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## UNIT 2 SEMITIC RELIGIONS: JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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The Semitic religions are based on monotheism, with an ethical stand. They interpret human life in terms of concepts like God, creation, revelation, law, sin, believer and non-believer, and Judgement. The main features of Semitic religions can be summarised as follows, on broad terms:

There is a single divine being, personal in nature, connected to the humankind through a prophet or a messenger. God has created the world as a reality distinct from Himself.

Religion began with a revelation from God, who gave the laws of relationship with God and between human beings, in which the justice occupies a prominent place, and any injustice is bound to incur the wrath of God. All men will be judged on the basis of obedience to this Law.

Except Judaism, the other two religions have the concept of believer and the non-believer, and it is the duty of the believer to bring the non-believer to the order of believers.

All the three religions had origin in the desert, and their founders came from among the people who later became followers of the religion.

Gandhi was very much impressed with the Semitic religions, even though he did not have much contact with Judaism. He says that Jesus Christ and Muhammad are world teachers, and was highly impressed by the *Sermon on the Mount*, which, he says transformed him. He included the Christian and Islamic worship in his Ashram prayers.

### Aims and objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand:

- The spirit of Semitic religions-Judaism, Christianity and Islam
- History of each of Semitic religions, and the circumstances in which they were born.
- How they influenced Gandhi in his outlook of life and social outlook.
- The principles of Semitic religions, necessary to understand the social and political milieu in India.

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## 2.2 JUDAISM: HISTORY, THEOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY

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Judaism is the oldest of the three Semitic religions, which introduced the concept of Monotheism. Its basic scripture, “Old Testament” is viewed as an exhaustive document, indicating the God’s will for humanity. Its Hebrew scriptures were written around 450 BC, and notable among them, is the Jewish book of divine instruction, the “Torah”. This book contains five Books of Moses. These five books are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This scripture also encompasses the Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, Isaih, Jeremiah, and Ezckiel, and twelve Minor Prophets. It also contains Writings: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Daniel, Chronicles, and Ezra Nhemiah. The entire Jewish holy literature is called “TaNaK”, containing the first letters of Torah, Nebium, and Ketubim, meaning Law, Prophets, and Writings respectively.

The book of Exodus gives the account of how Moses led the people of Israel out of their miserable condition in Egypt and led them to the wilderness of Sinai. The book says that Moses went up the mount, and brought from the Lord, the following Ten Commandments to the people of Israel.

1. Though shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.
2. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
3. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work.
4. But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates.

For in six days Lord made the heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

5. Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.
6. Thou shalt not kill.
7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
8. Thou shalt not steal
9. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.
10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour’s.

These Ten Commandments establish the ethical monotheism in Judaism.

### History

'Torah' and 'Prophets' tell the twin stories of exile from Paradise, which concerns the entire humanity, and the second one about the people of Israel, the people of the Torah. Judaism traces its history from Adam and Eve, and loss of Paradise, and the Garden of Eden. The first human beings on earth lost the paradise because of their rebellion against God, as the holy books maintain. The people had acquired the Promised Land as per the God's wish, revealed in Torah. However, they lost to Assyrians, the northern kingdom, in 722 B.C. And in 586 B.C. they lost the southern kingdom to Babylonia (present day Iraq). The Babylonians destroyed the temple of Jerusalem. In 530 B.C., the Persians conquered the Babylonians, and called the Jews to return and rebuild their temple. This was done, and around 450 BC with the consent of temple priests, and *Torah of Moses* was declared as the law of the land.

'Torah' describes the exile as a consequence of rebellion, and later repentance, and restoration of the Promised Land as reward for repentance, and adherence to Torah. The first document relating to oral tradition, Mishnah (200 BC), and the commentaries on Mishnah, namely, the Talmud of the land of Israel, and the Talmud of Babylonia (600 A.D) augmented the Scriptural law of Judaism. The Torah was enlarged to include Talmud.

By 70 B.C., more Jewish population lived outside Palestine than inside. Due to upheavals of migration, the temple system with priests lost its importance, and the Synagogue system with Rabbis came into existence. The synagogue was a place of worship, a place to meet, and a place to study.

### Theology

The theology was written in about first six centuries of the Christian era. After the destruction of the temple, Rabbis took over the Jewish theology, and the dialogues between the early prophets and the masters and disciples, were handed down by oral tradition, and laws were laid down for topics covered by scriptures, and laws were also framed for topics not *covered* by the scriptures. The same Rabbis produced the commentaries on scriptures also.

