

Religious Diversity of the Middle East

By [Dr. Vladislav B. Sotirović](#)

Global Research, June 07, 2024

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Religion](#)

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The Middle East is commonplace from which three global religions originated: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All three confessions recognize the Prophet, Abraham.

Judaism

Judaism is a monotheistic religion of the Jewish people, i.e. with a belief in one God and foundations in Mosaic and rabbinical teachings. The Jewish people have been asked to accept the worshipping of one God instead of many (polytheism). The will of this one God, the Creator, is expressed in the *Torah* – the first five books of the Bible (the *Pentateuch*) which contains the Ten Commandments. Such Jewish monotheism was later inherited and adopted by both Christianity and Islam. The essence of Judaism is that the Jews believe that as a result of the agreement between God and Abraham, they as the Chosen People have a unique relationship with God. Besides, they believe that the Messiah is going to be sent by God with a mission to collect all peoples of Israel in the promised land and bring everlasting peace to Earth. The Christians, but not the Jews, believe that Jesus Christ was such a Messiah.

There are three forms of Judaism: Orthodox Judaism, Liberal Judaism, and Reform Judaism.

Image: Judaica – candlesticks, etrog box, shofar, Torah pointer, Tanach, natla (הַנְטְלָה aka keli) (Photo by Gila Brand/Licensed under CC BY 2.5)



Orthodox Judaism teaches that the Torah or the five books of Moses has all the divine revelation that Jews require. In Orthodox Judaism, religious practice is strictly observed. However, when certain interpretations of the Torah are necessary then the reference is sought in the Talmud. Orthodox Jews practice the separation of sexes in synagogues during worship. Many Orthodox Jews support the Zionist movement and political designs but they deplore the secular origins of it and support the fact that Israel after 1948 is not a fully religious state. The Orthodox Jew recognizes a person as Jewish only if he/she has a Jewish mother or undergoes an arduous process of conversion. Nonetheless, the Israeli Law of Return, which deals with emigration to Israel, accepts all those with a Jewish grandmother as potential citizens of Israel.

The spread of Liberal Judaism started around 1780 in Germany as a response to the need to redefine the meaning and practical performance of the Torah in the changing social atmosphere of the time of the West European Enlightenment. Therefore, Liberal Jews see the revelations of the five books of Moses as progressive rather than static as expressing God's teaching rather than God's law. As a direct practical consequence of such an attitude, it allowed for a significant evolution in religious law and practice. Besides, it resulted in important changes in both food and custom. In Europe, Liberal Judaism is also known as Progressive Judaism which is roughly equivalent to Reform Judaism in the USA.

Reform Judaism has also been founded in Germany by Zachariah Frankel (1801–1875) as a reaction to the perceived carelessness of Liberal Judaism. Frankel himself questioned all divine inspiration of the Torah but retained observance of some Jewish laws and traditions. In the USA, Reform Judaism is understood as the whole of the Liberal tradition that was brought to the USA by immigrants from Germany in the 19th century.

Christianity

Image: *Crucifixion*, representing the death of Jesus on the Cross, painting by Diego Velázquez, c. 1632 (From the Public Domain)



Christianity is the last great global religion that emerged before Islam and after Judaism. It is dogmatically based on Judaism, originating in Palestine. Differently, compared with the case of Muhammad, it is little known and scientifically proven of the Christian founder, Jesus of Nazareth, before he started to preach, according to the Bible, about the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, that was a message for which the majority of Palestine Jews have been waiting for centuries. As the Jewish country was occupied by the Romans in A.D. 6 the Jews have been waiting for the long-promised Messiah or the Saviour who had the focal aim to liberate them and their land. The Jews at first followed Jesus thinking he was the Messiah whom they waiting for. However, the Jewish authorities were suspicious about his role and his popular support soon decreased. After three years of teaching and preaching Jesus Christ was arrested as a fake Messiah, handed over to the Roman procurator, and finally crucified (as a revolutionary).

The new Christian faith proved to be inflexible, despite the fact of his founder's early death. Whether Jesus Christ himself believed that God (Jehova/Jahve) had sent him to convert the gentiles (not Jews) is still not clear according to the sources. Nevertheless, it was left to Paul, a Jewish convert from Tarsus, to show the power and extent of Christianity's appeal as he preached in the Aegean islands, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and maybe as far as the Iberian Peninsula where within all these lands there were Jewish communities. Starting with the journeys of St. Paul, Christian churches sprang up throughout the Roman Empire. By the time of Diocletian's persecutions (A.D. 304), they had been thickly clustered around the Mediterranean and scattered as far as Britain and the Nile River.

