



EDUCATORS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Introduction to Religious Diversity

By Mitch Bogen

Lesson In Brief:

In this lesson students will be familiarized with the basic history, beliefs, and practices of the world's major religious traditions.

Time: One or two class periods depending on your choices.

Materials:

- Handout 1.1 World Religions as Percentages of U.S. Population
- Handout 1.2 World Religions as a Percentage of Worldwide Population
- Handout 1.3 Attitudes About Religious Diversity in the U.S
- Readings 1.1 - 1.3 (the “Getting Started” series of introductory readings for each world religion)

Learning Outcomes:

- Students will gain a beginning knowledge of selected religions of the world.
- Students will develop an appreciation for the similarities and differences among religions and for the diversity within each religion.
- Students will identify key ideas based on their potential to stimulate discussion and further research.

Notes and Suggestions:

1. If you haven't already done so, make sure to set the tone for exploring religion in a public school setting. Let students know that you aren't intending to promote or judge any particular religion. Also, let them know that, from time to time, you might present ideas about a religion that are subject to differing interpretations. Encourage students, as much as possible, to ask questions when their understanding is different than what is being presented in class.
2. If time permits, you will want to do background preparation on each religion beyond what we provide in the “Getting Started” series of readings. The references offered below are reader friendly and good for developing an accurate, baseline understanding of the world's religions.
3. Spend as much time on the opening polling activity as you wish. Students will probably find this both informative and engaging.

4. The whole lesson can be expanded or contracted, based on your goals. There is a lot of content provided here, so your explorations can become in-depth if you wish.
5. The extension activities provided may be ambitious, depending on the amount of time you are devoting to your religion and society unit. This lesson provides a good opportunity for students to practice comprehension strategies, including making connections, questioning the text, and identifying key ideas and vocabulary words for further research. Encourage them to make margin notes and/or apply “sticky notes” to flag ideas and questions. For more on teaching comprehension strategies see *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding*, by Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis.

Lesson Sequence:

1. Begin by asking students questions regarding the world’s religions based on the ideas you want to emphasize from Handouts 1.1 – 1.3 (1.1 World Religions as Percentages of U.S. Population, 1.2 World Religions as a Percentage of Worldwide Population, and 1.3 Attitudes About Religious Diversity in the U.S.). Call out each category and record representative student responses on the board. Don’t distribute the handouts. What percentage of Americans do they think are Christian? Buddhist? Atheist? Etc. Repeat the process, asking students about worldwide percentages. Spend plenty of time on the information in Handout 1.3, because it deals with Americans’ attitudes about and knowledge of religious diversity.
2. Distribute Handouts 1.1 – 1.3 and give students a few minutes to look over the statistics. Then lead a brief class discussion. Ask: What is surprising? Why do you think you sometimes had an erroneous impression? What questions do you have? What thoughts did this exercise trigger?
3. Introduce the main lesson by telling students that today’s goal is to begin to clear up misperceptions people might have about various religions and to introduce students to a working knowledge of the world’s main religious traditions. Emphasize: This is just a beginning.
4. Distribute the readings “Getting Started” (Readings 1.1 - 1.3) for introductions to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam so each student receives only one reading. Be sure the readings are evenly divided among students. Have each student read their intro text individually using key comprehension strategies and respond to this prompt: *What three facts or ideas jumped out at you that you think are important to share with the whole class?* This will identify Talking Points to stimulate a discussion of their assigned religion. Students must state the reasons they chose the facts they did. **Note:** If you are conducting the lesson as a two-day sequence, students can work on this activity overnight, and you can begin the next day with the group work described in the next step.
5. Group students according to their assigned religion. Have each group compile a list consisting of one Talking Point for each subsection of their reading (Foundation, Scripture, Key Concepts, Branches, etc.) Tell them to make a note of any concept that confuses them. Move from group to group and offer assistance as needed. Students might need help staying focused and on task. **Note:** If time is limited, you

- might have students concentrate on just four or five of the subsections. This will lend coherence to your whole-class discussion.
6. Have each group share their Talking Points with the entire class. Encourage all students to participate. Create a column for each religion on the board and a list of the subsections of the readings. Write each summarized idea as it is presented.
 7. Lead a whole class discussion with an emphasis on identifying similarities and differences among the key findings.

Extension Activities:

- *Reading and writing assignment:* Have each student read a full overview chapter (supplied by teacher) of the religion they analyzed in class, possibly from one of the suggested resources (below), and write a paper that formalizes the activities conducted during class. Papers might address: three things that surprised me about this religion (and why), three questions for future research, and three connections I made between this religion and the religion I am most familiar with. Option: Have students read an overview chapter on a religion other than the one they analyzed in class.
- *Community research:* Ask small groups to work together to investigate and report on a non-Christian religion in your community. They might visit a mosque or a Buddhist meditation center, or even arrange for a representative of a non-Christian religion to come to class for a presentation and Q & A session.
- *Research papers:* One rich topic would be to compare and contrast the ways that Christianity motivated Martin Luther King and Islam motivated Malcolm X. The possibilities are endless.
- If you choose to conduct an additional lesson (or lessons) exploring the roots of 9-11, you will want to research the modern conservative movements of Islam, such as the Wahhabi movement of Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. These groups have had a big influence on Al-Qaeda and other radical groups that merge extremely conservative theology with a strong anti-Western political stance.