The *monotheism* of Judaic doctrine which is set forth in Scriptures is in strong contrast with the polytheism prevalent at that time. There was a fear that multiple Gods would be difficult to please or appease, and a single God, all powerful and omniscient, would be in a better position to take care of man's needs. Man could make an appeal to Him, appeal to His kindness, and under all circumstances, he had to be just. He had to maintain equity and justice to create a world order.

### Four Key Beliefs in Judaism

1. God's world order regulates both public life and private life. God's creation is perfect, and is in keeping with the world order. Those who possess Torah are the followers of God, and those who go against his will, the gentiles, reject him in favour of the idols. The present state of Israel is God's wish to punish the Israel for its rebellion, and he has used gentiles (among the Jews, persons not belonging to Jewish people or faith) as the medium to punish the Israeli people.
2. The perfection of creation, which results in exact justice, ensures timelessness for human affairs, and ensures that there is a social commonwealth, which ensures that

- scarce resources, once allocated remain unchanged. The perfection also ensures complementarities, between God and man, who was created in God's image.
3. Israel's condition, public and personal, is due to standing up against the will of God. Since man defied the God, his sin that results from this defiance disrupts the world order. As it happened to Adam and Eve, it has happened to people of Israel also. God encourages repentance by punishing man's arrogance. When man repents, God forgives, and brings about an improvement in man's condition. Repentance means humility, and humility begets God's favour.
  4. God will restore perfection that was originally in his plan of creation. The death which existed because of sin would die, and the dead will be raised and judged for their deeds. And many having been justified will regain the paradise that was lost. Just as Adam and Eve regain the paradise, the people of Israel will get back their land of Israel, and idolaters will perish, and the remaining humanity, will know the God, and spend the eternity in His light.

### Philosophy

The theology developed by the Rabbis up to sixth century AD, was amplified by the intellectuals and the philosophers. But the advent of Islam in the seventh century made it mandatory for Jewish philosophers to match the rational rigour of the Muslim philosophy. Therefore, it brought about a different kind of intellectual activity in Judaism. They had to study the Torah through the instruments of reason and discipline of philosophy. They had to match the general principles of Torah, and the scientific principles of Aristotle. How can the scriptural notion that God changes his mind, be reconciled with Aristotelian principle that change indicated imperfection? How can the principle that miracles change course of nature can be reconciled with the principle that laws of nature are immutable? If God is arbitrary, it goes against the nature of God himself.

The Judaic philosopher, in addition to philosophic questions, had to confront questions from his own people. How can God's chosen people remain homeless, and live in ghettos in hostile countries? How could the philosopher explain the prosperity of the sister religions, which came later, and prospered immensely? Also, the Judaism had to reconcile with the Greek philosophy, where the truth should stand the test of reason, and revelations should be subjected to these tests. There was an inherent contradiction between the reason and revelation. The Jew was hard put to reconcile between two truths, one personal, and another based on reason. If God is all forgiving, how can he take a decision to set aside his laws to forgive people? It was hard to reconcile faith and reason.

**Judaism and Other Monotheistic Religions:** Judaism's existence became precarious with Christianity becoming the approved religion of the state in the fourth century of the Christian era. Till then, Jews in Christian countries were tolerated to some extent. But as the Christianity gained official acceptance, the states were in a dilemma: should the killers of Christ be punished, or should they be kept alive, and ultimately converted, at the time of second coming of Christ? The pluralistic character of some states made survival easy for Jews, as the state did not come heavily on the Jewish minority. India's Jews, even though in small number, were treated well, and the synagogues in major towns bear a testimony for that. In Christian and Muslim countries, Judaism kept a low profile, as the Christians and Muslims defined the issues, and Judaism could not compete, and absorbed the ideas as much as it could. However, Judaism has made valiant efforts to retain its ethics, and try to accommodate the secular value system.

**Reform, Orthodox, and Conservative Judaic Religious Systems:** These three main streams in Jewish thought took shape between 1800 and 1850. The first school, Reform Judaism, which developed in the early nineteenth century, recognised the right to make changes, and classified the change as reform, to give it legitimacy. Second one to develop was Orthodox Judaism, which was a reaction to Reform Judaism. It did adopt traditional Judaism, but selectively. But it denied the validity of change. As a reaction to both, positive Historical Judaism came, and is known in America as Conservative Judaism. It maintained that change is possible, as reform, only if it can stand the test of historical validity, upholding theological principles.

