Jerusalem, Mecca, Medina and the three Abrahamic faiths

Jerusalem, **Mecca**, and **Medina** are among the most important cities in religious history. All three are central to Islam, but their significance differs considerably. **Jerusalem** is especially important to Judaism and Christianity, while **Mecca** and **Medina** hold uniquely central roles in Islam.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are often called the ***Abrahamic religions*** because they share traditions connected to Abraham, although they understand his legacy differently.

The three cities at a glance



Jerusalem the city sacred to three faiths

Jerusalem is the historical center of ancient Jewish worship, a major setting for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in Christianity, and the site of Islam's Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

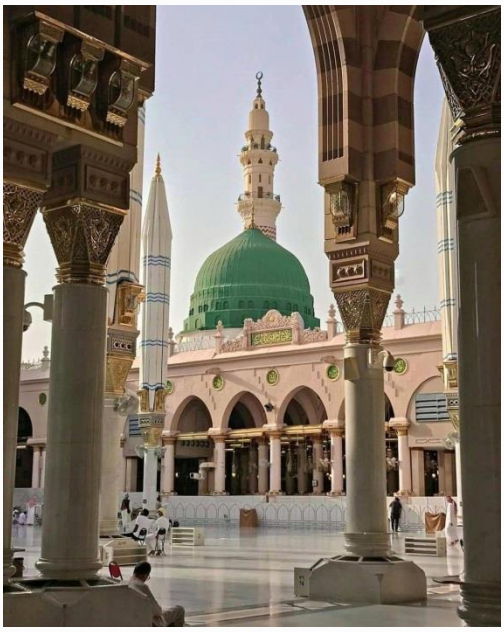
- **Judaism:** The site of the First and Second Temples and the holiest city in the Jewish tradition.
- **Christianity:** The place of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, central to Christian salvation.
- **Islam:** The location of Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension in Islamic tradition, and the first direction of Muslim prayer.



Mecca the holiest city in Islam

Mecca is the birthplace of Muhammad according to Islamic tradition and the home of the Kaaba, the sacred structure toward which Muslims pray.

- **Islam:** The destination of the Hajj pilgrimage, which Muslims who are physically and financially able must undertake at least once in their lifetime.
- **Judaism:** Important through shared traditions about Abraham and Ishmael, but not a Jewish holy city.
- **Christianity:** Connected indirectly to Abrahamic history, but not a major site of Christian worship or pilgrimage.



Medina the city where the Muslim community took root

Medina is where Muhammad migrated in 622 AD, establishing a community that became the foundation of the early Muslim polity. Its name means “the city” and it was formerly known as Yathrib.

- **Islam:** Home of the Prophet's Mosque, associated with Muhammad's life and burial; the second-holiest city in Islam in the mainstream Muslim tradition.
- **Judaism:** Has historical significance because Jewish communities lived in and around the city before and during Muhammad's time, but it is not a Jewish holy city.
- **Christianity:** Has no comparable central role in Christian doctrine or pilgrimage.

Why each city matters in each religion

Religious role	Jerusalem	Mecca	Medina
Judaism	Holiest city; ancient Temples and Jewish prayer	No central religious role	Historical Jewish communities
Christianity	Central to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection	No major sacred-site role	No major sacred-site role
Islam	Third-holiest city in the mainstream Sunni tradition	Holiest city; Kaaba and Hajj	Second-holiest city in the mainstream Sunni tradition
Main significance	Temple, Jesus, and sacred history	Worship, pilgrimage, and the Kaaba	Muhammad, migration, and the early Muslim community

Jerusalem's importance to all three religions is well established, but its meaning is different within each tradition.

Jerusalem in Judaism and Christianity



Judaism: God's covenant and the Temple

Jerusalem is deeply connected to the Jewish people's covenant with God, biblical history, and religious identity.

- **King David** made **Jerusalem** his capital, according to the Hebrew Bible.
- **Solomon** is traditionally associated with the construction of the First Temple.
- The Second Temple stood on the same sacred site and was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.
- The Western Wall is a major place of Jewish prayer and pilgrimage.
  Jews traditionally pray facing **Jerusalem**, wherever they live. The city also features prominently in Jewish prayers and hopes for restoration and peace.



