

Judaism: The Story of Tradition and Identity

The Bible is the cornerstone. The Talmud is the foundation. The edifice that they underpin is Rabbinic Judaism and from the middle of the First Millennium until the nineteenth century, that was the dominant kind of Judaism.

George Robinson

One superficially attractive but actually misleading [notion is that Jews] are united by a common religion. There is a Jewish religion, and for very many Jews it is the focus of their lives But it would be unrealistic to maintain that it is the Jewish religion that unites the Jewish people. In fact the Jewish religion [is that which] divides the Jewish people today, perhaps almost as much as it divides Jews from non-Jews.

Nicholas de Lange

If you have a sapling in your hand, and it is said to you, "Behold, there is the Messiah"—go on with your planting, and [only] afterward go out and receive him. And if the youths say to you, "Let us go up and build the Temple," do not listen to them. But if the elders say to you, "Come, let us destroy the Temple," listen to them.

The Talmud

Part 1: The Beginning

Thousands of years ago there was a man named Terah who lived in a bustling city on the edge of the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia. One day he charged his oldest son to sell his graven images while he went on a business trip. In the course of the day an elderly man approached the boy with the intention of buying an image. After learning of the man's age, the boy mocked the elder for foolishly thinking—after all his years—that an image made from a tree in only a few days was a suitable god. The man, shocked by the boy's insight, took the sentiment to heart and ceased worshipping idols.

That afternoon a woman came to the boy's shop to offer fine flour to the idols he was in charge of. Afterward the incensed lad took a stick and broke every one of the images except the largest one. He then put the stick in the idol's hand. When his father returned and saw the destruction of his business, he demanded an explanation. The boy replied that each of the little gods had begun fighting the moment the woman entered with the flour because they each wanted to be the recipient of worship. Not surprisingly, the largest of the idols proved victorious and crushed the others. Infuriated at his insolence, the father handed the boy over to Nimrod—the mighty ruler and hunter of old.

Nimrod lauded the boy's refusal to worship idols and instead suggested that fire was the most powerful force on earth. "Actually," the boy replied, "water has power over fire." Nimrod conceded and was prepared to make water his god to be worshiped before the boy pointed out to the great hunter that wind has authority over water. He then explained that people are stronger than wind. Eventually Nimrod tired of the boy's antics and threw him into the fire. Because of his faith in the one true God, however, the boy was saved from the fire without as much as a scratch or burn. Although the archangel Gabriel had offered to help the boy, God himself stepped in to shield him from harm.¹

So goes the story of Abraham, father of the three great monotheistic religions, as found in *Genesis Rabbah*, a Jewish commentary on *Genesis*. Clearly, this is not the story of creation in *Genesis*—a creation story that we Christians, together with Jews, hold to be the story of the creation of the world. As important as the *Genesis* account is—and it is important—this is not necessarily the starting point for contemporary Judaism. What is the starting point? To answer that question, let us look at a quote from the contemporary Jewish rabbi and scholar Shai Cherry:

1. This story is based on *Genesis Rabbah* or "Midrash on *Genesis*." See Samuel Rapaport, trans., *Tales and Maxims from the Talmud* (London: Routledge, 1912), 60, 77–78.

Judaism has variously been called a culture, an ethnicity, and a civilization, all terms that struggle to include more than "just" religion.²

Judaism today is just as much a culture, an ethnicity, and a civilization as it is a "religion." As a result, I wanted to begin our discussion with a story that encompasses these different aspects of Judaism without focusing just on the religious aspect—as important as that is. As for culture, the story above speaks of Jewish identity. Specifically, it seeks to undermine the (religious) idol worship that tempted so many Jews as the nation lived in close proximity to rival nations in biblical times. In terms of ethnicity, Abraham is commonly regarded in the Jewish tradition as the originator of the Jewish nation and religion. This is apparent not only in the Bible but also in other Jewish literature. Indeed, *Genesis Rabbah*, the Jewish midrash (or commentary) from which the story above was taken, makes this point strongly:

Perhaps in the proper order of things Abraham should have been the first man created, not Adam. God, however, foresaw the fall of the first man, and if Abraham had been the first man and had fallen, there would have been no one after him to restore righteousness to the world; whereas after Adam's fall came Abraham, who established in the world the knowledge of God. As a builder puts the strongest beam in the center of the building, so as to support the structure at both ends, so Abraham was the strong beam carrying the burden of the generations that existed before him and that came after him.³

Finally, in regard to the idea of civilization, Abraham is seen as the "strong beam" that carried the Jewish civilization forward. In fact, we begin with Abraham not only because he was so pivotal to Judaism but also because he is the father of the three great monotheistic religions in the West: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. From this one man three powerful stories emerged that have significantly impacted global history.

Part 2: Historical Origin

The story of the Jewish people is one of the most remarkable of all ancient stories. This is because there is perhaps no other people group that has received as much attention and has had as much influence on the world in relation to its actual size. Indeed, as one Jewish scholar points out, the

2. Shai Cherry, *Introduction to Judaism: Part 2* (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2004), 1.
3. Rapaport, *Tales and Maxims from the Talmud*, 67.

Jewish people, with the exception of modern-day Israel, “are a numerically insignificant minority” in all the places they reside.⁴ Although small, the Jewish people have penetrated all parts of the world and have infused their distinct culture into the larger cultures in which they find themselves. The Jewish story is one of trying to maintain one’s Jewish identity within the larger context of ethnically and religiously diverse nations.

Origins and Kingdom

We begin our historical overview of Judaism in the beginning of time. The book of Genesis describes the God of Israel as the Creator and Sustainer of the world. This God created two people—Adam and Eve—who gave rise to all humankind. Although they are the first people recorded in history, Abraham is customarily regarded as the founder of the Jewish nation. Indeed, as one historian of the Hebrew Bible quips, “A history of Israel must properly begin with the call of Abram to the father of the chosen nation.”⁵ The book of Genesis explains that Abraham came from the ancient city-state of Ur, which was a thriving culture. We are told that the Lord God commanded Abraham at the age of seventy-five to leave his home for a place that God would give him (Gen. 12:1–3). Today we call this land Israel or Palestine.

Eventually Abraham’s descendants became as numerous as God had promised. They grew from twelve sons to twelve tribes. The book of Exodus narrates how the pharaoh of Egypt noticed how fruitful the Jewish people had become and enslaved them in Egypt for hundreds of years. After rescuing his people from Egyptian bondage through Moses, God made a covenant with the Jewish people and regarded them as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). Out of this “kingdom of priests” God consecrated the tribe of Levi as the priestly tribe that would perform the necessary rituals to stay in covenant relationship with this God.

“Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.”
—Galatians 3:7

Temple	Built	Destroyed	Destroyer	Scripture
1st Temple	960 BC	586 BC	Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar	1 Kings 6–8; 2 Kings 25:1–21
2nd Temple	515 BC	AD 70	Rome under General Titus	Ezra 6:13–18; Mark 13

4. Nicholas de Lange, *Introduction to Judaism*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.

5. Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 25.

Several hundred years after the exodus, the twelve tribes of the Jewish nation became isolated and territorial. It was not until the time of King David and his son Solomon in the tenth century BC that the tribes were officially united. David set up his capital in Jerusalem, where the Jewish temple was built. The period under the united kingdom, however, lasted briefly. Over time, stronger world empires such as Assyria and Babylon conquered, destroyed, and divided the tribes and Jewish people groups, which had been weakened by the nation’s division into northern (Israel) and southern (Judea) territories after King Solomon’s death in the tenth century BC. The Hebrew Bible interpreted the destruction and exile of the Jewish nation as God’s condemnation for worshiping idols, acting wickedly, and violating the covenant God had made with the Jews hundreds of years before (2 Kings 17:7–20).

Dispersion

The most enduring defeat and exile of the Jewish people occurred in the sixth century BC at the hands of the Babylonians.⁶ The Babylonian armies ravaged Jerusalem, destroyed the temple that God had ordered to be built there, and exiled the wealthiest and brightest citizens into Babylon. This event marked the beginning of the dispersion, the scattering of the Jewish people across the world outside Israel. Although some Jewish people returned to Israel within a century after the Babylonian exile and rebuilt the temple, many did not. In fact, many Jews prospered in exile and experienced better living conditions away from Israel than they did inside their own nation.⁷ For those who did return, things were not the same. Not only was the temple only a shadow of its former glory (Hag. 2:3), but the Jewish people were still under the authority of Persia.

Even during New Testament times in the first century AD, despite the fact that the temple had been refurbished and enlarged, there was a common understanding that the people of Israel were still in dispersion. This is the case for two reasons. First, even though some Jews did live in Israel, many did not. Second, the Jewish residents of Israel were under pagan rule—first under Persian and then Greek and Roman rule. The Jewish prophet Jesus of Nazareth lived right before the Jewish nation rebelled against Roman occupation. Jesus, for his

6. Raymond Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 20–23.

7. *Ibid.*, 28.

“On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, ‘Yeshu is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Anyone who can say anything in his favor, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.’ But since nothing was brought forward in his favor he was hanged on the eve of the Passover.”
—Talmud (Sanhedrin 43a)

Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the Talmud are taken from Michael Rodkinson, trans., *The Babylonian Talmud* (Boston: The Talmud Society, 1918). Also, some Jewish commentators question whether this comment refers to Jesus of Nazareth.

"Torah learning is even more pleasing to the All-Present than burnt sacrifices. After all, if a person studies Torah he or she knows the will of the All-Present."

—Talmud (Avot of Rabbi Nathan 4)

There were several movements in Judaism at the time of the temple's destruction in AD 70: the Sadducees, who were in control of the temple system; the Essenes, who lived ascetic lives away from most Jews; the Zealots or even Sicarii, who advocated Jewish independence against Rome; and the Pharisees, who focused on observing the *halakha* or Jewish laws and customs, and out of whom rabbinic Judaism emerged.

part, encouraged the Jews to live within the kingdom rule of God and to repent (Mark 1:14–15).

In the middle of the first century AD many Jews found themselves increasingly in friction with Rome. Rebellion ensued. The First Jewish War lasted from AD 66–70. It was a watershed moment in Jewish history. The Romans crushed the Jews and destroyed the Jewish temple. But unlike in former times, the temple was never rebuilt. Instead of centralizing around the performance of daily sacrifices by priests, Judaism redefined itself. This redefinition of Judaism came to be called *rabbinic Judaism*.

Rabbinic Judaism, as its name suggests, refers to the Judaism that emerged under the guidance of rabbis or "teachers." Although its origins can be indirectly traced back to Ezra in the fifth century BC, it emerged most fully in the context immediately after destruction of the Jewish temple in AD 70. The Jewish priesthood fell into disuse soon after the temple's destruction because there were no sacrifices to be made. The group that filled this leadership void was made up of rabbis who, instead of making sacrifices in the temple, interpreted Torah. As one scholar explains:

Rabbinic Judaism centers on the constant study of the Torah and the oral traditions associated with it and involves the meticulous observance of religious regulations, which are understood as constituting a legal system. By placing the study of the Torah at the center of Jewish religious life, the rabbis incidentally laid the foundation for the preoccupation of later Jewish culture with intellectual activities of all kinds.⁸

Seventy years after the destruction of the temple, the Jews rebelled again. Known as the Second Jewish War (132–35), this spirited yet failed attempt to take control of Roman-occupied Judea began hopefully but ended disastrously for the Jews. Simon bar Kokhba (d. 135), the leader of this rebellion, ruled from Jerusalem for three years before undergoing the same fate as his countrymen. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed or enslaved. Moreover, the Romans—headed by Emperor Hadrian (76–138 AD)—eradicated all Jewish presence from Jerusalem by exiling Jews on penalty of death, prohibiting circumcision, burning Jewish scrolls, and renaming the area.⁹ The sobering outcomes of this war portended the next millennium of the Jewish story—continued exile, dispersion, and maltreatment under more powerful people groups.

8. *Ibid.*, 53.

9. *Ibid.*, 54–55.

Contemporary

Although there was always the option to identify as a Christian or a Muslim during the medieval period, in the late 1700s there were generally three options for Jews, particularly in Europe. The first was to assimilate into the dominant culture. This was a common choice that many Jews took. Although this option downplayed one's Jewish identity, it did provide educational and employment opportunities. Another option was to observe the Jewish traditions and customs as had been done for hundreds of years. Such an approach meant marginalization in the larger culture, but it also gave one identity within the Jewish community. Finally, the last option was a mixing of the two.

Jewish Ethnicities	Descent
Ashkenazi	German / Eastern European
Ethiopian	Sub-Saharan African
Mizrahi	North African / Middle Eastern
Sephardic	Spanish and Arab

This modernizing of Judaism was aimed at gaining "social acceptance without abandoning Jewish identity."¹⁰ Put simply, contemporary Judaism—with its division into Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist—emerged out of this larger context. That's because these movements each sought to deal with the rapid changes taking place during the Enlightenment and the rise of modern states. Many Jewish people struggled to understand, on the one hand, how to stay faithful to one's ancient customs while, on the other, how to adapt to an ever-changing world.

The twentieth century has been a momentous period for many in the world but especially for the Jewish people. The two most decisive events in the story of Judaism in this century were the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel. As for the first, there was a long history of Jewish persecution in Europe, but this came to a head with the election of Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) as chancellor of Germany in 1933. Within months of his election, Hitler implemented hateful measures against the Jews. The government boycotted Jewish businesses, expelled Jews from civil service, removed their children from

10. Norman Solomon, *Judaism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 100.

schools, and began the building of concentration camps.¹¹ Two years later Jews were stripped of their citizenship. Germany aggressively expanded its territory and found allies that forwarded its violent program against the Jews before the Allied forces ultimately defeated Germany and the Axis powers in 1945. But the war had taken its toll. Although difficult to imagine—let alone express in words—in as little as a decade 6 million of the 10 million Jews living in Europe had been murdered.¹²

Ironically, notes Jewish scholar Nicholas de Lange, the anti-Semitism and genocide that the Jews experienced during the Holocaust expedited the formation of a Jewish state in the middle of the twentieth century.¹³ The founder of the movement toward Jewish statehood or Zionism was the Austro-Hungarian journalist Theodore Herzl (1860–1904). His passionate plea for the creation of a (secular) Jewish state where Jews could live free from anti-Semitism continued to gain momentum after his death. Although some traditional Jews initially rejected Zionism because they believed it was the Messiah’s task—the timing of which only God knew—to gather the Jewish people out of exile and into a Jewish state, this changed after World War II.¹⁴ Within two years of the ending of the war, the United Nations partitioned Palestine into two territories, a Jewish and an Arab state. On May 14, 1948, the state of Israel came into existence.¹⁵ Since that time Zionism and the Zionist movement have continued strong. Indeed, I once had a conversation with a woman in Israel about her religious faith. She told me categorically that she did not believe in religion or God. “However, if pressured into choosing something,” she continued after pausing to reflect on our conversation, “Zionism would be my religion.”

