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## THREE RELIGIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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Textbook References: *World History, The Human Odyssey*: Chapters 2, 6, 8; *World History to 1800*: Ch. 2, 6, 8; *Modern World History*: Ch. 1–2

Three of the world's great religions have their origins in a "cradle of civilization"—the Middle East. At the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and Asia, this area is the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Collectively, the adherents of these religions are sometimes called "the people of the Book" because each of the three faiths has a set of religious writings at the core of its belief system. Some of the writings, religious figures, holy sites, and religious philosophies are common to all three faiths. Approximately 40 percent of the world's population are followers of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.

### JUDAISM

Judaism, the religion of the Jewish people, is the oldest of the three great Middle Eastern religions. The Jewish religion is thought to have begun about 4,000 years ago in the Fertile Crescent, an area of land stretching from the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers to the Mediterranean Sea. Today, there are about 13 million Jewish people in the world.

According to Jewish tradition, Judaism was founded by Abraham, who lived in what is known today as Iraq. According to Jewish belief, God appeared before Abraham and said, "Go from your country ... to the land I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you...." The land Abraham traveled to is today called Israel. A major belief of Judaism is monotheism: there is only one God. This is shown in the prayer, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." This was a new idea 4,000 years ago when most people of the world believed in many gods.

Jews also believe they are the chosen people of God—"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you." The Jews are sometimes called the children of Israel in the Bible. Another important part of Judaism is the Ten Commandments, which God is said to have given to Moses. The commandments are rules on how people should live. People are not supposed to lie, steal, kill, commit adultery, have false gods, or take God's name in vain, among other things.

Traditional Judaism teaches that a Messiah, or savior, will appear only when the Jewish people follow all the laws of God. Each Jew has an obligation to the whole community to observe God's commandments. The laws of God are written down in a holy book called the Torah, or Pentateuch, the Five Books of Moses (what Christians call the Old Testament).

Jews worship in a synagogue, a word that means meeting place. Worshippers usually cover their heads when they enter a synagogue as a sign of respect. The person who leads prayers at the synagogue is called the rabbi, or teacher. The Sabbath for Jews begins at sundown on Friday night and ends at sundown Saturday night.



One of the holy festivals of Judaism is Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year. It falls on the first and second days of the Hebrew month Tishri (September or October) and begins the High Holy Days, the Ten Days of Penitence. These end with the holiest day of the Jewish year, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, a day of praying and fasting. Another holiday is Passover, which comes around the time of Easter for Christians. This is a festival celebrating the exodus of the Jews from slavery in Egypt, led by Moses.

Today there are three main types of Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. The Orthodox base all aspects of their lives on the Torah, which they believe is God's word. They adhere strictly to Jewish dietary laws and do not work or travel on the Sabbath. In the United States especially, many Jews are either Reform or Conservative. Reform Judaism interprets Jewish law liberally, teaching that religion has to change to fit the needs of every new generation. Conservative Judaism assumes a middle position, maintaining most of the traditional rituals but also recognizing the need to change in response to changing times.

The most holy city in Jewish tradition is Jerusalem, the capital of Israel.

## CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is the second oldest of the great religions which began in the Middle East. It was started about 2,000 years ago by the followers of a Jewish teacher and prophet named Jesus, who was later called Christ, which means the Messiah. Jesus preached in Galilee, a region in what is now northern Israel, which was controlled by the Roman Empire at the time. About 20 percent of the world's population, or over 1 billion people, call themselves Christians.

Christians and Jews share many of the same beliefs. Most early Christians were Jews, as Jesus was. However, Christians believe that Jesus was the Son of God, humanity's savior. They believe those who accept Jesus as a personal savior are saved and will go to heaven. The Bible says of Christ, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one goes to the Father except by me." Another important Christian belief is sometimes called the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Christ taught people to love their enemies, be kind to strangers, and help the poor.

After Jesus died, his followers wrote down his teachings in what is called the New Testament. The Christian Bible is a combination of the Old Testament (the Torah) and the New Testament.

The place of worship for Christians is called a church. For most Christians the Sabbath is on Sunday. The person who leads the congregation is usually called a priest, minister, or pastor.

The major Christian holiday is Easter, which is in spring about the time of the Jewish Passover. Easter celebrates the Resurrection, or return to life, of Jesus after his crucifixion. Another important holiday is Christmas, which celebrates the birth of Jesus.