**Judaism and Modernity:** With the American Constitution of 1787 and the French Revolution of 1789, the Jews in these countries aspired for the rights given to the majority population, and equality before law. The Jews tried to make out that ethnicity and nationality are two different issues, and both can reconcile with each other. They have met with success to some extent.

**Conclusion:** Judaism has been a religion of the individual and the family, and of everyday life. But the religion has suffered all through history, and contributed concepts like the Diaspora, exodus, holocaust, and ghettos. All these concepts evoke a response of sadness and suffering. In spite of that, the outlook of the religion is cheerful, and life accepting. A poem by Prof. Albert Einstein (an eminent scientist and a Jew) given below, is a witness to the 'never say die' spirit of the religion.

“That man is here for the sake of  
 Other men...  
 Above all, for those upon whose  
 smile and  
 Well-being our own happiness  
 depends, and also  
 For the countless unknown souls  
 with whose  
 fate we are connected by a band of  
 sympathy.  
 Many times a day I realize how  
 much my own  
 outer and inner life is built upon the  
 Labors  
 of my fellow men, living and  
 Dead, and  
 how earnestly I must exert myself  
 in order to  
 give in return as much as I have  
 received  
 and am still receiving.”

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## 2.3 CHRISTIANITY: THE TEACHINGS AND BASIC DOCTRINES

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Of all the Semitic religions, Christianity is associated with economic development, much more than other two, Judaism and Islam. It has shown a long association with the development of temporal institutions, which aided secular development. Even in India, when secular institutions started developing, the social leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, and the educated elite started showing interest in Christianity, with the belief that there is a direct relation between traditional values and backwardness, as opposed to adopting modern values, which they thought are embodied in Christianity. Even though this trend was short lived, it shows the capacity of this religion, as a factor in institution-building in secular atmosphere.

This apart, Christianity has been one of the major religions in the world, practised all over the world, and in all the six continents. Its contribution to theology, philosophy, and other social sciences has been significant. The architecture it inspired in building the churches has resulted in creating monumental works.

There have been two major divisions within this religion, one being Roman Catholic and other Protestant movement, started by Martin Luther. In addition, there have been many denominations of each of these divisions, some region specific and some based on minor differences. Since the religion was started with Jesus Christ, it is necessary to know the essential teachings, and the philosophy and ideals for which he lived.

The information about the birth, parentage, life and preaching, and ultimate crucifixion of Jesus Christ is generally known. It is important to know the factors that led to making Christianity a universal religion and its special appeal to Gandhi, and the special qualities that made it universally acceptable.

*A very uncommon common man:* Many great teachers were born in the upper strata of the society whose parents or guardians possessed property, and could give early education to their children. Jesus was not born to any well to do parents, did not study under any teacher, and followed a profession demanding little skill in a small town. But his teachings attracted many people, and his miracles established his superior abilities. Even if one does not believe in the miracles, his gospels, full of spiritual experience and conviction, endeared him to the masses around him.

**Originality of Jesus' teachings:** Many people claim that there was nothing original in his teachings, and the ideas were already there in Judaism and Greek-Roman tradition. Even if it is granted that this may be so, presenting them and highlighting them to suit the need of the time calls for a genius. If the words he had spoken and the parables he delivered did not contain new ideas, there would have not been such a violent reaction to what he said, leading to his crucifixion. He was a revolutionary of his time, and his ideas took a long time for acceptance, and the society of his time was not ready to take his sermons. He was ahead of his time.

### Basic Doctrines of Christianity

**The Concept of Brotherhood** was given a new meaning by Christ, and it became universal brotherhood, all being the children of one father 'God'. Not just the brotherhood had to be assumed, it had to be demonstrated and practised. Jesus said, "A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another, even as I have loved you". His

love extended to his enemies, his detractors, and evil doers. Anybody, who had a germ of goodness deserved to be loved, and Jesus asked, "And who has not?"

