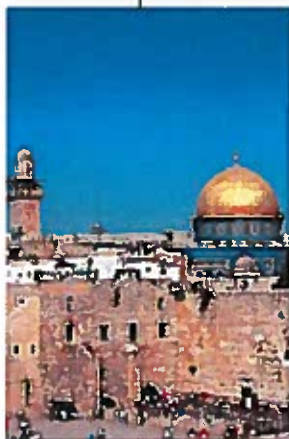


[PBS HOME](#)[PROGRAMS A-Z](#)[TV SCHEDULES](#)[WATCH VIDEO](#)[DONATE](#)[SHOP PBS](#)[SEARCH PBS](#)

# GLOBAL CONNECTIONS *the Middle East*

[Communities Respond](#) / [Educator's Resources](#) / [Maps](#) / [Glossary](#) / [Search:](#)

Go

[Connecting Questions](#)[Explore a Theme](#)[Timeline](#)[Politics](#)[Religion](#)[Economics](#)[Culture](#)[Geography](#)[Science and Technology](#)

The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, with the gold Dome of the Rock sitting just behind.  
© AFP/CORBIS

[E-mail a Friend](#)

An ancient wall relief depicting a religious scene [ [enlarge](#) ]



Homeless Jews arrive in search of a new life, Haifa, Palestine, July 21, 1947. [ [enlarge](#) ]

## Religion: Three Religions, One God

Three of the world's major religions – the **monotheist** traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – were all born in the Middle East and are all inextricably linked to one another. Christianity was born from within the Jewish tradition, and Islam developed from both Christianity and Judaism.

While there have been differences among these religions, there was a rich cultural interchange between Jews, Christians, and Muslims that took place in Islamic Spain and other places over centuries.

### Judaism

#### A brief history of Judaism

Judaism is the oldest surviving monotheistic religion, arising in the eastern Mediterranean in the second millennium **B.C.E.** Abraham is traditionally considered to be the first Jew and to have made a covenant with God. Because Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all recognize Abraham as their first prophet, they are also called the Abrahamic religions.

While there was always a small community of Jews in historic **Palestine**, in 73 **C.E.** the Roman Empire dispersed the Jews after an insurrection against Roman authority. Most Jews then lived in **Diaspora**, as minorities in their communities, until the founding of the state of Israel in 1948.

When Jews from all over the world came to settle in modern Israel, they found that various subcultures had developed in different areas with distinctive histories, languages, religious practices, customs, and cuisine.

#### Jewish cultural groups

Jews from Germany and Eastern Europe were known as Ashkenazim (from "Ashkenazic" the Hebrew word for Germany). Yiddish, a fusion of German and Hebrew, was the spoken language of the Ashkenazi. In Europe, Jews had tended to be segregated – voluntarily or not – from the Christian population. From the late 19th and through first half of the 20th century, many Ashkenazi Jews came to Palestine to escape the persecution and discrimination they faced because of their religion.

Sephardic Jews trace their ancestry to the Iberian Peninsula (modern-day Spain and Portugal); "Sephardic" comes from the Hebrew word for Spain). They once spoke Ladino, a mixture of Hebrew and Spanish.

Mizrahi Jews (from the Hebrew word for Eastern, also sometimes called Oriental Jews) trace their origin to North Africa and Asia. Mizrahi and Sephardic Jewish communities tended to be integrated into their respective societies.

#### Judaism in Israel and America

There is great difference of opinion among Israeli Jews over the role Jewish religious law should play in the state. Until recently, Orthodox Judaism was the only form of the religion formally and legally recognized in Israel. Although less conservative branches of Judaism now have partial recognition, Orthodoxy remains dominant politically and legally.