Besides Jesus, the other founder of Christianity was Paul of Tarsus, who transformed the faith from a branch of Judaism into a full-fledged religion. Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire. In 313 Emperor Constantine made it legal (and later converted). Theodosius I, who ruled from 378 to 395, made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. After becoming free of persecution, the Christian church began to build a stable religious organization. Church leaders met and made major decisions about their beliefs. They also established a hierarchy, or organization, which ranked church officials. Each major city of the Empire had a bishop who ran the church affairs in his area. The highest-ranking church leader was the bishop of Rome, who was later known as the Pope. As the Roman Empire declined, the church became the most stable institution in people's lives. In many ways, it replaced the government. In the Middle Ages, gov-



ernment leaders and church leaders struggled for power. The Catholic Church also faced conflict from within by those who wished to reform some of its practices. The attempts at reform led to a split in the church known as the Protestant Reformation.

Most Christians are either Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, or Protestant. Roman Catholicism is the largest branch of Christianity. Catholics believe that the Pope is Christ's representative on earth. The center of the Catholic church is in Rome and is called the Vatican.

The Eastern Orthodox Church, which officially split from Roman Catholicism in the eleventh century, is found mostly in Greece, Eastern Europe, and Russia. The Orthodox do not follow the rules of the Pope, but rather have their own leaders, called Patriarchs.

Protestantism, which began in the sixteenth century, includes many churches, such as the Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Pentecostals, Quakers, Calvinists, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses, among others. Protestants do not follow the leadership of the pope or patriarch.

## ISLAM

Islam is the third and most recent of the religions that began in the Middle East. Followers of Islam are called Muslims, the Arabic word for "one who submits." The prophet and founder of Islam was Muhammad, who lived from 570 to 632 in what is today Saudi Arabia. Today, Islam is the major religion in most of Asia and Africa. Over a billion people are Muslims, nearly 20 percent of the world's population.

Muslims believe many of the same things Jews and Christians believe. They regard the Torah and the New Testament as holy books and believe that Abraham, Moses, and Jesus were great teachers. However, Muslims believe that Muhammad was the last and greatest of God's prophets and that Allah, the Arabic word for God, revealed himself to Muhammad as described in the Quran, or Koran, Islam's holy book.

There are five major beliefs of Islam. The first is monotheism: there is only one God. The Quran says, "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his Prophet." The second is that Muslims must submit themselves to God by praying five times a day, facing the city of Mecca, where Muhammad was born. Third, all Muslims must give to those less fortunate than themselves. The Quran says that giving is done "in search of God's pleasure and for the strengthening of their own souls." The fourth major belief involves fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. During Ramadan, Muslims do not eat or drink from sunup to sundown. The final belief is that all Muslims must, if they can, make a pilgrimage to Mecca once in their lives.

Muslims worship together in a mosque. Friday is the Sabbath day. Religious leaders are called imams. At the end of services Muslims say to each other, "*As-salamu alaikum*," which means "peace be upon you."

Of the many festivals of Islam, Ramadan is considered the most important. Muslims fast for a month as a way of giving thanks to Allah and to discipline the soul. The Muslim New Year is called the Hijra. The Muslim calendar begins in the year 622 of the Christian calendar.

There are two main branches of Islam, although the differences between them are not as great as those between the different Christian or Jewish branches. The two are called Sunni and Shi'ite. Both believe in Allah, Muhammad, and the Quran. The main difference is that the Sunnis, who make up 90 percent of Muslims, believe that religious leaders should be chosen by the community. Shi'ites believe that leaders should only be people who are descended from Muhammad.

The holy cities of the Muslims are Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, and Jerusalem in Israel.

## CONCLUSION

While conflicts among Jews, Christians, and Muslims are often emphasized throughout history and in current events, their religions are really much more similar than different. Followers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are sometimes referred to collectively as the “children of Abraham.” All three belief systems trace their origins back to this patriarch from the Fertile Crescent. They all believe in a just and moral creator who has provided the human race with instructions for living a good and righteous life. Each faith, with its emphasis on the written word of God, lays the groundwork for a society based upon fairness and equality. Although each started out as little more than a tribal religion in the desert sands of the Middle East, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have all become major forces shaping the world in which we live.

## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

### LISTENING FOR MAIN IDEAS

**Purpose:** Students will focus on developing listening skills, finding main ideas, and taking meaningful notes.

**Directions:** The teacher is to read Lecture 3 to the class *one time only*. The teacher should read at a moderate but deliberate pace, pausing very briefly at the end of each paragraph. Students are to write down main ideas and important information from each part of the lecture. Using only their notes, they then are to answer a series of questions about the lecture. There are three difficulty levels for this assignment: beginner, intermediate, and advanced.