Christianity: Jesus' death and resurrection

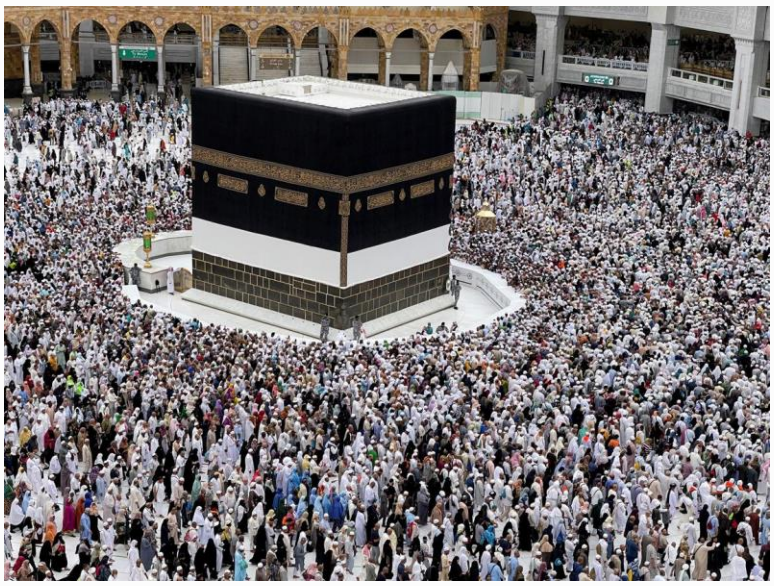
Jerusalem is central because of the events at the heart of Christian belief.

- Jesus' final days, crucifixion, and resurrection are associated with **Jerusalem**.
- The Church of the Holy Sepulchre commemorates the place Christians traditionally identify with Jesus' crucifixion and burial.
- Christians from many denominations travel there on pilgrimage, particularly during Holy Week and Easter.

Unlike Islam's obligatory pilgrimage to **Mecca**, Christianity has no universal requirement to visit **Jerusalem**. The core of Christian faith is Jesus Christ, not a particular city.

An important distinction: Judaism's connection to **Jerusalem** is rooted in the history of the Jewish people and their covenant with God. Christianity inherits much of that sacred history but interprets it through Jesus, especially his death and resurrection.

Mecca and Medina in Islam



Mecca: The center of Muslim worship

Mecca is the spiritual focal point of Islam.

- **The Kaaba:** The sacred structure at the center of the Grand Mosque. Muslims around the world face it during their daily prayers.
- **Abraham and Ishmael:** Islamic tradition teaches that Abraham and Ishmael established or raised the foundations of the Kaaba as a place of worship for the one God.
- **The Hajj:** An annual pilgrimage and one of the Five Pillars of Islam. It is obligatory once in a lifetime for Muslims who are able to undertake it.
- **Muhammad:** Islamic tradition identifies **Mecca** as his birthplace and the place where he first received revelations of the Quran.

  Mecca is therefore not simply a historic city: it is central to Muslim religious practice.



Medina: The birthplace of the Muslim community

Medina's importance is closely tied to Muhammad's leadership and the formation of the early Muslim community.

- **The Hijra:** In 622 AD, Muhammad and his followers migrated from **Mecca** to **Medina** to escape persecution. This event marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar.
- **The Prophet's Mosque:** Muhammad established a mosque in **Medina** that became a central place of worship and community life. The present mosque has been expanded substantially over the centuries.
- **Muhammad's burial place:** Muhammad is buried within the mosque complex, making it a major destination for Muslim visitors.
- **Early Islamic society: Medina** became the base from which the Muslim community developed religious, social, and political institutions.
  If **Mecca** represents the center of Islamic worship, **Medina** represents the formative history of the Muslim community.

How the three cities connect through Abraham and Muhammad

One of the most interesting differences between these religions is how they understand shared figures and sacred history.

Abraham

- In Judaism, Abraham is a founding patriarch associated with God's covenant with his descendants through Isaac.
- In Christianity, Abraham is a model of faith and an ancestor within the biblical story leading to Jesus.

- In Islam, Ibrahim (Abraham) is a major prophet and an exemplar of devotion to the one God. Islamic tradition links him and Ishmael to the Kaaba in **Mecca**.

Jesus

- In Christianity, Jesus is the Messiah and, in mainstream Christian doctrine, the Son of God and Savior.
- In Islam, Isa (Jesus) is the Messiah and a revered prophet, born of the Virgin Mary, but not considered divine.
- In Judaism, Jesus is not accepted as the divine Messiah of Christianity and does not occupy the same theological role.

Muhammad

- In Islam, Muhammad is the final prophet, and his migration from **Mecca** to **Medina** is a defining event.
- Judaism and Christianity do not recognize Muhammad as a prophet in the Islamic sense, although both traditions arose in the broader historical world of the Middle East.