### Jump To:

[Judaism](#)[A brief history of Judaism](#)[Jewish cultural groups](#)[Judaism in Israel and America](#)[What Jews believe](#)[Judaism's views of Christianity and Islam](#)[Christianity](#)[A brief history of Christianity](#)[Christianity in the Middle East](#)[What Christians believe](#)[Christianity's views of Judaism and Islam](#)[Islam](#)[A brief history of Islam](#)[Islamic communities](#)[What Muslims believe](#)[Islam's views of Judaism and Christianity](#)

### Also

[Timeline](#) (requires Flash)  
Key events related to religion in the Middle East  
[Text-Only Timeline](#)

[Lesson plans:](#)[Who Wears a Veil?](#)[Muslim Women Through Time](#)[How Many Wives?](#)[Israeli-Palestinian Peace Summit](#)[Terrorist, Freedom Fighter, or Something in Between?](#)[Stereotypes: More Than](#)



An Orthodox Jewish man prays at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. [ [enlarge](#) ]

Many Israeli Jews describe themselves in terms of their degree of observance of Jewish law. About half call themselves **secular**; about 15 to 20 percent see themselves as Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox; and the rest describe themselves as traditionally observant, but not as strict as the Orthodox.

In the United States, debate over the necessity of observing Jewish law has led to the development of three major movements. Orthodox Jews believe that Jewish law is unchanging and mandatory. Conservative Jews argue that God's laws change and evolve over time. Reform and Reconstructionist Jews believe that these laws are merely guidelines that individuals can choose to follow or not. In addition, there are many Jews in the United States who are secular or atheist. For them, their Judaism is a culture rather than a religion.

[Meets the Eye](#)

[Related sites](#)

[Related topics](#)

[Related maps](#)

### What Jews believe



Reading from the Torah [ [enlarge](#) ]

Jews believe in one god and his prophets, with special respect for Moses as the prophet to whom God gave the law. Jewish law is embodied in the **Torah** (also known as the Pentateuch) and the Talmud (collected commentary on the Torah completed in the fifth-century C.E.).

Judaism is more concerned with actions than dogma. In other words, observance of rules regulating human behavior has been of more concern than debates over beliefs in the Jewish tradition. According to Orthodox Judaism, Jewish law, or *halakha*, includes 613 commandments given by God in the Torah, as well as rules and practices elaborated by scholars and custom. Jewish law covers matters such as prayer and ritual, diet, rules regulating personal status (marriage, divorce, birth, death, inheritance, etc.), and observance of holidays (like Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement; and Passover, the feast celebrating the exodus of the Jews from slavery in Egypt).

[Make a Pledge](#)

[Support Your Local PBS Station](#)

### Judaism's views of Christianity and Islam

Jews do not believe in the prophets after the Jewish prophets, including Jesus and Muhammad. Therefore, they do not subscribe to the idea that Jesus was the Messiah and the son of God, nor do they believe in the teachings of Islam.

### Christianity

#### A brief history of Christianity



An aerial view of Istanbul, Turkey, formerly Constantinople [ [enlarge](#) ]

Christianity started as an offshoot of Judaism in the first century C.E. Until the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 324 C.E., early Christian communities were often persecuted. It was then that the Roman Empire became the Holy Roman Empire, and its capital relocated from Rome to Constantinople (formerly Byzantium and now Istanbul). The development of Christian groups derived from major and minor splits.

The Orthodox Church and its patriarch split away from the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope in 1054 C.E. because of political and doctrinal differences. In the 16th century, Martin Luther, upset at the corruption of the Catholic papacy, spearheaded a reformation movement that led to the development of Protestantism.

Christian missionaries proselytize all over the world, and there are large populations of Christians on every continent on Earth, although the forms of Christianity practiced vary.

#### Christianity in the Middle East

Many early Christian saints lived in the Middle East. The tradition of asceticism (denial of physical pleasures in order to come closer to God) developed first in the Middle East, and the monastic tradition has its roots there.

Christians in the Middle East today include Copts, Maronites, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, Assyrians, and Protestants. These groups have different liturgical languages, rituals, and customs, and different leaders who direct their faith.

The Coptic Church, the dominant form of Christianity in Egypt, arose from a doctrinal split in the Church at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The Egyptian government supports the Copts' rights to worship and maintain their culture, but there has been some violence against the community by extremist Muslims.