Suggested World Religions Resources:

Keith Crim, editor, *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1990.

John R. Hinnells, editor, *The New Penguin Handbook of Living Religions*, Penguin, 2003.

Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1991. (Previously published as *The Religions of Man*.)

Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2002.

William A. Young, *The World's Religions: Worldviews and Contemporary Issues*, Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2nd Edition, 2005

World Religions as Percentages of US Population¹

RELIGION	TOTAL #	PERCENTAGE
Atheists and Agnostics	40 million	14 %
Buddhist	2.5 million	1 %
Christianity (Official)*	160 million	55 %
Christianity (Unofficial)**	240 million	83 %
Judaism	6 million	2 %
Hinduism	1.2 million	0.5 %
Muslim	5 million	2 %
Pagan	1 million	0.5 %
Other (Afro-Caribbean, Baha'i, Jain, Sikh, etc.)	1 million	0.5 %
TOTAL POPULATION	290 million (approximate as of 2005)	

* Official church enrollment

** Some identification with Christianity, according to Encyclopedia Britannica Online

¹ Firm figures do not exist. The figures given here are sometimes averages of several different estimates for a given religion. The Pluralism Project at Harvard University gathered figures from many different sources. (<http://www.pluralism.org/index.php>)

Religions as Percentages of Worldwide Population²

Total world population equals approximately 6 billion in 2005.

RELIGION	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE
Christianity	2.0 billion	33%
Islam	1.3 billion	22%
Hinduism	0.7 billion	12%
Buddhism	0.3 billion	5%
Chinese Traditions	1.0 billion	17%
Other	0.7 billion	11%

Explanatory Notes:

Christianity is now a global religion, though countries such as China have few Christian believers. In a major religion such as Christianity, and in all religions, you will find a range of practice and belief, from casual to intense.

Islam: Most Muslims are now located in Africa and Southeast Asia, though it originated in the Middle East. Muslims can be found everywhere, however.

Hinduism: The majority of the people of India practice some version of Hinduism. No firm figures exist, but we know the population of India now exceeds one billion people. Hindus can also be found throughout Southeast Asia and in most Western countries, too.

Buddhism: Though Buddhists can be found throughout the world, most traditional Buddhism is practiced in Asia. It originated in Northern India, though relatively few Indians are currently Buddhist.

Chinese traditions: China's population now exceeds one billion people. Most practice some blend of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, with an overlay of Maoist communist philosophy.

Other: This data doesn't account for people who are non-believers or those who practice other religions, including indigenous tradition, such as Native American.

² Source: These figures are estimated based on overviews of each religion found in two core world religions textbooks: *The World's Religions: Worldviews and Contemporary Issues*, by William A. Young and *A Handbook of Living Religions*, edited by John R. Hinnells. There are no firm figures available.

Handout 1.3

Attitudes About Religious Diversity in the U.S.³

How many Christians claim to be:

Protestants	52%
Born Again	46%
Evangelical	24%
Catholics	21%

How many Christians see themselves as tolerant of other faiths? 81%

How many non-Christians say that Christians are tolerant? 54%

How many people in the US say they know someone of this particular non-Christian faith?

Jewish	51%
Muslim	28%
Hindu	17%
Buddhist	17%

How many people in the U.S. are familiar with the basic teachings of each of these non-Christian faiths?

Jewish	50%
Muslim	34%
Buddhist	27%
Hindu	21%

Approximately how many people think religious diversity threatens U.S. stability? 25%

Approximately how many do not see it as a threat to stability? 67%

How many see religious diversity as a threat to their beliefs? 13%

How many see religious diversity as a source of strength for their beliefs? 76%

How many Americans say religion is “a very important part” of their lives?

Overall	64%
Women	74%
African Americans	89%

How many Christians expect a war with an Islamic country? 75%

Non-Christians? 61%

How many Americans view Islam favorably? 36%

Unfavorably? 37%

³ Source: A poll conducted for Religion and Ethics Newsweekly and U.S. News and World Report by Mitofsky and Edison Media Research, March 26 – April 4, 2002, published online as “Special Report: Exploring Religious America, April 26, 2002, Episode no. 534.”

(<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week534/specialreport.html>)

Reading 1.1. Getting Started: An Introduction to Judaism

What Is Judaism?⁴

Judaism is the core religion of the Western tradition, which also includes Christianity and Islam. All three religions trace their roots to ancient figures found in the Biblical Book of Genesis, such as Adam, Noah, and Abraham. Though Judaism is small in terms of world population, its historical, intellectual, and spiritual impact is huge.

Foundation: History of a People's Relationship with God

More than the other major religious traditions, Judaism is a religion that emphasizes history. By describing the creation of the world, telling the story of the descendants of Abraham, and recording the history of the nation of Israel, Jewish scriptures reveals how God acts in the world, as well as how followers of the Judaic faith should act. These core events are told in the Jewish scriptures.

