

# **The Abrahamic Religions**

*An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of  
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod  
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## ***History, Beliefs, Practices***

### **Identity:**

The Abrahamic religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Religious leaders involved in interfaith dialogue, political leaders, and reporters may use the terms “Abrahamic religions” or “Abrahamic faiths” to suggest that the three religions share a common heritage and similarities in theology.

### **Founder(s):**

Jews, Christians, and Muslims regard Abraham as a key figure or founding patriarch of their faiths.

### **Statistics:**

Approximately 32% of the world’s population is Christian (2.2 billion people), 23% (1.6 billion) is Muslim, and 0.2% (14 million) is Jewish.<sup>1</sup>

### **Texts:**

Each of the Abrahamic religions accepts a particular written text as sacred and divinely inspired: the *Tanakh* (the Books of Moses, the Prophets, and the Writings) of Judaism;<sup>2</sup> the *Bible* (the Old and New Testaments) of Christianity; and the *Qur’an* (sometimes spelled *Koran*) of Islam.

### **History:**

An early use of the term “Religion of Abraham” is found in the Qur’an, in a reference designating Islam as the certain source of salvation, as opposed to Judaism or Christianity: “They say: ‘Become Jews Or Christians if ye would be guided (To salvation).’ Say thou: ‘Nay! (I would rather) the Religion Of Abraham the True, and he joined not gods with Allah’” (Surah 2:135)<sup>3</sup> The term “Abrahamic religions” at times replaces “Judeo-Christian,” a term used to describe the Western religious and ethical tradition. World War II, the Holocaust, and Arab-Israeli conflicts prompted world leaders and theologians to work for peace among the three faiths. The Roman Catholic scholar Louis Massignon (1883-1962) advocated peace between

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/global-religious-landscape-exec.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Most Jewish people look to the “interpretation” of the Tanakh provided in the Talmud as their real source of authority. There are, in fact, two Talmuds, the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud. The Babylonian Talmud seems to be preferred by most Jews today.

<sup>3</sup> A *surah* is a chapter of the Qur’an. Quotations from the Qur’an are taken from *The Meaning of The Holy Qur’an*, ed. Abdullah Yusef Ali (Beltsville, MD: amana publications, 2003), 55.

Christians and Muslims based on the faiths' "common origin in Abraham."<sup>4</sup> Documents of Vatican II (1962-1965) spoke of the common heritage of the three faiths, using Abraham "as the focal point for interfaith dialogue."<sup>5</sup> After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and due to ongoing conflicts in Middle Eastern countries and other parts of the world, government and religious leaders have called for unity and peace, hoping to find common ground among the three faiths.

On October 13, 2007, 138 Muslim scholars and clerics issued an open letter to the leaders of the world's churches, offering their understanding of the common ground between Christianity and Islam. The letter was entitled, "A Common Word Between Us and You." The title is based on a verse from the Qur'an (Surah 3:64) that calls on the "People of the Book" to come to agreement in the worship of Allah. The document asks for peace and understanding between Muslims and Christians based on "the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbor."<sup>6</sup>

### **Beliefs and Practices:**

The teachings and practices of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam differ significantly and there are also important differences in belief to be found within each religion—for example, the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed branches of Judaism, the Sunni, Shiite, and Sufi divisions of Islam, and the many denominations within Christianity. However, the term "Abrahamic religions" emphasizes aspects of basic teachings thought to be held in common by the three faiths. The scriptures of each of the three religions designate Abraham as an important figure or founding patriarch. Judaism honors Abraham as the primary physical and spiritual ancestor of the Jewish people: "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'" (Genesis 12:1-3). In Christianity, Abraham is regarded as the patriarch of God's covenant people, a spiritual ancestor of those who believe in the promised Messiah (both before and after Christ's birth), and an example of faith: "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations'" (Romans 4:16-17). In Islam, Abraham is a founding patriarch who serves as a model of submission to Allah and who, with Ishmael, set the foundation of the Kaaba (Islam's holiest site). Abraham's legacy is passed down, not through Isaac (as in Judaism and Christianity), but through Ishmael. Abraham and Ishmael pray: "Our Lord! make of us Muslims, bowing to Thy (Will), And of our progeny a people Muslim, bowing to Thy (Will)..." (Surah 2:128).

All three of the Abrahamic religions are monotheistic, that is, the believers in each faith worship one God, thought by some people to be the same God. Jews, Christians, and Muslims have all

<sup>4</sup> Aasulv Lande, "Abrahamic Faiths—Transcending Borderlines?" *Swedish Missiological Themes* 96:3 (2008): 250.

