The Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam

Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are all monotheistic religions. What does this mean, and how does it differentiate them from other religions? What does “worship of God” mean in each of the three faiths? How does it compare across faiths? How is it different within each of them?

Both scripture and tradition—the Qur’an and the Sunna—are essential guides to the Muslims’ central pathway of faith. Discuss the relationship between the two for understanding and interpreting Islam. What is the relationship between scripture and tradition in Christianity and Judaism?

Sharia is the Islamic “way” to well-being and spiritual fulfillment both in this life and in the hereafter. Are there parallels to sharia in Christianity and Judaism?

Discuss the implications of religious similarities and differences among people of faith for the civic life of your community. Are religious conflicts inevitable based on the teachings of each faith? Is common ground possible? What resources are available in the faith traditions themselves for forging civic unity and cooperation?
Muhammad: A Very Short Introduction

What is the role of the Prophet Muhammad’s recorded teachings and actions during his life in providing guidance and authority for ordinary Muslims in their religious beliefs and practices?

How is Muhammad a source of authority in legal and ethical matters as well?

In what ways did Muhammad see himself as a continuation of earlier Abrahamic prophets?

Discuss different ways to understand the early biography of the prophet, the Sīra, or the sacred narrative of Muhammad’s life. How has this story been questioned by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars? What controversies and debates arise in the search for the historical Muhammad?

How does this book help you understand contemporary Muslim reactions to portrayals of the Prophet Muhammad?

How are modern understandings of prophets different from pre-modern understandings of prophets? Consider how the meaning of prophecy has stayed the same or changed over time.
Rumi: Poet and Mystic (1207–1273): Selections from His Writings Translated from the Persian with Introduction and Notes

Rumi is one of the world’s most beloved poets, not only by Muslims but also by people of other faiths as well as non-religious people. Based on your reading of some of Rumi’s poems, what do you find appealing about them? Or, if you do not find them appealing, why not?

Based on Nicholson’s “Introduction,” discuss some of the characteristics of Sufism. Identify Sufic elements you see in some of the poems, beginning, for example, with “The True Sufi” (XX, p. 54), “God Beyond Praise” (LI, p. 95), “Die Before Death,” (LXXX, p. 131), and “Deification” (CXV, p. 184).

What metaphors does Rumi use to describe God? Do these metaphors seem to parallel or contradict the ways in which others describe the Divine? Focus, in particular, on “The Love of Woman” (XII, p. 44). How is spiritual life being described in this poem?

How does Rumi seem to imagine the relationship between human beings and God? How close can it become? What are the limits and boundaries of the relationship? Poems you may want to consider include “The Song of the Reed” (I, p. 31), “Remembered Music” (II, p. 32), “‘Here Am I’” (L, p. 91). How does he imagine the relationship of human beings to one another, as expressed, for example, in the poem “Do Not Travel Alone” (XXXIV, p. 71)?

What is Rumi’s idea of logic, or rational discourse (philosophy, theology?), in humankind’s relationship with Allah? To get started read his poem “Love and Logic” (CII, p. 165).
The contents of the Qur’an are universally regarded by Muslims to be the very words of Allah (God), revealed, according to Islamic belief, to the prophet Muhammad via the angel Gabriel. From a series of “recitations” in Arabic, first from Muhammad’s mouth to his close followers, then repeated throughout the growing Muslim community, the words were finally transcribed. How does this history of the Qur’an present unique complications for its translation into other languages? Do any other religions stress the learning of scripture in its original language? What impact does this emphasis on Arabic have in non-Arabic cultures?

Even though the Qur’an is believed to be the Word of God for all time, it was revealed in a specific time and a specific place. Qur’anic interpreters often seek to understand the contexts in which the Qur’an was revealed. How, according to Mattson, do the contexts of seventh-century Arabia and the prophetic mission of Muhammad help to explain the content of the Qur’an?

Why do Muslims emphasize the actual vocal recitation of the Qur’an? How do Muslims memorize it? Discuss the story of Muslim American Reem’s commitment to memorizing the Qur’an. What kinds of considerations go into reciting it properly?

What are some ways by which Muslims follow and respect the Qur’an in daily life?

This may be considered both in terms of belief and behavior by individual Muslims and by Muslims in groups such as in public worship and education.

Mattson presents varying forms of Qur’an interpretation in chapter 5. What is the role of interpretation in understanding the Qur’an? Discuss how it might or not be appropriate to select isolated passages straight from the Qur’an to classify Islam in simple terms such as “a religion of violence” or “a religion of peace”? Do you see similarities to the ways in which Jews and Christians read or interpret their holy scriptures?
The Art of Hajj

The holy city of Mecca is the “Centre of the World” for Muslims, as Venetia Porter states in her first chapter. What are some ways by which Muslims may physically, spiritually, and socially experience this center in their daily lives? Discuss the ways in which Mecca matters to Islamic practice.

Muslims observe five Salāt prayer services each day. Wherever they are in the world, whether they are alone or together with other Muslims, they must turn toward Mecca to pray. But how do they know where Mecca is? Discuss how this religious teaching is linked to the development of navigational instruments and maps among Muslims.

The hajj is both a physical and spiritual journey for Muslims. Identify an example of this dual journey in the book and discuss how it exemplifies both a journey of body and the spirit.

Many works of art in Muslim societies have been inspired by the experience of the hajj. How have pilgrimages and other religious journeys been depicted in other faith traditions? Are secular journeys or pilgrimages depicted in similar ways?