Capsule timeline:

c. 2000 B.C. E.: Abraham is called by God to leave Mesopotamia and create a new, righteous nation. He is the first “patriarch” of what would become the people of Israel.

c. 1600 B.C.E.: Joseph is sold by his brothers and taken to Egypt. He rises to power in Egypt because of the prophetic power of his dreams. He brings the Hebrews to Egypt, where they are eventually enslaved.

c. 1200 B.C.E.: Moses leads the captive Hebrew people out of Egypt to Canaan, also known as “the promised land” and the “land of milk and honey.” This becomes the site of present-day Israel. This story is called the Exodus. During this time, Moses receives the Ten Commandments from God. The Exodus shows that God acts for justice in the world, and is known as a “redemptive” act.

1000 – 931 B.C.E.: The United Monarchy thrives under kings Saul, David, and Solomon. The First Temple is built, and the holy city of Jerusalem is established.

870 – 586 B.C.E.: Israel becomes divided as leadership becomes corrupt and departs from the guidance of God. This is known as the time of the Prophets, because men such as Micah, Amos, and Isaiah call out for social and spiritual justice – what we today might call “speaking truth to power.”

586 – 538 B.C.E.: Babylonian Exile. The First Temple is destroyed, and the people of Israel are taken from their homes. They create the first synagogues where they can continue to study and practice their religion.

538 B.C.E. – 70 C.E.: The Second Temple Period. Returned to a restored Israel, the Temple is rebuilt and priests set about collecting all the written accounts of the history of their people. The first five books of this account are gathered into what we know as the Torah, which becomes the very heart of the Jewish community. The Romans destroy the Second Temple around 70 C.E.

70 C.E. to present: The Diaspora. The people of Israel spread throughout the world, keeping the faith alive through the study of scripture and with the guidance of priests who become

⁴ Major sources for this introduction include *The World's Religions* by William A. Young, *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions* edited by Keith Crim, and *A Handbook of Living Religions* edited by John R. Hinnells

Reading 1.1. Getting Started: An Introduction to Judaism, cont.

known as rabbis. This dispersion from home is known as “the Diaspora.” For many Jews the Diaspora ended with the creation of the modern state of Israel in 1948.

History and Myth

Not all of the preceding events are fully documented by historians, but in a way that doesn't matter. Take the story of the Exodus. Regardless of whether these events happened exactly as told in the Hebrew Scriptures or not, they have served as an inspiration for people throughout the ages. The story, or myth, of people escaping oppression, then wandering in the wilderness before finding the Promised Land, is one that never ceases to motivate people to seek freedom. It served as an inspiration for the ending of slavery in the U.S., and later for the Civil Rights movement. Bob Marley even named a recording “Exodus.”

Hebrew Scriptures

Christians refer to the Hebrew Scriptures as “the Old Testament,” but Jews themselves don't use this term. After all, Jews don't follow “the New Testament,” because for them Jesus is not seen as the Son of God or the Messiah.

The books of the Hebrew Scriptures were collected and/or written during the Second Temple Period (538-70). These written texts formalize the long oral tradition of the people. The Scriptures are divided into three sections:

1. *The Torah*: These first five books form a narrative that extends from the origins of the world (in Genesis) to Moses leading the Hebrews to the Promised Land. The first five books are also called the Law or the Pentateuch. The book called Leviticus contains many specific laws and codes of behavior.
2. *The Prophets*: These books tell the story of the years from the time of the United Monarchy through the Babylonian Captivity. Figures such as Joshua, Isaiah, and Jeremiah all help to show that justice can be not only personal, but also social.
3. *The Writings*: These miscellaneous books fill out the Hebrew Scripture, and include some of the most beautiful and influential writings in history, including Proverbs, Job, and the Song of Solomon.

Note: When writings become accepted as an official part of scripture, they are said to become part of the “canon,” i.e., they have been “canonized.”

In the centuries that followed the creation of the Hebrew Scriptures, rabbis created writings that are also part of the Jewish tradition.

1. *The Talmud*: A collection of writings that clarify Jewish law and proper behavior.
2. *The Midrash*: A voluminous collection of commentaries on the Scriptures. The Midrash demonstrates how dialogue and disagreement can be incorporated into a tradition.

Some Key Concepts:

Covenant: This is maybe the central idea in all of Judaism. In Hebrew Scripture, a covenant is a kind of contract or two-side agreement between the Jewish people and God, (or, as God is more commonly called in Scripture, the LORD). Justice is served when both sides, man and

Reading 1.1. Getting Started: An Introduction to Judaism, cont.

God, honor the agreement. The three main covenants in Jewish history are with these men and are represented by specific signs:

1. Noah: With the sign of the *rainbow*, God pledged never to destroy all living creatures again, accepting that the human heart is naturally flawed.
2. Abraham: The sign of the second covenant is *circumcision*, which symbolizes that the descendents of Abraham would enter into a special relationship with God.
3. Moses: When God revealed his *law* to Moses at Sinai, the final covenant was complete. Moses and his people would be bound to God in a relationship defined by special moral, legal, and religious responsibilities. Here is where we encounter the idea of the “chosen people.” Indeed, in Exodus, God says to the people of Israel, “you shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” The idea of being “chosen” would have positive and negative consequences throughout history.

Monotheism. Judaism is often credited with introducing the concept of *monotheism* in the Western tradition. Monotheism holds that there is only one God. During the time when Judaism took shape (c. 2000 – c. 1200) many nations/cultures believed they worshiped a particular god that was superior to the gods of other nations/cultures. This is properly known as “henotheism.” Other people practiced “polytheism,” a belief that there are many gods, each of whom reflect specific locations or functions of nature. The monotheistic God of the Hebrews is known to be both “transcendent” (i.e., the mysterious creator of things, existing outside of space and time) and “personal” (i.e., capable of and willing to act in human history for justice).