The establishment of Lebanon as an independent state is announced on the steps of a Maronite church, Lebanon, 1920. [\[ enlarge \]](#)

The Maronite Church was started in the fifth century by followers of a Syrian priest named Maroun. The Maronite Patriarch, based in Lebanon, guides his followers in the teachings of Maroun and other saints. Maronites are still one of the most powerful political communities in Lebanon.

There are also Christian communities of different sects living today in Syria (10 percent of the population), Jordan (6 percent), the West Bank (8 percent), and Iraq (3 percent), with smaller percentages in other Middle Eastern countries.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, many Christians from what is now Syria and Lebanon (then the Ottoman Empire) emigrated to the United States and other countries. Although Christians are a minority in the Middle East today, more than 75 percent of Americans of Arab descent are Christian.

### What Christians believe

Christianity developed out of the monotheistic tradition of Judaism; Jesus, its founder, was a member of the Jewish community in Roman Palestine. Its holy scriptures are the Old Testament (the Jewish Torah with additions), and the New Testament (written by the followers of Jesus after his death and containing the life story of Jesus and other early Christian writings).



A Christian painting depicting Mary with the baby Jesus [\[ enlarge \]](#)

Christians believe that God is revealed through three dimensions: the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. Jesus is considered the son of God, born to the virgin Mary and came to Earth to offer redemption for mankind's sins. After Jesus was crucified and executed by the Romans, he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. This event is celebrated at Easter, while the birth of Jesus is celebrated at Christmas.

Christians believe in an afterlife where those who have lived a good life will reside in heaven with God, and those who have lived an unrepentant life of sin will be punished in hell.

### Christianity's views of Judaism and Islam

Although Christianity developed out of Judaic texts, Christians do not follow Jewish law. Instead, they believe that the ritualistic Jewish law was abrogated in favor of a universal gospel for all of humanity and the Christian teaching, "Love thy neighbor as thyself."

Relationships between Jewish and Christian communities have often been difficult, particularly in Christian Europe. There, Jewish communities were often subject to discrimination and violence at the hands of Christians.



An artist's depiction of Christian Crusaders [\[ enlarge \]](#)

Christianity has also had a problematic relationship with Islam. Christians do not accept Muhammad as a prophet. While many Christians in the Middle East converted to Islam during and after the seventh century, the Church hierarchy in Rome and Constantinople considered Islam to be both a political and theological threat. The Crusades were an unsuccessful attempt to reverse the Islamic conquest of the eastern Mediterranean and the holy places of all three monotheistic religions.

### Islam

#### A brief history of Islam

Islam arose in the early seventh century C.E. in the settled desert community of Mecca (in present-day Saudi Arabia). It developed from both the Judeo-Christian tradition and the cultural values of the nomadic Bedouin tribes of Arabia.



Pilgrims surround Kaaba, the holiest temple in Islam, at the center of the

Islam expanded into areas controlled by the Byzantine Empire (largely Greek-speaking and Orthodox Christian, but with a diverse population) and the Sassanian Empire (officially Zoroastrian and Persian-speaking, but also

ancient shrine of Mecca.  
[\[enlarge\]](#)

diverse). By the mid-eighth century, Islam had spread west into North Africa and Europe, and east into Central Asia. Over the centuries, Islam continued to grow in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

As Islam expanded, the new Islamic societies adapted and synthesized many of the customs they encountered. As a result, Muslims in different areas of the world created for themselves a wide array of cultural traditions.

#### ▶ Related Video

Islamist v. Islamic  
 (3:06) [Watch](#)

The culture of Islamic Spain, for example, was so cosmopolitan that some Christian and Jewish parents complained that their children were more interested in developing their knowledge of Arabic than in learning Latin or Hebrew, respectively. Many elements of Islamic society became integral parts of medieval and Renaissance European culture, like the notion of chivalry, and certain forms of music (the lute, the arabesque) and poetry.

On the eastern end of the Islamic world, many Indonesians converted to Islam between the 15th and 17th centuries. Preexisting [animist](#) beliefs were often incorporated into the local practice of Islam.

