Judaism

Judaism is a set of beliefs and practices originating in the Hebrew Bible, or Tanakh, with later religious commentaries explained in the Talmud. Judaism represents the covenant relationship between the Children of Israel and the Jewish nation with God. Judaism claims a historical continuity of three millennia as the oldest monotheistic religion, with Jewish history, religious texts, and principles having influenced both its global offshoot, Christianity and, later, Islam.

Followers of Judaism, whether born in the Jewish nation—including seculars or converts, are called Jews and considered an ethno-religious group because their sacred texts define them as a nation rather than followers of a faith. In 2007, the world’s Jewish population was estimated at 13.2 million people, 41% of whom live in Israel and 40% in the United States, with other larger groups in Russia, Latin America, and Europe.

In modern Judaism, central authority is not vested on any single person or body but in sacred texts, religious law, and learned rabbis who interpret both texts and laws.

Judaism has adhered to a number of religious principles, the most important of which is a belief in a single, omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent God who created the universe and governs it while judging humans on the basis of their actions and faith. According to Jewish tradition, Judaism begins with the Covenant between God and Abraham around 2000 BC as the patriarch of the Jewish nation—his descendants—with his Israelite descendants first held in captivity in Egypt as slaves, then bonded together by their long flight in the Sinai under the Prophet Moses who received God’s laws, the 10 Commandments, and the Torah on Mount Sinai.

Historically, Judaism has considered belief in the divine revelation and the Torah as its fundamental core beliefs; but Judaism does not have a centralized religious authority dictating dogma.

Over the centuries, this gave rise to many different theological beliefs concerning the Torah and Talmud, although they demonstrate a core ideology, while some principles of faith in the Talmud—divine origin of the Torah—are so important that their rejection labels the person a heretic.

Although Judaism has never known any one normative and binding creed of faith, the most widely considered authoritative formulations are Maimonides' 13 Principles of Faith, from the twelfth century, which for centuries had been criticized and ignored by much of the Jewish community, only to become in time a widely-accepted list of Jewish beliefs. Maimonides considered any Jew who rejected even one of his 13 principles as a heretic. Neither Maimonides nor his contemporaries viewed these principles as encompassing all of Jewish beliefs but rather as the core theological underpinnings of the acceptance of Judaism.

Along these lines, the ancient historian Josephus emphasizes practice and observance rather than religious beliefs, associating apostasy with a failure to observe Jewish law and maintaining that the requirements for conversion to Judaism included circumcision and adherence to traditional customs.

Christianity

Christianity, from the Greek word Khristos, or “Christ”/the “anointed one,” is a monotheistic religion derived from Judaism, centered on the life and teachings of Jesus as recorded in the Bible’s New Testament—compared to the Old Testament, which includes the Jewish Torah. The Christian faith sees Jesus as the Messiah—Son of God.

Christians follow both the Old Testament and the New Testament and believe that Jesus is the Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Bible—the part of Scriptures common to Judaism and Christianity—who was the model of a pious life, was both the revealer and physical incarnation of God, died crucified by the
Romans, was buried, resurrected from the dead for the salvation of the faithful, and bodily ascended into heaven where he rules and reigns with God the Father.

Christians call the message of Jesus Christ the Gospel—"good news"—and hence, refer to the earliest four written accounts of his ministry as the Gospels and part of the New Testament.

Christians began as a Jewish sect and as Judeo-Christians. It spread from the Middle East to the Eastern Mediterranean, quickly growing in size and influence over a few decades; and by the Fourth Century A.D. became the dominant religion in the Roman Empire. The world's oldest national Christian church is the Armenian Orthodox Church, established in 301 A.D. During the Middle Ages, also the rest of Europe was Christianized, while large Christian communities were converted in the fold. During the Middle Ages, the large Christian religious minorities in the Islamized Middle East and North Africa, plus India, were slowly whittled away and converted to Islam.

Following the Great Discoveries, through missionaries and colonization, Christianity spread to Latin America, North America, Australia, and the rest of the world, turning Christianity into a major influence shaping the West.

Though there are many important differences of interpretation on Christianity, Christians share a set of beliefs that they hold as essential to their faith, with the largest denomination, the Catholics, hierarchically organized in the Church of Rome or Holy See, lead by a Pope as appointed successor of Saint Peter, the first Pope representative on Earth of Jesus and God.

Christianity is the world's largest religion with 33% of the world's population for the last hundred years and 2.1 billion followers split into 34,000 separate denominations. However, this masks a major shift in the demographics of Christianity with large increases in the developing world—around 23,000 per day—accompanied by declines due to atheism and lower birth rates, mostly in Europe, North America, Australia, and the Middle East through emigation to the West.