Ritual. The Jewish year is distinguished by a series of rituals and festivals that begin in late September/early October with the New Year festival called Rosh Ha-Shanah. During this festival, Jews repent of their sins and seek to launch the year in full awareness of God. Each ritual or festival throughout the year is intended to make Jewish doctrine real and concrete in people’s lives.

Modern Branches of Judaism

Reform. In the early 19th century, many rabbis began to urge that Judaism should, in the words of William A. Young, “adapt to a changing world,” and that Jews should find ways to practice their religion while being good citizens of the countries in which they live. Strict adherence to all laws in the Torah was no longer required, and the idea of a messiah that would create a restored Israel was no longer stressed.

Orthodox. In reaction to the liberalizing actions of the reform rabbis, many rabbis (who came to be known as Orthodox) insisted, says Young, that “the whole Torah, written and oral, was revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai.” As a result, Orthodox Jews try to observe and obey every law as stated in the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Conservative. The Conservative Movement was founded in the 19th century, as well, and sought to create a middle ground between the Reform and Orthodox branches. Conservatives try to respect the commandments of the Torah, while also allowing the law to evolve. For example, like reform Jews, they will ordain women as rabbis – something Orthodox Jews won’t do.

Reading 1.1. Getting Started: An Introduction to Judaism, cont.

Reconstruction: This branch was founded in the 1920s and 1930s to place the emphasis on the maintenance of Jewish culture. They founded “Jewish Community Centers” as places that Jews of all religious orientations could gather. Reconstruction Jews also seek to respect the views of modern science.

Kabbala: This is the mystical branch of Judaism. Like all mystical religion it stresses an inward, direct experience of the sacred or the divine. It has developed alongside traditional Judaism for many centuries. Again, like all mystical religion, it emphasizes the unity of God and creation, and provides a unique, detailed view of the cosmos.

Secular: Many Jews today consider themselves to be “secular Jews.” They identify themselves as Jewish, but don’t practice the religion in a serious way. Some secular Jews are Zionists, meaning their central concern is the creation and maintenance of a politically viable homeland for Jews in Israel. For many Israelis, says William Young, Zionism functions as a secular religion.

Some Key Figures

Hillel lived in the first century B.C.E. and was the greatest of the early rabbis. He helped to shape what we know as classical Judaism.

Maimonides lived in the 12th century Spain and codified much of Jewish law and is the greatest figure of medieval Jewish philosophy. He was also a physician.

Baal Shem Tov means “master of the Good name,” and refers to Israel ben Eliazer, an 18th century man who founded Eastern European Hasidic Judaism. He emphasized a joyful approach to the religion, with dance as a central component of worship.

Moses Mendelssohn lived in 18th century and brought the values of the Enlightenment into Judaism, stressing reason, intellectual achievement, and a respect for human rights.

Theodore Herzl lived in the late 19th century and founded political Zionism. He sought to create a safe homeland for Jews outside of Europe, preferably in the area known as Palestine.

Some Key Issues

Anti-Semitism is bigotry that often results in violence against Jews. The roots of anti-Semitism can be traced to “the deicide charge,” which means that some Christians blame Jews for the death of Jesus. Throughout the Middle Ages, Jews would be superstitiously blamed for such things as the Black Plague. Anti-Semitism reached its peak with the Holocaust, when Jews were blamed for many problems of pre-World War II Germany, and were killed by the millions as a result.

Israel/Palestine: As a result of the Holocaust, in 1948 the U.N. ruled that Jews should be allowed to create a new state, a safe place, in the area known as Palestine. This move was opposed by the Arab states, not least because many people already living there would become displaced. The history of violence between the Jews and the Arabs/Palestinians is too complex to summarize here. However, Jerusalem can be seen as a microcosm of the challenge. There, the ancient, sacred Muslim temple, The Dome of the Rock, sits on a hill right above the ruins of the Second Temple of Israel. History and geography alike connect the fate and future of Muslims and Jews.

Reading 1.2 Getting Started: An Introduction to Christianity

What Is Christianity?⁵

The largest religion in the world, with some two billion believers worldwide (approximately 33% of the world population), Christianity is based on the convictions that people are saved and achieve eternal life through faith in Jesus, and that Jesus provides both the example and the teachings for properly living in the world.

Foundation: Jesus

Whereas Judaism places its major emphasis on history and the law, Christianity, as the name suggests, focuses on the way that God entered the world through one individual, the divine figure of Jesus Christ. The word “Christ” means “the anointed one,” the long-promised messiah in the Hebrew tradition.

The first thing to know about Jesus is that he would have considered himself a Jew, and he was trained in the knowledge of the Jewish tradition and the Hebrew Scriptures. Remember, even though Christians now know the Hebrew Scriptures as the Old Testament, at the time of Jesus, there was no New Testament, and hence no “Old” one. The books of the New Testament were created after the death of Jesus to communicate the spiritual and religious meaning of his life.

