in *Religions of the World*:

"In general Christians share a common belief in the uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth, that he in some way provided for the redemption of humankind by his death and was himself resurrected from the dead. Christians generally also believe in baptism as initiation into the religion and in the communion meal. They hold to the idea that the believer has one life in which to determine his or her destiny for life after death. This destiny is usually thought to be either an eternity of bliss in heaven or an eternity of torment in hell. Around these basic themes are thousands of variations within the body of Christendom."

ISLAM: SUBMISSION TO GOD

Of the three great monotheistic faiths, Islam is perhaps least familiar and least understood in the West. Yet it is by far the most prevalent religion in the Middle East and, indeed, is embraced by one-fifth of the entire world population. Given its widespread presence, it is important to know and understand Islam, its origins, tenets, rites and variations, for it reaches into every part of the life of its follower (called a "Muslim," meaning one who submits to the will of God).

Origin and History

According to tradition, one night in 610 A.D. a man praying in the mountains near Mecca heard a mysterious voice say, "Thou art the Prophet of God." A holy spirit, traditionally identified with the Archangel Gabriel, then appeared and ordered, "Recite!" When Muhammad asked what he should recite, the spirit commanded:

"Recite: In the name of thy Lord who created,
created Man of a blood-clot.

Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous,
who taught by the Pen.
taught Man that he knew not."

(Sura XCVI)

Muhammad, then 40 years old, had apparently been religious before this experience, feeling deeply concerned with the social ills and corruption he had witnessed as a trader in Mecca and in his travels beyond the west coast of Arabia. But now he felt called to do something about it.

Tradition states that over the next 22 years the remaining text of the Holy Quran was transmitted to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel in similar moments of spiritual communion. During this period, as Muhammad preached publicly, his fame and influence began to grow and three events occurred which proved crucial to the development of Islam.

First, not long after the death of his beloved wife Khadija in 619 A.D., Muhammad became engaged to the young daughter of one of his most loyal followers. His favorite wife of his later years, Aisha proved an invaluable source of traditions concerning the Prophet after he died, and she figured prominently in the battle for succession which followed his death.

It was also during this period, when things were most difficult, that Muhammad is said to have had an experience now referred to as the "Nocturnal Journey." According to Muslims, in the course of a single night the Prophet was

All over the world, Christians meet in local congregations each Sunday to worship, pray, and partake of the sacramental meal together. This communion meal (usually consisting of bread and wine) is offered in commemoration of Jesus' "Last Supper" with His apostles before He was crucified. According to biblical sources, it was on that occasion that Christ, in a prayer to God the Father, described His own role and specified the goal of all Christians:

"Father, the hour is come: glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee: As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him. And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." (St. John 17: 1-3)

carried from Mecca to Jerusalem where he met and prayed with Abraham, Moses, and Jesus Christ, as well as others, at the spot where the Dome of the Rock now stands. Then, accompanied by Gabriel, he is said to have ascended into heaven and received further instructions concerning Islam. Finally, he returned to Jerusalem and was carried back to Mecca before dawn. For Muslims, his prophethood was confirmed through this experience and Jerusalem joined Mecca as one of Islam's holy cities.

The third holy city, Medina (known until the Prophet's time as Yathrib), gave Muhammad what he needed to ensure the continued expansion of Islam — the control and authority to make changes in government and society. He was invited there by converts to help mediate between warring factions. The "Hijra" (migration) of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Yathrib took place in 622 A.D. Yathrib welcomed him with open arms and soon became known as the city of the Prophet, "Madinat al-Nabi," or Medina for short.

Within 35 years, Islamic control spread from that city to the entire Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, Persia, Syria, and Lower Egypt. It has continued to spread and today Islam represents



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Entrance to the Golden Mosque in Baghdad

ISLAM: SUBMISSION TO GOD (continued)

the majority of the populations in 35 countries, as well as sizeable minorities in such countries as India, the U.S.S.R., Nigeria, China, South Africa, the United States, Yugoslavia, and Britain.

Beliefs and Practices

Like Jews and Christians, Muslims believe in obeying the will of God in this life and follow a well defined code of moral and ethical behavior based on scripture and prophetic teaching.

Three beliefs are most fundamental to a Muslim's faith. First, there is absolutely only one God (called "Allah" in Arabic) and He is supreme and the only being men and women should worship. Second, Muhammad is the messenger of God, through whom God revealed Himself to humanity. Even though he is considered by Muslims to be the greatest of prophets, he is not to be worshipped or called upon to intercede between the faithful and God. Indeed, it is offensive to a Muslim to be called a "Muhammadan." The Prophet was a great exemplar, however, and the sayings and actions of Muhammad (referred to as traditions) hold great weight for Muslims, second in importance only to the Quran. Third, the holy book of the Quran is the completion of God's revelation to mankind. Muslims believe it is literally the Word of God, infallible and immutable, and contains His will as revealed in the Arabic language. Indeed, they believe the Quran is a transcript of parts of a book that is preserved in heaven — a book in which is recorded all that has ever happened and all that ever will happen.

