

8: Historical Background: The Abrahamic Faiths

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Overview:

This lesson provides background on three Abrahamic faiths, or the world religions called Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is a brief primer on their geographic and spiritual origins, the basic beliefs, scriptures, and practices of each faith. It describes the calendars and major celebrations in each tradition. Aspects of the moral and ethical beliefs and the family and social values of the faiths are discussed. Comparison and contrast among the three Abrahamic faiths help to explain what enabled their adherents to share in cultural, economic, and social life, and what aspects of the faiths might result in disharmony among their adherents.

Levels:

Middle grades 6-8, high school and general audiences

Objectives:

Students will:

- Define “Abrahamic faith” and identify which world religions belong to this group.
- Briefly describe the basic elements of the origins, beliefs, leaders, scriptures and practices of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.
- Compare and contrast the basic elements of the three faiths.
- Explain some sources of harmony and friction among the adherents of the Abrahamic faiths based on their beliefs.

Time:

One class period, or outside class assignment of 1 hour, and ca. 30 minutes class discussion.

Materials:

Student Reading “The Abrahamic Faiths”; graphic comparison/contrast handout, overhead projector film & marker, or whiteboard.

Procedure:

1. Copy and distribute the student reading, as an in-class or homework assignment. Ask the students to take notes on each of the three faith groups described in the reading, including information about their origins, beliefs, leaders, practices and social aspects. They may create a graphic organizer by folding a lined sheet of paper lengthwise into thirds and using these notes to complete the assessment activity.
2. After the reading is completed, discuss what does the term Abrahamic faith mean, to which religions does it apply, and why. Make sure students understand the difference between beliefs and practices. Discuss how religious practices influence culture, and how diversity of culture persists despite common beliefs and practices—why?

3. Distribute the graphic comparison/contrast handout and divide the class into three groups or conduct a whole class discussion. The handout contains a graphic organizer for information about the Abrahamic faiths: a Venn diagram with three interlocking circles. The object of the exercise with the trefoil diagram is to use the information in the reading to determine what elements of the three faiths are common to all three faiths, which are unique to one of them, and which are held in common between each pair.
4. **EXTENSION:** If the class is undertaking a more detailed study of the three faiths than this brief overview provides, two other graphics might be added as activities: a set of parallel boxes and three concentric circles—a target diagram. The object of using the target diagram is to describe a relationship of inclusion and exclusion concerning elements of the faiths, such as the recognition of Jesus and the biblical prophets in Islam, and the recognition of the biblical prophets before Jesus in Christianity. In this case Judaism would be in the center, because the teachings of both Islam and Christianity include aspects of Jewish beliefs and scriptures. The parallel boxes can be used to list and describe elements or themes in all of the Abrahamic traditions that run parallel. Suggestions include the moral and ethical guidelines, attitudes toward the role of women (and changing or challenged interpretations of these today), the belief in emulating the prophets or spiritual leaders, the idea of water as purification medium, beliefs about death and the afterlife, judgment, and the role of journeys or pilgrimages. The importance of Jerusalem and the Holy Land are additional parallel elements.
5. Finally, the class can reflect on the significance of different ways of comparing and contrasting so as to appreciate the fact that complex relationships between beliefs and practices cannot always be reduced to categories of same and different, or for or against. Point out that similar information may appear on more than one chart, but it acquires meaning in terms of the ways in which adherents of the three faiths may view each other, and ways in which their interaction may be completely harmonious or absolutely opposed. How do people cope with awareness of these contrasts in their social interactions? How does the film *Cities of Light* show these aspects playing out historically?

Reading and Activity Handout 8: The Abrahamic Faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Introduction

Among the major world religions, three are very closely related in their origins, their beliefs, their revealed books or holy scriptures, and their institutions of leadership. They are also closely related in their beliefs about morals and ethics, and their views of the individual and social life. They do differ, however, in important aspects of their beliefs. Historically, relations among these faith groups reflect both conflict and cooperation. In modern times, adherents of the Abrahamic religions sometimes seem to be enemies and aliens, but at other times they seem like squabbling children of a single parent, who are in fact capable of reaching understandings and living in peace together.

