



# CROSS-CULTURAL RELIGIOUS LITERACY

THE COMPARATIVE COMPETENCY



Literasi  
Keagamaan  
Lintas  
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RELIGION  
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CROSS-CULTURAL RELIGIOUS LITERACY

# THE COMPARATIVE COMPETENCY

Daniel Adipranata  
(Editor)

PERKUMPULAN

  
institut  
**Leimena**

# **Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy: The Comparative Competency**

By: Chris Seiple, Henriette Hutabarat Lebang, David Rosen, David Saperstein, dan Ari Gordon

Editor : Daniel Adipranata  
Interior design : Rycko Indrawan S.  
Cover design : Rycko Indrawan S.

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Setiabudi, South Jakarta City, Jakarta 12950

Email : info@leimena.org  
Website : leimena.org  
Phone : (021) 52880355

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# INTRODUCTION

Praise be to Allah, God Almighty for His mercy and grace, so that we can publish a book series entitled “Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy: You, Them, and What Can Be do Together.” The publication of a series of books in both Indonesian and English aims to increase literature references related to the concept and implementation of Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (CCRL) in Indonesian society as well as the world.

Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (CCRL) is an approach to thinking, acting, and acting to be able to work together with different religions and beliefs (collaborative competence), based on an understanding of the moral, spiritual framework, and personal self-knowledge (personal competence) and people. other religions and beliefs (comparative competence).

CCRL is based on the belief that awareness and belief that the common good for humanity will be achieved not when the diversity of religions and beliefs is rejected or merged into uniformity, but precisely when the diversity is affirmed and managed together by different adherents through a process of evaluation, communication, and negotiation. together to respond to various opportunities and challenges faced, both in local and global contexts

We would like to thank the authors of this Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy book series such as Dr Chris Seiple, Dr Alwi Shihab, Prof Dr Amin Abdullah, Dr Ari Gordon, Rabbi David

Saperstein, Rabbi David Rosen, and Rev. Dr Henriette T. Hutabarat Lebang, and other writers

We realize that there are still many shortcomings in the writing of this book, for that we expect suggestions and constructive criticism for improvement.

Finally, I hope that this book will be of use to both CCRL training participants, educators in schools, madrasas, universities, policy makers, and the wider community.

Jakarta, June 3, 2022

# THE COMPARATIVE COMPETENCY: UNDERSTANDING MY FAITH AS I DO

*By Chris Seiple*

Cross-cultural religious literacy asks that you understand your neighbor's faith as s/he does. This chapter is but one Christian's perspective on his own faith, and what that means for society, the state, and citizenship.

It is not a chapter on theology. It is a chapter on my beliefs, and how they shape my understanding of governance and responsible citizenship.

As you read, I would encourage, maybe even challenge, you to think about how you would express your beliefs and what they mean for your behavior, what they mean for your understanding of good governance—of a good society, and a good state, that respects and protects all citizens

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By way of reminder, cross-cultural religious literacy is about you, the other, and what you do together. Our world's challenges demand partnerships. Good, even sustainable, partnerships result from engaging those with whom we will have to partner, individuals and institutions who have different beliefs, and behaviors, than you do.



The key, however, begins with you. How do you understand your own beliefs, and what they teach you about engaging the other (a personal competency)? Do you have the patience and perseverance to listen to understand how your neighbor understands his/her beliefs, and their application (a comparative competency)? And do you know how to work on our common challenges with people and partners different from you (a collaborative competency)?

Along the way there are skills that help you engage—skills of evaluation, negotiation, and communication, applied internally and externally—that help you cross toward one another, so that you can work together, across the dignity of deep difference. Combined, these competencies and skills are cross-cultural religious literacy (CCRL).

Also, a reminder of CCRL is not. CCRL is not syncretism. We are not saying that all faiths are the same, with different names. For example, the sons and daughters of Abraham—the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims—will *never* agree about nature and purpose of Jesus.

CCRL is not illiteracy, nor is not fluency. I will never be fluent in my neighbor's faith or culture, but I can ask enough questions to not be illiterate, to show respect. In other words, CCRL is humility. It is a posture of L.O.V.E., because CCRL asks that we Listen and Observe with our hearts, Verify with our heads, and Engage with our hands.

Put differently, the comparative competency asks: What does it mean for my neighbor to live his/her faith, in his/her specific cultural context? The answer to this question begs its own question: can I accept my neighbor's understanding of his/her own beliefs and behavior, even if it is contrary to my previous understanding, and/or to what social media tells me his/her faith is?

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What is Christianity? While there is much theology and discussion, the essence of my faith can be summarized in one question: Do I believe that the tomb is empty?

What do I mean by that?

Well, there's a story that Jesus was crucified on a cross, and he was buried. Christians believe, however, that he rose from the dead. We call this day Easter.

If I don't believe in this miracle, then there's no point in being a Christian.

If, however, I do believe that Jesus rose from the dead, then I have to come to terms with two key issues. First, He must have been who He said He was. And He said He was the son of God, fully human and fully divine. Only God could defeat death.