The four Gospels of the New Testament combine to tell the story of Jesus. (Note that historians can confirm only small portions Jesus’ life.) Jesus was born in Nazareth, in the area known as Palestine. Our modern dating system dates from very near to the year of Jesus’ birth. He lived a normal life of religious study and work, until being baptized by the prophet, John the Baptist. At this point Jesus became aware of his divine calling and taught for about three years until his death at around age 33-35. His teaching challenged the traditional Jewish conceptions of religion, though he certainly accepted the Torah.

Jesus tended to not teach in synagogues, but instead worked directly among the people. He gathered disciples around him but it is not clear whether he intended to found his own religious sect. During his years of teaching, he is said to have performed miracles, including healings. Finally he arrived in Jerusalem, where his many followers were vocal in considering him the promised messiah of Judaism. Because of his growing popularity and his challenges to the established order, the Romans (who governed the area) had him executed as insurrectionist. An essential part of Christian belief is that Jesus rose from the dead three days after his death, and then returned to heaven.

It’s important to know that for today’s Jews, Jesus is a great teacher; for Muslims, Jesus is a prophet; but for Christians, he is seen as the only incarnation of God in the world -- his life represents a sacred event like no other in history.

Christian Scriptures: The New Testament

The New Testament is also called the *New Covenant*, which reveals that, for Christians, the promised messiah has come to the world in the form of Jesus. The Hebrew Scriptures therefore become the “Old Testament.” The books of the New Testament were all written in the decades following the death of Jesus, and it wasn’t until the fourth century that Christian leaders agreed upon the writings that would be *canonized* as the official writings of Christianity. Other accounts of Jesus and his teachings, such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, were rejected, though they were widely

⁵ Major sources for this introduction include *The World’s Religions* by William A. Young, *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions* edited by Keith Crim, and *A Handbook of Living Religions* edited by John R. Hinnells.

Reading 1.2 Getting Started: An Introduction to Christianity, cont.

used by Christian believers of the time. The rejected writings did not fit with the leaders' conception of proper Christianity.

The New Testament consists of **four** main groups of writings:

1. *The Four Gospels* tell the story of Jesus and his teachings. Their accounts differ, say scholars, because the Gospels were written by different men, at different times, for different purposes.
 - *The Gospel of Mark* was written around the year 50 and explains how Jesus was the Son of God and how faith and discipleship provided the best model for new Christian believers. Interestingly, Mark's story of Jesus ends with the empty tomb, and does not provide any accounts of the risen Christ, as do the stories of Matthew and Luke.
 - *The Gospel of Mathew* was written around the year 90 and portrays Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish law and prophecy. The Sermon on the Mount, the most famous collection of Jesus' teachings appears here and in the Gospel of Luke.
 - *The Gospel of Luke* was written between 90 and 120 and is intended to spread Christianity into the Greek world. Luke places a strong emphasis on the importance of the Holy Spirit and the value of prayer.
 - *The Gospel of John* was written around the year 90 and emphasizes that eternal life is achieved by believing in Jesus as God. It is John who identifies Jesus as the "Word" of God.
2. *The Acts of the Apostles* continues the story of the Christian movement to the time period when Paul went to Rome. The author of Acts is anonymous, according to scholars. Acts, like Luke, emphasizes the importance of the Holy Spirit in creating the new Christian community and church.
3. *Epistles* are letters written by early apostles (representatives of Jesus and his message) to various congregations and groups to explain the experience and beliefs of early Christian believers. Paul was the most important contributor to these writings, laying out the foundation for much of Christian thought and organization.
4. *The Revelation* describes the apocalyptic vision of a man named John, who wrote sometime near the end of the first century. With compelling imagery, it foretells the end of this world and the coming of the new.

Some Key Concepts

Holy Trinity: Christians have wrestled for centuries to define the exact nature of God as well as the relationship of Jesus and God. The Council of Nicea in 325 defined God as being of three parts: the Father (who is creator of all), the Son (Jesus, who is still of the same "substance" as God), and the Holy Ghost (which "proceeds" from both the father and the Son).

Immaculate Conception: An especially important idea to Catholics, is the concept that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary through the miraculous, non-sexual intervention of God.

Original Sin and Salvation: This is a central theological concept of Christianity. Because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve all subsequent humans live with an inherent, unavoidable tendency to sin. Augustine first articulated this concept in the fifth century. Humans can be saved from this condition through the grace and sacrifice of Jesus.

Reading 1.2 Getting Started: An Introduction to Christianity, cont.

Crucifixion: The central image of Christianity is that of Christ on the cross. He is said to be dying for the salvation and redemption of mankind, who tend to sinfulness. His emergence from his tomb three days later symbolizes and assures the possibility of eternal life for all believers.

Concern for the poor: One of the greatest themes running through all the stories of Jesus is his concern for and identification with outcasts of society. He identified with the poor, the sick, the powerless, saying we are judged by how we treat the least among us.

Creed: More than any other major religion, Christianity is creedal, that is, Christians are defined by their adherence to certain *creeds*, which are statements of belief about the nature and meaning of Jesus.

Branches of Christianity

Roman Catholicism: The term “catholic” means the church is meant to be universal. Roman Catholics identify the pope as the head of this universal church, and Roman Catholicism traces its history back to the earliest days of Christianity. They hold that the original apostles intended a succession of Bishops to create ongoing continuity for the Christian tradition. Roman Catholicism is the largest branch of Christianity in the world.