<sup>5</sup> Aaron Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.acommonword.com>.

been called “People of the Book” because all hold certain texts to be sacred. All three religions honor figures such as Abraham, Jacob, and Moses. Each faith has a “communal ideal”—the covenant community of Judaism, the Church of Christian teaching, and the *umma* (community) in Muslim thought.<sup>7</sup> Views and claims regarding Israel, or Palestine, and the city of Jerusalem in particular, are often sources of conflict (both theologically and politically) because these places are significant and sacred for all three religions.

All three of the Abrahamic religions teach a moral code based on the love of God and kindness to one’s neighbor. Judaism teaches, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Islam teaches, “And do good—To parents, kinsfolk, Orphans, those in need, Neighbours who are near, Neighbours who are strangers” (Surah 4:36). Christian teaching reaffirms and develops the Leviticus passage: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39; Galatians 5:14).

### ***A Lutheran Response***

While it is true that there are certain common features among the three Abrahamic religions—the importance of Abraham, sacred scriptures, the worship of one God, and moral teachings—these very commonalities represent significant differences among the three faiths. In addition, of the three religions, only the Christian faith points to the unique revelation of God in the person and saving work of Jesus Christ.

#### *Abraham*

Although the patriarch Abraham is an honored figure, the three religions make different claims about him, his descendants, and the promises he received from God. According to Judaism, although Abraham is “the father of a multitude of nations” (Genesis 17:5), God’s covenant people are the Jews, descended from Abraham through Isaac: “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named” (Genesis 21:12). Abraham is an important figure in Islam, but he is only one among many prophets, including Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Jesus, who submitted to Allah. The Qur’an tells Muslims to “make no difference Between one and another of them: And we bow to Allah (in Islam)” (Surah 2:136). According to Christian teaching, all who trust in Christ for salvation “are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:29). In Judaism, the land promised to Abraham belongs to his descendants forever (Genesis 13:15), land that continues to be a source of conflict between Jews and Muslims (and for some Christians as well). As Lutherans, we understand that the land, the earthly nation of Israel, was not the fullness of Abraham’s inheritance. Abraham and his heirs lived in the land of promise “as in a foreign land,” desiring “a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Hebrews 11:8-16).

#### *Sacred Scriptures*

The title, “People of the Book,” affirms the centrality of a scripture to each community. But this also hides a problem, “namely, the diversity of the ‘peoples’ involved and the diversity of the

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<sup>7</sup> Darrol Bryant, “The Abrahamic Faiths and the Quest for Dialogue: Does Common Ancestry Make for Good Relations,” *Dialogue & Alliance* 21:1 (Spring/Summer 2007): 23.

‘scriptures’ involved.”<sup>8</sup> Significant differences are found among the three religions in the way in which the sacred scriptures of each faith were received and the person through whom those writings are interpreted. According to the teachings of Judaism and Christianity, God inspired different authors to write down His words. In Judaism, Moses is a central figure in the reception and interpretation of the written scriptures. The people of Israel were instructed “to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses” (Joshua 23:6). Muslims recognize the writings of Moses, the psalms of David, and the gospel of Jesus as sacred, but believe that Judaism and Christianity have corrupted those scriptures. In Islamic teaching it is Muhammad alone who received the ultimate revelation of Allah in the Qur’an. Christians teach that the books of the Old and New Testaments are “breathed out by God” (2 Timothy 3:16), written down by many inspired authors, and interpreted rightly only in and through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the one to whom the Scriptures testify (John 5:39).

### *The Worship of One God*

Followers of the Abrahamic religions confess different creeds or statements of faith. The central confession of Judaism is: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Muslims confess their faith in this statement: “There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is Allah’s Apostle.”<sup>9</sup> As Christians, we confess our faith in the Holy Trinity in the words of the Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds. We believe that “Jesus is Lord” (1 Corinthians 12:3), and that He is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16).

The creeds of the three religions make very different and mutually exclusive claims concerning God. Each of the three religions rejects not only belief in many gods, but also the monotheistic views of the other two faiths. At Mount Sinai God told Israel, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). Judaism rejects the doctrine of the Trinity, confessing in the words of Deuteronomy 6:4: “The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” In response to the use of the plural term for God, “elohim” (Genesis 1:1), the Jerusalem Talmud comments, “It is not written [plural] ‘gods created,’ but [singular] ‘God created.’”<sup>10</sup> Islam makes exclusive claims for Allah, and also rejects the Triune God: “They do blaspheme who say: Allah is one of three in a Trinity: for there is No god except One God” (Surah 5:73). As Christians, we believe that the Holy Trinity is the one true God. In the words of the Athanasian Creed, we confess that “the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; and yet there are not three Gods, but one God.”<sup>11</sup> In the Person of Jesus Christ “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Colossians 1:19). Jesus, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, is true God and true man, who said of Himself, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30) and warned that “the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10:16).

