

Unit 3: Foundational Beliefs

Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

Be aware of the following

- Helpful principles when studying beliefs other than one's own
- Essential Jewish beliefs
- Common misunderstandings experienced by Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths
- Basic Orthodox Eastern Christian beliefs
- Foundational beliefs uniting Muslims
- Five 'pillars' of Islam
 - Sacredness of the Qur'an

Identify

- Shema
- Torah
- Coptic Orthodox
- Shahada
- Salat
- Sawm
- Zakat
- Hajj
- Sura
- Jibril
- Jinns
- Abraham and Moses
- Mahdi
- Divine Decree
- Jihad
 - Lesser Jihad
 - Greater Jihad

Realize

- Variety within Orthodox Eastern Christian Churches
- Importance of Arabic recitation of the Qur'an
- Status of Prophet-Messengers within Islam
- Necessity of complete understanding of Islam

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Three underlying principles assist us before discussing foundational beliefs.

1. Treat other religions with respect. "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you."
2. Maintain your own spiritual/personal foundation.

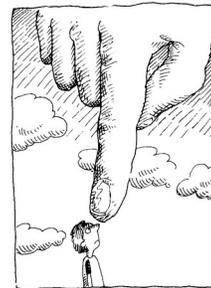
"I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any...Mine is not a religion of the prison-house."

-- Mahatma Gandhi (as quoted in All Men Are Brothers, Mahatma Gandhi [NY: UNESCO, Colombia Uiversity Press, 1958], p. 156)

"As the traveler who has once been from home is wiser than he [she] who has never left his own doorstep, so a knowledge of one other culture should sharpen our ability to scrutinize more steadily, to appreciate more lovingly, our own."

-- Margaret Mead (as quoted in Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, [Boston: Little, Brown, 1991], p. 853)

3. Realize the difference between what is normative and what is actually practiced (ideal/real; belief/practice). What people believe--the ideals of their religion--may often be very different from what is actually practiced.



Core ideas and texts form the basis for understanding a given faith's relation to society.

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Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all religions of the book.

They look to the scriptures--whether the Torah (TOH-rah) and Hebrew books of the Bible, the Bible (including the New Testament), or the Qur'an--as a primary source for understanding. Developed from these scriptures, the following beliefs summarize major teachings of these three faith traditions.



I. Judaism



1. Foundational Beliefs

a. Monotheism The Shema (shuh MAH), "Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God, The Lord is One," summarizes the most fundamental characteristic of God. The Torah (law) expresses God's concern for all.

b. Covenant



The agreement God made with Abraham established Abraham's descendants as the chosen people.

"Judaism has a 3000-year-old tradition of infusing the spiritual into our everyday lives, not for personal redemption, but to uplift the lot of [humankind] through adherence to ethical and moral principles, and to preserve through this common endeavor a sense of connectedness with a people. This, the essence of our Covenant, gives us tools to deal with the disparate and often confusing aspects of modern life."

-- Alfred Moses,
U.S. Ambassador to Romania (as quoted in the American

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Jewish Committee advertisement, New York Times, 8 Sep 1996, p. E-18)

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c. Torah Originally referring to the Pentateuch or five books of Moses, the term gradually included the whole of the Hebrew scriptures. By the end of the fifth and sixth centuries, the Torah became synonymous with anything which is authoritative as God's will for Israel.

Supplements to the Torah are oral traditions Mishnah (meesh-NAH) and the Talmud (tahl-MOOD), and interpretations of the scriptures, the Midrash (mee-DRAHSH). Torah thus encompasses particular rituals, universal ethical statutes, and ultimately includes knowledge of redemption/salvation.

d. Land God's eternal covenant made with Abraham spoke to the significance of the promised land of Palestine.

"The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God." (Genesis 17:8.)



Many Jewish people closely identify with Jerusalem and the present day land of Israel, attesting to the enduring importance of this country to their thought and practice.

2. Common Misunderstandings

a. Christian Speculations Though Jewish and Christian adherents enjoy a common history, the meanings of their shared religious vocabulary are not necessarily the same. Terms such as covenant, law, mercy, righteousness, messiah, salvation, heaven and hell may connote radically different meanings within the two traditions.

b. Jesus Jewish opinions concerning Jesus vary. Though not the Messiah, many accept him as a great teacher.