Second, I must understand the implications of death's defeat. In many human traditions, death is the consequence for wrongdoing. If Jesus came back to life—because He defeated death—then He took the punishment for all of humanity's wrongdoing.

Specifically, I do not have to suffer the consequence of my own wrongdoing. And if I do not have to die for wrongdoing, then that means that I can live forever because of the sacrifice Jesus made, because He loved all of us so much that He was willing to die for our eternal life, if we believe in Him.

In short, if the tomb is empty, then death is but the doorway to the rest of, eternal, life...with Jesus.

Why do Christians believe this story? Well, we believe that there were eyewitness accounts of the empty tomb, and of Jesus himself...after He had been crucified.

One testimony is from Matthew, a disciple of Jesus. Matthew tells us that while the male followers of Jesus were still hiding, scared that they too might be crucified, two female followers of Christ came to the tomb and discovered it empty. (In Jewish law—and remember, Jesus and all of His followers were Jewish—there had to be two eyewitnesses if a story was to be admissible in a court of law.) They also discovered an angel, who told them that Jesus had risen.

So that's the essence of why Christians believe. But there is one more

responsibility. If Christians believe that Jesus was the son of God, that He defeated death and that He is the way to eternal life, then we have to follow His commands

And what are His commands? Jesus told His disciples, as consistent with all the prophets of the Old Testament, that there are two commands: love God, and love neighbor (to include enemies).

Put differently, the two commands are the cross itself: Loving God is the vertical, and loving neighbor is the horizontal—their intersection is the cross, where death was defeated. If I love God, then I will love my neighbor. And by loving my neighbor, I love God.

Much theology has developed around these points over the past 2000+ years since Jesus walked on the earth as a man. I can gain eternal life if I choose to follow Him, and obey His commands

But He leaves me that choice.

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If the above is how one Christian understands the basic tenets of his faith, what about the practical application? Let me share a little bit about how I've learned to apply my faith in my own context.

I grew up in "New England," in the Northeast corner of the United States. This is my homeland, my tribe. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, some Christians in England decided they wanted to worship in a different manner than the Church of England, which they regarded as too much like Catholicism. These people were called "puritans" and were a minority of the total population. The majority faith tradition (the Church of England) harassed and/or persecuted the puritans. As a result, many left "Old England," crossing the dangerous North Atlantic Ocean in small ships, to start a "New England" on the North American continent.

But the puritans did not seem to learn from their previous experience. When they arrived in Massachusetts, they told everyone how to worship. In other words, they didn't like people telling them how to worship, so they left "old" England; but once free in "New England," they

nevertheless treated others the same old way that they had been treated.

Massachusetts became, essentially, a soft theocracy. Humans being human, though, not all appreciated being told how to worship. In fact, one of the puritans in their midst kept challenging the theocracy, telling them that “forced worship stinks in the nostrils of God.”

His name was Roger Williams

Not surprisingly, the rulers of Massachusetts did not like this Roger Williams. They decided to banish him back to old England, where he likely would have been executed. And, not surprisingly, Williams did not like this idea. So he fled Massachusetts.

He was a white, protestant man of the same theology as the white, protestants rulers of Massachusetts. He simply believed differently regarding its impact on society, and its governance (the state).

He fled West to his friends, the Native Americans, where, obviously, he was now a minority. These Indians took him in because he had been in a prior relationship with them. He had learned their language to show respect (and share his faith), and he was against the colonialism that gave away their land without asking them. Williams paid them for some land, establishing a place where all people could exercise what he called “liberty of conscience”—which he thought was the greatest gift from God. He called his town Providence because he believed God had provided him with this opportunity.

He did all of these things because he had a different interpretation of theology than the rulers of Massachusetts. Jesus commanded him to love all his neighbors, not just those who looked and believed like him.

Williams thought that respecting and protecting one’s neighbor was not only the right thing to do, but that it was good governance, resulting in more civility, and thus more stability. In other words, because he had experienced repression himself, Williams believed that when the state or society places legal or social restriction on people because of their beliefs—if they are prevented from practicing the essence of their identity—then it is more likely that they will become angry or even rebel against the state.

He best expressed the governance implications of his theological beliefs—to love God and love neighbor, as Jesus commands, because Williams believed Jesus to have defeated death as the son of God—through the analogy of a trip across the Northern Atlantic.

In the below quote, Williams talks about different people and different beliefs on one ship. The ship was full with mostly, Protestants, who were English. There were always other travelers, including Catholics, Muslims, and Jews. But they all had a common goal. They wanted to go to the new world, to a New England, to have a better life. Roger Williams writes

“It has fallen sometimes that both [Catholics] and Protestants, Jews and [Muslims] may be embarked on one ship. Upon which supposal I do affirm, that all the liberty of conscience that ever I pleaded for turns upon these two hinges, that none of the [Catholics], Protestants, Jews, or [Muslims] be forced to come to the ship’s prayers or worship, nor secondly, [be] compelled from their own particular prayers or worship, if they practice any. I further add, that I never denied that notwithstanding this liberty, the commander of the ship ought to command the ship’s course, yea, and also to command that justice, peace, and sobriety be kept and practiced, both among the seamen and the passengers.”<sup>1</sup>

Roger Williams is saying that there must be rules from the top-down if the ship is to make safe passage. The ship is the state, and the captain is the president. But there also must be relationships among the passengers, who respect and protect the other’s liberty of conscience, even if he or she believes differently from the majority.