**Beginner:** For students who are inexperienced at finding main ideas or who are new to listening for key information, the teacher is to hand out a copy of the questions they are to answer. At key intervals in the reading, the teacher should pause to allow students to answer the corresponding questions.

**Intermediate:** More experienced students should be encouraged to take notes during the reading without advance notice of the questions to be asked. At key breaks in the lecture, the teacher is to pause and read aloud the corresponding questions. The teacher should read each question twice, pause for students to write their answers, then resume the lecture.

**Advanced:** For advanced listeners and note takers, the teacher is to read the entire lecture without pausing to ask questions. Students are to take notes. At the end of the lecture, the teacher is to read each question twice, pausing while students write their answers.





## 4

# FIVE RELIGIONS OF ASIA

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Textbook References: *World History, The Human Odyssey*: Ch. 3, 4, 10; *World History to 1800*: Ch. 3, 4, 10; *Modern World History*: Ch. 1-2

The religions of Asia in many ways defy easy classification or understanding. In some ways they are more akin to philosophy than to religion as it is understood in the West. Many Asians are adherents of more than one religion and see no contradiction in belonging to several faiths. Two of the world's major religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, originated in India, although Buddhism today is more widely practiced in the Far East. Confucianism and Taoism are Eastern philosophies that began in China and spread to those Asian countries with origins in Chinese culture, such as Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. Shintoism is unique to Japan, but it incorporates many of the ideals common to Asian religions. Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Shintoism are world religions, both outgrowths of Asian cultures and major influences in the development of those cultures.

### HINDUISM

Hinduism, the religion of 400 million people, mostly in India, began nearly 5,000 years ago (although the word *Hindu* is only about 3,000 years old). The roots of the religion go back to the ancient Indus River civilization, and it is still closely linked to the history of India. Hinduism is an unusual religion to many Westerners because it has no founder and no prophet, and because its followers believe in a Supreme Spirit that takes on many forms.

Hindus believe in one God, known as Brahman, who is worshipped in many incarnations: male, female, and animal. This Supreme Spirit takes three main forms: Brahma, the creator of life; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer. The god Vishnu has appeared on earth at different times and in different forms (avatars) to save the human race from perils or evil. The most important avatars of Vishnu have been the gods Rama and Krishna. Hinduism also has three important goddesses. Saraswati is the wife of Brahma and the goddess of wisdom and learning. Laxmi is the wife of Vishnu and the goddess of wealth and good fortune. Parvati is the wife of Shiva and the goddess of kindness and gentleness (although she has a warlike form known as Durga). There are also many minor gods, such as Ganesha the elephant-headed god, and Hanuman the monkey god, worshipped for his physical strength.

Hindus worship these many incarnations of Brahman through a combination of prayers, offerings of fruit, flowers, incense and light, and meditation. There is no fixed day or time of worship. Hindus may visit a temple, but most worship is done in the home at a family shrine. Hinduism is not a congregational religion. Each person is given complete freedom to see and worship God in any form he or she chooses.



The home and family is the center of Hindu society. Each family belongs to a caste, or social group. Hindus divide and segregate their society into four main castes (and each of these is divided into many smaller groups). The highest and most privileged caste is the Brahmin, or priest class. After them comes the Kshatriya, or warrior caste, and then the Vaisya, or merchant caste. These three castes all wear a sacred thread to show their rank. The fourth cast is the Sudra, or laborer caste, although these are not the lowest people in society. Outside the caste system are the Untouchables. Mahatma Gandhi called these people Harijans, or "children of God." Traditionally, the Untouchables were outcasts, considered so unclean that they were not even supposed to let their shadows touch a person of higher caste. In modern India, the concept of untouchability has been outlawed. All people are born into a caste, and they are supposed to live, marry, and associate only within that caste. It is never possible to change castes while you are alive.

Even though individual Hindus may believe in different gods, all Hindus believe in reincarnation. Reincarnation is the belief that all people are part of "the wheel of life." A person lives, dies, and is born again into a different body.

Just as man discards old clothes and  
buys new ones, the Atman (soul)  
discards worn-out bodies and enters  
new ones.

(*Bhagavadgita* 2.22)

Whether one is born into a favorable or unfavorable situation depends on one's actions in a previous life. Hindus believe that everything that happens to a person, good or bad, is the result of things they did in another life. This belief is called karma. The caste a person is born into is also part of karma.