These similarities do not mean that the three religions teach the same theology. They share some figures and stories but interpret them in distinct ways.

Why Jerusalem is different from Mecca and Medina

There are three particularly important differences.

First, Jerusalem is shared sacred ground. It contains sites of immense significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The Temple Mount, known to Muslims as the Haram al-Sharif, is especially important: it is associated with the Jewish Temples and contains the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Second, Mecca and **Medina** have more specific roles in Islam. **Mecca** is the destination of the Hajj and the direction of Muslim prayer. **Medina** is closely associated with Muhammad's migration, leadership, and burial. These roles are not replicated by **Jerusalem**.

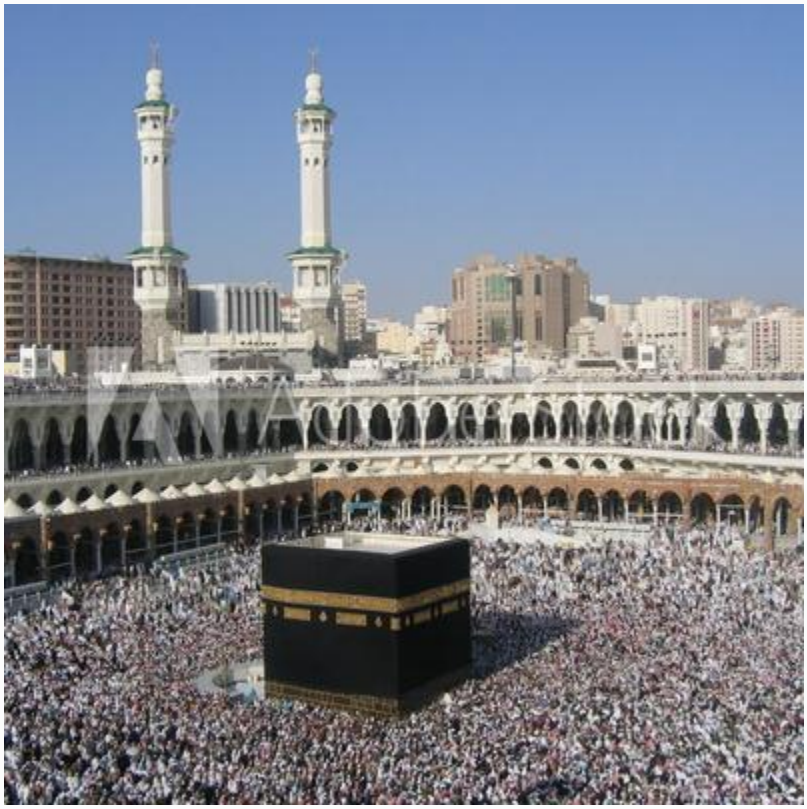
Third, Jerusalem's religious importance is also intertwined with modern politics. Israelis and Palestinians have profound historical, national, and religious connections to the city. Disputes over sovereignty, access, and the administration of sacred sites make it a particularly sensitive place. Its importance should not be reduced to politics alone: the spiritual attachments are independently profound and centuries old.

The simplest way to remember the difference



Jerusalem — the city of sacred history

The Jewish Temples, Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, and Muhammad's Night Journey.



Mecca — the city of worship and pilgrimage

The Kaaba, the direction of prayer, and the Hajj.



Medina — the city of the Prophet and the early Muslim community

The Hijra, Muhammad's leadership, and the Prophet's Mosque.

Ultimately, **Jerusalem** is sacred to all three religions, but **Mecca** and **Medina** are uniquely central to Islam. Judaism emphasizes **Jerusalem**'s covenantal and Temple history; Christianity emphasizes the events of Jesus' death and resurrection; and Islam connects **Jerusalem** to earlier prophets while looking to **Mecca** for the direction of prayer and the central pilgrimage, and to **Medina** for the formative history of the Muslim community.

Rome, Constantinople, and Venice: Their roles in the Abrahamic faiths

Rome, **Constantinople**, and **Venice** are three of the most important cities for understanding the history of Christianity (primarily) and Islam because they stood at the crossroads of religion, empire, trade, and war.

The simplest way to think about them is:

Rome became the principal center of **Western** (modernized) **Christianity** and the papacy. ***Constantinople*** became the capital of the **Eastern Roman Empire** and the center of **Eastern Orthodox Christianity**, before becoming the **Ottoman Muslim** capital known as **Istanbul**. **Venice** became a wealthy maritime republic that traded with both Christian and Muslim powers, while also playing *a major role in the Crusades*.

Their stories overlap for more than 1,500 years. Here's how they fit together.

