Information About Christianity

Followers of Christianity are called Christians. They believe in one God—the God of Abraham, often called Yaweh in English. Abraham lived in the Middle East about 4,000 years ago at a time when most people believed in many Gods. However, Abraham believed that only one, all-powerful God had created the world.

Christians believe that God made an agreement, or covenant, with Abraham. This agreement said that Abraham and the future generations of his family—his descendants—would be God’s chosen people in return for their faith and obedience. These people became the Hebrews. Today they are called Jews.

Christians base their religion on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, known as Jesus Christ. Jesus was a Jew who is said to have been born in Bethlehem, near the city of Jerusalem, around the year 4 B.C. During his life he traveled around northern Palestine teaching about a new covenant between God and the Jews. Those who followed Jesus' teachings broke away from other Jews. These followers became Christians, worshipping God in a new way that focused on Jesus' teachings.

The Christian idea of God is called the Trinity because Christians believe God has three parts: God the Father, God the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit (God’s presence on earth). Therefore, all Christians believe that Jesus was part of God, and most Christians believe Jesus was both human and divine (God-like). Christians believe that Jesus died on a cross, was buried, and rose from the dead three days later. They believe Jesus then ascended to heaven to be with God the Father. The story of Jesus’ life is recorded in the Christian holy book, called the Bible.

The Christian Bible has two parts—the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is the history of the law and the stories of the prophets—the ancient Hebrew messengers of God’s word. The Old Testament also contains psalms, or prayers written in
song or poem form. The New Testament includes the four Gospels, which are stories of Jesus’ life. It also includes letters and stories about early Christians. The Bible has no sacred language, and it has been translated into thousands of languages.

The goal of Christianity is to achieve *salvation*. The state of salvation is the eternal (never ending) life of one’s soul with God in heaven. The opposite of salvation is *damnation*, or eternal suffering in hell. Christianity holds that those who *sin* (turn away from Jesus’ teachings) without being sorry will suffer damnation.

Christians believe that a person achieves salvation in two ways. The first way is to follow Jesus’ teachings about living a moral (good) life. The second way is to participate in the *sacraments*—sacred ceremonies in which Christians experience the Holy Spirit. Some Christian groups practice as many as seven sacraments. However, all groups recognize *baptism* and *communion* to be sacraments. Baptism is the ceremony of introduction into Christianity. The ceremony re-creates Jesus’ own baptism in the River Jordan. Communion—commonly called the Lord’s Supper—re-creates Jesus’ breaking of bread and sharing of wine before His death, at the Last Supper.

Christianity requires that only people who are specially trained can carry out Christian teachings and ceremonies, and preside over (be in charge of) the sacraments. Christian *ministers*—also called priests or pastors—lead Christians in worship in holy buildings called *churches*. The most important service occurs on Sunday. During the worship service, Christians experience the sacraments, recite their basic beliefs, pray, and read from the Bible. The minister delivers a religious speech, or *sermon*, related to the Bible readings.

Christianity has three main groups, or *sects*: Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. Followers of all three believe that God continues to reveal his teachings to the world. All Christian sects consider Jerusalem the holiest city because that is where they believe Christ died and rose from the dead.


Information About Judaism

Followers of Judaism are called Jews. These people believe in one God—the God of Abraham—called Adonai in Hebrew. Abraham lived in the Middle East about 4,000 years ago at a time when most people believed in many Gods. Abraham believed that only one, all-powerful God had created the world. Jews believe that God made an agreement, or covenant, with Abraham. This agreement said that Abraham and the future generations of his family—his descendants—would be God’s chosen people in return for their faith and obedience. These people—called Hebrews—would live in a promised land called Canaan.

Jews base their religion on their holy book, called the TeNaKh. This holy book is written in Hebrew, the sacred language of Judaism. The word TeNaKh is taken from the holy book’s three parts. The Torah contains stories of the ancient Hebrews and the Hebrew law. The Nevi’im contains the history of the Hebrew messengers of God’s word, or prophets. The Ketuvim contains writings, including psalms—prayers written in song or poem form.

The Torah is the most important part of the TeNaKh because it is the law of God. Jews believe that about 3,000 years ago, God gave the Torah to Moses, Judaism’s most important prophet. In addition to the history of the early Hebrews, it includes 613 laws, called commandments. These commandments tell the followers of Judaism how to worship and how to live a moral (good) life.

The goal of Judaism is to live a good life according to the laws of the Torah. In addition, followers of Judaism are supposed to pass on Jewish traditions to their families. An example of this combination is the Torah law that requires Jews to keep the Sabbath day, or Shabbat, holy. From Friday evening until Saturday evening, Jews must rest and pray. Shabbat begins with a traditional family meal. This meal includes such practices as breaking the Shabbat bread, the challah, and sharing wine. On Friday evening and Saturday morning, Jews gather to pray at a holy building called a synagogue. During the worship service, a teacher, or rabbi, leads the congregation (worshippers) in prayers and readings
from the TeNaKh. During Saturday’s service the rabbi also
gives a religious speech, or sermon.

Traditionally, rabbis were Torah scholars who also kept
everyday jobs. They acted as rabbis only when working at the
synagogue. About 2,000 years ago rabbis began to speak about
the Jewish oral (spoken) law, or the Talmud. Jews believe that
the Talmud continues to unfold in every generation. This
means that God’s teachings continue to be revealed. Rabbis
work to understand the continual unfolding of God’s laws and
adapt them to the modern world.