If these relationships can be nurtured in this manner, then the non-majorities—the Catholics, Jews, and Muslims in this example—are more likely to contribute to the well-being of all passengers (according to the commands of their own faith), and they are more likely to be loyal to the mission of the ship of state.

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1 Roger Williams, January 1655, letter to the city of Providence. As quoted in James Calvin Davis, ed., *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger Williams*, (Harvard University Press, 2008), 278-9.

In today's language, Roger Williams was saying that the everyone has a spiritual citizenship, which must be respected and protected. He was also saying that everyone has a global citizenship—everyone on that ship was from a different place, but they were all seeking a better life on the other side of the planet. Therefore, it was all the more important to live out the best of their faiths on that ship, in order to live it out around the world, if there was to be civility and stability in the governance of a multi-ethnic and multi-faith society.

But these spiritual and global citizenships have to be lived out somewhere, in a particular place, that has and expects certain behavior according to the rules and relationships of both the state and society. So Williams is also making the case for a national citizenship, a place where all can find their story in the story of the country; precisely because that country allows them to live out the best of their faith, and thus contributing to the common good of all.<sup>2</sup>

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So, with that let me conclude about how I, one person from America, understands Christianity; and, how my beliefs shape my understanding of what the relationship between society and the state should be, thus enabling each of us to engage the dignity of deep difference. My only recommendation is that you continue to have these kinds of conversations about what you believe and why, as well as the implications for how you and your neighbors, together, live in society, and for how you and your neighbors, together, think about its governance.

\*This document has been prepared for the Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (LKLB, for its acronym in Indonesian) program, October 2021 – June 2022

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2 For more on Roger Williams, please see this article that I wrote ten years ago: "[The Essence of Exceptionalism: Roger Williams and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America.](#)" Chris Seiple (2012) THE ESSENCE OF EXCEPTIONALISM: ROGER WILLIAMS AND THE BIRTH OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN AMERICA, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 10:2, 13-19, DOI: [10.1080/15570274.2012.683252](https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2012.683252).

# KNOWING CHRISTIANITY

*Pdt. Dr. Henriette Hutabarat Lebang, M.A.*

**T**hrough this opportunity, I will introduce Christianity in a broad outline. To introduce it in detail would obviously take quite a long time. In particular, I will focus on the Christian view regarding relations with people from different backgrounds, among other things differences in culture, ethnicity and religion.

## **The Core of Jesus' Teachings: Genuine Love**

Christianity is centered on the teachings of Jesus, which is genuine love. Jesus said, *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."* (Matthew 22:37-40)

Love for God is love in its entirety, done with all the heart, with all the soul, with all the mind. In other words, love that is undivided. It can happen that someone says he loves God but does not do God's will, and instead puts his own desires first, or prioritizes what this world considers important, even commits things that are forbidden by God. Jesus said: *"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."* (Matthew 6:24) Love

is centered only on God, who first loved human beings and all of His creation. It is impossible for humans to profess to love God, but at the same time consider worldly things such as wealth as important or even deity such worldly things. Love for God in its entirety, this is the law which, in Christianity, is considered the greatest commandment.

And the second commandment that is as important as the first is "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" This love for fellow human beings is not love that is limited, or love that is feigned. This love is love that is genuine, whole, without ulterior motives and extended to all people, regardless of ethnic background, culture, religion, or gender. Actions driven by genuine love do not treat others differently.

To love one's neighbor is love in its entirety; 'as yourself,' Jesus commanded. Usually we love ourselves more than we love others, or we tend to love members of our family, people of the same ethnic group or religion as us more than those outside our primordial group. But Jesus mandated: "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" In the Gospel of Matthew 7:12, Jesus reminded His disciples "*So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.*" This is an example of how to love one's neighbor as oneself. So before we speak or do something, we need to reflect, what if these words were conveyed to me or these actions were done to me: would it be pleasant or not? The measure of each of our deed and speech are whether those actions or words reflect our genuine love for God and for fellow human beings, without limits, without restrictions, without pretensions, without any burden or without ulterior motives such as, 'I love so that others will love me, too.'

These two primary laws: love for God and love for neighbor cannot be separated. Love for God must be demonstrated through acts of love for others, as explained in the Bible: "*Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.*" (1 John 4:20-21)



Jesus even advised His disciples to love not only those whom they love or those who love them in return, but to love their enemies, too, and pray for them.

### **Love Your Enemy**

*Jesus said: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:43-45)*

A common belief or practice in Jesus' time was love your neighbor and hate your enemy. This kind of belief continues to be the prevailing view of people even up to now. Loving fellow human beings, yes. But our enemy? Wait a minute. Isn't it not unusual for a lot of people to assume that an enemy should be hated, even fought with until he is black and blue and even until he dies? Unfortunately, those considered as enemies nowadays are not only those who oppose us physically or harm us, but also those who do not hold the same opinion as us or those who have a different background be it their ethnic, cultural and religious background. It is not surprising that it is not unusual for us to have a negative attitude towards people who are different from us.

