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Comparative Religion FOR DUMMIES®



William P. Lazarus
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Dedication

Bill's dedication:

This book is dedicated to all the people who encouraged me both professionally and academically from the first time I decided to write and to learn about religious history: my wife, Kathleen; daughter, Maia; my parents; my three brothers, all of whom write and are published, although no one knows where the writing gene came from; and friends like Cynthia Schuster-Eakin, Jon Swebilius, Michael Silverstein, Tom Nimen, and Susan Cerbone.

Mark's dedication:

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Introduction

High school students in Ohio — and maybe elsewhere as well — used to take a course that introduced them to many of the world's religions. In classes filled with children of many beliefs, teachers would talk about how a particular faith developed and how it spread.

Today, when it seems that the faithful in one religion can't resist taking potshots at believers in another religion, people may have forgotten how life was in past eras. People of different faiths used to live and work side by side with little concern. At one time, Jews served as advisors and heads of state in Muslim countries. Christians and Jews labored together to build the culture in Catholic Spain. Christians lived in harmony with Muslims in the Middle East.

Less than 1,000 years ago, Catholic Roger II of Sicily relied on Arab scholars and financiers to run his widespread Mediterranean kingdom.

At one time, Jewish and Christian icons were included with the *Ka'baa*, the holiest religious monument in Islam, located in *Mecca*, the holiest city in Islam. Even today, Jerusalem is home to the Dome of the Rock, a sacred Islamic mosque, and the *Wailing Wall*, the last surviving piece of the great Jewish Temple that once existed there.

Visitors to Jerusalem can see religious Jews wrapped in prayer shawls, trudging along ancient streets alongside Muslims and Christians. Overhead, the cry of the Islamic *muezzin*, calling the faithful to prayer, rings out along with the tolling bells of Christian churches. The flag of Israel flutters in the breeze with the Star of David in its center.

Such situations are too rare. Members of the three religions seem to fight more than they pray together. Over time, the three great religions have become separated by seemingly unbridgeable chasms. Actually, they are very much alike.

- ✔ Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share a common heritage. They each tie their history to a single event and a single person, Abraham, who lived maybe 4,000 years ago.
- ✔ The three religions all worship the same God and shun the pagan concepts of multiple deities. In Judaism, his name is *Yahweh*. In Islam, the name is *Allah*, which means God. Christians simply call him God.
- ✔ They have similar holidays. Easter, for example, the holiest day in the Christian calendar, is tied directly to Passover, one of the most significant holidays in Judaism.
- ✔ Each religion believes Jerusalem is a sacred city.

There are many more links among the three faiths — they share many likenesses and have fewer differences.

But in spite of the similarities between these primary Western faiths, fissures between them continue today. These disputes can be seen in the Roman Catholic pope's apologies for comments he made about Islam, as well as Jewish and Arab fighting over Israel, American battles in Iraq, Iranian insistence that the American president is the “devil,” and more acrimonious and violent behavior.

Maybe it's time to review the histories of these religions and use this understanding as a way to create a peaceful path into the future.

About This Book

This book examines and compares the three great religions that believe in the same God. They are among the oldest and most widespread religions on earth. Jews, Christians, and Muslims can be found on almost every continent and in every country.

Each chapter in *Comparative Religion For Dummies* will bring you closer to understanding what each faith's followers believe, how their beliefs compare with their counterparts, and how each religion reached this point in time.

“Dummies” is actually an affectionate term. This is a book for people who don't know about these three great faiths, but want to find out more. All three of these religions encourage education. They can claim most of the world's greatest scholars — some who devoted their lives to helping others understand the world. This book continues that honorable process.

All the topics in these pages, of course, have been extensively researched by many people over the centuries. You can find books that devote thousands of pages to tiny aspects of each religion, as well as whole libraries focused on the founders of each faith. This book gives you an overview, with each chapter standing on its own. You can pick and choose what you want to know. Then when you need additional information, you'll know where to go to find what you're looking for.

Foolish Assumptions

You don't have to be a religious scholar to understand or appreciate this book. We don't assume that you have a background in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. But if you are familiar with or believe in one of these religions, we think you'll find the comparisons presented in this book to be enlightening. The three religions are more similar than most people realize, and we hope that developing an understanding of the similarities and differences can only improve the current state of affairs in our world.