Geographic Origins of the Abrahamic Faiths

Abraham was a person who lived during the Iron Age, sometime after 2000 BCE, in the city of Ur, in Mesopotamia. Accounts of his life vary, but all have two common threads: Abraham (or Abram) was called by God to take his family and migrate to another place. Abraham was the ancestor of many peoples—most prominently the Semitic (after the origin of their languages) peoples, among whom were the Hebrews, the Ethiopians, and Arabs. Among Abraham's descendants were the major prophets of the monotheistic tradition. The land where Abraham and his descendants settled came to be called the Holy Land, a region on the eastern Mediterranean coast between Mesopotamia and Egypt, and the desert toward its south—the land where the prophets described in the Biblical and Qur'anic scriptures lived, traveled, and preached. Today, that land includes all or part of several modern countries, including Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and parts of Egypt, Iraq, and Syria.

Over time, these lands have been the place of spiritual journeys, settlements and cities, trade, colonies, wars, and empires. They have been lands of human joy and sorrow, conflict and cooperation, and great diversity of thoughts and ideas. During the past four thousand years, the monotheistic tradition has brought forth the world religions called Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The prophets mentioned in the Torah, the Bible, and the Qur'an were born and lived in this region—that is why this geographic space is holy in all of the Abrahamic faiths. Unfortunately, this shared space has also been the scene of conflict, because of differing beliefs about that land and heritage among the three, and especially, claims to the right to govern this territory and possess its resources.

Basic Beliefs and Common Stories

Jews, Christians and Muslims believe that God made a covenant, or agreement with Abraham to keep the faith in One God, and to worship Him, to keep that faith and teach the practice of worship to his children down the generations, and God would preserve, protect and multiply the children of Abraham. This covenant became the legacy, or trust, for the children of Abraham to continue. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael (son of Hagar) and Isaac (son of Sarah), whom he settled in different parts of the Arabian Peninsula, the latter near Jerusalem, and the former near Makkah. According to the scriptures, Abraham was promised

that his offspring would become the fathers of great nations. These nations are the people who are now called Jews, Christians, and Muslims. They are called monotheists, meaning people who believe in one God, the Creator of all that is in the universe and on earth.

The common core of Abraham's story is his faith and obedience to the call of God. It is expressed in the Jewish and Christian traditions in a verse of the book of Genesis. In this verse, God calls to Abraham, and he replies, "Here I am" (Genesis 1:22), and in the *Qur'an*, 2:131, which states "When his Lord said to him: Surrender! he said: I have surrendered to the Lord of the Worlds." When Muslim pilgrims say, "Labaik! Allahuma labaik!" as they approach the sanctuary at Makkah—which they believe Abraham built—they are repeating, "Here I am, Lord, at Your Command!" Another act of Abraham that belongs to the core story is that God told him in a dream to sacrifice his son. He and his son were prepared to obey this divine command, but God redeemed the sacrifice with a magnificent ram. This miracle meant that God does not require human sacrifice, but only the willingness to obey. The Biblical account says that the son to be sacrificed was Abraham and Sarah's son Isaac, while the *Qur'an* states that it was the first-born son Ishmael, whose mother was Hajar. The lesson of obedience and strength of faith, however, is the same.

God, Prophets, and Revelations Over Time

All of the monotheistic faiths share a belief that God, the Creator, has "spoken" to humankind over time. The word for this divine communication is "revelation." It comes from the word "reveal" (to make visible or apparent). Adherents of the Abrahamic religions believe that God revealed Himself to certain individuals called prophets over the course of human history. They believe that God communicated five main messages: (1) the nature and qualities of the one God; (2) the purpose and nature of the universe created by God; (3) the need to worship one God; (4) the purpose of human life and the need to live a righteous life and the news of judgment after death, and reward or punishment in the afterlife, (5) morals and laws which people are told to follow.

The Abrahamic faiths have in common a belief in angels as God's messengers to human beings. The angel of revelation is named Gabriel. The human beings chosen by God as bearers of revelation to other human beings are called prophets. Some of them were chosen and inspired to teach people, while the major prophets received revelations that have been memorized, recited and written in holy books or scriptures over the centuries.

Abraham is very important to the monotheistic faiths, but he was not the first leader. Adam and Eve are the first human beings mentioned in the scriptures as receiving revelation from God. Other prophets included Elijah, Isaiah, Noah, Jonah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David and Solomon. The Abrahamic religions differ, however, over two of these individuals, Jesus and Muhammad, who lived about 600 years apart.

Believers in the Abrahamic faiths have preserved these scriptures and traditions of the prophets and the story of their unfolding in human history. They have continued to write, recite, and study the words of revelation that were first communicated orally, then recorded in books.

- The scripture of Judaism is the *Torah*, which is the first part of the *Tanakh*. The *Torah* contains the revelation that was given to Moses. The *Tanakh* includes the *Torah* and the books of the Prophets, the Psalms, Proverbs and other writings, 24 books in all. It contains history, law, poetry and song. It is written on a scroll and recited in Hebrew as a part of Jewish worship.