Jesus said to His disciples or followers, "*you have heard that it was said*". Jesus was referring to the belief or practice at the time that it was natural for one to only love fellow human beings, fellow friends, people of the same ethnicity or those whom we are acquainted. This kind of attitude assumes it is not wrong if we hate our enemy. However, Jesus said, "*But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*" (Matthew 5:44), not only to love your enemies, but also to pray for those who persecute you. Pray for those who may have spoken ill of you, pray for those who

may have been hostile to you with the hope that God will enlighten their hearts, so that there will be peace, and so that you can relate as brothers and sisters. Jesus advised His followers to love and greet not only those they are already acquainted or their friends, but to love and greet everyone without differentiating.

Even though our backgrounds are different, our cultures are different, our languages are different, our religions are different. And particularly if someone hates you, do not hate that person. Do not counter hate with hate. But instead hate should be countered with love. Why so? Jesus said, "*...that you may be children of your Father in heaven.*" What it means is that you become children of God, your Father in heaven, who is all-loving, who causes the sun to rise on the bad and the good. God does not discriminate. The sun still shines on everyone, on the good and the bad. And God causes rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous. This means that God's mercy is always available, bestowed to everyone. It does not matter whether they do good or evil.

The question is, how do humans respond to the said mercy of God? Is it by giving thanks, by doing the things that God requires as written in the law of love, or vice versa? Loving the Lord your God with all your heart means not worshiping other gods. These other gods point to an object of worship that differs from God's will. In the course of human life, material things or power often become the new god. It is not uncommon for human beings to compete in an unhealthy manner with fellow human beings, legitimize ways which are not authorized by God in order to obtain wealth or power that they assume can make them happy. Love for God and neighbor is put aside. Human beings even do not hesitate to knock down or kill fellow human beings in order to obtain wealth, power or position. Here, human beings no longer prioritize the commandment to love God and to love their neighbors.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, meaning that God's mercy granted to us should be used according to His will, which

is loving our neighbors, caring for our environment, caring for all creation for the benefit of all, so that God's peace can be attained in this world.

God is good to all people and full of mercy to all of His creation. In the Book of Psalms it is said:

*“The Lord is gracious and compassionate,  
slow to anger and rich in love.  
The Lord is good to all;  
he has compassion on all he has made.  
All your works praise you, Lord;  
your faithful people extol you.”* (Psalm 145: 8-10)

Christians believe that God is good to all people and full of mercy to all of His creation. Therefore, love for others should be realized without limits. For what reason? Because the Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. God is good to all and He has compassion on all He has made. The human response to God's infinite love is gratitude which is manifested in a disposition that cares for others and cares for His creation. Everyone who loves God will praise God in his life. And praise God not only with his voice, but also with his mind, with his deeds, with speech that pleases God and in accordance to God's command in the law of love.

### **Jesus Breaks Down Man-Made Barriers**

In our lives now and also at the time of Jesus, there were many man-made barriers that separated one human being from another or one group from the other. People from different ethnic groups, different backgrounds, different religions do not often greet each other. Oftentimes they are enemies, and this enmity is passed on to the next generation. One example in the Bible is that of the Samaritans and the Jews.

Jesus had a Jewish background. At that time it was forbidden for Jews to associate with Samaritans. The enmity lasted across generations. Each one of them avoids meeting people whom they consider as enemies, more so in public places. In the eyes of the Jews, Samaritans were considered lowly, so much so that at the time the Samaritans were hostile to the Jews. The Jews regarded the Samaritans as not of pure Jewish descent. Their religious background is different; their place of worship is different (Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim).

Once, on His journey, Jesus met a Samaritan woman at a well (John 4:1-42). Jesus asked for water from the Samaritan woman who came to fetch water at a well known as Jacob's well, at noontime. This Samaritan woman was astonished as to why a Jewish man would ask water from a Samaritan woman like her. This woman was instantly aware of the barriers that existed between them: differences in ethnic background, religion and gender. At the time women were considered inferior to men. In addition, this Samaritan woman was judged as violating morals, so she was regarded as a sinner.

However, Jesus instead greeted the woman, and even held a very in-depth discussion with her – by Jacob's well, a public place. Anyone can come to that place. There were many basic matters that Jesus talked about with the Samaritan woman. This was indeed a taboo in the time of Jesus. However, with His attitude, Jesus broke down man-made barriers. Jesus followed the command of an all-loving God, who did not differentiate people based on their background.

### **God Does Not Differentiate People**

One of the stories in the Bible, which is the meeting of Peter with Cornelius, shows that God does not differentiate people based on whatever consideration there is. The Apostle Peter was one of Jesus' disciples who was also of Jewish background. He met Cornelius, one of the officers of the Roman army. He was not a Jew. This Cornelius was a devout, God-fearing man, who was diligent in giving alms to the

Jews, and diligent in praying to God. His religion was not mentioned. It is told in the Bible (Acts 10:1-42) that Cornelius and Peter each had a vision; in both of their visions, Allah designed their meeting, because due to their different backgrounds, they inherited an unfriendly view towards people of different ethnic backgrounds.

