

Jerusalem: Sacred and Contentious

Background Reading

Together, Jews, Christians, and Muslims make up half of the world's religious believers. All three religions originated in the Middle East and are closely linked. Judaism, the oldest surviving monotheistic religion, arose in the eastern Mediterranean in the second millennium Before the Common Era (BCE). Christianity was born from within the Jewish tradition. And Islam developed from both Christianity and Judaism. Because Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all recognize Abraham as their first prophet, they are called the Abrahamic religions.

Followers of these three religions believe in one God—named Yahweh or Elohim by the Jews, Jehovah or the Holy Trinity by Christians, and Allah by Muslims. They congregate to worship in religious buildings on certain days of the week. Christian services are led by priests, ministers, and pastors in churches and chapels, primarily on Sundays. Muslim services are led by imams in mosques, on Fridays. And Jewish services are led by rabbis in synagogues, on Saturdays. Furthermore, each religion has a sacred text, identifies with a main prophet or messenger most associated with establishing the faith, and has branched due to internal disagreements. For Jews, the sacred book is the Torah (the Old Testament) and the prophet is Moses. The main split between Orthodox and Reform Jews occurred in the 1800s CE. For Christians, the sacred book is the Bible (which includes the Old and New Testaments) and the prophet is Jesus. Two major splits have occurred, first between Roman Catholics and Orthodox Catholics, formalized in 1054 CE, and then between Roman Catholics and Protestants in the 1500s CE. For Muslims, the sacred book is the Qur'an and the prophet is Muhammad. The division between Sunni and Shia Muslims occurred in 650 CE. Each religion also comprises a number of regional variations and smaller sects.

Notable differences among these faiths include that Muslims are required to pray five times daily, more than Christians or Jews.

Christians believe that God is the union of three divine manifestations (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit). And while Christians and Muslims believe in an afterlife of either eternal heaven or paradise or eternal hell, Jewish views vary: there may or may not be an afterlife. Even though all three religions agree that good deeds are a means to salvation, each faith adds its own requirements: for Jews, it is belief in God; for Christians, a person must have correct belief (that is, strictly adhering to doctrine, dogma, and practice, and believing that the religion has the sole “copyright” on truth), exhibit faith, and receive certain sacraments (or rites) during his or her life; and for Muslims, a person must have correct belief and fulfill five “pillars,” or obligations that demonstrate faith.

The differences continue. While all three religions are somewhat tolerant of other traditions, Muslims regards Judaism and Christianity as earlier versions of the monotheistic tradition and Islam as its final and correct revelation. Although Christianity developed out of Judaic texts, Christians do not follow Jewish law. Instead, they favor the Christian teaching, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Jews do not believe in any prophet who came after the Jewish prophets. Therefore, they do not accept the idea that Jesus was the Son of God or believe in the teachings of Muhammad.

Relationships between the three communities in Jerusalem have been difficult at times and continue to evolve.

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