Eastern Orthodoxy: These churches share the Christian heritage associated with the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Russian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox churches are part of this tradition. The Eastern churches share a heritage with Roman Catholics, but ultimately separated from them after the Great Schism in the eleventh century.

Protestantism: The major branches of Protestantism include Lutherans, Baptists, Anglicans (Episcopalians), Presbyterians, and Methodists. There are literally hundreds of Protestant “denominations” and movements, promoting their unique forms of Christianity worldwide. Among these are Pentecostals (who “speak in tongues”), Fundamentalists (who reject the critical study of the Bible as well much of modern scientific thought), and Evangelicals (who focus on the transformation of personal life in accordance with the teachings of the Gospels). All Protestant churches trace their roots to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, and promote a relationship with God that is direct (as opposed to mediated by Priests and Bishops, as in Roman Catholicism). Protestantism is the second largest Christian branch.

Mormonism or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. With as many as five million adherents in the U.S., this is the largest religion founded in the U.S. Joseph Smith launched the religion in 1822 when he claimed to receive revelations from an angel called Moroni. Mormons are based out of Salt Lake City, Utah. The exact relationship between Mormonism and mainline Christianity is hazy, since Mormons have their own scripture, *The Book of Mormon*, and a unique tradition based on the teachings of Smith.

African Christianity: Some scholars identify African Christianity as a unique branch of the faith, with as many as 400 million believers as of the 21st century. As the result of missionary work from Catholics and Protestants alike, a form of Christianity has developed in Africa that seeks to reconcile the new Christian beliefs with the “indigenous” pre-Christian worldview of the Continent.

Some Key Figures

Paul: Christianity, as we know it, is very much the creation of one man, Paul, who, in the decades after the death of Jesus, traveled the entire Mediterranean region, creating the first churches and spreading, even defining, many of the core Christian beliefs and ideals. He urged people to repent

Reading 1.2 Getting Started: An Introduction to Christianity, cont.

of their sins, to experience the Holy Spirit of God in Christian communities, and to wait, with faith, for the imminent return of Jesus as judge of humankind.

St. Augustine was the greatest Christian theologian of the early centuries of the faith. He is famous as the author of *The Confessions* and introduced such concepts as God's choosing, or "election" of certain, but not all, individuals to be recipients of God's loving grace, thus anticipating the idea of predestination.

St. Thomas Aquinas lived in the 13th century and was the greatest philosopher and theologian of the Middle Ages. He sought to reconcile the classical Greek philosophy of Aristotle with Christian thought, showing that Christianity and "reason" could be compatible.

Martin Luther, critical of the abuses of the huge bureaucratic structure of the Catholic Church in the 16th century, broke away from it with his posting of the "95 Theses." Prior to his actions, the Catholic Church dominated European Christianity. Luther famously argued that humans are saved only through faith, not through will or action. Luther was a driving force in what became known as the Protestant reformation.

Some Key Issues

Anti-Semitism is bigotry against Jews that sometimes results in violence. Scholars trace the roots of anti-Semitism to "the deicide-charge," which means that, based on their reading of the Bible, some people blame the Jews for the death of Jesus. Other Christians have been bothered that Jews refused to accept Jesus as the messiah. The vast majority of Christians are not anti-Semitic, and many of them choose to keep educating people about this issue, since Jews have suffered frequent injustices in the past. The film *The Passion of the Christ* revived this controversy.

Tradition versus Modernity: With continued technological, scientific, and moral changes in society, there is an ongoing debate in Christianity as to how far Christians should go in accepting these changes. Some argue that, in the face of changes, tradition should be even more strongly affirmed, and activities such as stem cell research and gay marriage should be condemned. Other Christians feel more comfortable practicing a Christianity that can co-exist, and even support, these changes.

Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism: Christianity has been known as an "exclusive" religion, meaning that many Christians contend that non-Christians are not saved, nor can they enjoy "eternal life." Christians continue to debate how important this contention is. With the convening of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, the Roman Catholics relinquished their belief that "outside the Church there is no salvation," and moved to an acceptance of other faiths as true and holy, maintaining, however, that Christ remains the cause of all divinity in the world. This is called an "inclusive" view. Religious "pluralists" maintain that no one religion is in possession of God, and that there are "many paths, one mountain."

Reading 1.3 Getting Started: An Introduction to Islam

What Is Islam?⁶

Islam is the world's youngest major religion, founded in the seventh century by a man named Muhammad, who claimed to receive the final revelation of God (God is referred to by Muslims as Allah) which he communicated to people in a holy book, the Koran (or Qur'an). Islam means "submission" to God, which, by extension, means "peace," since that is the result, say believers, of such submission. With over 1.3 billion believers at the start of the 21st century, Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world, and the second largest. Islam is also known as "the straight path," known as "shariah" in Arabic.

Foundation: Muhammad and the Spread of Islam

Although Christianity focuses on the life, meaning, and saving power of Jesus, it is not clear that Jesus himself ever intended to lead a new religious sect outside of Judaism. The prophet Muhammad, however, most certainly did seek to take the lead in establishing a unique religion. He did not see Islam as a new religion *per se*, but as the completion and perfection of all the teachings of Allah, which had been revealed through the earlier prophets, dating all the way back to Adam.