- The scripture of Christianity is the *Bible*, including the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible of Judaism, including the first five books, called by Christians the Pentateuch), and the New Testament. The New Testament includes the books that describe the life and teachings of Jesus and the history of the early Church. As the titles of the parts of the *Bible* indicate, it was compiled from the writings of many authors over time. Christians believe that it was inspired in these authors by God. There are 66 books in most versions of the Christian Bible.
- The scripture of Islam is the *Qur'an*. It consists of 114 chapters called *surahs*, and over 6000 verses called *ayat*. Muslims believe that it was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel over a period of 23 years. The *Qur'an* describes and affirms the basic spiritual and moral messages of the Torah and the Bible. The *Qur'an* text states that it is a continuation of God's message to humankind from earlier revelations.

Another concept common to the Abrahamic faiths is the Messiah. The word means one who is chosen by God for a specific holy task—literally, one upon whom oil is rubbed or poured to signify his appointment to a high honor and mission.

- Jews believe that a Messiah is still awaited, and coming at some future time. Jews do not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Some Jews believe that Jesus was a spiritual leader.
- Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah. They also believe that Jesus was the son of God, who came to redeem human beings from sin or wrongdoing, and that he compensated for all human sins with his suffering and death. This salvation, or being saved and given eternal life, is the central teaching of the New Testament (which means promise or pledge, i.e. the salvation through Jesus)
- Muslims also believe that Jesus was the Messiah, but they do not believe that he was the son of God, and Muslims also believe that God did not allow him to die at the hands of human beings.
- Both Christians and Muslims believe that Jesus was raised up to God, but Christians believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, or resurrected. Muslims believe that Jesus was one of the greatest prophets. Muslims also share the belief with Christians in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ near the end of time.
- Among adherents of the Abrahamic faiths, only Muslims believe that Muhammad was a prophet, a man who was born in Makkah in about the year 570 CE. They believe that he received the final revelation from God—the holy book called the *Qur'an*. Historically, Muhammad was not accepted as a prophet by Christians and Jews. Similarly, Jews do not accept Christian or Muslim beliefs about Jesus.

The Monotheistic Concept of God and the Afterlife

All three Abrahamic faiths share many ideas about the nature of God. He is the Creator of the Universe. The monotheistic tradition of God includes the idea of a covenant, or promise, of God. The covenant is a trust placed upon human beings to believe in God, to worship only Him and not to worship any other gods. The scriptures describe God's characteristics or attributes, such as justice, mercy, and power over all of Creation. The scriptures of the Abrahamic faiths also describe the promise of God to judge all human beings on the Judgment Day, after they have died, and to reward or punish them according to God's justice. All of the faiths believe that God requires human beings to show mercy to

others, to do good deeds such as helping others, and that He will reward those who have faith and do good in this world. Some Christians differ over the importance of having faith vs. doing good works. They believe that human beings are only granted salvation by the grace of God and His mercy, not by virtue of good works.

The promise of God is for eternal life after death, in a heavenly paradise. Equally, those who do evil will be punished in Hell. The most important thing for human beings, however, is to have faith in God, that He will grant mercy to whomever He will, and forgive their sins or wrongdoing. Another important concept of God is that He is not distant or removed from the world, but He is present, and each human being can approach God and become near to Him, through prayer and other acts of worship.

Theology, or the study of the nature of God, has developed as an important intellectual tradition in the Abrahamic faiths. Theologians have written thousands of books discussing the characteristics of God, trying to grapple with ideas that seem to contradict each other and affect the human condition. For example, the idea that God created human beings with a free will seems to contradict the idea that God decides the fate or outcome of each person's life. The idea of evil in the world and disasters that happen to innocent people seem to contradict the idea of a merciful, benevolent God. These questions concern people in traditions other than the Abrahamic faiths, but there is much shared philosophy among them.

Practices of Worship

Belief in the need to worship God is common to all religions. The most basic form of worship is prayer. Each tradition prescribes specific words and requirements for prayer, which takes place at appointed times of day. Public prayer in houses of worship is common to all three faiths—for Jews on Saturday, for Christians on Sunday, and for Muslims on Friday—and during celebrations throughout the year. All Abrahamic faiths recognize the personal, private prayer of each believer. The desire to speak with God is common among people everywhere, whether they follow a particular religious tradition or not. Prayers that mark the times in the day and the cycle of the year are among the most important signs of obedience to God. Such rituals are also the source of scientific efforts to achieve accurate timekeeping and calendars. The work of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim astronomers reflects this common and shared effort.