“The longing to return to the Land of Israel, a yearning that suffuses Jewish prayer and rituals, began to be fulfilled toward the end of the 19th century. The irony is that many of the early pioneers to the Land of Israel were secularists, motivated by politics rather than theology.”
—Shai Cherry

Cherry, *Introduction to Judaism*, 2:21.

Part 3: Religious Writings

There are a variety of religious writings associated with Judaism. Judaism is the world religion that is perhaps most focused on education, learning, and books.¹⁶ Naturally, then, there are a host of writings that are important to this religion and culture. In addition to the Bible, some

11. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People*, 202–3.

12. Solomon, *Judaism*, 15.

13. De Lange, *Introduction to Judaism*, 42.

14. Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 95.

15. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People*, 231.

16. De Lange, *Introduction to Judaism*, 43–44.

of the key writings include the Talmud, prayer books, mystical writings, and interpretive works on the Bible.

The Bible

Law (Torah)	Prophets (Nevi'im)		Writings (Ketuvim)		
	Former	Latter	Poetry	Five Rolls	History
Genesis	Joshua	Isaiah	Psalms	Ruth	Daniel
Exodus	Judges	Jeremiah	Job	Song of Songs	Ezra-Nehemiah
Leviticus	Samuel	Ezekiel	Proverbs	Ecclesiastes	Chronicles
Numbers	Kings	The Twelve		Lamentations	
Deuteronomy		Prophets		Esther	

We begin our discussion with the Hebrew Bible, the oldest and most foundational of the Jewish writings. The Hebrew text used by Jews—the Masoretic Text, which was given its present shape a millennium ago—is the same text that we Christians use in our Bibles. Apart from the name, the only difference is the arrangement. Whereas the Christian Old Testament contains thirty-nine books beginning with Genesis and ending with Malachi, the Hebrew Bible is classified into the three main categories of Law (*Torah*), Prophets (*Nevi'im*), and Writings (*Ketuvim*), which, when put in an acrostic in Hebrew, are referred to as the Tanakh. The main reason that the Christian Old Testament contains more “books” is that the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures dating to the third century BC—needed extra parchment space when translated into Greek, since Greek letters are larger than Hebrew ones. The Greek translators divided several larger books such as Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles into two.¹⁷

The Hebrew Bible was written over the course of hundreds of years in many different areas. The foundational section, the Torah or first five books, discusses the establishment of the Jewish nation from the beginning of creation to the time of Moses, who lived sometime between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries BC.¹⁸ The Prophets discuss the next thousand years of God’s interaction with and preservation of the Jewish

17. Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 23–25.

18. Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 60.

The Hebrew word *Torah* is a broad term that may refer to any of the following: the first five books of the Bible; the whole Hebrew Bible; or the oral tradition given to Moses, that is, the Talmud.

people through the course of the united kingdom, the exile, and the Jewish return to Israel. Finally, the Writings are the most varied of the Hebrew Scriptures. This section contains poems, histories, and prophetic documents that span hundreds of years of Jewish history.



Fig. 4.1.
The Torah in
Hebrew.

The Talmud

In addition to the Bible, the most important book in the Jewish canon is the Talmud (“study”). There is a story in the Talmud about when the famed Rabbi Hillel (70 BC–AD 10), whose grandson Rabban Gamaliel taught the apostle Paul (Acts 22:3), answered the secret to life while his student stood on one foot: Like Rabbi Jesus only a few decades later, Hillel said, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to others. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary” (Shabbat 31a).

If the Torah can be explained so succinctly, we may be wondering, why is the Talmud so long? The answer is twofold. First, the Torah itself

does not spell out all the implications of its commandments and prohibitions. Take the fourth commandment, for instance: “Remember the Sabbath day” (Ex. 20:8). By itself, this commandment does not explain exactly *how* we are to remember the Sabbath and to abstain from work. For example, is starting a fire or taking a walk “work”? In the Talmud the rabbis discuss these issues. (By the way, the rabbinic answer to the first question was “yes,” while the answer to the second depended on how far you walked.)

The other reason the Talmud is so long has to do with the time-honored tradition of Jewish debate and argumentation. Unlike Christianity or Islam, Judaism has a long and strong tradition of arguing with God. Jewish scholar and Rabbi Jacob Neusner goes so far as to say that the God of the Torah “expects to be argued with.”¹⁹ While all the many rabbinic discussions and interpretations of biblical law have struck some in the Christian tradition as legalistic and too focused on minute details, the Jewish tradition understands these discussions as important ways to preserve the Torah.

According to the Talmud, God gave Moses the “written Torah” and “oral Torah” on Mount Sinai. The written Torah is what came to be recorded in the Pentateuch. The oral Torah, by contrast, was not initially put into writing. Instead, it was passed down and preserved generation after generation. As the following Talmudic excerpt explains:

Moses received [the oral] Torah at Sinai and handed it on to Joshua, Joshua to elders, and elders to prophets. And prophets handed it on to the men of the great assembly. They said three things: “Be prudent in judgment; raise up many disciples; and make a fence for the Torah.” (*Avot* 1:1)

The “fence” that the rabbis made for the Torah is the Talmud. Although its name is a broad term referring to rabbinical commentary, the Talmud is technically composed of two major parts: the Mishnah and the Gemara. Stated differently, the Mishnah plus the Gemara equals the Talmud.

The first part of the Talmud, the Mishnah (“repetition”), contains the sayings and opinions of rabbis from around 300 BC to AD 220. Rabbi Judah HaNasi (AD 138–220), a descendant of Rabbi Hillel and of King David, edited and compiled the definitive version of the Mishnah in the early part of the third century.²⁰ The Mishnah contains laws, principles, stories, and opinions on any number of civil and religious issues. It is understood to be separate from yet parallel to the Hebrew Bible. Each

19. Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), 24.

20. Brad Young, *Meet the Rabbis: Rabbinic Thought and the Teachings of Jesus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 83.

of its six volumes or “orders” contains several tractates, several chapters per tractate, and several *mishnah* verses or *mishnayot* per chapter.²¹

I once asked one of my classes to read portions of the Mishnah in preparation for a discussion on Judaism. Not one single person understood what he or she was reading! Jacob Neusner, who translated a contemporary version of the Mishnah, captures the disorienting nature of the book well in the eyes of outsiders:

Falling into the hands of someone who has never seen this document before, the Mishnah must cause puzzlement. From the first line to the last, discourse takes up questions internal to a system that is never introduced. The Mishnah provides information without establishing context. It presents disputes about facts hardly urgent outside a circle of faceless disputants. Consequently, we start with the impression that we join a conversation already long under way about topics we can never grasp anyhow.²²

Unlike the Hebrew Scriptures, which contain many stories from beginning to end, the Mishnah has no real beginning or ending. The first “order” jumps into commentary concerning when the Shema—the liturgical declaration taken from Deuteronomy 6:4—can be recited in the evening.

The second part of the Talmud is the Gemara (“study”). This section is even more detailed and intricate than the Mishnah. The Gemara, written in Aramaic rather than in Hebrew, “consists largely of detailed and strenuously argued disagreements on the meaning and validity of both Mishnaic and biblical laws.”²³ In other words, whereas the Mishnah debates the meaning of the Torah, the Gemara debates the meaning of the Mishnah *and* the Torah. The Talmud is arranged according to *mishnah* verses from the Mishnah followed by *sugyot* or topical commentary from the Gemara. The two different Talmudic versions are the Palestinian (or Jerusalem) Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud. They were completed around AD 350 and 500, respectively.²⁴

Other Jewish Writings

In addition to the Bible and the Talmud, there are many other important Jewish writings. The first of these, the Midrash (“study” or

21. Ibid., 84–86.

22. Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), viii.

23. De Lange, *Introduction to Judaism*, 54–55.

24. George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs and Rituals* (New York: Atria, 2000), 344–46.

“investigation”), is a collection of texts that chiefly interpret the Bible. It includes rabbinic discussions of the Bible during the first several centuries AD. The midrashim are often classified into legal commentary (*halakha*) and nonlegal commentary (*haggadah*). In the beginning of this chapter, I referred to a midrash on the book of Genesis. The midrashim are enjoyable to read and include sometimes fanciful yet always intriguing interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures. Another important genre of Jewish writings is prayer or liturgical books called *siddurim*. A *siddur* is not only what you might read from if you attend a synagogue service, but also what many Jews use for prayer at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

Finally, the last Jewish writing I want to mention is the Zohar (“radiance”). It is the most significant of the texts associated with the Jewish mystical tradition called Kabbalah (“receiving”). Commonly regarded as being written in the thirteenth century AD in Spain, the Zohar is concerned with different mystical and esoteric ways to study Torah.²⁵ It is one of the more interesting Jewish writings—as the initial section of the book reveals:

There was a man who lived in the mountains. He knew nothing about those who lived in the city. He sowed wheat and ate the kernels raw. One day he entered the city. They brought him good bread. He said, “What is this for?” They said, “Bread to eat!” He ate, and it tasted very good. He said, “What is it made of?” They said, “Wheat.” Later they brought him cakes kneaded in oil. He tasted them and said, “What are these made of?” They said, “Wheat.” Finally they brought him royal pastry made with honey and oil. He said, “And what are these made of?” They said, “Wheat.” He said, “I am the master of all these, for I eat the essence of all these: wheat!” Because of that view, he knew nothing of the delights of the world; they were lost to him. So it is with one who grasps the principle and does not know all those delectable delights deriving, diverging from that principle.²⁶

This intriguing parable is about getting to the more advanced levels of Torah and not assuming that because you know something at the basic level, you know it at the deeper level as well.

Part 4: Beliefs

Judaism is one of the most difficult religions for my students to understand. The main reason for this has to do with the students’

25. De Lange, *Introduction to Judaism*, 60.

26. Daniel Matt, trans., *Zohar: Annotated and Explained* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Books, 2005), 2.

In Hebrew, words are made plural by adding the letters *im* or *ot* at the end of the word. For instance, *siddur* (prayer book) becomes *siddurim*; while *mitzvah* (commandment) becomes *mitzvot*.

assumption that they know more about Judaism than they actually do. While we Christians do share common Scriptures with Judaism and therefore hold many views that are similar, there are also sharp contrasts. So the first lesson we must learn about this religion is that while it is an outgrowth of the Hebrew Bible, contemporary Judaism is not equivalent to the Old Testament.

Indeed, my students are often shocked when I inform them that many Jews today do not even believe in God's existence! It is common for Jews to understand and identify themselves primarily as culturally Jewish rather than religiously so. As one Jewish scholar writes succinctly, "religion is . . . secondary to Jewish identity."²⁷ What's more, unlike its offspring, Christianity and Islam, Judaism is not a proselytizing religion. The truth is that rabbis generally discourage conversions to the Jewish religion. There is a lengthy tradition admonishing rabbis to send potential converts away three times before allowing their conversion.²⁸

Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–88), the leading rabbi of nineteenth-century German Orthodoxy, went so far as to write that "Judaism is the one religion which does *not* say, 'Outside me there is no salvation.'" Instead, he explained, the upright of all people groups are traveling toward the "same blessed destination."²⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, that of all religious groups in the world, the Jewish people are the "most likely religious group to describe their outlook as secular or somewhat secular, including 14 percent who could be classified as atheists and agnostics."³⁰ More than half the Jews in the world do not attend synagogues on any regular basis.³¹

I once had a conversation with an Orthodox Jewish man in Jerusalem. My friend asked the man what would be required for him to convert to Judaism. The man replied bluntly, "You don't have to convert to Judaism. All God requires of you, a Gentile, is to follow the seven laws of Noah. Conversion would be of no value." The man was alluding to the common belief that only the Jewish people are expected to observe the 613 commandments of God. The Gentiles, by contrast, are required to observe only seven basic laws. If we observe these basic laws, we will be afforded a portion of the world to come.

27. De Lange, *Introduction to Judaism*, 1.

28. Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 251.

29. Gwilym Beckerlegge, ed., *The World Religions Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2001), 47.

30. Cherry, *Introduction to Judaism*, 2:35.

31. Prothero, *God Is Not One*, 267.

Noahic Laws for Goyim (Non-Jews)

1. No murder
2. No sexual immorality
3. No idolatry
4. No eating animals from torn limbs
5. No cursing God
6. No theft
7. Setting up a system of law

This concept comes partly from the Talmudic passage that states: "The Holy One, blessed be He, offered the Torah to every nation and every tongue, but none accepted it until He came to Israel who received it" (Talmud [Avodah Zarah 2b]). Because only the Jewish people accepted the Torah—after every other people group rejected God's offer—only they are expected to keep its commandments or *mitzvot*. The 613 commandments that the Jews are expected to keep are often divided into 365 positive commandments (equaling the days of the solar year) and 248 negative ones (equaling the supposed number of bodily organs). This classification came from Rabbi Simlai in the third century AD, although several rabbis since then have divided the commandments slightly differently.³²

Religious Denominations

Although all forms of Judaism today trace their heritage back to rabbinic Judaism, there is great diversity within all the denominations or movements in contemporary Judaism. Most of these movements appeared in Europe during the Enlightenment when Jews were granted citizenship and admitted to public universities and professions that were historically barred from them. One of the important Jewish thinkers of this period, Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86), affirmed the rights of Jews to live as free citizens and to be afforded the rights and privileges offered in the countries where they lived. The Jewish people, like their Christian counterparts, responded to the changes of modernity in various ways, the result of which created a Jewish identity that differed greatly from the past. The religious movements that emerged during and after

32. Robinson, *Essential Judaism*, 196.

this time came to be known as Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Judaism.³³

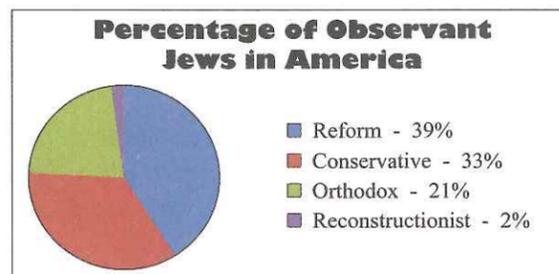


Fig. 4.2. Percentage of observant Jews in America.