#### Islamic communities

Within Islam, there are many different communities. Many of these divisions, like the Sunnis, Shiis, Ismailis, Alevis/Alawites, and Druze, originate in political and doctrinal differences in the community. Adherents of Islam may be more or less observant, conservative or liberal.



Whirling dervishes playing musical instruments and dancing, Istanbul, photograph c. 1922  
[\[enlarge\]](#)

Sufism is the mystical tradition of Islam, where direct experience of the divine is emphasized. The 13th-century poet Jalaluddin Rumi is a well-known Sufi figure whose work has become popular in the United States today. Whirling dervishes are dancers who are entranced in their experience of Sufism.

#### What Muslims believe

Muslims believe that Allah (the Arabic word for God) sent his revelation, the [Quran](#), to the prophet Muhammad in the seventh century C.E. to proclaim it to mankind. The Quran contains verses (*surahs*) in Arabic that tell Muslims to worship one god, and explains how they should treat others properly.

Another historical text, the Hadith, written by scholars after the death of Muhammad, describes Muhammad's life as an example of pious behavior, proscribes law for the community based on the Quran and the example of Muhammad, and explains how certain rituals should be performed.

Observant Muslims practice five principles (pillars) of Islam: orally declaring their faith (*shahadah*); praying five times a day (*salat*); fasting in the daylight hours during the month of [Ramadan](#) (*sawm*); giving a share of their income for charity (*zakat*); and making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime if they can afford it (*hajj*). Many Muslims also observe dietary rules, in origin similar to those of Judaism, that forbid certain foods (like pork), outlaw alcohol, and dictate how animals should be slaughtered for food.

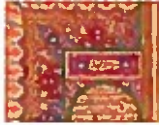
The Muslim calendar is lunar, and shifts in relation to the solar calendar. Just as Christians count years starting with the year of Jesus's birth, Muslims count years beginning with Muhammad's move from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E. Muslim years are labeled as A.H., *Anno Hegirae*, or "year of the Hijra."

Major Muslim festivals include Id al-Fitr (the Fast-Breaking Festival, celebrated at the end of Ramadan) and Id al-Adha (the Festival of Sacrifice, the commemoration of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Ishmail which takes place during the month of pilgrimage).

Muslims believe in a Day of Judgment, when righteous souls will go to heaven and wrongdoers will go to hell.

#### Islam's views of Judaism and Christianity

Islam sees Judaism and Christianity as earlier versions of Islam, revelations given within the same tradition by Allah but misunderstood over time by their followers. Muslims see Islam as the final, complete, and correct revelation in the monotheistic tradition of the three faiths.



A 19th-century copy of Islam's holy book, the Quran, hand-copied in Arabic, open to its first chapter, the Fatiha [ [enlarge](#) ]

The Islamic tradition recognizes many of the Jewish and Christian prophets, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (although he is not considered to be the son of God). Many non-Muslims mistakenly believe that Muhammad is the equivalent of Jesus in the Islamic tradition; in fact, it is the Quran that stands in the same central position in Islam as Jesus does in Christianity. Muhammad himself is not divine, but a prophet chosen by God to deliver his message and an example of piety to emulate.

Jews and Christians are specifically protected in the Quran as Peoples of the Book, reinforcing their spiritual connection to Islam by virtue of having been given revelations from God. The Islamic legal tradition has upheld the rights of Jews and Christians to maintain their beliefs and practices within their communities in Islamic lands, and this policy of tolerance has generally been upheld.

[Back to top](#)

### Related sites

Inside the Kingdom - Part II:

[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/middle\\_east/Jan-june02/saudi\\_2-15.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/middle_east/Jan-june02/saudi_2-15.html)  
*NewsHour* explores the debate over Islam, education, and culture in Saudi Arabia.

Christians in the Middle East:

<http://search.npr.org/cf/cmn/cmnpd01fm.cfm?PrqDate=04/23/2002&PrqID=5>  
*Talk of the Nation* looks at the role of Christians who live in Israel and the West Bank. This story was aired during the military standoff at Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity.