According to Hindu religion, there are four aims of life. The first and most important is dharma. This is the idea that every person has a set of duties or debts based on age, education, occupation, and social status. People have both duties and rights, but duties are more important. The second aim in life is to earn money by one's own efforts. This must be done legally, within the bounds of duty, and without causing harm. The third aim is the enjoyment of good things in life. This should be done with moderation to avoid causing harm to others. Life is seen as a positive force which contributes to the well-being of the whole community. The fourth aim of life is to reach that state which will allow the Atman to obtain release from the cycle of reincarnation. This is accomplished by performing good actions (karma) throughout life.

Hindus have many different religious festivals, about thirty festivals during the Hindu year, just as they have many different gods. All are joyous occasions with music, singing, dancing, and feasting. In the spring Hindus celebrate Holi, a festival dedicated to the god Krishna during which a bonfire is built in every village. There is dancing and singing in the streets, and people take turns squirting each other with colored water and powders. Diwali is celebrated in the fall. Houses are cleaned, firecrackers are set off to scare away evil spirits, and the goddess of good fortune, Laxmi, visits every house.

The Hindu scriptures are the oldest written holy books in the world. Several books are important to Hindus. The *Vedas* are a collection of hymns telling about the nature of the world and how to worship the gods. For thousands of years Hindus committed the *Vedas* to memory; they were written down about 3,000 years ago.



Other Hindu scriptures, the *Upanishads*, explain the place of humans in the universe, describe reincarnation and karma, and contain the philosophy of Hinduism. The *Upanishads* were written about 800 B.C.

The *Mahabharata* is an epic of 100,000 verses. The most influential part of this epic is called the *Bhagavadgita* ("Divine Song"). It describes the various duties of people. Another epic, the *Ramayana*, tells the story of prince Rama's banishment; the rescue of his wife, Sita, from the demon Ravana with the help of Hanuman and his army of monkeys; and Rama's return home to regain his father's throne. This story portrays the ideals of married faithfulness, brotherly affection, and a servant's loyalty.

Hinduism includes thousands of different branches. However, three main groups are distinguished by who is worshipped: Vishnu, Shiva, and Parvati. A person could choose to worship any or all incarnations of Brahman and still be a Hindu.

There is no one holy city for Hindus, but most consider the Ganges River to be sacred. Many people have their ashes scattered in the Ganges after they die.

## BUDDHISM

Buddhism began in India about 2,500 years ago. It was started by a man named Siddhartha Gautama, who was later called the Buddha ("enlightened one"). Siddhartha was born a wealthy prince and never saw any sorrow or pain until he was 29 years old. At that age he saw a frail old man, an invalid in great pain, and a funeral with many weeping mourners. He began to wonder why there was so much sorrow in the world. He gave up everything he owned and began to wander about India as a beggar. After many years of searching for spiritual truth, Siddhartha became enlightened. He spent the rest of his life teaching others the truth he had found. This truth became the basis of Buddhism and spread to China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. There are at least 200 million Buddhists in the world today.

Buddhism is a religion with no gods. Though Siddhartha was a Hindu when he was young, those who follow his teachings do not pray to any god. They follow the Four Noble Truths. The first of these is that all life is made up of suffering. The second is that suffering comes from wanting things. The third is that to stop wanting is to stop suffering. The fourth and final truth is that the way to stop wanting is to follow the teachings of Buddha (called the Eightfold Path). These teachings are explanations of the right way to speak, act, and work, among other things.

There are five main teachings of Buddhism: 1) do not injure any living thing; 2) do not steal; 3) refrain from sexual immorality; 4) do not lie; 5) do not use drugs or alcohol. By following these teachings, a person can reach Nirvana, the end of the self, and a reunion in life with the Great World Soul.

In many ways, Buddhism is very close to Hinduism. Like Hindus, Buddhists believe in reincarnation (being born into another body after death) and karma (punishment and reward follow you to your new life). Unlike Hindus, however, Buddhists believe that it is possible to be freed of karma by following the teachings of the Buddha. Because Buddhists believe that all life is suffering, their goal is to stop the cycle of reincarnation so that they will not have to be born into this world anymore. They seek permanent Nirvana, which has been called "nothingness." The Buddha also rejected the caste system, saying anyone could reach Nirvana.

Buddhists rely a great deal upon meditation, which is a practice similar to prayer. Meditation is a way of quietly looking into yourself and focusing your mind. Buddhists believe it is impossible



to know the true reality of the world through words, logic, or science. Some may try to express that reality by doing a simple act, such as painting or raking sand, with perfect concentration.