Reform Judaism

The first of these movements is Reform Judaism. Although it began in Germany in the eighteenth century, it has thrived in America. One of its key documents, the Pittsburgh Platform, was the result of a conference attended by many rabbis in Pittsburgh in 1885. An excerpt from the document represents some of its radical views on Jewish customs:

We hold that all . . . Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.³⁴



Fig. 4.3. Map of the world in the nineteenth century AD, when modern Judaism was developing in Europe and in America.

33. The percentages of the religious denominations below come from Prothero, *God Is Not One*, 267.
34. "The Pittsburgh Platform," in Robinson, *Essential Judaism*, 506.

As can be seen, Reform Judaism advocates a radical program of reform and modernization of the Jewish religion into contemporary culture. In this way, there are many similarities between Reform Judaism and liberal Protestantism. Both emerged at the same time in the same area for the same reasons. They were both responses to traditional expressions of their religions and the rapid changes taking place in society. These movements rejected the notion that God had inspired the Bible, affirmed complete gender equality, emphasized ethics and social justice, and abandoned those practices that were seen as antithetical to adaptation and assimilation into contemporary culture. At the same time, they shared many common values with their mother religions and did not want to wholly sever ties with them. Instead, they wanted to modernize and contemporize, and propel their religions into the modern world in ways that aligned with critical scholarship, science, and advances in technology.

Orthodox Judaism

The second religious Jewish movement is (Modern) Orthodoxy. It is the most traditional of the various forms of Judaism and is a continuation of the Judaism practiced by most Jews before the Enlightenment. Orthodox Jews believe that the *halakha* or Jewish laws and customs are completely binding. They regard them as given by God. Although they highly value the study of Torah, Orthodox Jews do not by any means reject secular learning and education. Instead, they seek to hallow secular learning, not flee from it. As for actual practices, Hebrew is spoken in Orthodox services, men and women are divided during worship, people are not allowed to drive their cars on Shabbat (or Sabbath), and men and women must wear head coverings and dress modestly.

In addition to Orthodox Judaism, there is a related group called the ultra-Orthodox or the Haredi. The ultra-Orthodox are the most conservative and traditional of the Jewish religious groups. Unlike the Modern Orthodox, however, they eschew secular learning for themselves (understanding secular learning to be the domain of non-Jews) and focus on studying Torah. They believe it binding on their families to populate the earth—which is the first of the biblical commandments (Gen. 1:28)—and have four times as many children as their Jewish counterparts.³⁵ I once walked through Mea Shearim, the famous Haredi neighborhood in Jerusalem, where the men and boys were distinctly dressed in white

35. Benjamin Blech, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Judaism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alpha, 2003), 315.

The word *halakha* ("path") refers to the entire body of Jewish law. This includes the Hebrew Bible, rabbinic interpretations, and other traditions and customs. All religious forms of Judaism are centered on determining how to interpret, observe, and adapt the *halakha*.

and black with black hats, and where large posters warned outsiders of entering with immodest clothing.

Conservative Judaism

"Reform [Judaism] declared that Judaism has changed throughout time and that Jewish law is no longer binding. Orthodoxy denies both propositions. . . . Conservative Judaism agrees with Orthodoxy in maintaining the authority of Jewish law and with Reform that Judaism has grown and evolved through time." —Rabbi Robert Gordis

Bleich, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Judaism*, 321.

The Conservative movement is the response to Reform and Orthodox Judaism. It began in nineteenth-century Europe, but has flourished in the United States. It is "conservative" from the perspective of the Reform rather than the Orthodox. Stated positively, it is "conservative" in the sense that it seeks to conserve and preserve the *halakha* or Jewish laws, but is willing to make modifications when necessary. Like Reform Judaism, the Conservative movement believes that the Jewish religion must be adapted to contemporary culture; like the Orthodox, it believes that the commandments are central. This means that Conservative Judaism is caught between two important yet competing stories of Judaism: the Reform on the left and the Orthodoxy on the right.

One good example of how Conservative Judaism straddles the fence between its two sister denominations centers on the topic of driving to the synagogue during Shabbat. In Exodus 35:3 the Jews are commanded: "You shall kindle no fire in all your dwelling places on the Sabbath day." Practically speaking, this means that Orthodox members of synagogues are not allowed to start their cars on Shabbat (by "kindling" a fire) and thereby driving to the service. Whereas Reform Jews would generally see this commandment as unrealistic in our driving culture (and therefore not necessary to modernize), Conservatives would seek to conserve or preserve this commandment until necessity demanded otherwise. As the interpretation goes, Conservatives decided that it was permissible to drive on Shabbat for the practical reason that many Jews lived too far from the synagogue to walk, so it was better to kindle a fire and attend the service than to literally observe the commandment and miss the service.

Reconstructionist Judaism

The last movement in Judaism is the most recent as well as the smallest. Unlike the other religious movements, it is the only one that was forged in America. The architect of this movement was Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1993), who was active in the Conservative movement although he grew up Orthodox. Reconstructionists typically understand Judaism as an "evolving religious civilization," to use Kaplan's words. This means that the emphasis is on preserving the Jewish culture as a civilization. Put bluntly, the Jewish culture is more important than

Jewish belief. Or as one rabbi states, "Reconstructionist Judaism isn't so much concerned with God as it is with Jews."³⁶ Whereas Conservative Judaism is a middle way between Reform and Orthodox Judaism, Reconstructionist Judaism shares many commonalities between Conservative and Reform Judaism.

Movement	Emphasis
Reform	Ethics
Orthodox	Law
Conservative	Tradition
Reconstructionist	Culture
Secular	Ethnicity
Zionist	Jewish statehood

At the same time, there are key differences. For instance, Reconstructionism can appear just as observant as the Orthodox because many observe the *halakha* even though they do not believe they are binding. Reconstructionists are more likely to observe the dietary laws and follow other traditional customs than the Reform.³⁷ However, Reconstructionism is perceived to be more "liberal" ethically or theologically than the Reform. Reconstructionism, for example, not only ordains women to the rabbinate (as do the Reform and Conservatives but not traditionally the Orthodox), but also ordains gays and lesbians. What's more, Reconstructionists reject the notion that the Jews are a "chosen people" as well as other traditional Jewish beliefs such as expectation of a future Messiah.³⁸

The Unifying Factor

In addition to the four religious movements discussed above, I would be remiss if I did not state again that many Jews do not even believe in God's existence, let alone attend a synagogue or believe that the *halakha* or Jewish laws are binding. They are called "secular Jews," and there is no real stigma attached to this classification. Although this sounds strange to many Christians, it does not to Judaism. Indeed, secular Jews are just as much a part of Judaism as are religious or observant ones.

36. Ibid., 323.

37. Robinson, *Essential Judaism*, 233.

38. Ibid., 62.

Given this great diversity, you may be wondering what it means “to be a Jew.” This is a difficult question to answer; each of the religious and secular movements would respond to it in divergent ways. But two things come to mind. The first response is that Judaism—however we define it—is more focused on deeds than on creeds. As one Jewish rabbi states it, “It is not so much what we believe, but rather what we do, that defines us as Jews.”³⁹ Practically speaking, the locus of this question—however we answer it—should concentrate less on defining Jews as *believing* in certain things than on *doing* certain things. Jews emphasize action over belief.

The Jewish tradition has always been a dance, or perhaps a wrestle, between the old and the new. And it is this give and take that keeps it vital.

This leads us to a second response, which I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter: Judaism can be defended and defined as a religion, a culture, an ethnicity, or a civilization. It is only after we understand Judaism as an identity *rather than strictly as a system of belief* that we will begin to comprehend what it truly means “to be a Jew.” Although Jewish identity traditionally meant being born to a “Jewish” woman, today it means many different things. Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, for instance, affirm that one can be considered Jewish from the father’s side, while Orthodoxy has always affirmed that anybody can become a “Jew by choice” by fully converting to Judaism and following the Jewish laws.

Part 5: Worship Practices

The Jewish life is punctuated by regular practices and observances. These range from daily prayers to weekly rituals to yearly festivals. Of all the world religions, Judaism is perhaps most aware of and in tune with sacred space and sacred time. The two principal places where sacred space is most manifest for Jews are the synagogue and the home. The first of these, synagogues, are variously called temples and shuls. The essential structure of the synagogue reflects the physical arrangement of the former Jewish temples. Central to a synagogue is the ark, which houses the Torah scrolls. This is a reminder of the ark of the covenant. The *bimah* or altar, which is another important component to Jewish synagogues, is a platform from which the Torah is read.

There is a long tradition of Jews’ having three daily services at synagogues, which reflect the sacrificial system of the temple periods. Synagogues also have weekly Sabbath or Shabbat services, which occur on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings. A typical service includes reading from the Torah, singing or responding orally out of the prayer

39. Rabbi Jerome Epstein, “The Ideal Conservative Jew: Eight Behavioral Expectations,” in Robinson, *Essential Judaism*, 522.

book, bowing and standing (when the Torah passes by), and saying prayers and blessings. Depending on the denomination, the primary or secondary language (for the liturgy) may be in Hebrew. In Orthodox synagogues, men and women are separated during worship and men are expected to wear *kippot* or hats and women are expected to wear head coverings. Men are also required to wear *tallitot* or prayer shawls. In other Jewish movements, customs vary widely from synagogue to synagogue. If you ever attend a synagogue, my advice to you is to wear modest clothes and to observe whether other people are wearing hats or prayer shawls, and not to be shy about asking how to respect the customs of the synagogue.

Besides public worship, the center of Jewish life is in the home. Many Jewish homes have a *mezuzah* (“doorpost”), which is a case hung next to a door filled with a parchment of the Shema (Deut. 6:4–9). These homes may also have a *menorah* or seven-branched lampstand, the Bible, and perhaps other Jewish books. Two regular rituals practiced in the home are celebrations of Passover and of Sabbath. The Passover meal or *seder* is celebrated annually to remember Israelite emancipation out of Egypt. It is an exciting night observed at the home where everyone is able to participate. The other home ritual is observing Shabbat, which begins on Friday evening and ends Saturday evening. Shabbat is the highlight of the Jewish week, and specific preparations are made—lighting candles, singing, eating certain food, and drinking wine. There are also special ways to end Shabbat on Saturday evening.

Part 6: Point of Contact

A few years ago, I was friends with a Jewish young man from work. We talked about many different things over the course of our time together. Sometimes I would talk to him about religion. When I did so, I always tried to bring our conversation to some story or event in the Old Testament, since I assumed that he—as a Jew—was familiar with these stories and events. One day he told me that he was not at all familiar with the stories and that he did not see them as particularly significant to his Jewish identity.

Because Christians affirm the authority of the Hebrew Bible, many of us believe this is the best place to begin a religious conversation with our Jewish brothers and sisters. This is based on the assumption that Judaism is equivalent to the Hebrew Bible. Yet the truth is that Judaism has developed and progressed over the centuries just as Christianity has. And although I am not discouraging anyone from talking about the

Synagogues are generally administered by elected members who make up a council. The rabbi (which is an earned and not a hereditary title) leads the synagogue. Priests and Levites (both hereditary titles) are honored in Orthodoxy, but not usually in other Jewish movements.

“The Sabbath is a day of rest for the sake of life . . . It is not an interlude but the climax of living.”
—Abraham Heschel

Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 14.

Hebrew Bible with Jews, it has been my experience that Jews are more readily interested in other items of discussion.

One of the concerns I have experienced most often in conversations with Jewish individuals has to do with identity. I have spoken with several Jewish people whose primary hindrance to Christianity is the supposition that they cease to be Jewish if they become Christian. This is understandable in many ways, since Christianity has become a “Gentile” religion through and through. Although it emerged out of Judaism in the first century AD, Christianity quickly became an international and ethnically diverse religion. At the same time, Christianity is less about losing one’s prior identity and more about gaining another identity, namely, of one who is, in the words of the Jewish apostle Paul, “in Messiah.” Stated differently, Jews do not lose their Jewish identity or heritage if they become Christians. On the contrary, as Jesus himself said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Jesus also said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). Jesus’ mission in life was not to abolish Jewish identity but rather to complete and amplify it.

This is the case for all people groups—Jewish ones included. When I became a Christian, for instance, I did not lose my identity as an American or as a son or as a brother. Rather, I began to understand that my identities as an American and as a son and as a brother are best understood from the lens of my primary identity as a Christian. My Christian identity illuminated and informed my identity as an American. I forever came to be defined by my identity “in Messiah.” I am a Christian before I am anything else. This is the same for Jewish people. Jesus does not demolish one’s former identity; he fulfills it.

Discussion Questions

1. How should Christians understand the Jewish religion given that Christianity emerged out of this religion and culture? How should Christians relate to Jews, especially in view of the extreme brutality that many Jews have experienced over the centuries under the authority of a culture that was “Christian”?
2. What is rabbinic Judaism? Why is it so important in the history of Judaism? What events led up to the emergence of this movement, and how has it changed the Jewish religion? What would Jesus have thought about this movement when it emerged in the second half of the first century AD?

3. Discuss the major branches of Judaism. Why are they so different? What is similar about the different branches of Judaism and the different branches of Christianity?
4. Based on the fact that many Jewish people today are not religiously observant and many don’t even believe in God, is it possible to be a “Christian atheist”? Why or why not?

Further Readings

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Islam: The Story of Submission

Although Islam is the youngest of the major world religions . . . [it] is the second largest and fastest-growing religion in the world. To speak of the world of Islam today is to refer not only to countries that stretch from North Africa to Southeast Asia but also to Muslim minority communities that exist across the globe. Thus, for example, Islam is the second or third largest religion in Europe and the Americas.

John Esposito

Islam is a religion, a civilization, a state, a social system, as well as a philosophy.

Yahiya Emerick

The [vast] majority of Muslims today live in south or south-east Asia. The universalism of Islam transcends the cultural boundaries of Arab civilization.

Vincent Cornell

Part I: The Beginning

In the beginning Allah—the God of the world—said, “Be!” and a giant object appeared before him like a ball. God ripped apart this ball, which we call heaven and earth, and separated it into two pieces. There was smoke everywhere. Allah said, “Come into being, willingly or not.” In submission to this God, all things came into being—willingly. Allah then spread out the earth as flat as the prairie and created mountains

that acted as giant pegs to keep the earth in place. God put the stars in orbit and established the necessary conditions for life. God created man out of dried clay from dark mud and placed him “as a drop of fluid” into a garden. From a drop of fluid to a clinging form to a lump of flesh and finally to a flesh-and-bones creature this man came into existence. He was designed to work and toil.