Conventions Used in This Book

Historians today are moving toward connoting time by using CE (of the common era) and BCE (before the common era.) The old way — BC, meaning “before Christ,” and AD, standing for “the year of our Lord” in Latin — was seen as too religious. With so many scholars from so many different faiths working together, no one wanted to offend anyone else's beliefs.

We don't either. However, BC and AD are such a part of our lives and the lives of our readers, we decided to stick to them. We don't want to offend anyone. We're just trying to reduce chances of misunderstanding. We are sure our readers will agree.

A note about translations: Nothing is harder than taking an ancient text and trying to convert it into modern English. It's worse than wrestling pudding. At least, if you do that, everyone agrees that you're talking about pudding. With the ancient documents, particularly those seen as holy, some people even object to the concept of translating.

In Chapter 9, we try to explain why it's so hard to translate the Bible and the Koran, the two principal sacred documents of the three faiths. Nevertheless, they are often the only texts that deal with the oldest portions of religious history, and we relied on the best translations we could find. Other writers may translate the words in a different way, but the gist is the same.

Finally, we use the following conventions to help you understand new words and concepts:

- ✓ We *italicize* all new words and terms that are defined.
- ✓ We **boldface** keywords or the main parts of bulleted lists.
- ✓ We use monofont for Web addresses.
- ✓ We've put quick little stories or fun trivia facts in shaded boxes called sidebars. The stuff in these sidebars is interesting, but you don't have to read them to gain an understanding of the topic at hand.

How This Book Is Organized

The book is divided into six parts.

Part I: History Is a Happening Thing

This section introduces the origin of religion and explains the rise of a belief in one God. That's when the curtain opens on Abraham, a nomadic tribesman who is credited with fathering the three faiths. Little is known about him, but historians have uncovered lots of information about his time and beliefs.

The section also explains how all three religions link their history back to Abraham.

Part II: The Development of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

This part explains how three different religions were nurtured on Abraham's vision. Each developed in a separate environment, endured hardships and setbacks, and then became firmly entrenched in the mind of man.

Chapters 3 and 4 concentrate on Judaism, the oldest of the three religions. The next two chapters, 5 and 6, look at Christianity, which developed directly from Judaism. The third section, Chapters 7 and 8, discuss Islam, which is younger and was born about 600 years after Jesus lived.

You're introduced to beliefs, customs, traditions, and rituals that characterize each faith. In many cases, you see how one belief influenced another or was the source for some idea.

Part III: Shared Aspects of the Faiths

In this section, you get the scoop on how members of the three religions have developed similar approaches to worship and to expressing their faith. You discover their sacred texts that serve as a bedrock to their beliefs, and you tour their holy cities.

Part IV: Shared Ideas Among the Faiths

This part focuses on similar religious ideas and concepts that help link the three religions. They all look to a messenger from God (called a *messiah*), foresee the day when the world ceases, provide ways to forgive sin, and propose ideas of what comes after death.

Part V: The Part of Tens

Like all *For Dummies* books, the last few chapters are top-ten lists. This part lists the main misconceptions about the three religions, our favorite religious films, and the top ways that the religions have influenced the world.

Part VI: Appendixes

We conclude the book with two appendixes. The first provides a timeline so you can see when events happened. The second attempts to trace Abraham's family tree back to Adam, the first man, and ahead to Jesus and Muhammad.

Icons Used in This Book

Information in the book has been highlighted to help you pinpoint exactly what you need to know.



This icon denotes an important point to keep in mind as you read on. It will help you understand what follows.



This icon indicates information that reflects some disagreement among scholars or even within a particular faith.

Where to Go from Here

You don't have to read this book from cover to cover. The chapters can stand alone, so check out the Table of Contents and read whatever topic interests you.