**Islam**

Islam is the religion founded by Muhammad through the *Qur'an* as the word of one single God (Arabic: Allāh), and the prophet Muhammad's Islamic examples, or Sunnah. Religious practices include the five pillars of Islam, as duties that unite Muslims into a community—*Umma*, while Islamic law—Šarī'ah in Arabic—encompasses every aspect of life and society from dietary laws to war.

With 1.2 billion Muslims, Islam is the second-largest religion in the world after Christianity, with the vast majority of Muslims divided into two key denominations: Sunnis are 85% of all Muslims and Shi'a 15%. Islam is the predominant religion in the Middle East/Gulf, Northern and Eastern Africa, and parts of Asia like Pakistan, Banglas-Desh, Indonesia, and Malaysia, with large communities also in Central Asia, Western China, Western Africa, Russia, and the Balkans plus immigrant communities. About 20% of Muslims live in Arab countries, 30% live in the Indian subcontinent, and 15.6% in Indonesia alone, the largest Muslim country.

**Sunni Islam** is the largest denomination of Islam from the word Sunnah, Arabic for the words and actions of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad. The term Sunni was established by the majority Muslim community, *Ummah*, after a minority of Muslims created the splinter sect, Shi'a. The estimated percentage of Muslims adhering to Sunni Islam ranges from 85% to 90% worldwide depending on sources.

All Muslim denominations accept the current *Qur'an* as compiled by Muhammad's companions, Sahaba, in 650 AD. In addition, Sunni Muslims consider equally valid all four schools, *Madhhab*, of Islamic law, Šarī'ah, based on the *Qur'an* and Sunnah with followers sharing the same basic belief system but differing in the practice and execution of rituals. Some Sunnis, however, do not follow any Madhhab, and others reject strict adherence to any school, preferring to use the *Qur'an* and Sunnah as their primary sources of Islamic law.
**Shi’a Islam** is the second largest denomination of Islam, and its followers are called Shi’ites or Shi’i’a. Similar to other schools of thought in Islam, Shi’a Islam is based on the teachings of the Islamic Qur’an and the message of the prophet Muhammad. However, Shi’a Islam holds that Muhammad's family, the Ahl al-Bayt—“People of the House,” and certain individuals among his descendants, known as Imams, have special spiritual and political rule over the community, Umma.

Shi’a Muslims also believe that Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, was the first of these Imams, and was the rightful successor to Muhammad. In this way, Shi’a reject the legitimacy of the first three Caliphs.

Shi’a Muslims are a small minority of the Muslim world, but the majority of the population of Iran, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and Iraq, while significant minority of Shi’a live in Syria, Kuwait, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Yemen.

Shi’a Islam embodies a completely independent system of religious interpretation and political authority in the Muslim world with various theological beliefs, schools of jurisprudence, and spiritual movements. Shi’a identity and theology was formulated in the 800s AD, and by 900s, the first Shi’a governments and societies were established.

Shi’a Islam is divided into three branches. The largest are the Twelvers, based on their adherence to the Twelve Imams, and is followed by the majority of the population of Iran, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and southern Iraq. The other two smaller branches are the Ismaili and Zaidi, who dispute the Twelver lineage of Imams and beliefs.

Shi’a Muslims believe that just as a prophet is appointed by God alone, only God can appoint the successor to the prophet, and God had chosen ‘Alī to be the successor of Muhammad as his first cousin and closest living male relative as well as his son-in-law. Shi’a Muslims also believe that before his death, Muhammad had appointed ‘Alī as his successor. But only 35 years later, in 656 AD, did ‘Alī become the fourth Muslim Caliph after the leaders of Medina had elected Abu Bakr as First Caliph and then two others.

‘Alī’s rule was often contested, including by some of his earlier followers who turned on him, and to maintain power, he was forced into several unsuccessful wars until he was murdered in 661 AD, leaving his main rival Mu'awiyah as Caliph. The respect that Sunni Muslims show to ‘Alī and his descendants—sayyids in the East or sharifs in North Africa—is just one of several ways in which Shi’a Islam has influenced Sunni Islam. Most of the early Shi’a as well as Zaydis differed only marginally from mainstream Sunnis in their views on political leadership.

Early Sunnis traditionally held that the political leader must come from the tribe of Muhammad—namely, the Quraysh. The Zaydis narrowed the political claims of All's supporters, claiming that not just any descendant of 'Alī would be eligible to lead the Muslim community (Umma) but only those males directly descended from Muhammad through the union of ‘Alī and Fāṭimah, Muhammad’s daughter.