Before creating humans, Allah had created angels that were made of light and have no free will. Allah also created energy-based creatures called jinn that were made of fire. They, like humans, have free will. God commanded the angels and jinn to bow down before Adam, the first man. Iblis, a jinn later known as Satan, refused. “What prevented you from bowing down as I commanded you?” God demanded of Iblis. “I am better than him,” the defiant jinn replied: “You created me from fire and him from clay.” Many jinn were persuaded by Iblis to disobey God. In anger God banished Iblis from his presence and declared that on the day of judgment he would cast him down into the fires of hell. But in the meantime, God agreed to let Iblis roam the earth and lie in wait for those not following the straight path—the way of submission to Allah. Iblis immediately approached Adam and his wife and tricked them into eating from the tree God had commanded them not to approach. After the man and woman did so, their nakedness was exposed and God banished them from the garden. Although they put leaves on themselves as garments to cover their nakedness, God rejoined that “the garment of God-consciousness is the best of all garments.”

After creating heaven and earth in six symbolic days, God established himself on his throne. He did not rest on the seventh day, as God has no need of rest. Instead, Allah sits on his throne, high above his creation, where he directs and determines the outcome of earthly events. God has sent many prophets and messengers on earth to lead people to the straight path and to the performance of good deeds. About fifteen hundred years ago, Allah sent his final prophet and messenger upon the earth. The message this prophet gave is the last revelation until the day of judgment—at which time God will judge humans and jinns and send them to heaven or hell.¹

So goes the creation account of Islam. Although there are many commonalities between the Qur’anic and biblical accounts, let us examine the differences. The first major difference to note is that Hawwa or

1. The following creation story was pieced together from various portions of the Qur’an, specifically: 7:10–27; 9:4; 10:3–4; 13:1–4; 15:19, 26–50; 18:50–53; 20:121–24; 21:30–33; 23:12–15; 41:9–12; 81:25; 51:47–49. All quotations from the Qur’an come from M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur’an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Note that the terms *Allah* and *God* will be used interchangeably in this chapter for the Muslim deity.

Eve, who is never explicitly mentioned in the Qur’an by name, is neither made from Adam nor responsible for their transgression before God. If anyone is to blame for Adam and his wife’s eating from the forbidden tree, it is Iblis or Adam, but not Eve. The second difference is that Allah—“the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy” (Qur’an 1:1)²—quickly forgave Adam and his wife for their transgression and did not curse them or creation. As a result, there is no concept of original sin in Islam. In other words, none of the descendants of Adam and Eve ever received a sinful disposition. On the contrary, Allah gave free will to humans, who can do good or bad deeds as they choose.

The next difference between the Qur’anic and biblical accounts of creation is that Allah made a creature in addition to humans and angels called jinn. Coming from the Arabic word for *hidden*, jinn are invisible creatures that live in a parallel dimension. Besides humans, jinn are the only creatures that Allah created who have free will. All other creatures and creations—including angels, rocks, and animals—are by nature *Muslims*, that is, beings or things that are completely surrendered or submitted to Allah. Jinn, like humans, can be either good or bad. Good jinn do not interact with humans, but bad jinn—like Iblis—whisper bad thoughts to humans, haunt houses, possess people, and give predictions to fortune-tellers.³

The last difference to mention between the Qur’anic and biblical stories of creation is the Muslim emphasis on submission. When I teach on Islam, I distribute a handout to students that was given to me by a Muslim. The document reads boldly that “Jesus is a Muslim.” It’s a shocking declaration, and it takes students a moment to respond to this statement. One of the reasons I share this with students is to communicate to them that Islam understands itself to be all-encompassing. Although many of us in the Judeo-Christian world think of Islam as a religion that began with Muhammad several hundred years after Christ, Muslims claim that Islam has always existed and that the biblical characters that we claim as our own spiritual descendants, such as Abraham, Moses, and David, were devout Muslims. Indeed, Muslims assert, Jesus himself was a Muslim prophet whose teachings were later corrupted by his followers.

Part 2: Historical Origin

The story of Islam is one of the most impressive in the world. Exactly how a handful of marginalized people in the early part of the seventh

2. In this chapter all citations come from the Qur’an unless otherwise noted.

3. Yahiya Emerick, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Understanding Islam*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alpha, 2004), 24.

“We [Muslims] believe in God and in what has been sent down to us and to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes. We believe in what has been given to Moses, Jesus, and the prophets from their Lord. We do not make a distinction between any of them.”
—3:84

century were able to flourish into several thousand within a few years and propel themselves into virtual world dominance over the next centuries and become the second-largest global religion continues to intrigue onlookers. In this section we will trace the history of Islam in several stages: (1) Early Origins, (2) Rightly Guided Caliphate, (3) Dynastic Period, and (4) Modern Islam.

Early Origins

Although Muslims claim that Adam was the first Muslim—which is important to bear in mind when studying Islam—the origins of the Islamic world properly begin with Muhammad. Born into the minor Hashim clan within the much larger and prestigious Quraysh tribe in the year AD 570, Muhammad was orphaned at a young age and eventually taken under the guardianship of his paternal uncle, Abu Talib, who was the head of the Hashim clan.⁴ Mecca, the city where Muhammad was born, was of vital religious and economic importance in Arabia because it contained the Kaaba—a cubed shrine that housed hundreds of deities and that brought in countless pilgrims on their way to see and ritually circumambulate (or walk around) it. The Kaaba itself was believed to have been built by Adam and later rebuilt by Abraham and his son Ishmael.⁵

As an adult, Muhammad was known for his integrity and honesty. His nickname was *al-Amin*, “the trustworthy one.”⁶ By profession Muhammad was a caravan trader. Although originally of a lower socioeconomic status, he married a wealthy widow named Khadijah when he was twenty-five years old. He eventually came to be regarded as a powerful and respected figure in Meccan society. In addition to being an adept businessman, Muhammad had a contemplative side. Once a year he would leave Mecca and spend a month privately in a cave on Mount Hira. There he prayed and meditated. One night in AD 610, when he was forty years old, he experienced something on this cavernous mountain that forever changed his life—and more than a billion people since then.

As Muhammad was asleep, an invisible angel entered the cave and began squeezing the life out of the confused man, and demanded that he

4. Fred Donner, “Muhammad and the Caliphate,” in *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6.

5. Daniel Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 27.

6. Reza Aslan, *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* (New York: Random House, 2006), 32.

“Muhammad was middle-sized, did not have lank or crisp hair, was not fat, had a white, circular face, wide black eyes and long eyelashes. . . . The upper part of his nose was hooked; he was thick bearded, had smooth cheeks, a strong mouth and his teeth were set apart.”
—Annemarie Schimmel

Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1985), 34.

“recite” or “read” from a book the angel carried.⁷ Despite protestations by Muhammad that he did not know what to read, the angel—in a cascade of rolling demands—continued commanding him to “read.” Finally, the angel released its powerful grip. Then the frightened businessman heard clearly:

Read! In the name of your Lord who created: He created man from a clinging form. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One who taught by the pen, who taught man what he did not know. (96:1–4)

So goes the first revelation that Muhammad received, the rest of which would eventually comprise the Qur’an. Upon awakening, Muhammad raced outside the cave and saw the angel Gabriel standing on the horizon (53:1–11). Terrified, Muhammad fled the mountain and returned to his wife, Khadijah. She comforted him. Over the course of the next three years Muhammad privately received more revelations and gradually attracted followers from among his family and friends.⁸ Eventually, in about 613, Allah commanded Muhammad to “proclaim openly” what had been revealed to him (15:94).

This was a risky thing to do, for it meant confronting the religious, political, and economic powers in Mecca. Driven by his conviction that “there is no god but God,” Muhammad began preaching to the polytheists in Mecca that Allah alone was lord of the world and the only one worthy of worship. The people of means in Mecca—some of whom made a living from the pilgrims and traders visiting the Kaaba—leveled a boycott on Muhammad and his clan for three years that made the young prophet odious in the sight of his people. Shortly thereafter, Muhammad’s wife, Khadijah, as well as his protector, Abu Talib, died. He was left powerless and without protection. With no other choice, Muhammad fled Mecca at night to join the handful of people who were waiting for him in a cluster of villages that would later be renamed Medina—some 250 miles north of Mecca. Muslim historian Reza Aslan captures well this scene and the incredible events that soon followed:

It is a wonder—some would say a miracle—that this same man, who had been forced to sneak out of his home under cover of night to join the seventy or so followers anxiously awaiting him in a foreign land hundreds of miles away, would, in a few short years,

7. There are contrasting stories of how Muhammad received his first revelation. See Aslan, *No God but God*, 34–35.

8. Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam*, 55.

In 621, a year before the *Hijra*, Muslims believe Muhammad made a miraculous one-night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem—at the current-day Dome of the Rock—where he ascended to the seven levels of heaven. There he saw Adam, Jesus and John the Baptist, Joseph, Idris, Aaron, Moses, and Abraham. Though God originally commanded Muhammad’s followers to pray fifty times a day, Moses helped Muhammad get that number down to five times a day.

Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam*, 58–60.

Medina was originally referred to as Yathrib. It was changed when Muhammad moved there and came to be known as *Medinat un Nabi*, “the city of the prophet,” which was eventually shortened to *Medina*, “the city.”

“He who honors Muhammad must know that he is dead. But the one who honors the God of Muhammad must know that He is living and immortal.”
—Abu Bakr in 632

Montgomery Watt, “Islam: The Way of the Prophet,” in *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the World’s Religions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 314.

return to the city of his birth, not covertly or in darkness, but in the full light of day, with ten thousand men trailing peacefully behind him; and the same people who once tried to murder him in his sleep would instead offer up to him both the sacred city and the keys to the Ka’ba—unconditionally and without a fight, like a consecrated sacrifice.⁹

This secret journey Muhammad took to Medina in AD 622 is known as the *Hijra* (“migration”). It marks the official beginning of the Islamic calendar: year one. Over the next several years Muhammad battled with the Meccans and other tribes but managed to gain continued support and allies. By the time he returned to Mecca in 630, Islam was a mounting religion with distinct rituals, beliefs, practices—and armed men. At this time, Muhammad and his army of men marched (peacefully) to Mecca, took the keys to the Kaaba, forgave the Meccans and invited them into their fold, and ceremonially “cleansed” the shrine. One by one the prophet took the 365 idols in the Kaaba and smashed them to pieces before the astounded crowd—forever ending the practice of polytheism in Mecca and the Middle East at large. (Interestingly, because of his respect for Christianity, Muhammad preserved the statues of Jesus and Mary.)¹⁰

Rightly Guided Caliphate

Within two short years of Muhammad’s conquering of Mecca, he died in his home in Medina in 632. Because he—like the Buddha—did not appoint a successor, the Muslim community faced an unprecedented challenge. Who would take charge? Although there would never be another leader who could equal Muhammad as prophet and messenger, strong leadership was essential for the preservation and continuation of the new Muslim community or *Ummah*. There were several candidates capable of succeeding Muhammad who had known him personally and were related to him by marriage. By dawn of the morning after the prophet’s death in Medina, the Muslim assembly had chosen a successor.

The first successor or caliph to Muhammad was Abu Bakr (573–634). He was Muhammad’s father-in-law as well as his companion during the *Hijra* to Medina in 622. Abu Bakr had also been designated by Muhammad to lead prayers in Medina while Muhammad

9. Aslan, *No God but God*, 49.

10. See *ibid.*, 106.

was ill before his death.¹¹ Bakr, as the new caliph of Islam, experienced immediate difficulties. Now that Muhammad was dead, several Arab tribes rescinded their oaths to the newly formed Muslim *Ummah*, and some individuals even claimed that they were prophets.¹² Bakr and his army defeated these tribes and expanded Muslim territory beyond what Muhammad had subdued.

When Abu Bakr died in 634, succession went from Umar (d. 644) to Uthman (d. 656) to Ali (d. 661). Together this succession is known as the Rightly Guided Caliphate, since it was seen as the golden age of Islam when the *Ummah* or community was ruled by Muhammad’s religious principles. Like Abu Bakr, these men were each confronted with continual warfare and territorial expansion. Indeed, they were instrumental in setting a trajectory in Islamic history of ongoing conquering and extension of not only Arab but also non-Arab communities. Principal among this conquering and extension of non-Arab communities during the Rightly Guided Caliphate was the defeat of the Sassanid Empire (224–651) in Persia.

Years	Caliph	Highlight	Death
632–34	Abu Bakr	First successor to Muhammad	Natural death
634–44	Umar	Developed Muslim calendar	Assassinated
644–56	Uthman	Codified official Qur’anic version	Assassinated
656–61	Ali	Followers called Shiites	Assassinated

The first major schism experienced among Muslims occurred during this period and revolves around the caliphate of Ali, who was the fourth and last of the caliphs during the Rightly Guided Caliphate. This schism is called the First Civil War, which took place from 656–61—tellingly, the exact years of Ali’s reign. For his part, Ali was a significant person in Islamic history. He was not only one of Muhammad’s first converts but also his son-in-law. When he was chosen as caliph in 656, he was caught between rival forces and was never free from opposition. This led him to move the capital of the Islamic empire from Medina to Kufa in present-day Iraq. Unable to unite all the Muslim factions vying for power and rule, he was

11. Mircea Eliade and Ioan Couliano, *The Eliade Guide to World Religions* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 148.

12. Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam*, 117.

murdered in 661 by a group that had seceded from him called the Kharijites.¹³



Fig. 5.1. Map of the world in the seventh century AD, when Islam was emerging as a world religion.