In the religious tradition of the Jews at the time, it was forbidden for a Jew to enter the house of a Gentile. Jews tend to look down on people of non-Jewish background and regard them as unclean. However, in the divine vision revealed to Peter, God opened Peter's eyes after he heard a voice saying: *"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."* (Acts 10:15) Cornelius also had a vision telling him to send his servants to fetch Peter who was in another city. When Cornelius' messengers arrived at the house where Peter was staying, and conveyed Cornelius' message to bring them back for a meeting with Cornelius, Peter struggled. How could he as a Jew enter and become a guest at the house of Cornelius, a Gentile? But God made Peter realize that all people are equal before God.

When Peter arrived, Cornelius along with his relatives and close friends welcomed him warmly. Peter said to those present: *"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"* (Acts 10:28-29) This experience led Peter to a confession of faith, saying: *"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all."* (Acts 10:34-36) 'Fear the Lord' means to do or practice His commandments: love, truth, justice, peace.

In short, Christians, or followers of Christ, acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord of all people. Therefore every Christian should treat each person as a fellow brother, whatever the differences that exist between them, just as Christ had exemplified.

Jesus also exemplified how to love, and not to stay away from people who are regarded as sinners. Luke 19:1-10 tells the story of Jesus' meeting with Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector who wanted to meet Him. In those days, tax collectors, who were assigned by the Roman government to collect taxes from the people, often demanded more than what the government had determined. Because of this, tax collectors were hated by the Jewish community at the time, were regarded as sinners, and considered unclean. When there was news that Jesus would enter the city of Jericho, Zacchaeus wanted so much to meet Jesus. Because he was short, he had to climb up a sycamore fig tree in order to see Jesus who was about to pass by. Zacchaeus was surprised when he saw Jesus directing His eyes on the tree where he was, and heard His voice: *"Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."* Then Zacchaeus immediately came down and greeted Jesus with joy. But all who saw this grumbled and criticized Jesus, because He was regarded as staying in a sinner's house. But Jesus said, *"Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham."*

The children of Abraham are entitled to the promise of salvation from God. Jesus emphasized that He came into the world to seek and save sinners (Luke 19:10). Those were the new breakthroughs that Jesus had done, that sinners who wanted to seek God will be received by God. Because of his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus then repented, renewed his life, and no longer practiced corruption. He said: *"Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."* (Luke 19:8)

## **Understanding The Faith of Christians**

Christians or adherents of Christianity are followers of Christ. They believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of this world and are committed to imitating Jesus and carrying out His teachings in their daily lives. Jesus taught the values of love to all people without

differentiating, declaring **truth, justice and peace** to all people and even to all of His creation.

Therefore, in the Christian faith's understanding, the church is not primarily the building, but the church is the people. The fellowship of Christians who gather to worship and share and carry out Christ's commands in the midst of the world is called a church. This corrects the understanding all this time that the church is the building. These Christians or churches understand 3 (three) vocations, namely: **fellowship, witness, and service.**

In FELLOWSHIP, the congregation gathers, unites their hearts to worship God together, both in church buildings or in the congregations' homes. In the worship service, they praise God, confess their sins, hear and meditate on God's Word, pray intercessory prayers for God's guidance so that the congregation can live according to God's word, as well as for the nation and state so that the common good of society will be realized. At the end of the service, they receive God's blessings and are commissioned to go back into their daily lives to do God's will. Through worship, Christians deepen their relationship with God, so that they can understand God's Word or His will more and more, and are empowered by the power of the Holy Spirit to do His will in their daily lives, both in the midst of family or in the society.

WITNESS means the congregation demonstrates God's great love for mankind and to all beings, and perform deeds in accordance with the will of God, which concerns the salvation and well-being of all His creation. Thus, Christians in their lives should reflect the saving love of God, and manifest that love both to fellow human beings and to all of God's creation. This is what is called the Gospel message. The Gospel is good news, the news of salvation from God that must be preached to this world, to all beings (Mark 16:15) The good news of the Gospel concerns the salvation of man and all creation. Salvation from God is salvation that is comprehensive, not only the salvation

of the soul in the afterlife, but also the well-being of life while in this world. That is why Christians are aware that their calling is to be present in the world to witness the love of God, to bring the light of Christ to places of darkness, to be the salt of the earth that gives good favor to the world, to prevent decay in society and to nurture the continuity of a life that is meaningful while they are still given the chance to live in the midst of this world.

Jesus taught the "Our Father's Prayer" that is recited by his followers, and among other things, it pleads with God: "...*your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*" (Matthew 6:10) Christians pray that God's will be done not only in heaven but also on earth at this present time. In this prayer, it is hoped that the salvation of God, the well-being that is from God is brought to fruition in this world so that human beings and all of God's creation experience salvation that comes from God. As its implication, followers of Christ should manifest the infinite love of God, the love of God that forgives those who do wrong or sin, through their thoughts, words and actions that imitate Christ. In this way, the peace of God Allah or *shalom* (in Hebrew) or *salam* (in Indonesian) can be truly enjoyed by all.