In essence, Christianity is a religion whose believers follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. Originally, it was only a Jewish sect in Palestine that believed that Jesus Christ (Jesus of Nazareth) was the Messiah (Christ - a person with the divine message). Very much due to the former Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus who later became St. Paul, Christianity soon became an independent organization. Christian believers experienced persecution by the state, although it was not at the beginning clear legal foundations for it until A.D. 250.

Nevertheless, by the 3rd century A.D., Christians could be found throughout the Roman Empire. The Emperor Constantine the Great ended persecutions in 313 and 380 the other Emperor, Theodosius, recognized Christianity as a state religion.

Islam

The birth, rise, and expansion of Islam are some of the most significant and far-reaching historical events and its impact is very important in our times too.

Islam as both religion and life philosophy started later, in A.D. 570, with the birth of Muhammad the Prophet in Mecca on the Arabian Peninsula. The founder of Islam as a personality was a combination of a social reformer, military General, statesman, empire builder, and visionary. Islam originated in his teaching which he framed in the Qur'an or Koran which is the holy book of Muslims like the Bible to the Christians, or the Torah to the Jews. Islam means the act of giving one's self to God (Allah), and a person who behaves and follows the teachings of Islam is called a Muslim. All non-Arabs, like, for instance, the Iranians or the Turks, are linked to their Muslim brothers and sisters around the world by their common religion of Islam. More than half of the world's 1,6 billion Muslims are today not Arab according to their origin.

Muhammad spread God's message to mankind as the last Prophet of God. Muslims believe that God spoke through the mouth of Muhammad and that the Qur'an (recitation) is the Word of God. A historical figure of Muhammad, according to Muslim belief, is the Seal of the Prophets, and no other Prophets will come after him. Nevertheless, he is not divine as divinity belongs only to God alone. His message to the people of West Arabia was that they should stop worshiping idols, and submit instead to the will of Allah.

This religion soon after the death of the Prophet spread out firstly across the Middle East and later further beyond its boundaries. At its peak, the empire of Islamic believers has been larger compared to the Roman Empire at its zenith. Formally, the Qur'an has the discourses that God revealed to his Prophet from Mecca. However, as a religion, Islam is diverse as it has different interpretations of its teachings like Sunni Muslims in North Africa and Saudi Arabia on one hand and Shia Muslims in Iran or Iraq where most believers are Shia. It is clear to an expert in the studies of the Middle East that Islam possesses an extreme power over the life and culture of the local people since the 7th century, Islam has become the focal binder among the peoples of the Middle East – it is a way of life for them but not only a religion.

Image: Muslim men reading the Quran (Licensed under CC0)



There are five pillars of Islamic belief accepted and respected by all Muslims (visually, these five principles compose the coat of arms of the Islamic Republic of Iran):

1. The profession of Faith or Shahadah. This is an open proclamation of submission that “there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of God”. At Muslim shrines – mosques – this sentence is chanted five times per day.
2. Prayer or Salah. At prescribed hours, worship or ritual prayer has to be prayed five times per day, individually if not preferably in groups. The bowing or kneeling is toward Mecca (for Christians the praying is toward Jerusalem). The Muslim prayer must be pure, hence newly washed and not dirty. For the Muslims, Friday is traditionally a day reserved for rest, when the congregational prayers of men at midday should be ordinarily performed in the mosque.
3. Giving charities or Zakah. The teaching of Islam is that all believers must give to charities. In practice today, it ranges from 2 to 10% of one’s annual income.
4. Fasting or Sawm. Any Muslim must abstain from food and drink during the 30-day lunar month of Ramadan, while practicing continence in other respects, from dawn to sunset. There are some Muslim states, like, for instance, Saudi Arabia, in which this obligation is legally protected.
5. Pilgrimage or Haj. It is an obligation for all Muslims at least once if one is financially and physically able, to perform this act of piety by going to Mecca as a pilgrim during the month of Haj. Especially are respected those Muslim pilgrims who could stay in Mecca between 8 and 13 days and perform the rites and ceremonies.