Muhammad was born in 570 and died in 632. He married a wealthy widow when he was 25, but kept a low profile, so to speak. Then at age 40, he began seeing visions and receiving revelations. In other words, he was experiencing direct communication with God. As a result, he began preaching a new religion in the streets of Mecca, urging people to turn away from local deities, in favor of Allah, the one true God. This led him into conflict with the wealthy clans, including his own, who controlled things.

At age 52, Muhammad finally lost the protection of his clan, and was forced to leave his home. This is when he and his followers embarked on a migration (called the "hijra") to a settlement north of Mecca, which came to be known as Medina (the "city of the Prophet"). From this base, Muhammad rose to political, military, and spiritual leadership in central and western Arabia.

After Muhammad's death at age 62 in 632, leadership of the new Muslim faith was assumed by a succession of "caliphs," including a man named Umar, who, within just twelve years, took control of Egypt, Palestine (including Jerusalem), Syria, and Mesopotamia by means of military conquest. Once conquered, people were encouraged to convert to Islam, and eventually the majority of people did convert -- from various forms of Christianity and from local, indigenous religions. Very few Jews converted, however. Within a century, Islam spread throughout the entire Middle East, and all the way across Northern Africa to Spain. Today, Islam has spread around the world, with especially rapid growth in Southeast Asia and Indonesia. Muslims refer to areas where the majority of people have converted to Islam as Dar al-Islam (the House of Islam).

Islamic Scripture

The Koran. The Koran is the main text of Islam, and the heart of the religion. It is known as the "recitation" because it is believed that these are the words that Muhammad spoke at the direction of God. Scholars think that Muhammad started, but did not complete, the written version of the Koran. The Koran is divided into 114 units (or books) called "suras," which are meant to guide Muslim worship. Muslims believe that it is important to read the Koran in its original Arabic because this is the only way to understand the exact intention of God. Better yet, the Koran

⁶ Major sources for this introduction include *The World's Religions* by William A. Young, *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions* edited by Keith Crim, and *A Handbook of Living Religions* edited by John R. Hinnells.

Reading 1.3 Getting Started: An Introduction to Islam, cont.

should be spoken or recited, because the sounds of the words themselves are believed to have a spiritual impact on speaker and listener alike.

The Hadith is a collection of accounts of the sayings and deeds of Muhammad. These writings stand next to the Koran in importance, as they expand and clarify understanding of exemplary Muslim action and belief.

Some Key Concepts and Practices

A good way to develop a beginning understanding of Islam is to look at the five essential practices of the faith, known as “The Pillars of Islam.” Bear in mind that these “pillars” are meant to be grounded on the foundation of the Koran. Also, keep in mind that Islam is intended to be a complete way of life, where the believer practices the religion and submits to the will of God on a constant basis, “24-7” we might say. The Five Pillars, say Muslims, help them “remember” God as the source and meaning of life.

Pillar #1: The Shahada. Shahada means “bearing witness” and is the daily profession of faith. Muslims must recite, on a daily basis, this simple creed: “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger (or “prophet”) of God.” Note that “Allah” is the proper name in Arabic for God, and Muslims are strict monotheists. They don’t see themselves as worshipping a different God than Christians and Jews. However, they are adamant that Jesus was not the Son of God, but rather one prophet in a line of many going back to Adam, Noah, and Abraham. For Muslims, Muhammad is the both the *last* and the *greatest* prophet of God.

Pillar #2: The Salat. The Salat is the daily prayer ritual and is the earliest Islamic practice. Five times a day, Muslims kneel down to pray, facing in the direction of Mecca (located in present day Saudi Arabia). In every predominantly Muslim city you will hear a public call to prayer (“adhan”) at the required time each day. The call consists of seven short statements, which sound to Western ears like a form of singing. Traditionally, the call to prayer is made by a “muezzin,” i.e., a man calling out from a tower (“minaret”) in the city center. Now the call is often broadcast by a recording. Before praying, Muslims must enter into a state of “ritual purity,” preferably by cleansing with water found in the places of worship, called “mosques.” Friday is the day for community worship, when men gather to pray and listen to the sermon of the “imam.” In Islam, there is no distinction between religion and politics, and these sermons can be quite political in nature. Women often pray at home, or if they do attend the mosque, they must sit separately.

Pillar #3: Zakat. Zakat means “purity” or “integrity” and is the requirement of “alms-giving.” This means that it is the obligation of all practicing Muslims to give money to help the poor and maintain the mosque. At one point, the Koran indicates that one should give whatever one does not need. However, since “need” is an essentially subjective idea, Islam has developed a formal system of Zakat, in order to regulate people’s contributions. In effect, this functions as an Islamic system of taxation, and can constitute up to ten percent of a person’s disposable wealth. If a state has an official tax system, Zakat becomes voluntary, much like Christian “tithing.”

Pillar #4: Fasting. Fasting (“sawm” in Arabic) means that during the holy month of “Ramadan” healthy adults must abstain from eating, drinking, smoking, and sexual intercourse during the daylight hours. Ramadan occurs in the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, thus its dates shift on the more familiar solar calendar. The main purpose is to remember and commemorate the month when Muhammad received his first revelation from God. Like all fasting, it is meant to promote the discipline needed to help an individual focus on higher matters.

Reading 1.3 Getting Started: An Introduction to Islam, cont.