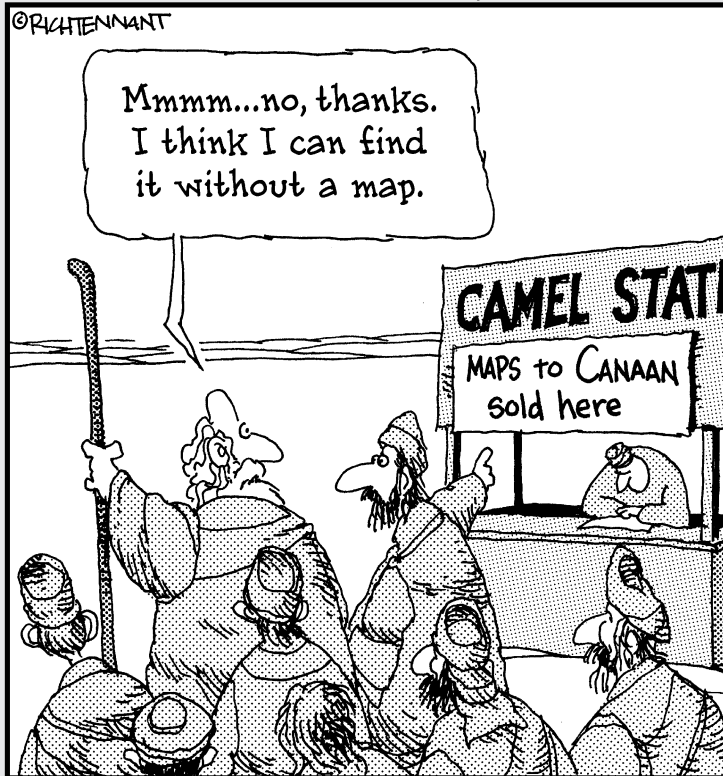
Finally, please let us know what you think about this book. It took a long time to write and produce this book, so we'd love to hear your thoughts. You can write us through the publisher at www.dummies.com. You are also welcome to write the authors at wplazarus@aol.com. We'll try to respond to all legitimate comments.

Part I

History Is a Happening Thing

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



In this part . . .

Say hello to Abraham, a simple shepherd who moved away from his own country and faith possibly 4,000 years ago. Abraham's quiet announcement of a belief in a single God rocked his own society and still reverberates through the centuries. His revelation inspired three great religions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — that now dominate the world.

Those religions developed in the heat and turmoil of the Middle East. Each one centered on the idea of one God, and then diverged in ways of worship. Abraham's genealogy includes two distinct branches that both link and divide Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Chapter 1

One God, Three Faiths

In This Chapter

- ▶ Revealing how religions worked prior to Abraham
 - ▶ Uncovering the origins of monotheism
 - ▶ Discovering how one God led to three religions
-

In New York City alone, there are 6,500 or so Christian churches, according to the Internet. The Boston area is home to around 6,000 Christian churches. In fact, every American community features many different churches serving Christian residents of various denominations.

When you include buildings for Jews, Unitarian Universalists, Muslims, and other worshippers, our country seems awash in religious structures.

There are so many sects, so many denominations, so many beliefs, that the number of religions seems to multiply daily.

Yet, all of them have an origin. Everybody's religion, whatever anyone believes, started somewhere. In this chapter, we explore some of these starting points and show how they've affected the three major monotheistic religions of today: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Holy Toledo! How Many Gods Are There?

Originally, ancient people believed in magic. Their holy men, called *shamans*, practiced various rituals and had magical sayings that were supposed to heal illnesses, stop storms, grow crops, or change the future.

The people soon realized that these actions and spells didn't work, so they decided that great, distant beings, called *gods*, watched over all aspects of life and controlled everything. These deities could only be reached through rituals and prayer. The ancient people developed thousands of gods, each of whom was responsible for some aspect of human life.

Religion was born. Religion began as a way for people to understand lightning, thunder, good or bad fortune, birth, death, and all the other events in their lives.

Religion quickly became an integral part of life. For example, Egyptians, who originated one of the earliest civilizations, began to create rituals to “guarantee” that the Nile River flooded on time every year. When the Nile flooded, it brought rich, fertilizing soil to their farmland. Without it, they would starve. The Egyptians developed calendars based on the stars so they would know exactly when their gods would send the floods.

Not that far away from Egypt, Babylonians built large pyramid-like structures to their gods and invented a style of writing to record the amount of grain and beer that worshippers donated to their temples.

Every early religion worshipped many deities. Scientists call that belief *polytheism*, which means “many gods.” Still, some people began to believe that there was only one God who controlled everything.



The religions that believe in one God practice *monotheism* — the opposite of polytheism — which comes from the Greek for “one god.”

Monotheism Develops

Monotheists have never been the majority of humans. Even today, roughly half of all humans accept the idea that there is only one God. But the followers of one God belong to two of the world’s largest religions, Christianity and Islam. They developed their faith by building on ideas generated by an older religion, Judaism. Table 1-1 shows how the number of believers in each monotheistic faith compares to the others.

Table 1-1	Largest Monotheistic Faiths
Religion	Members
Christianity	2.1 billion
Islam	1.3 billion
Judaism	14 million
Baha’i	7 million
Unitarian Universalist	800,000