Fasting – going without food or certain kinds of foods – for a period of time is a common form of worship in the Abrahamic tradition. Fasts are often related to holy days in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Fasting is also found in many other spiritual traditions in the world. Giving charity as an act of kindness, help for the poor, or as a way to make up for bad deeds is common in the Abrahamic tradition. The idea that wealth is purified through giving is also common to the three traditions.

Water has a spiritual significance in the Abrahamic faiths. Purification of the body before prayer and in connection with other rituals is a common theme. Pilgrimage, or travel to visit holy sites to seek forgiveness, to strengthen the connection with God, and the journey in search of knowledge is similar, even though the pilgrimage involves different destinations. In Islam, the pilgrimage to Makkah once in a lifetime is one of the five pillars. In Christianity, visiting the holy land and other shrines has a long tradition. In Judaism, the site of the temple in Jerusalem is a pilgrimage destination.

Celebrations

Each of the Abrahamic faiths has a few major celebrations during the year. Both Judaism and Islam follow a lunar calendar for the timing of these celebrations, and some Christian feast days are also influenced by the lunar calendar. Some of these celebrations are:

- Judaism – Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover, Shavuot, Sukkot, Chanukkah, Purim; these celebrations recall events in the dramatic history of the Jewish people.
- Christianity – Advent, Christmas, Lent, Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost; these are only a few of the celebrations that commemorate events in the life of Jesus.
- Islam – Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr; Hajj and Eid al-Adha; Ramadan is a month of fasting commanded in the Qur'an, and the feast day that ends it is Eid al-Fitr. Eid al-Adha and the Hajj (the ritual journey to Makkah) commemorate events in the life of Abraham and his family.

There are fast days and feast days, when people deny themselves the ordinary necessities of life for a time of remembrance and thankfulness. Sharing food and other gifts with family, neighbors, and needy people are common ways to celebrate, and attending special worship services are part of these celebrations.

