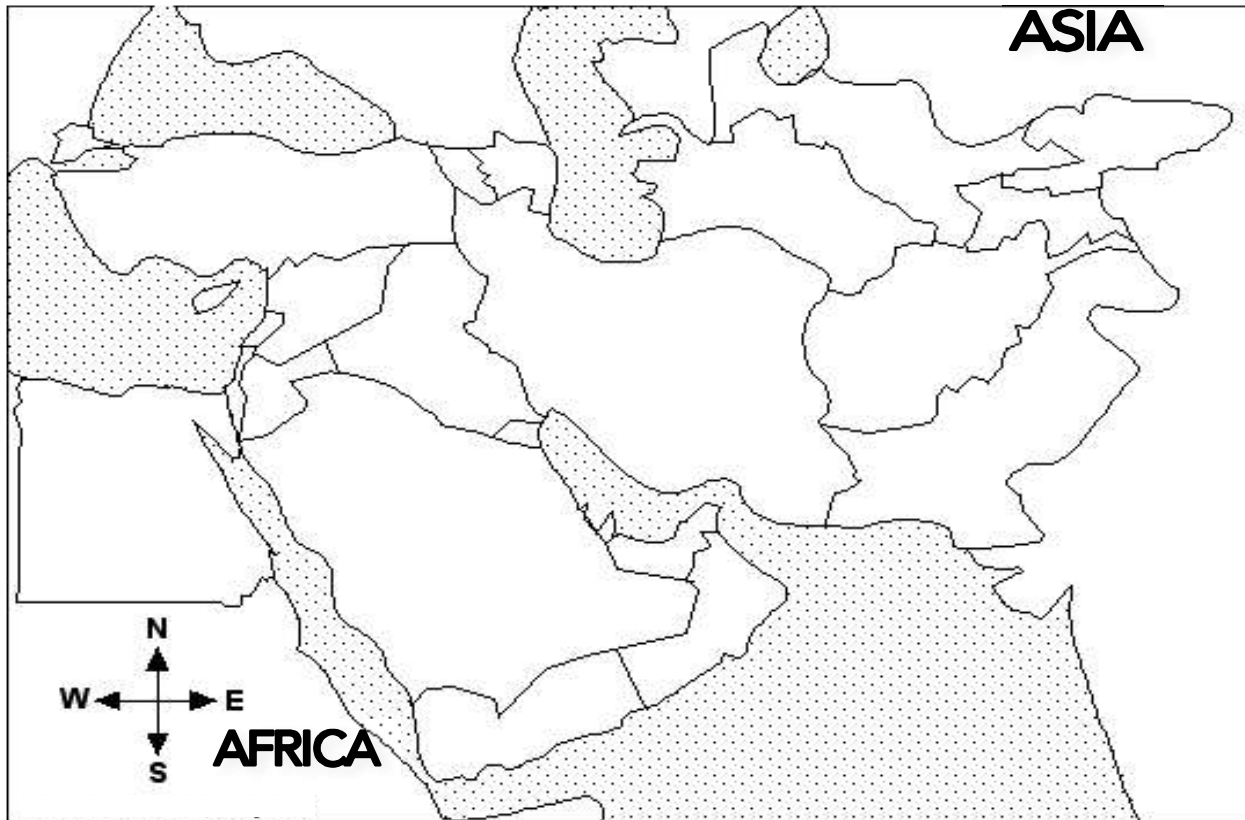


SOUTHWEST ASIA: BIRTHPLACE OF THREE RELIGIONS



★ Three major religions began in Southwest Asia. Believers in Judaism, Christianity and Islam all consider this area holy.



These religions share some common traits as well as have some major differences. One clear similarity is the belief in monotheism or a single god. This is different from polytheism, which is a belief in multiple gods. Jews, Christians and Muslims believe in the same God, who is all-knowing, all-seeing, and all-powerful. However, their other beliefs differ greatly. In the readings that follow you will learn about each individual religion and later be asked to identify how Judaism, Christianity and Islam are both alike and distinctive.