Dynastic Period

The Rightly Guided Caliphate came to an end at the death of Ali. In its place emerged a new period of Islamic history that lasted from the seventh to the twentieth centuries. This was the transition from a religious community to a political empire. The first dynastic movement in Islam is called the Umayyad Dynasty (661–750). It began with the reign of Muawiya (602–80), who was part of the Quraysh tribe in Mecca and was the opponent of Muhammad and the Muslims until being conquered by them in 630. Eventually he was appointed governor of Syria by his cousin Uthman, who was the third caliph. Muawiya proved successful in this role and gained control of the Muslim community after the murder of Ali—with whom he had regularly fought—despite the fact that Muhammad’s grandson and Ali’s son, Hassan, had also made a claim to the caliphate. Muawiya moved the capital of the empire from Kufa to Damascus, Syria. There the Muslim empire expanded and enlarged during the next century under hereditary succession. As one author notes about the Umayyad Dynasty:

During their tenure, the borders of the empire expanded in all directions, from China to France. Islamic learning flourished, and the major traditions of Islamic Law began to be established. Hundreds of books were written every year on every subject imaginable, from gardening to politics. Free public hospitals and schools were set up

13. Adam J. Silverstein, *Islamic History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16.

in every city and town, and Muslim scientists and philosophers were busy making new discoveries and organizing the knowledge they had acquired from their subject nations.¹⁴

Despite the successes of the Umayyad Dynasty, internal and external factions were always close at hand. A Second Civil War (680–92) erupted after Muawiya’s death, which portended the temporal reign of this dynasty. In 750 the Abbasid family, which claimed descendancy from the prophet Muhammad’s uncle, overthrew the Umayyad Dynasty—marking the beginning of a new era. The Abbasid Dynasty (750–1258) moved the capital from Damascus to Baghdad, which was close to the old capital of the Persian Sassanid Empire. The period of the Abbasid Dynasty was one of wealth and continual advances in science, literature, and mathematics. It was also the time of Muslim missions eastward into India and ultimately China. Eventually, the empire was too unwieldy to maintain, and many regional caliphates emerged that took control of various regions in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

One of the more important developments in Islamic history at this time was the migration of Turks from Central Asia westward. This resulted in the Great Seljuk Empire (1037–1194), which was a conglomeration of regional empires. It was due to the Seljuk Empire’s disconnected realms, in fact, that the Christians were able to retake different regions of it during the Crusades.¹⁵ In the thirteenth century another pivotal figure in the history of Islam arrived on the scene. Later known as Genghis Khan or “Great Emperor” (d. 1227), this Mongolian-born warrior founded the Mongol Empire (1206–1368) and conquered virtually all the territories from Asia to Iraq. In 1258 one of Genghis Khan’s grandsons killed the last Abbasid caliph in Baghdad and ravaged the city. And so for the first time in Islamic history, “a significant part of the Islamic world had been subjected to the domination of a non-Muslim power.”¹⁶

Although the Mongols were powerful warriors and were initially impervious to the Muslim religion, they eventually came to accept it and integrated Islam into their culture. As their empire dwindled, regional empires emerged. Two of the most enduring of these Muslim empires were the Mogul (1526–1858) and the Ottoman empires. The Mogul Empire ruled over vast portions of Greater India, which had been reached by Muslim armies as early as the eighth century before being dispossessed by the British in 1858.

14. Emerick, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Understanding Islam*, 326.

15. Donner, “Muhammad and the Caliphate,” 56.

16. *Ibid.*, 59.

Two of the most enduring achievements of the Abbasid Dynasty are the Dome of the Rock and *Arabian Nights*. The Dome is a shrine in Jerusalem built upon the rock believed to have been the site of Abraham’s binding of Isaac and of Muhammad’s night journey. *Arabian Nights* is a famous collection of Middle Eastern stories and folk tales.

The Crusades were a series of battles fought between Christians and the Great Seljuk Empire in the Holy Land from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries.

Dynasty	Dates	Capital	Highlights
Rightly Guided	632–61	Medina	Ruled by caliphs who knew Muhammad personally and followed him closely; came to an end after Ali was assassinated
Umayyad	661–750	Damascus	Completed conquest of Persian and eastern (Byzantine) Roman empires; came to an end at Abbasid slave revolt
Abbasid	750–1258	Baghdad	Produced wealth, power, education and progress, and dominant culture; replaced by a series of sultanates after Moguls destroyed the capital in the thirteenth century
Seljuk	1037–1194	Iran	Covered a vast area from Central Asia to the Middle East; served as the target of the First Crusade
Mamluk	1250–1517	Cairo	Made up predominantly of former slaves; dealt the first decisive blow to the Moguls by halting them in Palestine
Safaved	1501–1733	Iran	Developed Twelver school of Shiite Islam; produced beautiful art and architecture; dismantled by surrounding tribes
Mogul	1526–1858	India	Most well known for new trade routes, art, and architecture (Taj Mahal); dismantled after the British gained control over Indian Empire and later divided the empire into India and Pakistan
Ottoman	1300–1922	Istanbul	Reigned over huge area, including Asia and Europe; dismantled during First World War by Turkish and European powers

The Ottoman Empire (1300–1922) reigned over large areas in Eastern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. This empire is most well known to Christians because of the conquering of Constantinople in 1453 and its subsequent renaming as Istanbul. After sacking (Christian) Constantinople, the Ottoman Turks also overpowered Muslim kingdoms—first wresting Cairo, Jerusalem, Mecca, and Medina from the Mamluk Sul-

tanate (1250–1517) and then taking Baghdad from the Safaved Dynasty (1501–1733). Islamic historian Adam Silverstein summarizes the story of the Ottoman Empire well:

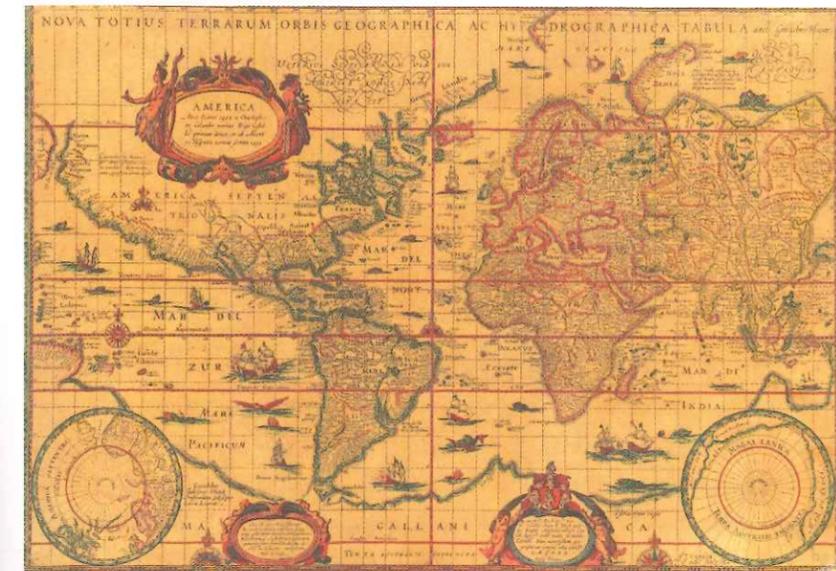


Fig. 5.2. Map of the world in the seventeenth century AD, when (Muslim) Mogul and Ottoman empires were dominant in the East.

By the mid-16th century, the Ottomans had created a strong, centralized, and cosmopolitan empire that incorporated some of Islam's—and the world's—greatest cities and resources, with footholds in Europe, Asia, and Africa. But being cosmopolitan proved to have both positive and negative results: on the one hand, trade and culture in Ottoman cities were boosted through the [inhabitation of Jews, Christians, and differing Muslims]. . . . On the other hand, by the end of the 19th century, it would be clear that there was very little to unite this patchwork of populations.¹⁷

Modern Islam

Contemporary Islam is diverse. It includes more than fifty Muslim states—let alone all the non-Islamic states with growing Muslim populations—that vary in language, ethnicity, customs, politics, and economic systems. Most of these states were colonized by Europeans, and many of them are officially countries with less than a century of existence. When the colonial era ended after World War II and countries such as England and France pulled out of their colonial territories, many

17. Silverstein, *Islamic History*, 39.

“Islam represents a basic unity of belief within a rich cultural diversity. Islamic practice expresses itself in different ways within a vast array of cultures that extend from North Africa to Southeast Asia as well as Europe and America.”
—John Esposito

John Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

Muslim states began to emerge.¹⁸ In this way, the twentieth century has been one of the most innovative and explosive centuries in Islamic history.

Group	Response to Modernity
Secularist	Religion is private and should be separate from politics.
Traditionalist	Islamic law and doctrine should guide society.
Revivalist (Fundamentalist)	Society should return to original aims of Islam and purge non-Muslim ways of life from society.
Modernist	It appropriates the best of the West but resists assimilation into Western culture and values.

One of the most pressing issues in Islamic history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has to do with modernity. In short, what has been the impact of modernity on Islam?¹⁹ Because of the diversity of Islam, there are many responses to this question. The first is that Islam should progress toward adaptation and modernization. This can be seen in the work of Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–98), an educator and politician in India during the time of British occupation. At the height of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 against the British, Sayyid Ahmad encouraged his countrymen to remain loyal to British governance and to embrace India’s modernization. Instead of fighting the changes taking place in his homeland, he argued that the well-being of Muslims “lies in leading a quiet life under the benign rule of the British government.”²⁰ He also believed that adaptation of Islam to modern science, reason, and technology was not a rejection of the Muslim religion but rather a “new theology” that propelled it forward and realigned it with its original vision.²¹

A similar aim for Islam was secularization. This is perhaps most apparent with the agenda of the first Turkish president, Mustafa Kemal (1881–1938), known as Ataturk or “Father of the Turks.” When he abolished the caliphate and the Ottoman Empire in Turkey in the early 1920s, he immediately “established a thoroughly secular state . . . suppressing or marginalizing religious institutions, and replacing them with European-based

18. S. V. R. Nasr, “European Colonialism and the Emergence of Modern Muslim States,” in Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam*, 552.

19. Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam*, 259.

20. John Donahue and John Esposito, *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 40.

21. John Esposito, “Contemporary Islam: Reformation or Revolution?” in Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam*, 648.

laws and institutions.”²² Although Ataturk was not opposed to religion, he ensured that the new Turkish state separated Islamic law from secular law, and he created a new culture of progress and modernization rather than tradition and conservatism.

On the opposite end of this spectrum were revivalists who reacted strongly and negatively to modernization. Two individuals who embody this response to modernity were Hasan al-Banna (1906–49) and Sayyid Qutb (1906–66). Al-Banna was an Egyptian teacher who founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 and soon moved its headquarters to Cairo. The designated purpose was to promote Muslim piety, institute social policies, and purge secular influences from Islamic societies. The Brotherhood believed that Islam was a comprehensive way of life and that religion and politics should not be separated, as was being done in Turkey. After al-Banna was assassinated by Egyptian police in 1949, the Muslim Brotherhood took on a more extremist and violent posture as it came to be led by Qutb, who became the “ideologue of radical Islam” for many later Muslim extremists or fundamentalists.²³

Finally, between these two extreme positions are modernists who seek to steer a middle course between secularization and fundamentalism. They seek to learn from the West and to appropriate all the best of science, medicine, technology, and education without compromising their religious beliefs and Muslim heritage. An example of a modernist leader is Abdurrahman Wahid (1940–2009), who was the first democratically elected president of Indonesia.²⁴ Although a Muslim in a predominantly Muslim state, he insisted on religious pluralism in a country that is influenced and inhabited by Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians. Like many others in that country, Wahid advocated separation of religion and politics.

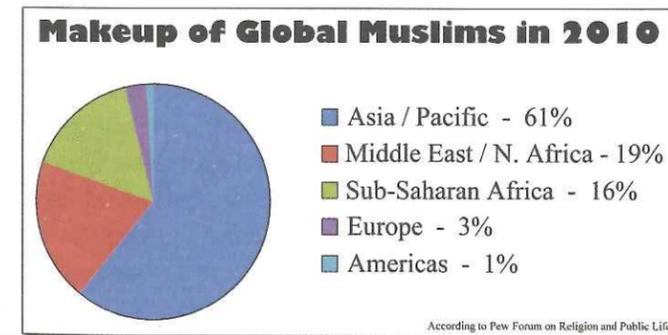


Fig. 5.3. Makeup of global Muslims by region in 2010 according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

22. Ibid., 652.

23. Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam*, 196.

24. Ibid., 69.

What does the future hold for Islam? Because Islam is so diverse, the response will vary according to any number of factors, including region, country, education, family background, denominational affiliation, and socioeconomic standing. But one thing most Muslims have in common is that they are at a crucial juncture in their history. Muslim scholar John Esposito responds to this question well:

Qur'anic readings are preceded by the phrase: "I take refuge with God from Satan, the accursed one," and followed by: "God Almighty has spoken truly!"

Malise Ruthven, *Islam: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21.

Muslims today are at a critical crossroads. They are faced with making radical social, political, and economic changes that the Western world has had many decades to implement gradually. Amidst increasing globalization, Muslims strive to survive and compete, often with limited resources, and to preserve their identity in a world dominated (culturally as well as politically and economically) by the West. For many, the role of religion is critical in the preservation of their personal and national identities. It provides a sense of continuity between their Islamic heritage and modern life. For some, the temptation is to cling to the authority and security of the past. Others seek to follow new paths, convinced that their faith and a tradition of Islamic reform that has existed throughout the ages can play a critical role in restoring the vitality of Muslim societies.²⁵

In the end, Islam—although not as diverse as Christianity—is nevertheless quite varied in its responses to modernity. Muslims, like Christians, will be confronted with innumerable challenges as they seek to live out their beliefs in an ever-changing world.

Part 3: Religious Writings

The Qur'an

Compared with Hinduism or Buddhism, Islam has few religious writings. Besides the sayings of Muhammad, which are important to the history and interpretation of the religion, the Qur'an is the centerpiece of Islamic thought. Its significance within the Islamic tradition is difficult to overestimate. As a contemporary translator of the Qur'an notes:

The Qur'an is the supreme authority in Islam. It is the fundamental and paramount source of the creed, rituals, ethics, and laws of the Islamic religion. It is the book that "differentiates" between right and

25. Ibid., 66–67.

wrong, so that nowadays, when the Muslim world is dealing with such universal issues as globalization, the environment, combating terrorism and drugs, issues of medical ethics, and feminism, evidence to support the various arguments is sought in the Qur'an. This supreme status stems from the belief that the Qur'an is the word of God, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad via the archangel Gabriel, and intended for all times and places.²⁶

It is critical to recognize that the Qur'an is the source not only for theological beliefs and ritual practice in the Islamic world but also for such things as Arabic grammar and language, calligraphy, the arts and sciences, law, philosophy, and politics. As a fifteenth-century Muslim jurist once quipped, "Everything is based on the Qur'an."²⁷

Its name literally meaning "reading" or "reciting" in Arabic, the Qur'an is a series of revelations that Muhammad received from Gabriel from 610 until his death in 632. Although some scholars—even Islamic scholars—have argued that "there is no historical justification" for the view that Muhammad was illiterate given that he was a successful merchant, Muslims have traditionally claimed that the prophet was unable to read or write.²⁸ This interpretation validates Muhammad's revelation from the archangel as a miracle. Like Joseph Smith in the nineteenth century, Muhammad went into a trance as he experienced these revelations over the course of two-plus decades. After receiving a revelation, he memorized it and dictated it to a close friend, who recorded it on parchment or leather scrolls. He also taught the revelation to other close friends to memorize.