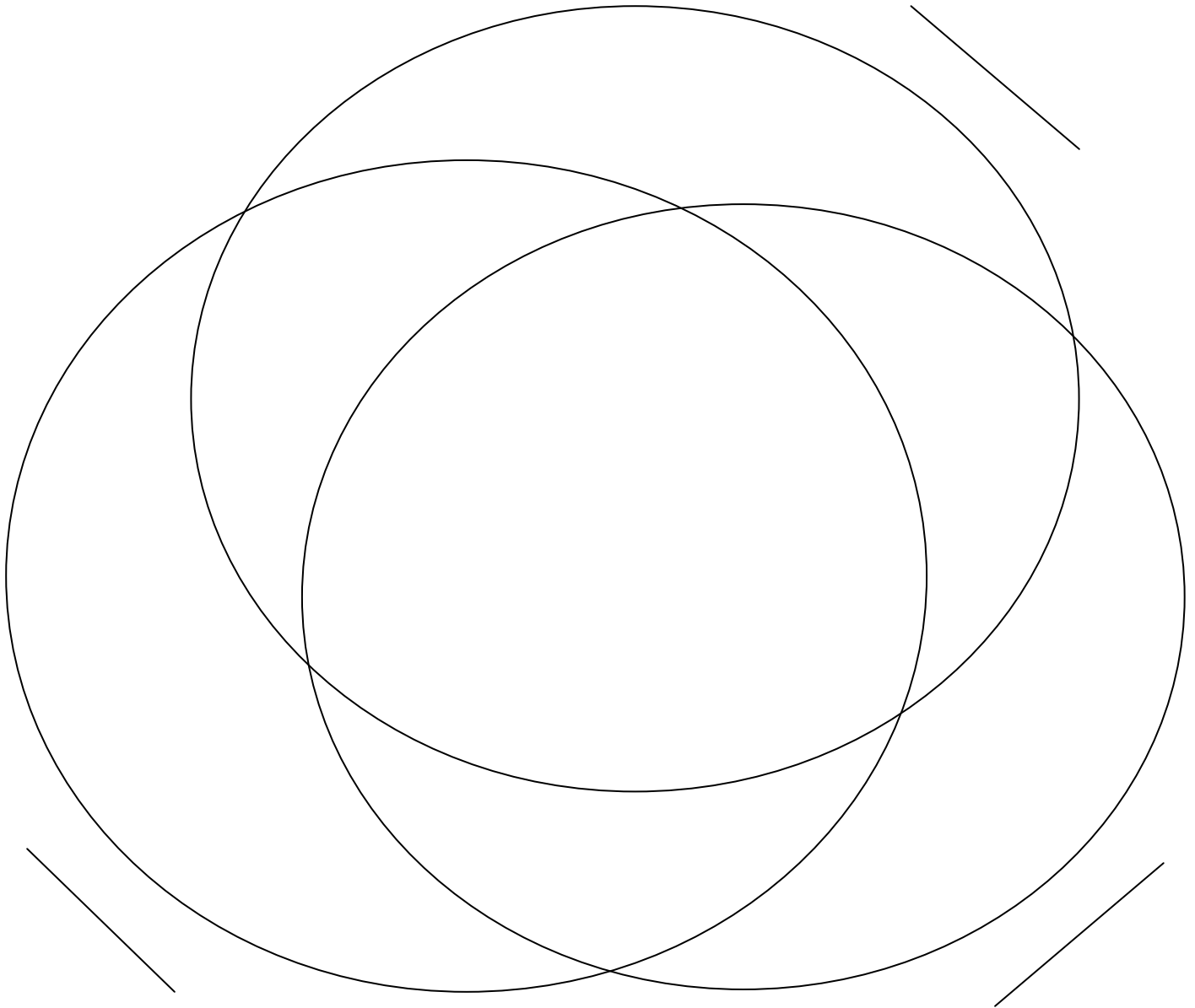
Leaders

Individuals and the community participate in worship and follow ethical, practical and religious laws. Leaders especially trained in knowledge of the faith and care for the community and its members play roles in guiding the faithful. In Judaism, leaders are called *Rabbis*, and they receive rigorous training in the scriptures and other Judaic writings. In Christianity, *priests* and *pastors* serve as part of a church hierarchy, or ranks of authorities. Only trained, ordained, or initiated priests can fulfill certain sacred functions of worship for the lay, or ordinary, people. In Islam, there is no priesthood, ordination, or religious hierarchy. A prayer leader is called an *imam*—“one who stands in front” of the lines of worshippers. Leaders who offer advice on how to practice Islam, on the law, and other kinds of guidance are called *alim* (sing., AH-lim) or *ulema* (pl., oo-leh-MA). The word means one who has knowledge.

Moral and ethical principles and laws

One condition for groups of people to be able to live together in one society is that they share a set of morals and values. The most basic set of moral and ethical values in the Biblical tradition is the Ten Commandments, which was part of the revelation taught by Moses, and are revered by Jews and Christians as they appear in the Torah and the Old Testament. This part of the belief system is an important reason why Muslims are taught to respect Jews and Christians as fellow “People of the Book.” The Qur'an includes all of the ten commandments – many of them stated in a similar way, with the exception of the Sabbath (day of rest). The Qur'an also states that its revelation came to confirm the message that the earlier prophets brought. Much of this message is the central religious concept of one God, and the basic commandments to honor parents, help the poor, respect neighbors, not to steal, kill, envy, or lie, and so on. Some of these commandments also form the basis of civil and criminal law in secular governments, and they form the basis for the concept of human rights.

Another type of religious practice that affects how religiously diverse groups get along is rules about food. Jews and Muslims both follow dietary laws about the types of meat they can eat, how animals used for meat are slaughtered and prepared. Christians do not follow either the very detailed laws about food of the Jews, nor do they follow the laws in Islam that forbid eating pork and drinking alcoholic beverages. Jews, Christians, and Muslims, however, do share food in social settings, and among members of religiously mixed families. This is an important basis for social life in a diverse society such as Spain during the medieval period, in mixed cities of the Muslim lands, or in large cities of the world today. Sharing food makes sharing ideas much easier, as do shared values, beliefs and ethics make business dealings and many kinds of interactions possible, including intermarriage.



Trefoil Diagram of the Abrahamic Faiths

The three faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—share a common core of beliefs and practices. There are also certain beliefs, practices and traditions that are shared between two of the three faiths. Finally, there are aspects of each faith that are uniquely held by each tradition. (1) Label each of the circles on the line outside the circles -- “Judaism,” “Christianity,” and “Islam.” Using the Student Reading, identify elements of these belief systems and practices that are held in common by all three faiths, and place them in the central space. In the intersecting spaces between each two faiths, place elements held in common between two of the groups. In the non-intersecting space, identify and write elements that are unique to each of the three traditions. Be prepared to discuss the results in class. You may also want to do some additional research to find out more specific details.