JUDAISM ~The "Wailing" or Western Wall is considered the holiest place for Jews to pray~



Judaism is one of the oldest religions in the world. It involves beliefs and ways of life that have been important to its followers for over 5,000 years.

Generally, a Jew is person whose mother was Jewish, or someone who has converted to Judaism. The branch of Judaism known as Reform Judaism also accepts as Jews children born to a non-Jewish mother and a Jewish father. Not everyone who is born Jewish follows the religion. Not all Jews who do follow the religion follow it in the same way. However, most Jews feel that what they share with other Jews is very important.

One way of describing this is to say that the Jews think of themselves as being like a large family. In any family, different members may have different opinions and work in different ways, but the fact that they are a family is something that affects them all their lives. Today, Jews live in many different parts of the world, but most Jews feel that they have something in common with other Jews. This is true even if they live far away and in countries where everyday life is quite different.

What are Jewish beliefs? Jews believe that there is one God. They believe that this God is a spirit who is eternal. This means God was never born and will never die. God has always existed and always will exist. They believe that God made the world and everything in it and loves and cares about this creation. This spirit is so holy that a name cannot be used, but Jews usually use the name Adonai, which means, "Lord." Jews use any name of God with great respect and would never use it carelessly or as a swear word. To show how important they think it is, many Jews avoid even writing the word "God." This is why in some Jewish books it is written "G-d."

JUDAISM FAST FACTS

- The Jewish place of worship is called a synagogue.
- Abraham is believed to be the father of the Jewish people.
- The story of Abraham is told in the Jewish holy book, the Torah, or what Christians call the Old Testament.
- Jewish celebrations include: Rosh Hashanah (new year), Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), Passover (the exodus from Egypt), and Hanukkah (festival of lights).
- The Sabbath or holy day recognized by Jews is from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday
- Some modern Jews keep kosher, which means they follow ancient Jewish dietary laws. Under these laws certain foods, such as pork and shellfish, are forbidden. People who keep kosher do not eat meat and milk products at the same meal.
- Moses—the leader of the Jewish people—spoke to the Children of Israel, in God's name, and presented to them all the laws by which they were to live. Among those laws are the Ten Commandments and many other laws and regulations covering every aspect of life for both the individual and society.
- Jewish men wear small caps called yarmulkes and they may also wear talliths, or prayer shawls.
- There are two symbols most often used for Judaism. One is a six-pointed star, called the Star of David. The other symbol is a candlestick with seven branches called a menorah.
- The religious leader of the Jewish community is called a rabbi, meaning "master" or "teacher".
- Jews believe Jerusalem is their most holy city.
- There are just over 13 million Jews in the world today.

C H R I S T I A N I T Y

~The holiest of all places for Christians
is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher ~



Christianity is the most widely held religious belief in the world. Christians can be divided into three main groups. Orthodox Christians live mainly in eastern countries, especially around Greece and the former Soviet Union. In other parts of the world (Europe, the Americas, Australia and Africa for example) most Christians follow the Roman Catholic or Protestant traditions. Within these main groups, there are hundreds of smaller groups. Not all the groups and individuals share exactly the same teachings, but they do all share the most important beliefs.

What do Christians believe? Christians believe that there is one God, revealed in three “persons” – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. This belief in one God in three persons is called the Trinity. This is the basis of Christian teaching about God.

Christians teach that God the Father is a spirit who is eternal and the creator of the universe. He is a loving father who cares about what he made. Christians believe that the most complete demonstration of what God is like was in the man named Jesus, whom they call God the Son.

Christians believe that Jesus was a man who lived in Palestine – the country now called Israel – 2,000 years ago. Christians often call him Jesus Christ, which is where the name “Christian” comes from. “Christ” is often used as if it is part of Jesus’ name, but it is actually a special title. It comes from the Greek word “Christos.” This in turn is a translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah,” which means “someone who is anointed or chosen by God. Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

The death of Jesus is especially important for Christians. They believe that he dies a horrible death when he was nailed to a cross, but that two days later God the Father brought him back to life. This is called the resurrection. For Christians, the resurrection shows that death is not the end. They say that the death and resurrection of Jesus changed the relationship between God and human beings forever, and it is possible for sins to be forgiven. “Sin” is a word that describes all wrongdoing that puts up barriers between people and God. Forgiveness of sins is an important part of Christian teaching. Christians believe that Jesus saved them from the results of their sins, which would prevent them from getting close to God. This is the reason why they often call Jesus their Savior.