But during Abbasid revolts, other Shi’i’a, known as imāmiyyah—followers of the Imams—of the theological school of Ja'far al-Sadiq asserted a more exalted religious role for Imams and insisted that, at any given time, whether in power or not, a single male descendant of 'Alī and Fāṭimah was the divinely appointed Imam and sole authority in his time on all matters of faith and law.

Later, most Shi’a, including the Twelver and Ismaili, became followers of the Imams as spiritual and political successors to Muhammad, believing them to be individuals who rule over the community with justice but also interpret the Divine Law and its esoteric meaning as guide and model for the community.

This difference between following either the Ahl al-Bayt—Muhammad's family and descendants—or the First Caliph, Abu Bakr, is at the core of the rivalry between Shi’a and Sunni views of the Qur’an, Hadith—narrations from Muhammad—and other areas of Islam. For Sunnis, ‘Alī’s authority is that of the Fourth Caliph as third successor to Abu Bakr who succeeded Muhammad, while Shi’a claim he was always the first divinely sanctioned Imam as first successor of Muhammad, not as Fourth Caliph.
After ‘Ali’s assassination, the seminal event in Shi’a’s history is the martyrdom in 680 AD at the Battle of Karbala of ‘Ali’s own son, Hussein, and 17 followers who opposed the ruling caliph. Hussein’s death symbolized resistance to tyranny.

**Other Religious Groups in the Middle East**

There are other important ethno-religious groups in the Middle East worth noting: the Kurds, Assyrians/Chaldeans, Druze, ‘Alawites, Circassians, and Chechens.

**Kurds** are the fourth largest ethnicity in the Middle East after the Arabs, Persians, and Turks. Kurds are an Indo-European, Iranian ethno-linguistic group mostly inhabiting a region known as Kurdistan in Northern Iraq with neighboring portions in Turkey, Iran, and Syria: Kurds are 20% of the population in Turkey, and this comprises half of all Kurds living, 15-20% in Iraq, 8% in Syria, 7% in Iran, and 1.3% in Armenia. Substantial Kurdish communities also exist in western Turkey’s cities as well as in Lebanon, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and in Germany. The total Kurdish population is around 30 million in the Middle East and another million live abroad.

Most Kurds consider themselves among the descendants of Medes of Ancient Persia, although by the time of the Islamic conquests a thousand years later, the term *Kurd* had a socio-economic rather than ethnic meaning to identify nomads in western Iran. Most Kurds are Sunni Muslims and are bilingual in Arabic, Turkish, or Persian.

Few Kurdish Jews and some Kurdish Christians exist; they usually speak Aramaic, an ancient Semitic language.

Since 2010, the Arab Spring democratic reforms have met dictatorial resistance/civil war and Islamic fundamentalist terrorism.

Since 2014, the violence committed by the terrorist group, Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIS or ISIL), has led to massacres and forced deportation of historical religious minorities (Christians, Yazidis, Turkmeni, etc.).

The **Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs**, or Assyrians and Syrians, are another Semitic people indigenous to the Middle East with their homeland around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

Today, this area is divided between Northern Iraq, Syria, Western Iran, and Southeastern Turkey, with many Assyrians condensed, migrating in time to the Caucasus, North America, and Europe during the 20th century.

The major division is between the Eastern group, "Nestorians" and "Chaldean Christians," and the Western ones, “Syrian Jacobites.” They spoke neo-Aramaic with bilingual knowledge of **Arabic, Persian, or Turkish.**

As for religion, Assyrians belong to various Christian denominations of the East with 300,000 members of the Chaldean Catholic Church with 900,000 members and the Syriac Orthodox Church with 100,000 to 4,000,000 members around the world, plus various small minorities of Protestants.

The Assyrians dominated pre-Islamic Mesopotamia, today’s Iraq, from the Akkadian Empire to the neo-Assyrian Empire. They were Christianized in the 1st-to-3rd centuries in Roman Syria and in Persian Assyria, and from the 8th century became a religious minority after the Islamic conquest of Mesopotamia, which since subjected them to religious and ethnic persecution.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Assyrian population in the Middle East has decreased dramatically following the Armenian and Assyrian genocides during World War I carried by the Ottoman-Turks and the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, with most Assyrians emigrating later to the West.
The total population is **3.3 million, of which** 150,000-830,000 live in Iraq, 52,000-735,000 live in Syria, 10,500-103,000 live in Iran, 4,000-70,000 live in Turkey, 77,000 in Jordan, plus 83,000 in the United States of America, another 80,000 in Sweden, and 70,000 more in Germany.