The first caliph, Abu Bakr (r. 632–34), is traditionally viewed by Muslims to have been responsible for having the first Qur'an written down after a battle in which many of those who had memorized the Qur'an were killed. The book was arranged, recorded on paper, and placed in the care of one of Muhammad's widows. A decade later the third caliph, Uthman (r. 644–56), noticed that many non-Arab Muslims were making their own versions of the Qur'an. As was the case with rival interpretations and versions of the Buddha's teaching, these Qur'anic versions differed from one another. As a result, Uthman ordered an official version to be written (based on Abu Bakr's copy), and distributed duplicates to the different regions of the empire so that only one version would be used. The faulty versions were to be burned.²⁹

26. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, "Introduction," in *The Qur'an*, ix.

27. Ibid.

28. Aslan, *No God but God*, 35.

29. Emerick, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Islam*, 239–40. Certain scholars argue that the Qur'an betrays a context much later than seventh-century Arabia and suggest that the

"Muslims believe that the Quran, as well as the Torah and Gospels, is based on a tablet written in Arabic that exists in heaven with God. They believe that the teaching of these scriptures, revealed at different times in history, originates from this source. The Quran, recited by Muhammad as it was revealed to him by the angel Gabriel, and later recorded in Arabic, is thus believed to be the direct word of God."

—John Esposito

Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam*, 10.

The Qur'an is organized into 114 chapters or *suras* ("rows"). It is roughly the same size as the New Testament. Like Paul's letters in the Christian Bible, the Qur'an is arranged according to length rather than chronology or theme. The only exception is the first *sura*, which is called the Fatiha or "Opening." It serves as the introduction to the Qur'an and is prayed daily by observant Muslims. It reads as follows:

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy! Praise belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy, Master of the Day of Judgement. It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help. Guide us to the straight path: the path of those You have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray. (1:1-7)

About two-thirds of the Qur'an—eighty-five chapters in total—was delivered to Muhammad in Mecca, while the rest was delivered afterward in Medina.

When I read this chapter to my students, what catches their attention most often are the many references to Allah's mercy. Contrary to what many in popular culture think of Allah, the god of Islam, Muslims believe Allah to be extremely merciful. In fact, the first two references to Allah in the Qur'an are that he is the Lord *and* giver of mercy!

Each of the 114 *suras* is given a special name taken from a theme or word in each chapter. Scholars divide the messages as having an origin in either Mecca or Medina. The Meccan revelations are the oldest parts of the Qur'an, which Gabriel gave to Muhammad before he had made the *Hijra* or migration to Medina. The Meccan *suras* emphasize the unity of God (since the Meccans believed in many gods) and the legitimacy of Muhammad as a prophet (since the Meccans did not originally accept him as such). A Meccan *sura* that illustrates these concepts is Sura 35:

People, remember God's grace towards you. Is there any creator other than God to give you sustenance from the heavens and earth? There is no god but Him. How can you be so deluded? If they call you [speaking to Muhammad] a liar, many messengers before you were also called liars: it is to God that all things will be returned. People, God's promise is true, so do not let the present life deceive you. (35:3-5)

The Medinan *suras* have a different context from the Meccan ones. Whereas Muslims were a tiny and persecuted minority in Mecca, for instance, they were a powerful and established community in Medina. Revelations at this later time—in Medina—emphasize communal laws and practices, and speak about the "people of the book," that is, Chris-

Qur'an was recorded a century or two after Muhammad's time. See especially John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004).

tians and Jews, with whom the Muslims interacted increasingly after living in Medina.³⁰

The content of the Qur'an is varied. It addresses a range of issues surrounding the *Ummah* in Mecca and in Medina. One of the more intriguing aspects of the Qur'an for Christians is its reference to countless biblical persons and events. This is especially the case for Jesus, who is mentioned many times—always positively. The Qur'an recognizes Jesus as a great prophet from God who gave the Gospels to his community. Jesus is regarded as being born of the Virgin Mary (19:20-22) and a miracle worker filled with the Holy Spirit (2:87, 252-53). At the same time, the Qur'an asserts that Jesus was not crucified and that he came only to deliver the message of Allah (3:55). As one *sura* explains:

This [Qur'an] is knowledge for the Hour: do not doubt it. Follow Me for this is the right path; do not let Satan hinder you, for he is your sworn enemy. When Jesus came with clear signs he said, "I have brought you wisdom; I have come to clear up some of your differences for you. Be mindful of [Allah] and obey me: [Allah] is my Lord and your Lord. Serve Him: this is the straight path." (43:61-65)

Muslims strongly declare that besides being a Muslim prophet sent from Allah, Jesus was not God's Son, since God can have no equals. This is asserted many times in the Qur'an. As one of the last *suras* proclaims, "Say, [Allah] is God the One, God the eternal. He begot no one nor was He begotten. No one is comparable to Him" (112).

The Hadith and Sunna

In addition to the Qur'an, one more body of literature is important to the Islamic tradition. Called the Sunna ("trodden path") or the Hadith ("traditions"), these are stories about Muhammad's life that were collected and circulated orally until being written down decades and even centuries after the prophet's death. Sometimes regarded as synonymous, a hadith is technically a narration of the prophet's life—which is sometimes difficult to verify as authentic—while a sunna is a custom or practice of the prophet in that narration.³¹ There are multiple versions of the Hadith, since many groups collected and recorded Muhammad's sayings. Six of the most authoritative—according to Sunni Muslims—are those assembled by Imam Bukhari (d. 870), Muslim b. al-Hajjaj (d. 875),

30. Abdel Haleem, "Introduction," xvii.

31. Charles Braden, *The Scriptures of Mankind: An Introduction* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 453.

Abu Dawud (d. 879), al-Tirmidhi (d. 882), Ibn Maja (d. 887), and al-Nasai (d. 915). These are known collectively as The Authentic Six, the first two of which enjoy special privilege.³²

The Hadith are important to Muslims because of their focus on Muhammad. Indeed, whereas the Qur'an contains the words of God and no one else—Muhammad is rarely mentioned in the book and he did not write it or add anything to it—the Hadith is focused on the stories of the prophet's life. According to pious Muslims, Muhammad lived a virtually perfect life, and his words, actions, habits, and customs should be imitated by Muslims today.³³ Stated differently, the Hadith is the Qur'an in action. The reasoning for this is straightforward: since Allah chose Muhammad to be the recipient of his message, he must know better than anyone else how to live out the message he received. In this way, the Hadith and the Sunna are the primary sources for the correct interpretation of the Qur'an. This includes formal interpretations about doctrine and practice as well as informal anecdotes about how to comb one's hair or brush one's teeth. Below are examples taken from the Hadith:

Every child conforms to the true religion [Islam]: It is his parents who make him a Jew [or] a Christian.
 You should worship God as if you see Him. If you do not see Him, He still sees you.
 You will recognize the faithful in their having mercy upon each other and in their love for one another.
 God has no mercy on him who is not merciful to others.
 Your body has a right over you, your soul has a right over you, and your wife has a right over you.
 Never did God allow anything more hateful than divorce. With God, the most detestable of all things allowed is divorce.
 No one eats better food than that which he eats out of the work of his own hand. God did not raise a prophet who did not also pasture goats. Yes! I used to pasture them for the people of Mecca.³⁴

Part 4: Beliefs

There are six primary articles of belief in Islam. These include belief in (1) God, (2) angels, (3) scriptures, (4) prophets, (5) predestination, and (6) heaven and hell and a divine judgment. At face value, these beliefs are

32. Ibid., 455; Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam*, 13.

33. Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam*, 89.

34. Gwilym Beckerlegge, ed., *The World Religions Reader* (London: Routledge, 2001), 167–69.

The Shariah (or Islamic law) is based on the Qur'an and the Sunna. Islamic scholars of law are called the *ulama*, a very important group in the Islamic tradition.

similar to those found in Christianity, which is Islam's closest relative as well as the religion that puts most emphasis on belief. Differences begin to emerge in these two religions, however, when we move from generalities about believing in God and in the Holy Scriptures to believing in Jesus as God's Son or in the New Testament as the inspired Word of God.

Fig. 5.4. The name of Allah or "God" in Arabic.

The first article of faith in Islam is belief in Allah. Although alluded to above, it is important to underscore that Muslims do not believe in just any God. Rather, they believe in "the God," which is the literal meaning of the word *Allah* in Arabic. As one author points out, "To proclaim *Allah* in Arabic is to deny the possibility of any co-existing deities, which is why the pagan Arabs avoided using the term."³⁵ Muslims, in fact, are adamant about the oneness of God. Practically speaking, this means that God's existence excludes any possible existence of another god—whether Jesus or Krishna or any other being. (In fact, to ascribe divinity to Jesus is a major and unforgivable sin in Islam known as *shirk* or "sharing.") At the same time, Muslims believe that Allah is the same God revealed to Jews and Christians, although both groups eventually distorted the true message they received. A good example of the qualities and attributes of Allah is found in the following verse, taken from the longest chapter in the Qur'an, called "The Cow":

God: there is no god but Him, the Ever Living, the Ever Watchful. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. All that is in the heavens and in the earth belongs to Him. Who is there that can intercede with Him except by His leave? He knows what is before them and what is behind them, but they do not comprehend any of His knowledge except what He wills. His throne extends over the heavens and the earth; it does not weary Him to preserve them both. He is the Most High, the Tremendous. (2:255)

35. Raana Bokhari and Mohammad Seddon, *The Complete Illustrated Guide to Islam: A Comprehensive Guide to the History, Philosophy, and Practice of Islam around the World with More than 500 Beautiful Illustrations* (Leicester, England: Hermes House, 2009), 116.

The second article of faith in Islam is belief in the angels. Like Jews and Christians, Muslims believe that angels perform different functions for God—including protecting and relaying God’s message to human beings. Muslims assert that angels are made from light and can materialize in any way that is necessary. But unlike humans and jinn, they do not have free will. Thus, all angels are good and completely submissive to God’s will. According to many Muslims, each person is attended to by two angels that record the person’s daily actions, which will be the source of that person’s judgment on the last day.³⁶

Messenger	Message
Moses	Torah
David	Psalms
Jesus	Gospels
Muhammad	Qur’an

The third and fourth articles are belief in the prophets and in the messages these prophets gave as recorded in the scriptures. However, Muhammad is God’s final prophet and messenger. His prophecy confirmed and completed all revealed messages from Adam’s day to the day of judgment.³⁷ Whereas the term *prophet* refers to Muhammad’s role of preaching God’s word to the people, the word *messenger* refers to the written message he received from Gabriel as found in the Qur’an. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is exceptional for someone to be regarded as both a prophet and a messenger. For the most part, this privileges Moses in the Jewish tradition and Jesus in the Christian tradition. Muslims believe that God gave truthful messages to them and made covenants with their people. However, Muslims also believe that Jews and Christians altered and distorted the Judeo-Christian writings as they have come down to us in the Bible (5:12–14). The Qur’an, by contrast—the final revelation of God—contains the truthful accounts of the messages of Moses and Jesus. As the Qur’an asserts, “We sent to you [Muhammad] the scripture with the truth, confirming the scriptures that came before it, and with final authority over them” (5:48). Just as Muslims sometimes appeal to the doctrine of abrogation—by which later *suras* in the Qur’an abrogate or rescind former revelations—so Muhammad’s revelations

Muslims believe that Gabriel is the angel who revealed God’s message to Muhammad, while Michael is the angel who controls the weather.

36. Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam*, 28.

37. *Ibid.*, 19.

to the people in the seventh century are the final authority relative to revelations given by former prophets.

The last two articles of belief in Islam are predestination and the day of judgment. Below is a section of the Qur’an that encompasses both of these concepts:

I [Allah] created jinn and mankind only to worship Me: I want no provision from them, nor do I want them to feed Me—God is the Provider, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty. The evildoers, like their predecessors, will have a share of torment—they need not ask Me to hasten it—and woe betide the disbelievers on their promised Day. (51:56–60)

Christian Doctrine	Muslim View
Original sin	Since Adam and Eve were forgiven, no taint of sin was passed on to descendants.
Trinity	God is one and has absolutely no partners.
Atonement	Jesus did not die on the cross, nor is there any need for him to do, so since there is no original sin.
Priesthood	There is no priesthood in Sunni Islam, although this concept does exist in Shia Islam.

According to Islam, God is the master and people are his servants. Stated differently, Allah is the submitter and all of Allah’s creation are the submitted (ones). Although human beings and jinn (or genies) were originally created by Allah to give him worship, “there is no compulsion in religion” (2:256), so humans and jinn are free to do good deeds or bad as they desire. In this way, there is a paradox in Islam, given that God determines or predestines all things while human beings, in particular, exercise free will. On the last day, Muslims believe, Jesus will return to earth and defeat an antichrist figure known as al-Dajjal (“False Messiah”). On earth, Jesus will reign in righteousness for forty years and marry before judging the living and the dead.³⁸ On the day of judgment, everyone will line up before Jesus, and he will determine whether one is resurrected to heaven or to hell. Those who did good deeds and submitted to Allah will experience a “Garden of Bliss” (10:9) in the life to come. Those who did bad deeds and did not submit to Allah will be the “losers in the Hereafter” (3:85), eternally experiencing “agonizing torment” (10:4) in hell (23:102–4).

38. *Ibid.*, 28–29.

Part 5: Worship Practices

The practices of Islam are best summarized in what are called the five pillars of the faith. These five pillars serve as the foundation of Islamic practice. The first is the most basic, which is called the declaration of faith: Muslims confess that there is only one God, Allah—the God—and that Muhammad is his final prophet and messenger. This is the primary confession of Muslims, the first step that one must take on the road to converting to Islam. It is tantamount to affirming one's belief in the Trinity at baptism in the Christian faith or taking refuge in the Three Jewels in Buddhism. I was once in Casablanca, Morocco, visiting a beautiful mosque with the tallest minaret³⁹ in the world. What caught my attention as I stood gazing upon the intricate design of the mosque was oneness or unity—and for good reason. The oneness of God is a crucial tenet in Islam. It is found in countless passages in the Qur'an, such as the following: "God: there is no god but Him" (2:255). In fact, whereas the unforgivable sin in Christianity is to blaspheme the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:28–29), the unforgivable sin in Islam is to reject the oneness of God and to ascribe a partner—such as Jesus—to him:



Fig. 5.5.
The Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca, Morocco, which boasts the world's tallest minaret.

39. A minaret is a tall spire with a small opening that is attached to a mosque for the call to prayer. Its distinct architectural design is visible in many Muslim countries.