Western Christianity

Rome was the capital of the **Roman Empire** and later the seat of the pope. Christianity began in the eastern Mediterranean, but **Rome** became one of its most important centers because of its association with the **apostles Peter and Paul** and the authority of its bishop, the pope.

Eastern Christianity and Ottoman Islam

Founded as **Constantinople** by the **Roman emperor Constantine** in 330 AD, it became the capital of the **Eastern Roman**, or **Byzantine**, **Empire**. It was the leading center of **Eastern Orthodox Christianity** before the **Ottoman** conquest of 1453 AD transformed it into the capital of a major **Muslim** empire.

Venice grew into an independent, predominantly Catholic republic whose fleets connected Europe with Byzantine territories, North Africa, and the eastern Mediterranean. It profited from trade with Muslim societies and sometimes fought them, as well as competing with other Christian powers.

30–100 AD

Christianity emerges in the Roman world

Christianity begins in Roman-ruled Judea, in the eastern Mediterranean. It spreads through the Roman Empire, including **Rome** itself. At this point, Islam does not yet exist as a historical religious community.

330 AD

Constantinople is founded

Emperor Constantine establishes **Constantinople** as a new imperial capital. It becomes a major center of Christian theology, imperial government, and trade between Europe and Asia.

380s AD

Christianity becomes dominant in the Roman state

Under Emperor Theodosius I, Nicene Christianity becomes the empire's official religious norm. **Rome** and **Constantinople** both become major centers of Christian authority.

ABRAHAMIC HISTORY

610–750s AD

Islam emerges and expands

Muhammad begins preaching in Arabia in the early seventh century (600s AD). After his death in 632, Muslim-ruled states expand rapidly through the Middle East and North Africa. They take territories previously ruled by Christian Byzantine or other powers, and Arab Muslim forces repeatedly attack **Constantinople**, without capturing it.

1054 AD

The East–West Christian split occurs.

The division between the Roman Catholic Church centered on the papacy and the Eastern Orthodox tradition associated with **Constantinople** becomes symbolically marked by the events of 1054. This separation developed over centuries rather than occurring in a single moment.

1096–1291 AD

The Crusades

Western European Christian armies launch expeditions to the eastern Mediterranean, particularly to gain or defend control of **Jerusalem** and other holy places. **Constantinople** is a crucial staging point for some crusaders, while **Venice** supplies ships, money, and commercial connections.

1204 AD

Christians attack Christians

The Fourth Crusade sacks **Constantinople**, even though it is a Christian city. **Venice** gains territory, wealth, and valuable artworks and religious relics. The attack deepens the divide between Western Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians.

1453 AD

The Ottomans conquer Constantinople

Sultan Mehmed II captures the city, ending the Byzantine Empire. **Constantinople** becomes the principal **Ottoman** imperial capital, and Islam becomes central to its

imperial identity. Its Christian communities do not disappear, however; Orthodox Christians continue living there under Ottoman rule.

Why Constantinople is the key to understanding both religions

Constantinople is probably the single most important city for connecting the histories of Christianity and Islam.

It was originally a Christian imperial capital. Its most famous monument, the Hagia Sophia, was built as a Christian cathedral and completed in 537 AD.

When the Ottomans conquered the city in 1453 AD, Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque. Today, it functions as a mosque, while also remaining a monument to the city's Byzantine Christian past.

The Ottomans were Muslims, but they did not erase the city's entire Christian history. The Orthodox Church continued to exist, and the Ecumenical Patriarch of **Constantinople** remains an important spiritual leader in Eastern Orthodoxy.

This is why **Istanbul** today contains layers of Roman, Byzantine Christian, and Ottoman Muslim history.

Why Venice matters more than you might expect

Venice is particularly interesting because it demonstrates that Christian and Muslim history was not just about religious conflict.

Venice was a Catholic republic, but its survival and prosperity depended heavily on maritime trade. Its merchants dealt with Muslim rulers and merchants in places such as Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean, even during periods of religious warfare.

Its relationship with **Constantinople** was especially complicated:

- **Venice** borrowed from Byzantium. Venetian architecture and religious art drew heavily on Byzantine styles.

- **Venice** competed with Byzantium. Both wanted influence over the lucrative trade routes linking the Mediterranean and Asia.

- **Venice** helped attack Byzantium. In 1204 AD, Venetian interests and the Fourth Crusade contributed to the capture and looting of **Constantinople** by Western Christian crusaders.