The **Druze** are a religious off-shoot of Islam in Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan, whose religion incorporates Gnostic, neo-Platonic and other philosophies similar to Ismaili Shi'a Islam. The Druze call themselves *Ahl al-Tawhid*, "People of Unitarianism or Monotheism," and theologically, they consider themselves an Islamic Unitarian reformatory sect.

Druze speak Arabic and French in Lebanon and Syria or Hebrew in Israel where they serve in the Israeli military. They number around 1,120,000 of which half-a-million live in Syria, 280- to 350,000 in Lebanon, 118,000 in Israel, mostly in the Golan Heights, and 20,000 in Jordan. Outside the Middle East, there are 100,000 more Druze and 20,000 in the United States.

The **Alawites**, in the past called also Nusayris, are an off-shoot of Twelver Shi'a. They have seven pillars of Islam, including jihad and devotion to 'Ali, who is divine; and they also drink wine, contrary to most Muslims. 'Alawites are split into five sects: the Sun Sect–Shamsiyya; the Moon Sect–Qamari; Murshids—named after their Messiah, Sliman Murshid/Murshad; the Haidariyya; and Ghaibiyya. In Syria and Lebanon, 'Alawites are accepted as Muslims; but in other Muslim countries, they are seen as heretics (ghail) outside of Islam, and tens of thousands have been killed by other Muslims and also in internecine fights.

There are over 3,500,000 million 'Alawites in several tribes—some native to western Syria, others emigrated from Iraq in the 12th century. In 1919, after the collapse of the Ottoman-Turkish Empire, they sought to form an Alawite State, then under the French Mandate over Syria and Lebanon. The 'Alawites succeeded in establishing a semi-autonomous *Sanjak of Latakia* in 1920-36.

Since 1971, 'Alawites control Syria under the dictatorship of 'Alawite Hafez Assad and currently his son Bashar. 'Alawites were also recognized by the Lebanese Twelver Shi’a leader Imam, al-Sadr, in 1974 as legitimate Muslims, following Assad’s growing influence in the region. Other smaller groups who believe in the deification of 'Ali, along with the 'Alawites, are called 'Alawi.

**Circassian** is a term derived from the Turkic *Cherkess* (*Çerkes*) referring to Northern Caucasian peoples living along the Black Sea, mostly Cherkess, Shapsugs, and Kabardin, or including broadly also the Abkhaz, Abazins, and vanished Ubykh. Today, a significant number of Circassians live abroad. From 1763-1864, Circassians fought against Russian expansionism in the long Russian-Circassian War, finally succumbing to a scorched-earth campaign in 1862-64 under Russian General Yevdokimov.

Afterwards, large numbers of Circassians were resettled in Russia far from their home territories or deported to the Ottoman Empire in the 1860s-70s. They were settled in Amman and Jordan, in Damascus and Syria, in Turkey, in Egypt, and in small communities in Israel’s Golan Heights.

The largest Circassian group is in Syria, where, in 1987, they numbered 100,000. During the French Mandate in Syria in the 1930s, Circassians from Al-Quneitra tried unsuccessfully to convince the French authorities to create a Circassian national home in the Golan Heights. After the 1967 Six-Days War, when Syria lost the Golan Heights to Israel, most Circassians withdrew to Damascus.

All Circassians in Syria are well-educated and know both Arabic and English, although knowledge of their ancestral language, Adyghe, is shrinking.

The **Chechens** are a large Muslim ethnic population living in Russia’s Northern Caucasus states of Chechnia, with minorities in neighboring Russian states of Dagestan and Ingushetia, plus Moscow. A Smaller number of Chechens are widely scattered in Siberia and the Russian Far-East. Chechens speak both Chechen and Russian.
Chechens are Sunni but mostly of the Hanafi School, while 50% belong to Sufi brotherhoods or tariqah. The term "Chechen" possibly derives from the Persian name for the Nokhchii tribes, and it first occurs in Arabic sources from the 8th century. In Russian sources, it appears since 1692, possibly derived from the Kabardian Shashan.

Outside Russia, significant Chechen populations live also in Israel, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, where many Chechens migrated after the Caucasian War and the region's annexation in 1850 to Russia, as well as after the 1944 Stalinist deportation of all Chechens to Kazakhstan and Siberia in punishment for their support of German forces during World War II against the Soviet Union. There are 1.36 million Chechens in the Russian Federation today in the states of Chechnya, Daghestan, and Ingushetia: 100,000 in Turkey, 8,000 in Jordan, 5,000 in Egypt, 4,000 in Syria, and 2,500 in Iraq.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, tens of thousands of Chechen refugees settled in the European Union and elsewhere after the Chechen Wars and Russia's final re-conquest of the state in 1999.