**The Concept of Divine Father:** All religions have unknown elements and fear of unknown keeps the flock on the fold. The invisible powers have to be propitiated, by making offerings, holding ritual ceremonies, and many other ways, so that they do not harm the survivors and the faithful. Jesus raised this unknown Supreme Being to the father image, God as father. Unseen, but always watching his children, not only their outward actions, but inward motives, the way in each overcomes their crises, and the good and the bad in them. The all watchful Father was always around, beseeching his children not to walk away from the path of righteousness.

**The Future Life, its influence:** All Semitic religions have the concept of future life, a life after death. Jesus brought the concept of *future judgement*, by which, the temporal inequalities would be redressed. The belief that a future judgement is to take place, in which the conduct of men would be evaluated, according to the conduct in this life, had influence in determining the conduct in this life. It has elevated the moral tone, and has brought fresh converts into the fold.

**Importance of Faith:** Faith is the key in Christ's teachings. While other religions may exhort the practitioners to believe in their doctrines, and to practice them, Jesus said that faith would give the believer the salvation and forgiveness, and other boon if required, could be obtained by faith. The ancient world was suffering from a consciousness of the sin. When the world was getting weighed down by the concept of sin, Jesus said that the faith in Him would relieve the soul of the burden of sin. When the faith has elevated and purified the character, man can start on a higher course of life, as the faith becomes the healer.

**The Demand for Truth:** It is said that nature itself establishes truth. That which pretends will perish and men in conflict with reality cannot hold on to their positions for long. The spirit of enquiry should ascend all the hurdles, and advance towards absolute truth in all directions. This was emphasised by St. Paul, who said, "Prove all things". "We can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth". The adherence to truth in the Christianity is so strong that those who work for preconceived notions and interested parties can be rated as those opposed to Christianity.

**Law of Kindness:** When the ancient world was holding on to the concept of "eye for an eye, limb for the limb", Jesus gave the call for kindness. Fellow men are to be treated "as a loving Father would treat his loved and erring children". He taught men to "love their enemies, to do good to them that hate them". This principle has enormously influenced the thinkers like Count Leo Tolstoy, and Gandhi. Both of them made it the guiding principle of their lives.

**His relation to God the Father:** Jesus said, "He who hath seen Me hath seen the Father". By this saying, Jesus revealed and exemplified the Divine Father in his person. He provided the ordinary man a person in flesh and blood, with exemplary conduct to see the Supreme Being, at least in part. He was aware that he is only a part of Holy Father, when he said, "No man can see my face and live".

**His relation to Mankind:** Jesus could relate to the entire mankind, with his unity of will and spirit with his Supreme Father. He could be the Son of God and son of man, and the common man could relate to him. God was not a distant all powerful force, but a

loving Father. He, the Son of God, was here, to carry out His wish and will, and he could reveal the mind and nature of his Father to the man.

**His treatment of Women and Children:** When the status of women in his times was inferior, Jesus was very kind, considerate, and concerned. When he spoke of the marriage union, he made no distinction of subjection between the parties.

**Towards Children:** Jesus had a special affection, and always he spoke of them, and to them, with special consideration. "To become as a little child", was an aspiration, and this has become the ideal of Christians. Since he was the "son of God", the filial relation gets emphasised all through his speech and conduct, and inspires love for the children.

**Of Miracles:** Jesus is said to have performed many miracles, which go against the physical law. But his teachings, even without the miracles, are everlasting and beneficial to the mankind. Maybe, miracles are required to establish some belief. Some Christians believe that when a person has such a high spiritual and moral status, he may be aware of the technique of establishing the supremacy of mind over matter. However, Christianity can stand its ground even without miracles.

**Liberation from Lower Nature:** When Jesus would admonish people for their shortcomings, they heard him. Even though it was not palatable, his words reached their conscience, and made them think, for he had no selfish interest, no personal gain, but only a desire to relieve the man of his burden.

**His Mode of Teaching** needs no explanation. His parables, which gave examples from day to day life, were concrete, practical, and definite. His imagery and metaphors transported one from the mundane to the spiritual sphere. All kinds of people in the society figure in the parables, and every man can relate himself to one of the characters.

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## 2.4 GANDHI AND CHRISTIANITY

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Gandhi's interaction with Christianity has been long and fruitful, though was repelled by it when he was in the school. Even a local conversion to Christianity created a bad impression on the young Gandhi. When he went to England, he met a Christian from Manchester, and narrated his bitter experience. Then this man sold a copy of the Bible to him, and Gandhi states that he started reading *Old Testament*.