Five Pillars	Description
Confession	Belief in Allah and final prophet Muhammad
Prayer	Five prayers a day facing Kaaba in Mecca
Almsgiving	Giving 2.5 percent of wealth to the needy
Fasting	Fasting in the month of Ramadan
Pilgrimage	Making a pilgrimage to Mecca once in one's lifetime

God does not forgive the joining of partner with Him: anything less than that He forgives to whoever He will, but anyone who joins partners with God has fabricated a tremendous sin. (4:48)

The second pillar in Islam is prayer. Muslims pray (or worship) five times a day at different intervals (set by a calendar) from dawn to dusk. I distinctly remember having lunch one day in the ancient city of Jericho in Palestine. As I was eating falafel and hummus, the muezzin (a person standing atop the minaret in a nearby mosque) called for prayer.⁴⁰ The owner of the restaurant obediently pulled out his prayer mat and began praying in the middle of the restaurant. This man's piety underscores the importance of prayer in the Muslim world. While it can be performed alone—any place in the world that is considered clean—it is best done with fellow believers.

Observing Muslims in prayer is striking. Muslims—separated by gender—stand shoulder to shoulder in distinct rows facing Mecca. They follow a strict yet simple ritual of standing, bowing, kneeling, touching the ground with their foreheads (at the exact moment they are to say that God is the highest), and sitting. The ideal place for Muslims to pray is at a mosque. Although there are set times throughout the day to pray there, the busiest time each week is Friday afternoon. Called *Jumuah* ("Friday prayer"), Friday afternoon prayer at the mosque is based on the following Medinan *sura*:

Believers! When the call to prayer is made on the day of congregation, hurry towards the reminder of God and leave off your trading—that

40. The muezzin calls out the following in Arabic for prayer: "God is most great, God is most great, God is most great, God is most great. I witness that there is no god but God; I witness that there is no god but God. I witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God. I witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God. Come to prayer; come to prayer! Come to prosperity; come to prosperity! God is most great. God is most great. There is no god but God." See Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam*, 19.

Muslims believe that Friday is the day "on which God created Adam, the day Adam was sent to earth from heaven, the day he died, the day when the Final Judgment will come and the day on which there is an hour, toward the end, just before sunset, when all prayers are answered. Islam teaches that all prayers are witnessed by the angels, but that on Friday, the angels record all those who go to the mosque and pray. As a reward, they are forgiven all sins committed between that Friday and the next."

—Raana Bokhari and Mohammad Seddon

Bokhari and Seddon, *The Complete Illustrated Guide to Islam*, 162.

is better for you, if only you knew—then when the prayer has ended, disperse in the land and seek out God's bounty. (62:9–10)

Every time I attend a Friday prayer service at a mosque, the procedure has been the same. Just as Jews are encouraged to make haste to worship God on Shabbat—this is most apparent on Friday afternoons at the Western Wall in Jerusalem—so Muslims hurry into the mosque on Friday afternoon, say prayers, socialize with each other, and then return to work or other daily activities.

The third practice of Islam is obligatory almsgiving or *Zakat* (“purification”). Islam teaches that wealth is a blessing from Allah and that those blessed must share their blessing with others. This has traditionally been interpreted to signify that Muslims give 2.5 percent of their wealth to the needy. Although Muslim governments historically collected this tax, nowadays people distribute their wealth based on individual conscience.⁴¹ The recipients of this required tax or almsgiving are stipulated in the following Medinan *sura*:

Alms are meant only for the poor, the needy, those who administer them, those whose hearts need winning over, to free slaves and help those in debt, for God's cause, and for travelers in need. This is ordained by God; God is all knowing and wise. (9:60)

The fourth ritual practice in Islam is fasting during Ramadan, which is the ninth month in the Islamic calendar. Ramadan is important to Muslims because it was believed to have been the month of the first message Muhammad received from Gabriel. During Ramadan all Muslims who are physically able abstain from food, drink, and sexual activity during daylight hours for the purpose of reflecting on our human frailty and remembering the less fortunate. Muslims eat and drink before dawn, and after sundown they prepare a more elaborate communal meal, which contains special foods that are served only during this time.

I was once invited to a Ramadan feast. Although we in the Christian tradition tend to look upon fasting as a solemn occasion, the mood at this feast—despite the fact that Muslim believers had been fasting all day—was joyous and celebratory. It was more like an Easter Sunday meal than an Ash Wednesday service. Toward the end of Ramadan, Muslims celebrate what is called the Night of Power. This is the anniversary of the night Muhammad received his first revelation of the Qur'an from Gabriel. The monthlong fast of Ramadan ends with the Eid festivities

41. Ruthven, *Islam*, 141.

“[Ramadan] is a month of intense spiritual renewal and reflection for Muslims, when they call upon God and re-establish their covenant with him. The nights of Ramadan are marked by an extra prayer . . . where the whole Quran is recited over the month.”
—Raana Bokhari and Mohammad Seddon

Bokhari and Seddon, *The Complete Illustrated Guide to Islam*, 156.

when Muslims pay a special tax to the needy and exchange presents with one another. This feast, formally called Eid al-Fitr (“the Feast of the Breaking of the Fast”), is similar to the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah or the Christian celebration of Christmas.

The final practice in Islam is *Hajj* or “pilgrimage.” It is a requirement of each physically healthy and financially able Muslim to make a pilgrimage to Mecca once in his or her lifetime. The prescription is based on the following Medinan *sura*:

We showed Abraham the site of the House [Kaaba], saying, “Do not assign partners to Me. Purify My House for those who circle around it, those who stand to pray, and those who bow and prostrate themselves. Proclaim the Pilgrimage to all people. They will come to you on foot and on every kind of lean camel, emerging from every deep mountain pass to attain benefits and mention God's name, on specified days, over the livestock He has provided for them. Feed yourselves and the desperately poor from them. Then let the pilgrims perform their acts of cleansing, fulfill their vows, and circle around the Ancient house.” All this [is ordained by God]: anyone who honours the sacred ordinances of God will have good rewards from his Lord. (22:26–30)

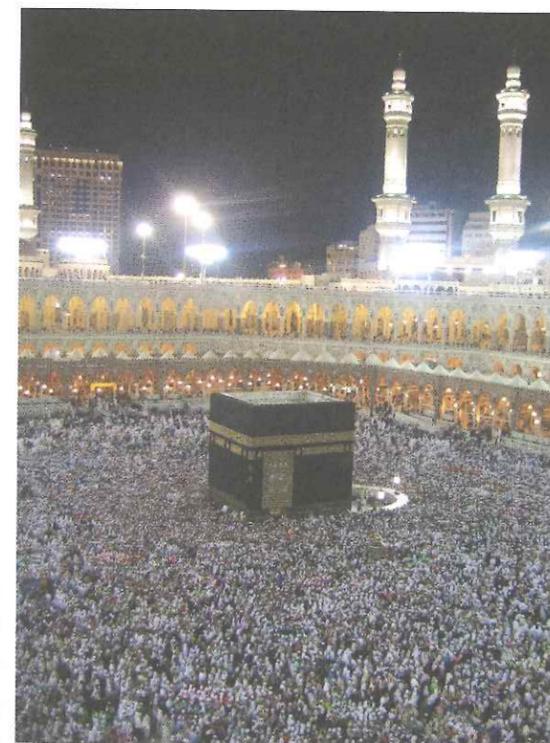


Fig. 5.6. Muslims circumambulating the Kaaba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, during the *Hajj*.

There is sometimes recognized a sixth pillar of Islam called jihad (“struggle”). Often seen as controversial by non-Muslims, this wide-ranging term can refer to struggle against one's ego, evil, injustice, or oppression. Although this mostly includes spiritual warfare, it sometimes includes armed struggle and violence.

The *Hajj* is performed during the last month of the Islamic calendar and consists of observing set rituals. For instance, men and women wear simple clothing to symbolize their equality before God, circle the Kaaba seven times to signal their entry into the divine presence, pray at specific times and locations, and drink water from the well believed to have been provided for Hagar and Ishmael. Some pilgrims also make the trek to Medina, also in current-day Saudi Arabia, in order to pay respect to Muhammad, who is buried there in the Mosque of the Prophet, which is both the second holiest site in the Islamic world and the oldest mosque in the world.⁴²

Part 6: Point of Contact

Given the ongoing attention that Islam has received in the news especially in the last decade, many Westerners are now aware of the basic beliefs of Islam and even some of its history. Some Westerners are even familiar with portions of the Qur'an and specific terms from the Islamic religion. In this section I would like to explain the origin of two key terms—Sunnis and Shias—and suggest how the differences between these two Muslim groups or sects may serve as a point of entry into a conversation with Muslims.

Sunnis	Shias
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Succession of leadership based on character and not heredity • Constitutes 85 percent of Muslims • Have their own Hadith or traditions of Muhammad distinct from the Shia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Succession of leadership based on heredity • Constitutes 15 percent of Muslims • Mainly in Iran, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon • Divided into further divisions based on number of imams after Muhammad through Ali: Fivers, Seveners, Twelvers

Because Muhammad left no male heirs, some in the *Ummah* argued that rightful succession of the Muslim community belonged to Ali—who was Muhammad's closest relative, the husband of his daughter Fatima, and father of Muhammad's grandsons. This group would eventually come to be known as the Shia (singular: Shiite), or the Party of Ali, which today is the second-largest branch within Islam—about

42. *Ibid.*, 158–59.

15 percent of Muslims worldwide.⁴³ The other major group in Islam, the Sunni, constitutes the remaining 85 percent of the Muslim community. The Sunnis believe that succession of the Muslim community rightly went to Abu Bakr, the first caliph, and that succession was to be passed down to the most qualified person—not the one who was most closely related to the prophet Muhammad. Although these two groups agree on the essentials of the faith, Sunnis and Shia have developed distinct customs and even beliefs.

One key difference between the two is the high regard the Shia preserve for the imam. In Sunni Islam an imam (“one who stands before”) is the leader of a mosque but is not considered clergy. There is no concept of clergy in this major branch of Islam. In contrast with the Sunnis, who concentrate religious authority on the *Ummah* and the *ulama* (Muslim legal scholars), the Shia—not wholly unlike Roman Catholics in their conviction about the pope—believe that the imam is not only clergy but also religiously inspired and infallible in his legal and theological declarations.⁴⁴ The Shia also affirm that imams were historically descendants of Fatima and Ali, though the direct line of succession ended centuries ago. Among these descendants the Shia are divided into three main groups: the Fivers, Seveners, and Twelvers. These sects get their names based on the number of perceived rightful imams after Muhammad: five, seven, and twelve.

Among the Shia the Twelvers are the overwhelming majority. They are roughly equivalent to the Sunni in relation to the total percentage of Muslims. The Twelvers believe that the twelfth imam—known as the Hidden Imam—went into occultation or hiding in 941 and will return as the Messiah or *Mahdi* (“the Guided One”) on the day of judgment. He will establish the right practice of Islam and lead a battle of good forces against evil.⁴⁵ In fact, all Muslims—not just the Shia—believe that the *Mahdi* or Messiah will return on the day of judgment.

Some of the best conversations I have had with Muslims over the years have been those concerning the day of judgment and the Messiah. Although Muslims and Christians differ on any number of important beliefs and practices, one thing we hold in common is our conviction that the world is not as it should be. Few would deny the level of evil, oppression, and injustice that is perpetrated on a daily basis. We all long for the day when the world will be set to rights. For Muslims, just as for

43. Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam*, 49.

44. *Ibid.*, 43.

45. Bokhari and Seddon, *The Complete Illustrated Guide to Islam*, 236–37.

Christians, that day will occur when the Messiah appears and does away with the forces of darkness.

In one conversation with a Muslim man, I told him that Christians believe that the world is not right based on sin. I then asked him why Muslims believe that the world is in need of a Messiah if there is no concept of original sin. This led to an interesting discussion. Because I know that for a Christian to speak directly about Jesus to a Muslim can be off-putting, I did not mention his name or draw any parallels between Jesus' role in the end times in both Islam and Christianity.

This conversation, which led to more conversations, reinforced to me that it is sometimes better to speak about what we as Christians have in common with other religions before talking about what we do not have in common. As I spoke with this man about some of the similarities in our beliefs about the end times, we gradually discovered that we shared other commonalities and we were able to speak on common terms. Although there is a time and a place both to speak freely about Jesus and to emphasize the differences between Christianity and Islam, it has been my experience that it is best to be cautious when speaking about our faith with Muslim believers rather than being too hasty.

Discussion Questions

1. How have the events of 9/11 changed the way in which many Westerners see Islam? Do you think that Islam is an extremist or violent religion? How do you reconcile this with the fact that Muslims understand Allah to be all-merciful? Discuss these questions in connection with the first chapter of the Qur'an.
2. If you lived in a predominantly Muslim state, what would be your greatest fear? Is there anything about the Muslim religion that you would appreciate as a Christian? What can Christians learn from Islam?
3. Islam has five major practices that are essential to the religion. Discuss some similarities between these major practices and what you would consider to be the five major practices of Christianity.
4. What are some of the key differences between the nature of God in Islam and Christianity in terms of God's attributes, qualities, and personality?
5. What are some potential obstacles you might encounter when talking to Muslims about Jesus? How would you share your faith with a Muslim?

Further Readings

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Buddhism: The Story of Enlightenment

Suffering, the origin of suffering, the destruction of suffering, and the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to release from suffering—that is the safe refuge, that is the best refuge. A person is delivered from all pains after going to this refuge.

The Buddha

Rather than portray Buddhism as a philosophy or a way of life, as it is so often characterized in the West, I prefer to view Buddhism as a religion to which ordinary people have turned over the centuries for the means to confront, control, or even escape the exigencies of life.

Donald Lopez Jr.

Buddhism is older than Christianity, older than Islam, deeper than the Ganges River [referring to Hinduism] and the Mekong [in Southeast Asia]. Today, more than five hundred million people worldwide practice Buddhism, and it manifests in many different forms. But whatever shape it takes, it always strives to free human beings from the life of suffering. It is a philosophy of emancipation.

Stephen Asma

The designation Buddhist without further qualification conveys virtually no insight into what a person believes or practices. There are as many schools of Buddhism as there are Christian Protestant denominations, but the teachings of many of these schools appear to be irreconcilable beyond a very general core.

Winfried Corduan

Part 1: The Beginning

If Hinduism is the religion of infinite creation stories, Buddhism is the religion of none. According to Buddhist teaching, there is no beginning to the universe. Instead, what we call the universe is simply the combined experiences and actions of the universe's inhabitants as well as the physical elements that house these inhabitants. The life spans and living conditions of these residents are determined by the law of cause and effect—karma (“action”).