About SERVING. Jesus exemplified how to perform service that is sincere. Jesus discerned Himself, as someone who '*did not come to be served, but to serve*'. (Mark 10:45) Jesus even gave His life to be a ransom for many people. Jesus said: "*Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.*" (Mark 10:43-44) Jesus, the Teacher, teaches a way of life that is different from the values of this world. He washed the feet of His disciples (John 13:12-17) Teachers should understand their duties as servants and not demand to be served. Leaders are also advised to become servants to the people they lead and not to follow worldly ways, where leaders often exercise their power harshly and act arbitrarily.

Christians are also asked to be of service to God's creation. It is a mandate to manage, care for and preserve God's creation (Genesis



1:26-28; 2:15; Psalm 8). Serving in the midst of this world also means striving to establish truth, justice and peace in society. Helping those who are hungry, sick, the widows and orphans, those who suffer or are hit by disasters, setting free those who are in chains, proclaiming that the year of the Lord's favor has come. (Luke 4:19)

The call for the church or Christians to be involved in ecological social service is also the moral responsibility of the members of the church as citizens of the country in fighting for the ideals of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, which is to achieve a just, prosperous, and peaceful Indonesian society. To achieve this responsibility, the church develops its cooperation with the government, society and all people of religion and belief.

Christians are certain of the word and promise of God: *"How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! ...For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore."* (Psalm 133: 1,3) Because of this, what we need to strengthen is *tali silaturahmi* ('the cord of friendship') with fellow citizens of our country, regardless of background, so that the glory of God will reside in our country, an atmosphere where: *"Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven. The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest."* (Psalm 85: 10-12)

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\*English Translations of the Bible verses are copied from the *New International Version* (Online source: <https://www.biblegateway.com/>)

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# WHAT IS JUDAISM? A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO JEWISH BELIEFS, PEOPLEHOOD, AND PRACTICE

*Authors: Rabbi David Rosen, Rabbi David Saperstein,  
and Dr. Ari Gordon*

## **Introduction**

Judaism is one of the oldest world religions, and it is also one of the least understood. Unfortunately, ignorance and misinformation about the religious “other” often leads to baseless hatred among God’s children. We know that Jews and other non-Muslims should learn about Islam to become better partners in humanity based on shared values. Likewise, it is important for Muslims and other non-Jews to learn about what Judaism teaches, how Jews tell their own story as a people and how they practice their religion. Knowledge of other faith traditions makes us better citizens of an ever-shrinking world and can even deepen our commitment to our own faiths and practice.

The Holy Qur’an teaches that the diversity of humanity is a sign of God’s greatness (Surat al-Rum 30:22). Likewise, Jewish tradition also affirms the sacred value of human diversity. The Talmud—the

collection of oral traditions of ancient Jewish sages—records the following teaching about why God created humanity from a single person (and not myriads of people at once):

Humanity was created from a single person, to teach that one who destroys one soul of a human being, is considered by sacred Scripture to have destroyed a whole world, and one who saves one soul is considered to have saved a whole world. And also [humans were created from one person] to promote peace among God's creatures, so that one should not say: My ancestors were greater than yours ... and [humanity began with one person] also to proclaim the glory of the Holy One, blessed be He. For a human being stamps many coins with one stamp, and all of them are alike; but the King of the kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, stamps each person with the stamp of Adam the First, and nevertheless not one of them is like the other. (*Sanhedrin 37a*)

The message in this story is that every human being is of infinite worth, that all people share an equally venerated ancestry, and that our human difference is a tribute to the beauty of creation and the majesty of our creator.

If diversity is part of God's plan and a sign of Divinity, then when we develop cross-cultural religious literacy, not only are we learning to navigate a multicultural world, but we are also deepening our relationship with God. We see this essay as a tool to learn about Judaism on its own terms, to help Muslim audiences deepen appreciation of their own faith, and to engage in the sacred task of honoring the diversity of God's creation.

No single writing can capture the entirety of Judaism, Jewish community and Jewish experience, but this introduction offers a first entry point into the question "What is Judaism?" by highlighting three key elements of what it means to be a Jew: faith, peoplehood and practice.

## **Judaism as a Faith Tradition**

At the heart of Judaism lies the affirmation that this world is not an accident, or a ship without a captain. It is the creation of a God, who is not only all-Wise and Omnipresent, but it is also the world established by a moral God. Jews believe that God's qualities of divine compassion, mercy, justice, righteousness, and loving kindness all shape God's relationship with the world that we know.

## **The Place of Human Beings**

God placed humans at the summit of creation, both as divine servants and as caretakers for the world. Judaism teaches that human beings were endowed with a special aspect, referred to in the Hebrew Bible, the Torah, as the divine image or *Tzelem Elohim* (Genesis 1:26-27). Of course, God doesn't have a material image and therefore the phrase in the Torah is a poetic metaphor, which indicates that humans have something of a spiritual nature that the rest of creation does not have. This is understood to be the human soul, or what many of the Torah's commentators understood in terms of our intellectual capacities. But regardless of how one understands the metaphor precisely, it means that humanity has a special responsibility in this world.