The *New Testament* though impressed Gandhi. He read the "*Sermon on the Mount*", which, he says, "went straight into my heart". He further continues: "I compared it with the Gita. The verses- 'But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also', and 'If any man take away thy coat, let him have your cloak too' delighted me beyond measure and put me in mind of Shamal Bhatt's 'For a bowl of water, give a goodly meal' etc., My young mind tried to unify the teachings of *Gita*, *The Light of Asia*, and the *Sermon on the Mount*. That renunciation was the highest form of religion appealed to me greatly." (Autobiography, Part I, CH XX)

Gandhi emphasised that prayer is important, but held that congregational worship is no true worship. He quotes Jesus, "When though prayest, though shalt not be as the hypocrites are; but enter into thine inner chamber and having shut the door, pray to the Father, which is in secret".

Gandhi called Jesus “one of the greatest teachers of the world”. On another occasion, he said, “In my humble opinion, he (Jesus) was a prince among politicians.....He gave the devil his due. He even shamed him and is reported never once to have yielded to his inclination” (Young India , 25-8-1920). He called Jesus Christ, “A prince among passive resisters”.

## **2.5 ISLAM: SPREAD OF ISLAM, THE HOLY QURAN**

Islam was born in the desert of Arabia, where Bedouin tribes lived. These were tribes of the desert, true sons of the soil. The desert had its stamp on the character of the people. The climate was extreme and water was scarce; burning hot sun, hot sands and storms were the realities they had to live with. In such hostile ground, the tribesmen tended their animals for livelihood. They depended on the camel for transport, and the sun and the moon for time and guidance. Under such circumstances, where they had little to give, hospitality was a virtue; they were in physical danger all the time; bravery was a virtue. Where fear could easily overtake a man, manliness was a virtue.

In such land, as if to answer the needs of men, Prophet Muhammad was born. The tribes, which were many in number, fought amongst themselves, followed polytheism, animism, and had strange rituals. They had to be unified, and made into nation. Hence was the advent of Islam.

**Spread of Islam:** The spread of Islam in the West Asian countries was more due to socio-economic causes prevailing at that time. It gave a relief from quarrels and strife, and various practices like polytheism, and animistic worship. The end product was a new faith and a new state, which suited the local population. In areas outside West Asia, various factors like discriminatory taxes against non-Muslims, desire of the leaders of society to become part of the body politic, the desire of the bureaucracy to preserve its privileges, the desire of the land-owning class not to pay the tax, and the desire to become a part of the upcoming empire, and various kinds of threats and privileges led to the spread of Islam. In the centuries following its birth, Islam spread by conquest and occupation, religious activism and peaceful missionary work. Gradually, it spread to North Africa, Europe, Arabian Peninsula, Central Asia, and up to Indus River in the east. In South East Asia, in countries like Malaya, and Sumatra, it was due to traders, who established themselves in these countries.

**Holy Scripture:** The holy scripture, Qur’an, considered to be the direct and true word of God, was transmitted by angel Gabriel to Muhammad , when the prophet was in a state of divine inspiration akin to trance. In this state, the prophet was ordered to recite (Iqra) the word of God, and hence Qur’an, a “recitation”.

After the death of the Prophet, the holy book could not provide specific answers to the questions posed by the growing community in search of extra guidance, the faithful turned to the life, habits and practices of the Prophet, and thus arose the practice of compiling, recording, and classifying the tradition. This is known as Hadith. Out of this compilation, grew the subsequent material, a completed product. ‘Sunnah,’ gave the customary way of doing things, which expresses the ideal behaviour for the pious, orthodox Muslims, who call themselves the followers of the custom (ahl al sunnah) from which the term, Sunni was born.

**The prophet’s position in Islam is venerable:** Kalimah, the holy word says, “There is no Deity but God, and Muhammad is his only apostle”. This phrase is the foundation

of Islamic faith, and it differentiates the believer from the non-believer. From this exalted position, the prophet becomes a human being, a warm and kind person, in Hadith which is a collection of the practices of the prophet.

**The Holy Qur'an:** *Qur'an* contains 114 chapters, which are arranged in decreasing order of length. There is a Mecca portion, and Madina portion, and they reveal a prophetic genius. Its essential theme is the *Unity of God*. The believer is exhorted to accept the envoys of God, from Adam, continuing with Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and finally Muhammad. Throughout the Holy Scripture, two veins run. One is that of impersonal, remote, and all powerful God, who can punish the guilty and sinful, and the other, compassionate and merciful, who gives the purest form of divine benevolence and love.