For Muslims, belief is only validated through practice. Thus, to be saved and attain Paradise after death, a Muslim must perform five specific actions during his/her life. Referred to as the Five Pillars of Islam, they have been set forth in the Quran and clarified in the traditions as Testimony, Prayer, Almsgiving, Fasting, and Pilgrimage.

The First Pillar, Testimony, is simply an affirmation of the uniqueness of God and the role of Muhammad as His messenger. It is repeated daily by devout Muslims at the close of their Prayer, which is performed five times each day, facing Mecca. With regard to Almsgiving, while in some Muslim states obligatory alms are collected regularly in lieu of income tax, most believers voluntarily make the collection among themselves and are traditionally openhanded with street beggars. Fasting tests the self-denial and obedience of the faithful and also permits the rich to better understand the deprivations of the poor. Thus, once a year for a period of one month during the daylight hours, Muslims are required to abstain from food, drink, smoking, and physical intimacy. The fifth and final pillar requires the faithful to make a Pilgrimage to Mecca. To adherents of Islam, this pilgrimage (referred to as the "Haji") is well worth the effort and expense and, indeed, is believed by many to guarantee entry into Paradise.

BRIDGING THE DIFFERENCES

"The Holy Land." The phrase today conjures up several contrasting views. Some read it and picture soft brown hills, dotted here and there by ancient olive groves and slowly shifting herds of sheep. Others feel a stirring within as they imagine the ancient prophets who appeared in that region to change the destinies of so many. Then, too, there are those who cannot help but shake their heads at the irony in that phrase as they consider the war and destruction that stain the history of that "Holy Land."

Religion has played an impressive role in the Middle East for thousands of years, and continues to do so today. Whether it affects the economic, social, or political framework of the region's countries, or whether it simply affects the faith and hope of their inhabitants, it has served to both divide and unify.

A sad example of the division which religion can stir up occurred just last year at the annual Christmas cleaning of

the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Priests from two different Christian denominations had gathered to clean their respective areas of the church, but ended up coming to blows over questions of territory and rights. Some might wonder how a simple act of cleaning a church could result in such a fracas. But religious tradition is complex and involved in the land which saw the birth of three of the world's great religions. As explained by Daoud Kuttab in *Al Fajr* (February 1, 1985):

"The significance of the right to clean a given area in the holy places derives from the fact that the church or denomination which cleans a particular spot becomes the de facto owner of that spot. Ownership of a particular spot has no tangible value but it does boost a sect's prestige. Since most churches in the Holy Land were constructed, their ownership has changed hands from one denomination to another depending on wishes of the particular country in power and the relations and agreements between the contesting churches themselves."

Although there is cause for contest and division, there is also cause for a unity of faith in the Middle East. The three great monotheistic religions which developed successively there — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — share much more than is generally known or suspected. Indeed, each successive faith claims to complete the one(s) before, readily acknowledging the value of its predecessor(s). Just as Christians believe the Old Testament prophesied the coming of Jesus Christ, Muslims believe the Gospels foretold the coming of Muhammad.

All three religions, based on revelation and promulgated by prophets, worship the same personal God, referred to variously as Yahweh, God, or Allah. They sprang from the same basic geographical area and, thus, are all semitically rooted. And due largely



to their common father, Abraham, the teachings of each were originally written and spoken in closely related languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic).

Many of those teachings are similar and several of the same incidents and characters are mentioned in the scriptural writings of all three religions. This should come as no surprise when one considers that the Jewish Torah is included in the Christian Bible, and that both Jews and Christians are respected by Muslims as "People of the Book." Indeed, in an early chapter of the Muslim holy book of the Quran, Jews are referred to as "the children of Israel, whom Allah rescued from Pharoah and whom He chose in His knowledge."

With so many common strands, it is not surprising, then,

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that historically Jews, Christians, and Muslims have often lived side by side in the same communities in the Middle East.

It is important to realize that the bitter conflicts of the area today are not conflicts of religious belief; they pertain, rather to questions of economic, political and social rights of self-determination and, to a large extent, have been exacerbated by influences and powers outside the Middle East.

Religion, however, is never far removed from society in that part of the world. It is ANERA's hope that, rather than causing further fragmentation, religion will help to bridge the differences, heal the wounds, and build a true peace and unity in the Holy Land.

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This issue of the ANERA Newsletter was written by Tanya Parker, ANERA's Administrative Assistant

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