The Torah’s laws direct many aspects of Jewish religious and social life. For instance,
the Torah commands all Jews to fast by not eating or drinking during the holiday of
Yom Kippur. This sacred holiday is a day Jews set aside for being sorry for bad acts,
or a day of atonement. The Torah also calls upon Jews to give to the needy to create
justice in the world. The Torah outlines what a Jew can eat, called the rules of kashrut.
Jews only can eat only kosher foods, because they alone meet the Torah’s requirements
about the clean preparation of food. Food that is not kosher is called tref. These foods
include pork, shellfish, and meat prepared with dairy products. Today, Jews from
various sects follow kashrut to varying degrees.

The three main sects of Judaism are Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed. All
three sects have a special reverence for Jerusalem because it is the sacred city of
the prophets.
Information About Islam

Followers of Islam are called Muslims. These people believe in one God—the God of Abraham, called Allah in the Arabic language. Abraham lived in the Middle East about 4,000 years ago at a time when most people believed in many Gods. Abraham believed that only one all-powerful God had created the world. Muslims believe that God made an agreement, or covenant, with Abraham. This agreement said that Abraham and the future generations of his family—his descendants—would be God’s chosen people in return for their faith and obedience. Abraham had a son named Isaac by his wife Sarah. He also had a son named Ishmael by his wife Hajar. Muslims believe that the Hebrews, or Jews, descended from Isaac, and that the Arabs descended from Ishmael.

Islam is based on God’s teachings and the example of the life of Muhammad. Muhammad was born in Mecca, located on the Arabian Peninsula, around A.D. 570. Muslims believe that when Muhammad was 40 years old, he had a vision. In this vision, the angel Gabriel appeared and told him to repeat a message from God. God’s message was revealed over the next 23 years. During this time, Muslims learned to accept all the Hebrew messengers of God’s word, or prophets, including Moses and Jesus. However, Muslims did not believe that Jesus was divine (God-like), and they felt that God’s chosen people had not properly followed the prophets. Muslims consider Muhammad to be God’s final prophet. They believe that through Muhammad, God made Mecca the center of Islam, and its holiest city. After Muhammad’s death, God’s teachings, as revealed to Muhammad, were written down in the Koran—the holy book of Islam.

Arabic is the sacred language of Islam. Though the Koran has been translated into many languages, it is used for religious purposes only in its Arabic form. The Koran contains the
revelations (teachings) God made to Muhammad. These revelations include many of the ideas from the history and law of the ancient Hebrews and their prophets, as well as the story of Jesus’ life. The Koran outlines the goal of Islam: living according to God’s guidance, which will be rewarded with salvation, or eternal (never ending) life in paradise with God. The opposite is damnation, or eternal suffering in hell.

To achieve salvation, Muslims must participate in five basic practices. These practices are known as the “five pillars,” and they are found in the Koran. The first is shahada, a public declaration of faith, which is the recitation of the Islamic basic beliefs, or creed. The second is salat, or prayer. Muslims pray five times a day at specific times, always facing Mecca. The third is zakat, or giving to the needy. Islam requires a Muslim to give approximately 2.5 percent of his or her wealth to charity. Siyam, or fasting, is the fourth pillar. For 30 days—during the month of Ramadan—Muslims cannot eat, drink, or have sexual relations from dawn to sunset. The final pillar requires each Muslim who is able to make a hajj, or journey, to Mecca once in his or her life. The Koran also describes a way of life that contains halal, acts that are allowed, and haram, acts that are forbidden. These acts include dietary laws, which do not allow the eating of pork or the drinking of alcohol.

Muslims worship in a holy building called a mosque. Prayers held on Friday at noon are the most important. During the Friday worship service, an imam, or prayer leader, leads prayers, reads from the Koran, and gives a religious speech, or sermon. Muslims select a person of good character and religious knowledge as their imam. However, the imam has the same relationship with God as any other Muslim. Muslims also hold Jerusalem sacred as the city of prophets. They believe it is the place where Muhammad met the other prophets and ascended to heaven.

The two major sects of Muslims are the Sunni and the Shi’i. The sects share most beliefs, but differ mainly over the issue of leadership in the Muslim community.
Islam Reading Questions:

1. Muslims believe in one God, the God of ____________, called Allah.

2. Muslims believe that Jews descended from Isaac, and that the Arabs descended from ____________.

3. Muslims base their religion on God’s teachings and the life of whom?

4. How did Muslim teachings differ from Judaism and Christianity?

5. What is Islam’s most important holy city?

6. What is the holy book for Muslims called?

7. What is the goal of Islam?

8. Describe the “five pillars” in detail.

9. Muslims worship in a mosque, where an imam leads the prayers, reads from the Koran and gives a sermon. What qualities are needed to become an imam?

10. Why is Jerusalem important to Muslims?

11. What are the two major sects in Islam?
Judaism Reading Questions:

1. Jews believe in one God, the God of _______________, called Adonai in Hebrew.
2. Where is the “promised land” according to the Jews?
3. The Jewish holy book is written in Hebrew and called the TeNaKh. List the three parts included in this holy book:
4. What is the goal of Judaism?
5. What must Jewish people do on the Sabbath?
6. The worship service is held in a synagogue and led by a ________________.
7. List three of the laws that Jews must abide by according to the Torah:
8. What are the three main sects in Judaism?
9. Why is Jerusalem important for Jews?

Christianity Reading Questions:

1. Christians believe in one God, the God of _______________, often called Yaweh.
2. Christians base their religion on the life and teachings of whom?
3. The Christian idea of God is called the Trinity because Christians believe God has three parts (list those parts):
4. What is the holy book for Christians called?
5. The goal of Christianity is salvation. How does one achieve salvation?
6. Who presides over Christian teachings and ceremonies?
7. What are the three main sects in Christianity?
8. Why do Christians consider Jerusalem the holiest city?