Jews believe that human beings have been given a special capacity to distinguish between right and wrong, between good and bad. But Jews also understand that a key distinction between human beings and God is that humans are limited in our intellectual and spiritual knowledge. Therefore, the important second principle that Judaism affirms is that God has shown us, through prophetic revelation, the knowledge of God's ways and will.

## **Revelation and Law**

For Judaism the climax of revelation occurs at Mount Sinai, where God reveals through Moses, to the children of Israel, the covenant

with the Jewish people that also records the Jewish way of life, that we call the Torah.

Jews use the term Torah to refer to many things, including all of the Hebrew Bible or the entirety of Jewish tradition. However, the word Torah, or *tawrat* in Arabic, most often refers to the five books of Moses. The Greek name for that set of scriptures is the “Pentateuch.”

According to ancient Jewish tradition the Torah contains 613 commandments, or in Hebrew *mitzvot*, from which all of Jewish practice stems. So, for example, there are commandments that have to do with what we can and cannot eat, those that mandate charity, those outlining the holidays, and many on how we treat one another. Many of these commandments are not relevant today. For example, since the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, called Bayt HaMiqdash in Hebrew, the laws connected to sacrificial offerings, the Temple priests and ritual purity within the Temple are no longer in practice. The commandment that Jews who are able to do so make pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times each year was also only in effect while the Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem.

Likewise, there are commandments which are contingent on circumstances. For example, there is a commandment for the appropriate procedure for divorce. Divorce is not an ideal situation, and we prefer people to have happiness in their marriage. However, Judaism recognizes that sometimes marriages break down, and if a marital bond must be dissolved there is a commandment and set of procedures as to how divorce should take place. Many commandments are situational in this way.

Judaism also teaches that beyond the actions we take, we must lead our lives with consciousness of the Divine. For example, we must be aware of God’s presence in every aspect of our life, both personal and in our relationships with others. Our actions should reflect that metaphorical “Divine Image” with which we were

created. We must carry gratitude to God for the gift of life and the blessings we receive. We must commit to belief in the one God and develop both love and fear of God. Many Jews strive to develop the experience of joy as part of their service of God.

Jewish tradition does describe the idea of 613 commandments, but many of the details are not outlined in the Torah. For example, in the ten commandments that were first revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai, there is the commandment to “keep the sabbath day holy” (Exodus 20:8). What does that mean? How does one keep a day holy? This is just one example of many of where the language of the Torah itself is very concise.

Therefore, Jewish tradition teaches that together with the divine revelation of a written Torah, an oral Torah also developed—a tradition of interpretation transmitted through word of mouth by reliable transmitters—which enables us to expound the text and to understand how it applies to different situations. The mode of interpretation that relies on tradition is like *tafsir* within Islamic tradition.

The oral tradition—which some Jews believe was also revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai—was communicated by word of mouth from one generation to the next. However, new circumstances arise, technologies develop, the world becomes increasingly complex world, more teaching and more information emerges. Eventually there became a need to compile the oral traditions into canonical collections.

The first stage of oral traditions that commented on the written text of the Torah were compiled in a collection called the *Mishnah*, approximately in the year 200. The *Mishnah* is divided into six areas of Jewish law and contains 63 volumes, each addressing one specific topic. The six divisions cover 1) prayers, daily worship, and agriculture, 2) sabbath and holidays 3) marriage/divorce and family law, 4) finances, torts, and legal procedure, 5) the Holy Temple and

its practice, and 6) purity. Several topics that do not fit neatly into any of these categories—such as ethical teachings—are also included in one or another of the divisions

The next layer of oral teachings is known as the *Gemara*, which expounds upon the text of the *Mishnah*. Together the *Mishnah* and *Gemara* constitute the canon of Jewish tradition known as the Talmud. The Talmud was compiled around the year 500, and it includes a wide range of teachings. Most of them pertain to Jewish law, but the Talmud also contains philosophy, ethics, and narrative expansions of the stories recorded in the Torah.

Another major feature of the Talmud is that it records the debates between the great Jewish sages on many topics. For example, the first passage in the Talmud goes as follows:

When in the evening should one recite the obligatory *Shema* prayer? The view of Rabbi Eliezer was that one may recite from the time the priests of the Holy Temple used to eat their agricultural gifts, until the end of their first watch. The majority view of the sages was that one may recite it until midnight. Rabbi Gamliel taught that one has until the break of dawn to recite the *Shema* prayer. (Berakhot 2a)

The prayer known as *shema*, is a Jewish affirmation of God's unity, much like the *shahada*, and Jewish law teaches that one must recite this prayer twice each day, once during the daytime and once in the evening. However, as you see, several views are recorded on exactly when one might be able to recite this prayer. So it is with almost every area of Jewish law—the Talmud teaches the predominant opinions of the Rabbis of ancient times. These volumes were left to the Jewish scholars afterwards as a repository of teachings to use as they guided their communities on how to live in accordance with God's will on a daily basis, weekly basis, annual basis, according to changing circumstances.

