

BLOCK -3 INTRODUCTION

Middle Eastern religions, religious beliefs and practices of the ancient inhabitants of the Middle East were hardly known until scores of religious literature were uncovered by excavations in the 19th and 20th centuries. The picture is still incomplete, although from the available information it appears that the various religions shared many beliefs and concepts. It was from these roots that four of the world's best known religions—Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—developed. Three of the world's major religions, as well as Zoroastrianism that continue to exist today, arose from the Middle East. Up to modern times religion and politics were inseparable, and to some extent this is still true today there. For the majority of these peoples, their primary identity has been religious. People thought of themselves first as Muslims, Christians, Jews, or Zoroastrians, and second as a member of some ethnicity or as an inhabitant of a specific locality. The third block, consisting of 4 units, provides a student with a synoptic view of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Unit 1 on “Zoroastrianism” inquires into the politico-religious context in which Zoroastrianism developed, declined and later re-emerged. The major languages and texts of Zoroastrian thought, the Zoroastrian notion of God, world and human as well as human's ultimate end, the religious aspects of Zoroastrianism such as the Zoroastrian pantheon, the significance of the sacred fire, the priesthood, liturgy and religious ceremonies form the scope of the unit.

Unit 2 introduces “Judaism” as a religion. Judaism in the strict sense designates religious beliefs and practices of the Jews and broadly speaking it is the oldest monotheistic religion of the world. It has a written history of over 4000 years. It began as the faith of the ancient Hebrews in the Middle East and its sacred scripture is the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament).

Unit 3 studies “Christianity” arranged in four sections. Section one looks at Jesus Christ, the founder and the centre of Christianity, locating him in history. Section two is focused on the place of the Bible in Christianity. Section three studies the central message of Jesus' mission: the Kingdom of God, and its significance to Christian life and action in the world. Finally, section four studies the meaning and the nature of the Church, its doctrines and ritual practices.

The last Unit “Islam” defines Islam and describes its historical development. The main emphasis is on the fundamentals of the religion of Islam. The unit examines the essential belief system of Islam across the world with varying social and cultural contexts in order to gain an understanding of how this tradition has emerged and spread around the world posing new challenges.

The above given 4 units will give you an introductory understanding of religions of the Middle East. The Middle East is very diverse when it comes to religions, most of which originated there. Islam in its many forms is by far the largest religion in the Middle East, but other faiths, such as Judaism and Christianity, are also important. Zoroastrianism stands out as the most important among minority religions.