The Pope's Journey:

[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/religion/Jan-june01/pope\\_5-8.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/religion/Jan-june01/pope_5-8.html)  
*NewsHour* conducts a discussion on Pope John Paul II's journey of reconciliation to Greece, Syria, and Malta.

Islam: Empire of Faith:

<http://www.pbs.org/empires/islam/index.html>  
 The companion Web site for *Islam: Empire of Faith*, a PBS film about the world's fastest growing religion

Observing Islam:

[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/religion/Jul-Dec01/islam\\_11-16.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/religion/Jul-Dec01/islam_11-16.html)  
 Islamic scholars discuss the future of Islam as Ramadan begins amid curiosity and concern. (November 2001)

Inside Out: Revolutionary Islam:

<http://insideout.wbur.org/documentaries/revolutionaryislam/>  
 This radio documentary examines the manifestations of political Islam around the world.

Guide to Religions of the World:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/world\\_religions/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/world_religions/)  
 A guide to six world religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism

Beliefnet Web Site:

<http://www.belief.net/>  
 A Web site on religion

Judaism 101 Web Site:

<http://www.jewfaq.org/index.htm>  
 An online encyclopedia on Judaism

Lexicon of Israeli "English":

<http://www.ivba.co.il/lexicon.htm>

A glossary of Israeli terms, acronyms, and abbreviations found in English-language publications

Exploring Religions:

<http://uwacadweb.uwyo.edu/religion/er/default.htm>

Information on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism

Who Are Eastern Christians?:

<http://www.ariathea.co.uk/whoare.htm>

The origin and definition of Eastern Christianity

Syria and Christianity:

[http://atheism.about.com/library/world/KZ/bl\\_SyriaChristianity.htm](http://atheism.about.com/library/world/KZ/bl_SyriaChristianity.htm)

The history of Eastern Christianity in Syria

Islam:

[http://www.cqpress.com/context/articles/epr\\_islam.html](http://www.cqpress.com/context/articles/epr_islam.html)

An encyclopedia entry on Islam

Islam: A Worldwide Religion:

<http://www.seasite.niu.edu/crossroads/russell/islam.htm>

Islam's impact on Southeast Asia

Persian Poet Top Seller in America:

<http://www.csmonitor.com/durable/1997/11/25/us/us.3.html>

An article on the popularity of mystic Islamic poet Jalaluddin Rumi

Historical Maps of Islam:

<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~brvs/pages/maps.html>

Historical maps of Islam

Islam in Iran:

[http://www.pbs.org/vsavis/islam\\_in\\_iran\\_mstr.html](http://www.pbs.org/vsavis/islam_in_iran_mstr.html)

*Vis à Vis* explores the origins of Islam and its evolution in Iran.

Saudi Time Bomb?:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saudi/>

*Frontline* investigates the hidden undercurrents of Islamic extremism, its far-flung reach, and its threat to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Religion & Culture:

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/classroom/p5.html>

Students will consider the theme of religion and culture as they learn about the Hindu-Muslim conflict in the province of Gujarat, India.

Understanding History, Religion, and Politics in Jerusalem and Beyond:

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2001/promises/intheclassroom.html>

Students will acquire historical knowledge of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians in the region, learn how to interpret a conflict from multiple perspectives, advocate for a point of view, and develop greater conflict resolution skills.

Gender Issues in Islam:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/teach/muslims/>

Students will compare and contrast the roles of men and women with regard to various topics in the six countries featured in the film.

Great Thinkers and Accomplishments of Islam:

<http://www.pbs.org/empires/islam/lesson4.html>

Students will learn about the diverse accomplishments of great Islamic scholars.

God Fights Back: 1978-1992:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/peoplescentury/teachers/good.html>

In the 1970s, alienated Iranians flock to the promises of Islamic fundamentalism and Egyptians and Algerians soon follow. In the 1980s, alienated Americans flock to the promises of Christian fundamentalism.

The Fascinating World of Islam:

<http://www.pbs.org/empires/islam/lesson2.html>