## CONFUCIANISM

Confucianism, like Buddhism, is a religion without a god. It is based upon the ideas of a great Chinese teacher named Confucius who lived about 2,500 years ago (around the same time as the Buddha). Confucianism is based upon precise rules about how people are to interact with each other; it has been a strong influence in China, Korea, and Southeast Asia.

Confucius outlined many rules of human behavior. The three main ideals are 1) good manners; 2) courtesy; and 3) respect. The last one, respect, is further broken down into the Five Relationships, which explain how a father and son were to act, how an elder and younger brother were to relate to each other, how a husband and wife should get along, the responsibilities of an older person and a younger person, and the relationship of the ruler and the subject.

The Golden Rule of Confucius was, "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others" (similar to the Christian Golden Rule).

Confucius taught that people should have great respect for their ancestors. This respect did not stop when they died. Confucius said, "While the parents are alive serve them according to the ritual; when they die bury them according to the ritual; and sacrifice them according to the ritual." This was important because, according to Confucian teachings, part of the soul remains near the family. Many Chinese believe that when a person dies, one part of the soul goes to heaven, part goes to the grave to receive sacrifices, and part stays at the family ancestral shrine. If the ancestor is not given proper respect, he or she may cause harm to those who do not follow the ritual.

## TAOISM

Taoism is both a philosophy and a religion and, like most of the beliefs systems of Asia, defies simple categories. It was founded in China during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. as a reaction against the moral and social conformity of Confucianism. Very little is known about its founder, Lao Tzu, called the Old Master. Taoists do not have holy books in the sense that the term is understood by adherents of Western religions. However, there are many books written by Taoist masters dealing with the Tao, or the Way. The best known is the *Tao Te Ching* which tradition says was written by Lao Tzu. It is a puzzling book, as revealed by Lao Tzu's statement that "the one who knows does not speak, and the one who speaks does not know." For Taoists, beliefs cannot be explained, but must be experienced.

Central to Taoism is a belief in the Tao, the Way, which cannot be named or described. It is everything: the beginning, the end, God, the universe, the totality of existence. It is constant, yet ever changing. Taoism, unlike Confucianism, teaches that people must turn away from society and seek freedom in the contemplation of nature. Passive acceptance of things and mystical contemplation of the wonders of creation are the focus of a Taoist life. The Chinese master T'ao Ch'ien wrote,

Just surrender to the cycle of  
things  
Give yourself to the waves of the



Great Change  
Neither happy nor yet afraid,  
And when it is time to go, then  
simply go,  
Without any unnecessary fuss.

Taoists seek to emulate nature, often using the example of a river as a lesson for how humans should live their lives. The river is constant, yet ever changing, and over time can wear down the mightiest rocks. So too should humans seek out those things which are eternal, yet always be open to the spontaneity and transformations in life. Lao Tzu wrote,

A good traveller  
has no fixed plans and  
Is not intent on arriving.

For a Taoist the journey through life is more important than the ultimate destination.

## SHINTOISM

Shintoism is one of the religions of Japan, although it is not really one religion, but more like hundreds of religions. It is at least 2,000 years old, and probably much older than that. Like Hinduism it has no founder and no prophet.

The Shinto religion is based on the belief that all things of nature, such as animals, birds, plants, seas, rocks, and mountains have spirits. These spirits are called kami. There are over eight million kami, including ancestors (relatives who have died).

There are many Shinto shrines in Japan. Each shrine is for an individual kami so, in a way, each shrine represents its own religion. The kami of the shrine may be a stream or a mountain. One shrine is built on a huge rock which is supposed to hold down a giant catfish, said to be responsible for causing earthquakes. Each shrine is marked by a gate called a torii.

There are as many Shinto festivals as there are Shinto shrines. They often involve parades, floats, and fairs with stalls and sideshows set up. Often, paper lanterns and streamers accompany a kami through a town.

## CONCLUSION

The religions of Asia offer an interesting contrast to those of the West. Whereas Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, see human existence as linear, with a definite beginning, middle, and end, Eastern religions tend to view life as part of a great cycle, with no beginning or end. These faiths tend to stress the ultimate unknowability of the creator of the universe and generally view humans as part of creation, rather than the center of creation. In each of these religions, the veneration of ancestors plays an important role. Like Western religions, each views the universe as a moral place and offers guidance for how humans are to live in harmony with the rest of creation. They provide structure to ease the frictions inherent in communal living and to provide solace for the pain experienced by each person. Like all religions, they provide an explanation for finite humans about the infinite wonders of life.