The great achievement of Prophet Muhammad was to disentangle the earlier beliefs, without cutting them abruptly, and retaining some elements of them, without causing a cultural and emotional shock. This involved cutting out totally some earlier practices and retaining some, after reinterpreting them in the monotheistic way. They were reinterpreted to accommodate them into the broader, monotheistic values of *Qur'an*. Even though some of the elements of earlier faith were retained, they were put into a new structure, which was capable of handling them in the concept of strong monotheism, described in Arabic as 'Tauhid'.

**Five Pillars Of The Faith:** The practice of Islam involves following the five pillars of faith, which lead to being a faithful follower of the religion.

a) **Kalimah:** The holy word. When translated, it reads as follows:

'There is no deity but God. Muhammad is the apostle of God'. This sentence, recited everyday during the prayers, establishes the principle of monotheism, and 'Tauhid', the principle as ordained in holy *Qur'an*.

b) **Namaz, the prayer:** Each person has to pray five times a day, after following the principle of ritual cleanliness. The prayer can be done even at home, but ritual cleanliness is more easily achieved in the mosque. However, the Friday prayer is to be done in the mosque.

c) **Zakath, the almsgiving:** Each person is ordained to give a portion of his wealth as alms, depending on his capacity. Certain class of persons, who are not capable of giving, are exempted from this.

d) **Roza, the fasting:** Each Mussalman has to fast in the month of Ramadan. In this month, a person has to fast from sunrise to sunset, during this period should abstain from food, drink, tobacco and sex. Those who are unable to follow, like pregnant women, children of pre-puberty age, the aged, and the sick, are exempt from fasting.

e) **Haz, the pilgrimage to Mecca:** Each Mussalman has to do his pilgrimage to Mecca, provided he has the physical ability and means to undertake the journey. This practice has brought about a communication in the Muslim world, and has cultural and political significance. Even if a man is unable to go, he can experience the holiness and atmosphere of the pilgrimage in the company of the pilgrim, which is shared by all.

**Law and Jurisprudence:** During the formative period of law, there was no definitive interpretation, and it was done as per the customary tenets, by following some elements

of the Roman and pre-Islamic law. By the end of Umayyad period, about 725 and 750 A.D., the Qur'an and Sunnah became established as the principal sources of Muslim jurisprudence, and the body of jurists grew, who could develop these sources and find solutions to the hitherto unknown problems.

Hadith, the practices of the Prophet, was also a source of law, and to prevent different interpretations and narratives, a method was established by which the veracity of each recorded practice could be verified. This started after two to three hundred years after founding the religion, and by ninth century, A.D., the study was institutionalised, and a full-fledged scholarly tradition came into existence. The compilations of al-Bukhari (d.870) and Muslim (d.875) enjoy universal acceptance in Islam.

The legal edifice was completed with the introduction of the principle of consensus (Ijmah), which brought about integrity in the entire legal framework and the religious thought. This principle of consensus has origin in prophet's saying, "My community will not agree in error". Ijmah verifies the authenticity and guides correct usage of the 'sunnah' tradition, and reinforces the community's sense of divine origin of laws, which lead to a strong belief and respect for the law.

**Sects within Islam:** There are two major sects within Islam, and several minor sects. The major sects are *Sunni* and *Shia*. Sunni Muslims are traditionalists, and the word, Sunni, means "one on the path". (Sunnah means path, the path ordained by the Prophet). The other sect is Shia, which literally means "followers". They are the followers of Ali, the first cousin of Prophet, and the husband of his daughter, Fatima. The Shias maintain that Ali was the first legitimate Khalif, or successor to the Prophet, and others are usurpers. The Shias are in small number compared to the Sunnis, and may constitute about 8 to 10 percent of Sunni Muslim population. Other sects are too small in number, and are confined to specific regions. There are sub-sects which were part of the Shia sect, like the Zaidi branch, and Ismaili branch. Ismaili branch survives mainly in India and East Africa, and several offshoots of Ismailism like the Druze, the Nusairi and Yazidi sects display such extreme character that it is difficult to consider them as fully Muslim.