There are traditionally understood to be six realms in which the inhabitants of the universe live. Known as the Wheel of Life, these realms represent the places where all beings are born and reborn based on their actions in former lives.¹ Aside from the fact that Buddhism views these realms to be cyclical rather than linear as in the (Christian) West, these realms are not completely different from the medieval Catholic construal of the universe as containing four levels: heaven, purgatory, earth, and hell.

The highest realm in the Buddhist universe or Wheel of Life is that of the gods.² However, the luxury and prosperity of gods' lives covers their eyes to the truth of suffering, and thus they are eventually reborn in another realm. The next level, where we currently reside, is the realm of potential enlightenment.³ Here, humans are able either to seek awakening or to be consumed with the desire to acquire and possess. The next realm is that of the titans (demigods or demons), who are always fighting with the gods because they want to be like them. Next comes the realm of the ghosts. The ghosts are pitiable creatures whose necks are so thin that food is unable to pass to their perpetually hungry stomachs. The residents of the ghost realm live there because of their jealousy and greed in their former lives, although they were not so bad as to end up living in hell. The animal realm is marked by comfort, ignorance, and apathy. Finally, those living in the hell realm

1. As the Buddha said, “Some people are reborn. Evildoers go to sorrowful existences. Doers of good go to happy ones. Those who are free from all worldly desires attain nirvana” (9.11), in *Dhammapada: Annotated and Explained*, annot. and rev. Jack Maguire (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2005), 41.

2. This reference to “gods” does not mean Creator Gods as in Judaism or Islam but rather to beings who have reached this level based on good karma.

3. As a Tibetan Buddhist monk explains, “Generally, there are three ways in which we can use our precious human life to realize its potential. We can use it to ensure that in future lives we will be born as a human being with all the conditions necessary for a happy and meaningful life; we can use it to attain complete liberation from suffering; or we can use it to attain full enlightenment, or Buddhahood, for the sake of all living beings.” See G. K. Gyatso, *Introduction to Buddhism: An Explanation of the Buddhist Way of Life* (Glen Spey, NY: Tharpa Publications, 2008), 40.

are tormented by fire or frozen in ice. The residents of this regrettable realm likely led angry and abusive former lives.⁴



Fig. 2.1. The Wheel of Life in Buddhism.

Often portrayed at the center of this ever-turning Wheel of Life are a pig, a rooster (or bird), and a snake. Together these animals symbolize ignorance, attachment, and aversion, respectively, and are sometimes called the Three Poisons. As long as these types of vices or poisons are present in a living being, karma will dictate that he, she, or it will be born again in one of these different realms. It is only after desire or attachment is suspended that one's karma runs out like a shooting star, and one ceases to be imprisoned by the laws of cause and effect—which is the goal of enlightened human beings.

The question may arise concerning where karma originated, since karma is the source of power that holds everything together and continually gives birth to life and rebirth. Getting to the bottom of where or how karma originates, however, is a futile task. Like the God of the Bible, karma does not have a beginning. It has always existed. At the same time, however, although it is true to say that the universe—like karma—does not have a beginning as we understand this concept in the West, the universe does go through cycles.

Like Hinduism, Buddhism teaches that the universe develops through four periods or stages: creation, abiding, destruction, and nothingness.⁵ The universe is always in one of these cycles. We, for instance, are living during the second stage, when beings inhabit the different realms discussed above. After the universe is destroyed and becomes nothingness, karma—like the rustling of leaves in a windstorm—will blow into this nothingness and living beings will once again begin to

4. Damien Keown, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 30–36.

5. Huston Smith and Philip Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 19.

inhabit the universe. Or, to change images, after the universe is destroyed, karma—like a powerful magnet—will force all the bits of nothingness to unite. Then the period of abiding will be inaugurated.

It is sometimes difficult to understand the concept of how nothing can produce something or how something can come from nothing. As Christians, particularly Westernized Christians, we tend to think in a very linear fashion and highly value logical thinking. It is not easy for many of us to conceptualize—let alone visualize—how something can simultaneously exist yet not exist. This is a theme that my Buddhist friends point out to me regularly. Perhaps, then, there is an easier way to understand how Buddhism can say that the universe has *no* beginning while at the same time say that it *does* have a beginning.

The answer lies with the Buddha himself. As noted Buddhist practitioners and scholars Huston Smith and Philip Novak assert, “Buddha preached a religion that skirted speculation.”⁶ In other words, the Buddha intentionally refused to speculate about the origin of the universe and when or why or how the universe was created. Such questions, the Buddha thought, were fruitless. More to the point, the Buddha believed that attempts to probe these types of questions distracted a person from the ultimate issue of life: how to ease and altogether eliminate suffering. This was the only real question worth asking. An anecdote from the Buddha’s life illustrates his aversion to the question of the universe’s beginning:

Should anyone say that he does not wish to lead the holy life under the Blessed One,⁷ unless the Blessed One first tells him, whether the world is eternal or temporal, finite or infinite; whether the life principle is identical with the body, or something different; whether the Perfect One continues after death, etc.—Such a one would die, [unless] the Perfect One could tell him this.

It is as if a man were pierced by a poisoned arrow and his friends, companions, or near relations called in a surgeon, but that man should say: I will not have this arrow pulled out until I know who the man is that has wounded me: whether he is a noble, a prince, a citizen, or a servant; or: whether he is tall, or short, or of medium height. [Surely], such a man would die, [unless] he could adequately learn all this.

Therefore, the man who seeks his own welfare should pull out this arrow—this arrow of lamentation, pain, and sorrow.⁸

6. *Ibid.*, 25.

7. Although this statement may give the impression that the Buddha relied on God (“the Blessed One”), this is just a figure of speech. The gods, if they existed at all, really had nothing to do with achieving enlightenment. They are referred to sometimes in early Buddhist thought simply because they are residues of Indian (Hindu) thought.

8. Dwight Goddard, *A Buddhist Bible*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 35.

The arrow to which the Buddha refers is suffering. It is a poisoned arrow that directly leads to death. All that is important in this life is *the present*, namely, understanding that the arrow kills but that it can be eliminated. Theorizing about the past is pointless.

When understood in this context, we can see how Buddhism teaches that the universe has no beginning. For even if a person discovered exactly how or when or why the universe came into existence, this information would not bring us any closer to the reality of suffering and the attempt to eliminate it. In this way, we may say, the Buddha was hardly an abstract teacher or a theoretician. Rather, he was from beginning to end a practitioner—focused on the here and now rather than the there and then. As the Buddha said to his disciples, “greed for [speculation] tends not to edification.”⁹ What is most important is what is right in front of us: suffering.

Part 2: Historical Origin

Religious scholar Stephen Prothero summed it up best when he wrote that “Buddhism begins with a fairy tale.”¹⁰ Indeed, the lack of interest in a creation story in Buddhism is abundantly made up for by a rich and fanciful array of stories about the Buddha’s life. Because these stories were written down by various groups of followers hundreds of years after the Buddha’s death, there is a good degree of diversity in these writings and a fine line between historical fact and poetic license.

What Siddhartha Encountered	What It Symbolized
Sick person	Life is frail.
Old man	Age masters everyone.
Corpse	We will all die.
Ascetic	Liberation can occur.

The story of the Buddha’s life begins when a prince of the warrior caste named Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 BC) was born to the Shakya tribe in present-day Lumbini, Nepal. Just as Jesus’ birth was attended by praises from the angelic hosts (Luke 2:13–14), so Siddhartha’s birth was attended by “thousands of waiting-women looking on with joy in their

9. E. A. Burtt, *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* (New York: Mentor Books, 1955), 32.

10. Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 169.

hearts."¹¹ Although born as a human being, Siddhartha "did not enter the world in the usual manner, [for] he appeared like one descended from the sky." He entered the world in full awareness because he had meditated for eons (in countless previous lifetimes) before his present birth. He took seven steps after being born, and his first words indicated his purpose in this life: "For enlightenment I was born, for the good of all that lives. This is the last time that I have been born into this world of becoming."¹²

Despite the auspicious circumstances surrounding Siddhartha's miraculous birth and the fact that his mother received the best medical care available at the time, his mother Maya died from complications shortly after giving birth to her prized and remarkable son. To protect his son partly from the pains of the world and partly from the prophecy stated over Siddhartha after his birth by a Brahmin (Hindu) priest that he would be a great world king if he was not exposed to suffering (otherwise, he would be a holy man), Siddhartha's father Shuddhodana made every effort to provide all that Siddhartha would ever need or desire in order to influence the likelihood of his becoming a ruler. But his plan backfired. Instead of becoming a great king, Siddhartha would become a holy man.

Unfulfilled in life even with the best that money and power could provide, including a beautiful wife and loving son, Siddhartha bid farewell to his life of luxury and comfort at the age of twenty-nine. The impetus for this decision occurred over the course of four successive trips during which he encountered the realities of sickness, aging, death, and liberation, respectively. Known as the Great Signs, these excursions that Siddhartha took with his chariot driver awakened him to the fact that suffering left its mark like a handprint on everything in this world. He also realized that he had lived completely secluded and sheltered from this reality. His only hope was to understand what it all meant so that he could help others, and to this end he left everything in pursuit of awakening.

The next six years of Siddhartha's life were as exhausting as they were ineffective. He first studied with two Hindu (*raja*) gurus, but eventually learned all they could teach him. Siddhartha then joined a group of ascetics—those who believe they can master themselves spiritually by manipulating their physical bodies like a blacksmith beats down and forms a piece of metal. Instead of attaining spiritual enlightenment, however, the great prince only managed to starve himself nearly to death. Siddhartha was so emaciated by his ascetic

11. Edward Conze, ed. and trans., *Buddhist Scriptures* (London: Penguin, 1959), 35.
12. *Ibid.*, 36.

lifestyle that, as he later stated, "when I thought I would touch the skin of my stomach I actually took hold of my spine."¹³



Fig. 2.2.
Siamese
Buddha statue
in Thailand.

Everything changed for Siddhartha as he sat down one afternoon under the Bodhi ("enlightenment") Tree in Bodh Gaya in India. After accepting a bowl of rice porridge from a country girl—the eating of which signaled his renunciation of asceticism—he entered the lotus (sitting) position and vowed not to get up until he had attained enlightenment. As in the case of Jesus when he battled with the devil for forty days in the desert before the inauguration of his ministry, Siddhartha warred with Mara, the Lord of Death.¹⁴ Mara tempted Siddhartha in many ways,

13. Clarence Hamilton, *Buddhism: A Religion of Infinite Compassion* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1954), 14.

14. Conze, *Buddhist Scriptures*, 48.

but each time the prince responded with concentration and resolve. Eventually Mara was defeated.

Alone under the tree, Siddhartha went deeper and deeper into meditation. Like a bucket of water penetrating the deepest levels of the well, Siddhartha reached the limits of what one's mind can see and apprehend. He first saw all his countless previous lives and deaths and rebirths, which made him mindful of all living beings. He then traced the cause of the endless cycle of death and rebirth (called *samsara*) to ignorance. This empowered him to recognize that karma ceases to have command over a being once ignorance is destroyed. And once karma is destroyed, a living being ceases to be imprisoned by the perpetual cycle of life.

As the dawn rose from the night, Siddhartha awoke with the universe and became forever known as the Buddha, "the Awakened One." The Buddha knew all things because he was one with everything. Although he attempted to get up, the peace, calm, and joy of his realization kept him seated under the tree for a week—and altogether for forty-nine days. At the end of this time, two of the principal Hindu gods, Brahma and Indra, implored the Buddha to share his realization with the universe:

O Buddha, Treasure of Compassion, Living beings are like blind people
in constant danger of falling into the lower realms.
Other than you there is no Protector in this world.
Therefore we beseech you, please rise from meditation equipoise and
turn the Wheel of Dharma.¹⁵

This is exactly what the Buddha did. He turned the Wheel of Dharma by teaching others what he realized in meditation. Like Jesus the Christ, Siddhartha the Buddha soon attracted disciples—eventually becoming a traveling guru who always tempered public teaching with private meditation. Also like Christ, the Buddha comforted, counseled, challenged, encouraged, and disciplined. Upon his death at the age of eighty in Kushinagar, India (the result of natural causes after he healed from accidental food poisoning),¹⁶ the Buddha's disciples surrounded him one last time. Because he had taught them all that was necessary

15. Gyatso, *Introduction to Buddhism*, 10. As the author explains, "The reason why Buddha's teachings are called the *Wheel of Dharma* ["Protection"] is as follows. It is said that in ancient times there were great kings . . . who used to rule the entire world. These kings had many special possessions, including a precious wheel in which they would travel around the world. Wherever the precious wheel went, the king would control that region. Buddha's teachings are said to be like a precious wheel, because wherever they spread, the people in that area have the opportunity to control their minds by putting them into practice" (10–11).

16. See the original story in E. J. Thomas, trans., *Buddhist Scriptures* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company), 112.

The lotus flower symbolizes purity. For just as a lotus flower is born in the mud but blossoms atop the water, so we are born in suffering but can attain purity of mind.

for them to know, his last earthly statement was just a summary of his overall teaching: "Decay is inherent in all things; be sure to strive with clarity of mind (for nirvana)."¹⁷

Council	Year	Country
1st	483 BC	India
2nd	387 BC	India
3rd	250 BC	India
4th	1st c. BC 1st c. AD	Sri Lanka Kashmir

Because the Buddha achieved nirvana (or "extinction" of existence as we know it) after his death through his achievement of enlightenment while on earth, he was no longer bound by the law of cause and effect (karma) and so was not reborn. His legacy, however, continued. For even while alive, the Buddha established the first religious monastic community in the world—the *Sangha* ("community"), a group of monks and nuns who put into practice what the Buddha taught. Like Muhammad, the Buddha did not indicate a successor. Instead, as his last words conveyed, it was the responsibility of each individual to discover the truth and test the Buddha's words against his or her own experiences.

As time went on, several Buddhist councils were formed to determine what the Buddha actually taught as well as to determine the parameters of Buddhist thought and practice. The first council, which occurred soon after the Buddha's death, was convened in order to recall and then memorize the Buddha's teaching since he, like Jesus, did not write anything down. These recitations became known as the Pali Canon or Tripitaka. The second council, meeting about a century later, convened as a result of a division within Buddhism. The dispute arose between those who followed a strict interpretation of the Buddha's teaching and those who followed a less strict approach.

Roughly another century later, the third council met to adjudicate how to handle the alarmingly high number of Buddhists who became practitioners of the religion after the emperor of northern India, a man named Ashoka (304–232 BC), converted to Buddhism.¹⁸ In the same way that Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity in the early fourth century made Christianity more widespread among the Roman masses

17. Keown, *Buddhism*, 28.

18. Karen Armstrong, *The Buddha* (London: Penguin, 2004), vii.

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