- **Venice** benefited from the conquest. Artworks, relics, and other treasures taken from **Constantinople** became part of **Venice**'s cultural heritage. The famous bronze horses displayed at St. Mark's Basilica are among the best-known examples, although they have ancient origins and their precise original history is debated.

The lesson is that religious solidarity did not always overcome political and economic competition. Catholic Venetians could fight Muslim powers, trade with them, and attack Orthodox Christians, depending on their interests.

Rome versus Constantinople: two centers of Christianity

Rome — Catholic

- The pope is the head of the Catholic Church.
- Emphasizes the pope's universal authority.
- Became the principal religious center of Western Christianity.

Constantinople — Orthodox

- The Ecumenical Patriarch is traditionally regarded as first among equals among Orthodox bishops.
- Orthodox churches are organized through multiple self-governing churches.
- Remains a historic center of Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

These two cities are not simply the Christian and Muslim capitals. For centuries, they were rival centers within Christianity itself.

The Catholic–Orthodox division is also separate from the Sunni–Shia division in Islam. Both are historical splits over religious authority and other issues, but they arose in different circumstances and involve different beliefs.

The bigger picture

Rome (Mid-West Italy)

The enduring symbol of the papacy and Western Catholic Christianity.

Constantinople / Istanbul (Turkey)

The former capital of the Christian Byzantine Empire and later the Muslim Ottoman Empire; still an important center of Orthodox Christianity.

Venice (North-East Italy)

The maritime trading power that connected Christian Europe with Byzantine and Muslim societies, and whose commercial ambitions helped reshape the history of the eastern Mediterranean.

If you remember just one thing, remember this: **Rome** represents the western Christian tradition, **Constantinople** connects eastern Christianity with the rise of Ottoman Islam, and **Venice** shows how trade and political ambition intertwined with both.

Together, these cities help explain why the history of Christianity and Islam is not simply a story of two religions fighting each other. It is also a story of shared geography, cultural exchange, divisions within each religion, and rulers pursuing power and wealth.

Understanding Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christians

Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox Christians are the three major branches of Christianity. They all believe in Jesus Christ, but they differ in how they understand Church authority, tradition, worship, and certain teachings.

The biggest historical split happened in stages: the "Church of Christ (or Christians)" **divided** between **Eastern** (older) and Western (newer) Christianity in 1054 AD (about 1,000 years after the death of Christ), and Protestantism emerged during the **Reformation** in the 1500s (about 500 years after that).

The three branches at a glance

Catholics - Led by the Pope

Catholics recognize the Pope, the Bishop of **Rome**, as the universal head of the Church. They emphasize the Bible, Sacred Tradition, and the teaching authority of the Church. Mass, the Eucharist, the saints, and the seven sacraments are central to Catholic life.

Protestant - Many different denominations

Protestantism includes Baptists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, Pentecostals, and many others. Most emphasize the Bible as the highest authority and salvation by God's grace through faith. Worship can range from traditional liturgy to contemporary music (especially in Southern Baptist denominations) and preaching.

Eastern Orthodox - Led by bishops and patriarchs

Orthodox Christians emphasize the *continuity* of the ancient Church, the Bible, Sacred Tradition, and the decisions of early Church councils. They do not accept the Pope's universal authority. Their worship is known for ancient (older) liturgies, icons, incense, and the Eucharist.

The biggest differences

Topic	Catholic	Protestant	Eastern Orthodox
Church authority	Pope and bishops	Bible as highest authority in most traditions	Bishops and councils
Tradition	Scripture and Sacred Tradition	Varies; usually Scripture is the final authority	Scripture within Holy Tradition
Salvation	God's grace, received through faith and lived out in love	Generally emphasizes salvation by grace through faith	God's grace, faith, and spiritual transformation
Sacraments	Seven	Usually two: baptism and Communion	Seven major sacraments or mysteries
Mary and saints	Veneration and asking for their intercession	Varies; most do not pray to saints	Veneration and asking for their intercession
Communion	Christ is truly present	Beliefs range from real presence to symbolic remembrance	Christ is truly present
Leadership	One worldwide Church under the Pope	Many independent denominations	Multiple self-governing churches

These are broad generalizations. Protestant beliefs in particular vary considerably by denomination.

Why do they disagree about the Pope?

Catholicism

Believe the Pope is the successor of **Saint Peter** and has a unique role as the universal leader of the Church. Catholic teaching also holds that the Pope can teach infallibly under specific, carefully defined conditions concerning faith and morals.

Protestantism

Reject the Pope's authority over their churches. Some have bishops and formal hierarchies, while others are governed by congregations or groups of church leaders.

