

Monotheistic Religions

Conflict between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam has been ongoing for over 1,000 years. But these three religions actually share common origins and are more alike than recent history might suggest.

Most ancient civilizations were polytheistic, meaning they worshiped more than one god. In contrast, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are based on monotheism, the belief that there is only one true god. And in theory, Jews, Christians, and Muslims all pray to the same god.

These three major world religions began in the Middle East. They are sometimes called the Abrahamic religions because they all trace their origins to the prophet Abraham, who was born in what is now Iraq.

Abraham is considered to be the founder of Judaism and its original prophet. Jews believe God made a covenant, or agreement, with Abraham: God promised protection and land to Abraham and his descendants if they promised to follow his guidance. Moses, a prophet descended from Abraham, is said to have received God's teachings, including the Ten Commandments. Jewish holy books include the Torah and the Talmud.

After the Roman Empire dispersed the Jewish people from Jerusalem in 73 CE, Jews settled all over the world, developing subcultures in different regions. As minorities in many communities, Jewish people often faced discrimination and outright persecution, the most extreme being the Holocaust, the genocide of six million Jews during World War II. In 1948, the nation of Israel was established as a Jewish state.

Today, Jewish people around the world worship in synagogues and temples, led by rabbis.

Christianity emerged as an offshoot of Judaism in the first century CE. Jesus, the founder of Christianity, was a member of the Jewish community in ancient Palestine who gained a following of disciples. The Romans, who controlled the region, viewed Jesus as a political threat and crucified him.

When Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in the early 4th century CE, the religion spread

widely through Europe. Since then, there have been many major and minor disagreements among Christians, one of the most notable being the split between Roman Catholics and Protestants in 16th-century Europe.

Christians practice their religion in churches, led by pastors, ministers, and priests. They read the Bible as their holy text, which states that Jesus is their savior, the son of God who was sent to Earth to atone for the sins of mankind.

Islam arose in the 7th century CE, influenced by both the Judeo-Christian tradition and the cultural values of the nomadic Bedouin people of the Arabian Peninsula. A descendant of Abraham, the prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca in Saudi Arabia in 570 CE. Muslims believe that the angel Gabriel visited Muhammad to bring him the message of Allah (Arabic for God). Allah's teachings are written down in the Quran.

Muhammad began preaching throughout Mecca and later traveled to the city of Medina with his followers. This journey became known as the Hijra and marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. After Muhammad's death, Islam spread rapidly throughout the region, led by a series of caliphs, or Muslim rulers. The caliphate system lasted for centuries and eventually evolved into the Ottoman Empire, which controlled large areas of southeast Europe, western Asia, and northern Africa until World War I. Disagreements over who should rule led to a split in Islam between the Sunnis and Shiites.

Today, Muslims worship in mosques, led by imams. They follow five pillars that are essential to their faith, including declaring one's devotion to Allah, praying five times a day, giving to those in need, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca if they are able.

Let's review. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are the three largest monotheistic religions, meaning their followers believe in one god. They are called the Abrahamic religions because their origins go back to the prophet Abraham, who lived 2,000 years ago and whose descendants include Moses and Muhammad. These religions share common origins and many similar beliefs: the Torah, Bible, and Quran contain many of the same stories. But it is these very similarities that have led to much hostility throughout history. The city of Jerusalem is holy in all three religions, and battles over who owns the territory have raged for thousands of years, from Biblical times to the modern conflict between Israel and Palestine. It remains to be seen if and how these conflicts will be resolved in the future.