CHRISTIANITY FAST FACTS

- Christianity developed out of the monotheistic tradition of Judaism; Jesus, its founder, was a member of the Jewish community in Roman Palestine.
- Sunday is the holy day recognized by Christians
- Christians worship in churches and cathedrals. It is customary to worship on Sunday, the Sabbath.
- An ordained priest or minister most often leads Church services.
- During a religious service, members of a church will eat a small wafer of bread.
- The Christian holy book is called the Bible.
- The two symbols used for Christianity are a cross and fish.
- There are about 1.9 billion Christians worldwide.
- Nearly all Christians recognize two main holidays, Christmas and Easter.
- Holy places for Christians include: Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Lourdes, Rome and Canterbury
- Christians follow the laws of 10 Commandments outlined in the Holy Bible.
- The Bible’s rules about Christian clothing cannot be applied directly to today’s situations, meaning standards of dress vary from church to church and over time.

ISLAM ~The Grand Mosque or the Al-Masjid Al-Haram is the holiest place for Muslims in the world~

Islam is the religion of people called Muslims. The word “Islam” and the word “Muslim” both come from an Arabic word that is best translated as “submission.” “Submission” means “to place under” – in other words, to accept that someone else is more important than oneself and to obey that person. Muslims believe that they submit to Allah. “Allah” is the Arabic word for “God.” This submission is an active decision to live according to God’s will.

What do Muslims believe? Muslims believe that there is one God – Allah. They believe that Allah is eternal. In other words, he was never born and will never die. He has always been there. He is all-powerful and knows everything. He created the universe, the world and everything in it. He cares about what he made. He created human beings, and they have a duty to worship him in return for all that he has done for them.

Muslims believe that the nonhuman natural world always follows God’s law, but that human beings have free will. They are able to choose to submit and be Muslims or to follow a different path. Believing in Allah is not enough. They must live in the right way, too. Muslims call this niyyah, meaning “intention.” They believe that the intention to live a good life is essential to being a Muslim. This does not mean that they expect everyone to succeed all the time, but it is necessary for people to try as hard as they can. They believe that Allah is merciful and will judge what their intentions were.

Prophets Muslims believe that Allah chooses people to be prophets in order to deliver his message to humanity. Some prophets are messengers who bring a message from Allah in the form of Scripture. Muslims believe that there have been 124,000 prophets over thousands of years and all of them were Muslims. The first prophet was Adam, the first man. The last prophet was a man called Muhammad. He was born in the country we now call Saudi Arabia in the year 570 CE. Muslims believe Muhammad received messages from Allah, given to him by an angel. These messages were the words of Allah and can never be changed. They were collected together to form the Muslims’ holy book, which is called the Qur’an.

ISLAM FAST FACTS

- The Islamic house of worship is a mosque. Muslims gather in mosques on Friday afternoon for prayers. An Imam often leads the prayers. An Imam is an Islamic cleric.
- Many Muslims observe dietary rules like forbidding certain foods (like pork), outlawing alcohol, and dictating how animals should be slaughtered for food.
- The symbol most often used for Islam is a crescent moon and a star.
- There are estimated to be 1.3 to 1.5 billion Muslims in the world today.
- The month of Ramadan is the most important holiday for all Muslims.
- Besides following Islamic laws and accepting its beliefs, a Muslim must fulfill five important duties called the Five Pillars of Islam.
- The dress code for Muslims varies from place to place, but the Qur’an instructs men and women to dress modestly. Traditionally, women wear a hijab, a headscarf, in the presence of men to whom they are not married or related.
- Jerusalem is the third holiest city of Islam. Mecca is the most holy city and also contains the most holy mosque.