Orthodoxy

Respect the ancient importance of the Bishop of **Rome** but reject his claim to universal jurisdiction over all Christians. They emphasize the authority of bishops acting together through councils.

This disagreement over authority was one of the major factors in the three divisions and several warlike campaigns between them (such as Protestants v Catholics) over the years.

What do they believe about salvation?

All three teach that Jesus Christ is central to humanity's salvation, but they explain the process differently.

- Catholic: Salvation comes through God's grace. Faith, love, repentance, the sacraments, and a life lived in cooperation with God's grace are important.
- Protestant: Many emphasize justification by faith alone — that people are made right with God through faith, not by earning salvation through good works. Good works are understood as the fruit of genuine faith, although Protestant denominations differ in how they explain this.
- Orthodox: Salvation is not just forgiveness of sins; it also involves being transformed and united with God. This process is often called theosis, or becoming more like God through His grace.

An important clarification: Catholics do not teach that people can earn salvation independently of God's grace, and Orthodox Christians also emphasize God's grace. The disagreement is partly about how grace, faith, good works, and transformation fit together.

Why do their churches look different?

Catholic worship

Mass follows a structured liturgy, with readings from Scripture, prayers, and the Eucharist. Churches may feature statues, crucifixes, and images of saints.

Protestant worship

It depends on the denomination. A Lutheran or Anglican service can look quite traditional, while a Baptist or Pentecostal service might emphasize preaching, congregational singing, and contemporary music.

Orthodox worship

Divine Liturgy uses ancient prayers, chanting, incense, and icons. Worship emphasizes continuity with the early Church and the mystery of God's presence.

How did Christianity split into these branches?

The first centuries
Christians shared a common Church/faith, developed the foundational creeds, and held councils to clarify Christian beliefs.

1054 AD - The Great Schism

The Eastern and Western Churches separated over a range of disagreements, especially church authority and theological differences. These became known as Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.

1500s - The Protestant Reformation

Reformers such as **Martin Luther** challenged aspects of Western Catholic teaching and practice. Their movements developed into the many Protestant churches that exist today.

One additional detail: As Christianity spread globally, Oriental Orthodox churches, such as the Coptic Orthodox Church, became a distinct family of ancient churches that separated from the earlier churches that accepted the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. They are not the same communion as Eastern Orthodox churches.

What do they have in common?

Despite their differences, Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox, most share several central beliefs:

- Jesus Christ is Lord and is central to salvation.
- God is one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- Jesus died and rose from the dead.
- The Bible (old and new testaments) is sacred Scripture.

- Prayer, worship, repentance, and loving others are important parts of Christian life.

They disagree about how Christian truth and authority should be understood and practiced, but the three branches are all part of the broader Christian tradition.

The simplest way to remember the difference: Catholicism emphasizes unity under the Pope; Eastern Orthodoxy emphasizes the ancient faith preserved through its bishops, councils, and liturgy; Protestantism emphasizes Scripture as the highest authority and encompasses many different ways of practicing Christianity.

There is one important distinction here. Protestantism as a movement is newer, but many Protestant beliefs are much older than the Reformation. Protestants generally understand themselves as recovering or preserving biblical teachings, not as claiming that Christianity itself began in the 1500s.

What does the earliest historical evidence suggest?

One of the most interesting examples is Ignatius of Antioch (as in Antioch Baptist Church), a Christian bishop who wrote around 110 AD. Acts 11:26 *"And when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called* ***Christians*** *first at Antioch."* Barnabas, originally named Joseph, and Saul, later known as Paul, two pivotal figures in the early Christian church, played a significant role in the spread of the Gospel and the establishment of Christian communities across the Roman Empire. Their ministry is primarily documented in the Acts of the Apostles, where their partnership and missionary journeys are detailed.

In his letters, Ignatius emphasized three things:

- The importance of the bishop in each local church.
- The central role of the Eucharist.
- The unity of Christians around their Church leadership.

He even wrote that Christians should gather around one bishop and one Eucharist. These ideas resemble Catholic and Orthodox practice much more closely than many modern Protestant forms of church government. However, that does not automatically prove the entire modern Catholic or Orthodox system was already in place. Some doctrines and structures developed over subsequent centuries, and historians distinguish between early evidence and later interpretations of it.

A question worth considering: When Jesus established his Church, did he intend it to have a continuing, visible authority that could definitively interpret Christian teaching, or

did he intend Scripture itself to be the final authority over every church (religious group)?

The two major branches of Islam

Sunni Islam - About 85–90% of Muslims worldwide

Sunni Muslims are the majority of Muslims globally. They generally recognize the first four caliphs as legitimate successors to the Prophet Muhammad, beginning with Abu Bakr.