*Sufi movement* was an example of synthesis between theology and mystic movement in Islam. Sufism was a way of practising religion through the personal mystical experience. It was not against the orthodox Islam, and in many ways complemented it. Soon the power of popular Sufi movement began to be seen among the masses, and for the fear of being upstaged, the orthodoxy moved away from it, even though this movement gave strength and popular acceptance to the orthodoxy. In many countries like Iran, Sufism, along with orthodox religion, contributed to national revival.

**Islam and the State:** There is a close nexus between religion and state, and state is considered to be a device for upholding the faith. The Khalif is the chief executive of the state, without legislative powers, as all the laws have their origin in *Qur'an*. This institution was founded after the death of Prophet, and the Khalif was supposed to be the successor to the Prophet in temporal and spiritual powers. The institution of Khalif had a chequered history, and it was formally abolished by Turkish republic in 1924, and it created stir in the Muslim world, and many Muslim countries held a meeting in Cairo in 1926, to revive the institution, but it was of no avail. Gandhi launched the Khilafat movement in support of Muslims in India at the same time.

**Islam and Society:** Islamic states are facing many challenges in the recent times. All over the world, the increase in oil prices has given an advantage to the Arab world, which has

become cash rich, and is promoting pan-Islamist movement all over the world. At the same time, the international terrorism brought about negative perception to the community, and has put the moderate, upwardly mobile, and those who want to be upwardly mobile, into difficulty, as it has become difficult for them to shake off the label. The Orthodoxy is not ready to give up its grip, and the emerging middle class among Muslims are in a dilemma over demands of the modern world and orthodoxy.

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## 2.6 GANDHI AND ISLAM

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Gandhi included the “Kalimah” in the Ashram prayers. This brought out an angry reaction from one of his Hindu friends, “You have now given the Kalimah a place in the Ashram. What further remains to be done to kill your Hinduism”? About this, Gandhi wrote, in *Harijan*, (15-2-1942):

“I am confident that my Hinduism and that of the other Ashram Hindus has grown thereby. There should be in us an equal reverence for all religions. Badshah Khan (Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan) whenever he comes joins in the worship here, with delight. He loves the tune to which the Ramayana is sung, and he listens intently to the Gita. His faith in Islam is not lessened thereby. Then, why may I not listen to the Qur’an with equal reverence and adoration in my heart?”

Gandhi included the well known verse from Qur’an into the Ashram worship, known as “Al Fateha”. His views on Islam have been dealt at length in the succeeding sections.

1. I take refuge in Allah, from Satan the accursed.
2. Say: He is the God the one and only  
God, the Eternal absolute  
He begetteth not, nor is he begotten,  
And there is none like unto Him.
3. Praise be to God,  
The Cherisher and Sustainer of worlds,  
Most Gracious, most Merciful,  
Master of the day of Judgement  
Thee do we worship.  
And thine aid we seek.  
Show us the straight way,  
The way of those on whom  
Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace,  
Those whose (portion) is not wrath  
And who go not astray.

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## 2.7 SUMMARY

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Even though Judaism is the oldest among the Semitic religions, it did not prosper as much as its successor religions. The Jews think that it is due to incurring the wrath of God, by violating his commands. The Jews suffered displacement and persecution all through the history. Still, the community has shown resilience, and many a time they have reinvented themselves under hostile circumstances. It is essentially a religion of individual and family.

Even though the principles of Christianity look well accepted universally, Jesus Christ was a revolutionary of his time. Even though the religion faced many hurdles in its early years, it proceeded to become one of the major religions in the world. It brought out the concepts of brotherhood, faith in the Lord, adherence to truth, kindness and empathy towards women and children, and above all, the simplicity of teaching through parables and psalms.

Islam had its origin in Arabia, among the Bedouin tribesmen. It spread all over the world with vigorous preachers, who brought the word of God, 'Qur'an', which was given to the world through Prophet Muhammad. It further had two sects within itself, without any change in principles, but only in methods. It developed its jurisprudence, art, architecture, philosophy, theology, epistemology, and various other disciplines. It has spread in all the continents, and has a strong adherence by its followers.

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## 2.8 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

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1. Explain the key beliefs of Judaism.
2. Bring out the basic doctrines of Christianity and how they influenced Gandhi.
3. Evaluate the significance of five pillars of Islamic faith.
4. Bring out the common features found in Semitic religions.
5. Discuss how the Semitic religions have shaped Gandhi's thinking.

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