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<sup>8</sup> Bryant, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Yerushalmi Berakhot ix.VI.d, [http://halakhah.com/yerusahalmi\\_berakhot\\_tzvee\\_zahavy\\_2010.pdf](http://halakhah.com/yerusahalmi_berakhot_tzvee_zahavy_2010.pdf), 318.

<sup>11</sup> The Athanasian Creed, *Lutheran Service Book* [St. Louis: CPH, 2006], 319.

### *Moral Teachings*

The moral code of each of the three faiths is expressed in kindness toward one's neighbor. According to Judaism and Islam, such kindness helps those in need and earns the favor of God or Allah. With regard to salvation, Judaism "spans a broad range of beliefs about immortality."<sup>12</sup> Jews believe that "because of their election by God as His people, [they] are already essentially saved," although this salvation "can be forfeited by severe crimes and the refusal to repent."<sup>13</sup> Muslims believe in life after death and in a final day of judgment on which people will be rewarded according to their deeds on earth. On that day, believers will be gathered to Allah and sinners will be driven into hell. Muslims must be righteous, fulfilling the obligations of their faith, in order to receive from Allah "forgiveness And a great reward" (Surah 5:9). Christians "love one another" in obedience to Jesus' command (John 15:12) and follow the example of Jesus' sacrificial love for both neighbor and enemy, knowing that such love and service cannot earn salvation. As Lutheran Christians, we believe and strongly emphasize that forgiveness and eternal life are gifts, received only by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-10).

### *Jesus Christ*

The three religions differ significantly in their teachings about Jesus Christ. In Judaism, Jesus is not accepted as the Son of God or as the Messiah foretold by the prophets. The Qur'an of Islam also denies the deity of Christ, stating that only Allah may be worshiped as Lord: "They do blaspheme who say: 'Allah is Christ the son of Mary.' But said Christ: 'O Children of Israel! Worship Allah, my Lord And your Lord'" (Surah 5:72). The Qur'an also teaches that Jesus did not die on the cross: "That they said (in boast), 'We killed Christ Jesus The son of Mary, The Messenger of Allah'—But they killed him not, Nor crucified him, But so it was made To appear to them, And those who differ Therein are full of doubts, With no (certain) knowledge, But only conjecture to follow, For of a surety They killed him not" (Surah 4:157). As Christians, we believe that the prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Jesus, God in human flesh, who is "the Christ [Messiah], the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Jesus was "delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Romans 4:25) and He is the one by whom the world will be judged in righteousness on the day appointed by the Father (Acts 17:31).

In 2009, the Missouri Synod responded to "A Common Word Between Us and You," noting that Muslims and Christians do not hold to the same beliefs about Jesus, but expressing the hope "that our differences would 'not cause hatred and strife between us.'"<sup>14</sup> As Christians, we, with the Triune God we worship and confess, want "all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). To that end, we continue to pray for peace among all those who follow the Abrahamic religions, bearing witness in "gentleness and respect" to the hope that we have in Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:15) so that everyone may come to confess that "Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:11).

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<sup>12</sup> Erwin J. Kolb, *How to Respond to Judaism* (St. Louis: CPH, 1995), 29.

<sup>13</sup> Kolb, 28.

<sup>14</sup> Response to "A Common Word Between Us and You," <http://lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=726&DocID=346>.

### ***For Further Reading***

- Adams, David L. and Ken Schurb, eds. *The Anonymous God: The Church Confronts Civil Religion and American Society*. St. Louis: CPH, 2004.
- Baker, Robert C. and Roland Cap Ehlke, eds. *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal*. St. Louis: CPH, 2011.
- Francisco, Adam. *One God, many gods*. St. Louis: CPH, 2011.
- Hahn, Ernest. *How to Respond to Muslims*. St. Louis: CPH, 1995.
- Kolb, Erwin J. *How to Respond to Judaism*. St. Louis: CPH, 1995.
- Steinbronn, Anthony J. *Worldviews: A Christian Response to Religious Pluralism*. St. Louis: CPH, 2006.

### ***Links and Websites***

Background to *A Common Word Between Us and You* (2009)  
<http://www.lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=726&DocID=347>

Response to *A Common Word Between Us and You* (2009)  
<http://www.lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=726&DocID=346>

An Evaluation of Judaism from a Lutheran Perspective  
<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=384>

An Evaluation of Islam from a Lutheran Perspective  
<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=382>

Fry, C. George, "The Quranic Christ," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 43 (1979): 207-221.  
[www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/fryquranicchrist.pdf](http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/fryquranicchrist.pdf)