Sunni Islam contains several schools of Islamic law and a wide range of theological and cultural traditions.

Shia Islam - About 10–15% of Muslims worldwide

Shia Muslims believe that leadership of the Muslim community should have remained with Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, and his descendants.

Shia Islam places particular importance on the Imams, especially the family of Ali and Muhammad's daughter Fatimah.

The split originated in a disagreement over who should lead the Muslim community after Muhammad died in 632 AD. Over the centuries, the two branches developed some different religious authorities, legal traditions, and practices, while sharing core beliefs such as belief in one God, the Qur'an, and Muhammad as God's prophet.

Just as is the case with Christianity, there are also smaller branches and traditions, including Ibadi Islam, which has a historic presence in Oman.

What about Wahhabism and Salafism?

These are the terms you may have heard associated with Saudi Arabia.

Wahhabism

An 18th-century (1700s AD) Islamic **reform movement** that originated in Arabia and became closely linked to the Saudi ruling family. It emphasizes strict monotheism and rejects practices its followers consider religious innovations. It has historically shaped Saudi Arabia's religious establishment.

Salafism

Salafism is broader Sunni movement that emphasizes following the beliefs and practices of the earliest generations of Muslims. Some Salafists focus on religious scholarship and personal practice, while others take political positions. Wahhabism is often described as a particular form of Salafism, although the labels are not always used consistently.

The important distinction: Wahhabism is not a third major branch alongside Sunni and Shia. It belongs within the broader Sunni tradition as should Salafism.

What are the other branches or groups?

Here is a simplified overview:

Group or tradition	What it is
Sunni	The largest branch of Islam.
Shia	The second-largest branch, with several subgroups.
Ibadi	A distinct Islamic tradition, especially associated with Oman.
Sufism	A mystical or spiritual tradition found within both Sunni and Shia Islam, rather than a separate major branch.
Salafism	A Sunni movement emphasizing the example of the earliest Muslims.
Wahhabism	A reform movement rooted in 18th-century Arabia, historically influential in Saudi Arabia.

Within Shia Islam, the largest group is **Twelver Shia**, which is **the predominant form in Iran**. Ismaili and Zaydis are other Shia branches.

Which branch dominates which countries?

Broad overview; populations and affiliations vary within countries.

Saudi Arabia

Sunni majority; historically strong Wahhabi influence.

Iran

Predominantly Shia, especially Twelver Shia.

Iraq

Shia majority, with a substantial Sunni minority.

Pakistan

Predominantly Sunni, with a significant Shia minority.

Oman

Ibadi Islam has a particularly important historical and religious role, alongside Sunni and Shia communities.

The simplest way to remember it

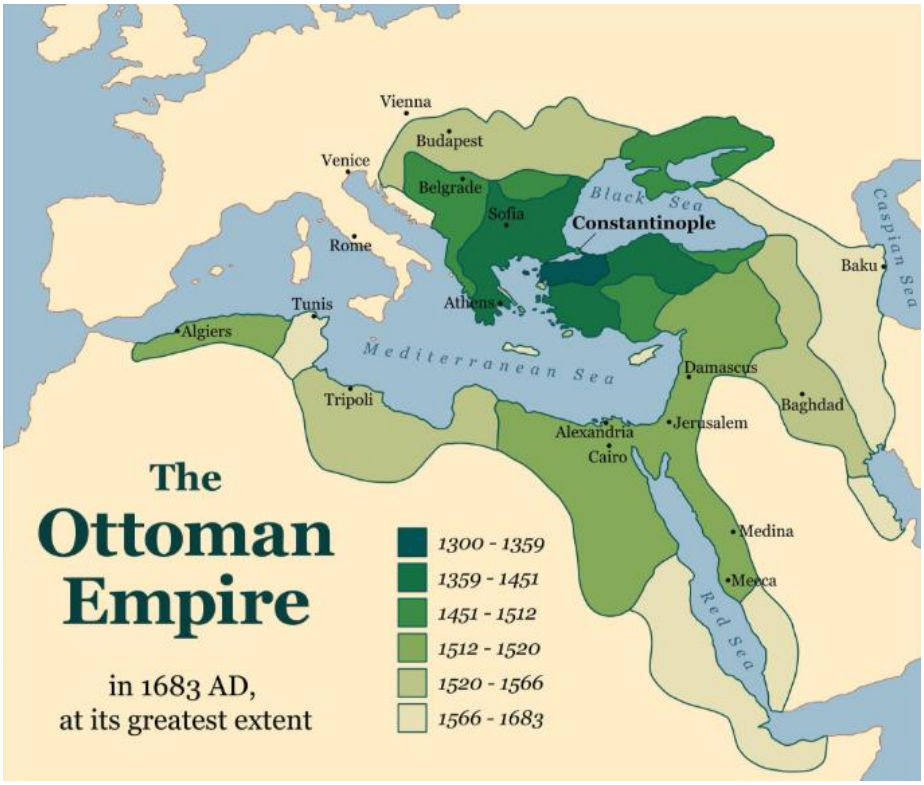
- Sunni vs. Shia: The two main branches, originating in a dispute over leadership after Muhammad's death.
- Saudi Arabia: Predominantly Sunni, historically influenced by Wahhabism.
- Iran: Predominantly Shia.
- Wahhabism and Salafism: Movements within the broader Sunni tradition.
- Sufism: A spiritual tradition that can exist within either Sunni or Shia Islam.