It has to be noticed that for some Muslims exists and the sixth pillar of Islam – Holy War or Al-Jihad –allegedly offers the reward of salvation. However, this effort to promote Islamic values and doctrine is not necessary to be done through the actual war as it was traditionally wrongly understood. Initially, Islam did not particularly encourage conversion. The Qur’an enjoins Muslims to respect the “people of the book” – members of the other monotheistic religions with written scriptures. Muslims are expected to show hospitality toward strangers, even if those strangers are not Muslims, and to enhance family relationships. In fact, the Islamic Holy War that is practiced today by some military and fundamentalist organizations like ISIS or al-Qaeda is a result of globalization, which transcends conventional politics and represents a radical departure from traditional Islam and Islamic values.

Islam is regarded by its followers as the last of the revealed religions after Judaism and Christianity. Muhammad of Mecca is understood as the last of the Prophets after Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. There are three basic and interrelated significations of Islam:

1. The personal/individual submission to God (Allah).
2. The Islamic world is a historical reality that includes a variety of communities sharing not only a common fund of cultural legacies.
3. The concept of an ideal Muslim community is fixed in the Qur’an and some of its supporting sources.

There are two crucial types of Islam: the Sunni Muslims and the Shia Muslims.

Sunni Islam (in Arabic, sunna means tradition) is the belief and practice as opposed to Shia Islam. Sunni Muslims constitute today over 80% of all Muslims in the world and they follow the sunna – a code of practice based on the hadith collected in the Sihah Satta – six authentic Books of Tradition about the Prophet Muhammad. The term sunna can mean custom, code, or usage. In essence, it means whatever Prophet Muhammad demonstrated

as the ideal behavior for a Muslim to follow. Consequently, it complements the Qur'an as a source of legal and ethical guidelines. The Sunni Muslims recognize the order of succession of the first four caliphs and they follow one of four schools of law. In the Middle East (and Pakistan) the Hanafi school prevailed.

The Shia Muslims or the Shiites (from Arabic – sectarians) are the minority division within Islam (between 15% and 20%). They are in the majority in Iran (where Shia Islam is the official state religion), South Iraq, Azerbaijan, parts of Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, East Africa, North India, and Pakistan. They originated as the Shiat Ali (the “party of Ali”) who was the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad. The essence is that the Shia Muslims regard Ali and his descendants as the only right heirs to Mohammad as the leader of the Muslims. The Shia Muslims differ from the Sunni primarily concerning the importance they attach to the continuing authority of the imams – authentic interpreters of the sunna or customs, the code of conduct based on the Qur'an followed by hadith or sayings and deeds of Muhammad. They also believe in an inner hidden meaning of the Qur'an.

Sufism is the mystical aspect of the Islamic religion. It emerged as a reaction to strict Islamic orthodoxy. The Sufis seek personal union with God and there are many Sufi poets and scholars followed by Sufi organized orders or brotherhoods.

In the world, there are 42 Muslim-majority nations of whom Iran, Sudan, and Mauritania are officially Islamic states by Islamic law. Religious diversity is quite visible in all Middle Eastern nations for the reason of different religious minorities like Judaism, or/and Christianity and their branches (sects). Most Muslims are distributed in a broad belt from Morocco to Indonesia and from Central Asia to Tanzania. Nevertheless, the historical and cultural center of Islam is the Middle East, especially the Arabian Peninsula.

The spread of Islamic religion outside of the Arabian Peninsula started immediately after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632. By 711, Arab armies had been attacking Sind in North-East India and preparing for the crossing to the Iberian Peninsula. In practice, the Arab-Islamic conquests in the East exceeded those in the West in both size and importance. In 750, when the dynasty of Abbasids replaced the dynasty of Umayyad, the Islamic Empire ruled by them was the biggest civilization westward of China. After the subjection of Maghreb, Arab forces crossed the Straits of Gibraltar in 711 and occupied the Iberian Peninsula. There were further advances into South France, but the Arab army was defeated at Poitiers in 732, and in 759 they withdrew south of the Pyrenees.

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Dr. Vladislav B. Sotirović is a former university professor in Vilnius, Lithuania. He is a Research Fellow at the Center for Geostrategic Studies. He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

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