Pillar #5: Hajj. Hajj is the pilgrimage to Mecca. Once in their lifetime, all Muslims, men and women, must journey to the holy city of Mecca, if they are physically and financially able. The hajj is intended to echo Muhammad's own pilgrimage to Mecca just before his death in 632. Before entering Mecca, each pilgrim trades in his or her regular clothes for simple white garments that symbolize the unity and equality of all Muslims. In Mecca, they face the black stone of Ka'ba, said to be established by Abraham and Ishmael, and considered the symbolic center of the Muslim world. Remember, Muslims trace their roots back to the same place that Jews and Christians do. During the hajj, pilgrims also travel outside of Mecca to the towns of Mina and Arafat, where they perform rituals to help them resist evil in the world and to ask forgiveness of Allah.

Branches of Islam

Sunni. Known as the "way of tradition," Sunni is the largest branch of Islam, making up approximately 85 percent of the religion worldwide. The idea of Sunni Islam is to follow, as closely as possible, the faith and behavior established by Muhammad and his first four successors, called the "righteous caliphs." Believers try to model themselves as closely as they can on these founders, especially by referring to the authority of the Koran and to a collection of stories and reports of Muhammad's life, called the "Hadith." As might be expected, there is tremendous diversity within the Sunni branch, often springing from the question of how good Muslims should live in the modern world.

Shi'ite. Known as the "Party of 'Ali," this is the smaller of the two main branches, making up most of the remaining 15% of Muslims worldwide. Shi'ites trace their lineage to 'Ali, the fourth caliph, and in their mind, the first true successor of Muhammad. Shi'ites call the lineage of successors "Imams," not caliphs. Shi'ites reject what might be called the consensus method of the Sunnis and place faith in the authority of the Imams. Iran is the center of Shi'ite Islam.

Sufi. This is the mystical branch of Islam. It is small and mysterious, yet influential, partly because of its great poets, such as Rumi. Sufis seek annihilation in God, the dissolving of the individual identity into the divine Reality. One practice meant to promote this goal is the dancing of the Whirling Dervishes. Sufis point to Muhammad's "Night Journey" to heaven as an example of the Prophet's own mystical experience.

Some Key Figures/Islam in America

Mamun was a ninth century caliph in the Abbasid line of caliphs, which later became known as the Sunni tradition of Islam. He is famous for his intellectual aspirations for the faith, and he turned Baghdad into a center of learning, where the scientific and philosophical wisdom of many civilizations, include that of the Greeks, was translated into Arabic and made available for study.

Saladin was the greatest Muslim general during the Christian Crusades of the 12th century. He is notable for recapturing Jerusalem for the Muslims after 88 years of Christian rule and then for showing respect for the Jewish and Christian residents of that city. He is also famous for the truce he signed with Richard the Lionhearted in 1192.

Suleyman ("the Magnificent") ruled as sultan of the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire during the 16th century, its time of greatest glory. His laws merged the Ottoman and Islamic traditions, and he also undertook to repair, redecorate, and preserve the great Muslim shrine The Dome of the

Reading 1.3 Getting Started: An Introduction to Islam, cont.

Rock, which stands at the site of the Second Jewish Temple, built by Suleyman's namesake, King Solomon.

Elijah Muhammad built on the legacy of *W.D. Fard*, who worked among poor blacks in 1930s Detroit, establishing a paramilitary organization for men called the Fruit of Islam. Fard stressed what he identified as "the deceptive character of the white man and the glorious history of the black race." When Elijah Muhammad took over in 1934, he declared that Fard himself was Allah, and he, Elijah Muhammad, was a new prophet. Based out of Chicago, he created an even more militant organization, and his followers became known as Black Muslims. In addition to offering harsh rhetoric aimed at white people, the Black Muslims had great success preaching self-help for blacks, and successfully converted many outcasts of society, such as convicts, criminals, and drug addicts.

Malcolm X was one such man who benefited from this conversion. He left a life of crime to become the most famous and effective spokesperson for the Nation of Islam during the 1960s, promoting what was known as Black Pride. Malcolm offered an alternative to Martin Luther King, Jr., who advocated an integrated society and promoted Christianity. Malcolm rejected integration and called Christianity a "white religion," which held no promise for blacks. After his pilgrimage to Mecca, where he witnessed the integration of Muslims of all color, Malcolm began to tone down his separatist rhetoric. His life was cut short by assassination in 1965. Today, the main leader of the nation of Islam is *Louis Farrakhan*.

Some Key Issues

Jihad is a concept that is so central to Islam that it is sometimes called "the Sixth Pillar." Often taken as a synonym for Holy War (a Western concept), jihad actually means "striving" or "exertion" in the cause of God. Muslims distinguish between the Greater Jihad, which is the struggle inside of the individual to combat his or her evil tendencies, and the Lesser Jihad, which is armed, even violent, conflict in defense of the faith. Jihad is controversial in part because it's hard to agree on what constitutes "defense" of a faith.

Modernity versus Tradition: This same struggle occurs within Christianity, but it is especially intensified in Islam, which sees itself as a total way of life, and is therefore less comfortable with the separation of church and state that has become the norm in the West. While many Muslims feel that they can thrive as good Muslims in modern, democratic societies, other Muslims feel that the price is too high, that the faith gets compromised beyond recognition in the process of participating in such societies.