One final nuance: being Sunni or Shia does not automatically determine someone's political beliefs, level of religious conservatism, or attitude toward other Muslims. There is considerable diversity within both branches. And they fight with each other almost as much as they fight against Christian and Jewish peoples/nations as well. Likewise, not all majority Islamic countries impose **sharia law**(s) (also known as: Islamic law, Syariah law, sharīʿah) the same way.

To really understand the difference between these **Abrahamic faiths** one would be wise to read a well-researched and written book by **Raymond Ibrahim** a student of Victor Davis Hansen entitled: **Sword and Scimitar:** Fourteen Centuries of War between Islam and the West.

"With passion, Raymond Ibrahim offers an edgy and eye-opening introduction to a millennium of warfare between the Muslim and Christian worlds before the modern age."

The history of Ottoman Empire is also worth exploring in order to better understand the way Islam rule spread between **1299** and **1922** when Turkey was finally established after WWI and **Constantinople** eventually became recognized internationally as **Istanbul**.



The Ottoman sultans who ruled from 1299 to 1922 were overwhelmingly Sunni Muslims, not Shia Muslims. The Ottoman Empire was a major Sunni Muslim power for nearly its entire existence, and its rulers generally followed the Hanafi school of Sunni Islamic law.

Why were the Ottoman sultans Sunni?

- **Sunni Islam:** The Ottoman dynasty emerged in Anatolia in the late 13th century within a predominantly Sunni political and religious environment.
- **Hanafi legal tradition:** The empire's official legal institutions largely followed the Hanafi school, one of the four principal Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence.
- **Rivalry with Shia Persia:** Beginning in the early 16th century, the Ottoman Empire frequently fought the Safavid Empire of Persia, whose rulers promoted Twelver Shia Islam. This rivalry reinforced the Ottoman state's Sunni identity.
- **Religious leadership:** After Sultan Selim I conquered Mamluk territories in 1516–1517, the Ottomans gained control of **Mecca** and **Medina**. Later sultans increasingly emphasized their role as protectors of Islam and, eventually, as caliphs of the Sunni Muslim community.

Were there any Shia Ottoman sultans?

There is no generally recognized Shia sultan in the Ottoman dynasty. The dynasty's rulers identified with Sunni Islam, although their personal religious practices and the beliefs of their subjects varied.

It is worth distinguishing the sultans from the people they governed. The empire included Shia communities, particularly in parts of eastern Anatolia, Iraq, and other regions. Sunni rule did not mean that every Muslim subject was Sunni.

Constantinople itself became widely known internationally as **Istanbul** during the 20th century, with 1930 marking the official adoption of **Istanbul** as the city's name for international use.

The change happened gradually rather than on a single day.

- **1453:** Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II conquered **Constantinople**, ending the Byzantine Empire. The city remained known as **Constantinople** in many languages, although names such as ***Istanbul*** were also used.
- **Ottoman period (1453–1922): Istanbul** became a common name among Turkish speakers, while **Constantinople** continued to be widely used internationally.
- **1923:** The Republic of Turkey was established, with **Ankara** as its capital rather than **Istanbul**.
- **1930:** Turkish authorities requested that foreign countries use ***Istanbul*** in international correspondence and postal addresses, helping establish the name internationally.

One important detail: the Ottomans were already using the name **Istanbul** centuries before 1930. The year 1930 is best understood as the point when the name was standardized for international use, rather than when the city first acquired it. Ottoman documents also used *Kostantiniyye*, another form of **Constantinople**.

In short, 1453 marks the Ottoman conquest; 1930 marks the international standardization of the name **Istanbul**.