Beginning in the Middle Ages, Jewish scholars also developed extensive codes of Jewish law, which did not record the many opinions of debate, but taught the ways of practice according to that sage. One of the greatest scholars of Jewish history, Maimonides (1138-1204 CE), compiled such a code which is still referenced by Jewish jurists and teachers to this day. Likewise, when issues arose in the lives of Jews they would ask questions of their rabbis, and they would respond according to their best understanding of the situation and how the law applies to that circumstance. In this sense, the rabbis were like the *ulama* who mastered the tradition and like the *mufti* who issued legal rulings when there were questions that arose.

The system of Jewish law and the way of practice is referred to in Hebrew as *halacha*. *Halacha* is the Jewish equivalent of *sharia*, and both words mean path, the way that one walks according to God's will.

### **Free will, Sin, and Reward & Punishment**

The next important Jewish belief is the principle of reward and punishment. Judaism rejects nihilism and believe that our actions have consequences. The idea that bad things happen when we do bad things, and the good things result from doing good things is also predicated on the belief that all human beings have free will. Human beings can choose how we act.

The belief in free will alongside reward and punishment also relates to the condition of our soul. Judaism teaches that the divine element within us, our soul, is not material, and therefore when our physical bodies die, the soul continues. When we leave this world, our soul lives the result of how we have led our lives in this world.

We are all flawed and so we can make mistakes. Judaism teaches a very important principle in the concept of *teshuva*, repentance, (or *tawbah* in Arabic) which comes from the Hebrew word *lashuv*, to



return. It suggests that we are all basically good as God's creatures as his children, and our natural desire is to be close to God. However, because to be human also entails frailty, we make mistakes, we stray from the proper path. But within us is the capacity to return to God. And therefore, God, who is abundant in mercy and forgiveness will accept us back when we repent.

### **Judaism and the World**

So, what does Judaism teach about the mission of the Jews in the world? The Children of Israel, the Jewish people, understood that the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai, placed upon it a special responsibility. Not by any inherent virtue within the people but simply because of God's mystery and of his faithfulness to the covenant that he made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - the patriarchs, that the Jewish people was to model God's word in their practice. The Hebrew Bible portrays Jews in the Holy Land striving to create a society that could serve as a paradigm. As with all human societies, there were successes and failures. The voice of the prophets often criticized the practice of the kings and of the people, and when the people were punished, even to the point of exile from the land, the prophets also offered comfort that God's covenant with the Jews was not broken and that God's love for them endured.

Judaism does teach the concept of a messiah, who will usher in an era of universal peace, when all nations would live in tranquility, and no one will experience persecution. In the traditional Jewish messianic vision, all would recognize the presence of God in the world and seek to live according to the moral principles that flow from that recognition.

Judaism was born in a pagan world, where most peoples did not recognize the one Creator, the moral guide of the universe. However, other religions came to be, as well. While every religion has an exclusivist tradition that rejects the teachings of other faiths,

Judaism also carries inclusive and pluralistic voices that honor the shared values of the various faiths. For example, in the Middle Ages great scholars like Maimonides taught that Jesus of Nazareth and the prophet Muhammad (peace upon him), were messengers who brought about universal truths that are also to be found within the Torah. And therefore, through this message a new world could be brought for everybody, where everyone would learn to live out of a sense of God's presence in the world and how they should treat one another. That is the fullness of the Jewish messianic idea.

### **Jews as a People**

Jews do not define themselves only as a faith tradition, but also as a collective. Judaism as a religion is born out of a people's historical experience, and as a people, its identity also flows from the unique religious experience of Jews. So, one of the first elements to understanding the idea of Jewish peoplehood is to understand Jewish history.

### **Origins and Early History**

Judaism emerged over three thousand years ago, and its formative years were alongside some of the great civilizations of the area known as the Near East: the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Egyptians, many others.

What kinds of societies were they? Were they religions? Each one had their own religious cultures. Were they nations? Each one had a national identity. Were they ethnic peoples? Many of them had ethnic identities, as well. Did they have their own culture? Each developed their own music, art, and literature.

The same is true for the Jews—they are a people that developed with a religion, a sense of nationality, an ethnic identity, and a unique set of cultures. However, the Jewish people have maintained an unbroken tradition and continuous collective identity. From

Abraham to the Exodus from Pharaoh's oppression in Egypt; from the establishment of kingdoms in the Holy Land to exile after the destruction of the Holy Temple in 70 CE; from the Middle Ages and up to today, Jews tell a continuous story of a people in history.

Often Jewish communities existed both in Israel and among the populations of the world. Sometimes they exercised sovereignty in Israel and thrived within Israel alongside other populations, and at other times they were forced into exile, conquered by other peoples. Over the centuries Jews spread across the globe, living alongside many different cultures and in many different regions.

After Christianity and Islam were established, and Jews lived under Christian and Muslim rule, they tended to do better under Muslim rule. These societies often showed greater tolerance and provided more freedoms, even as the Dhimmi status was sometimes used to subjugate Jews to abusive treatment, as during the times of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil. While Jews were oppressed by some Muslim dynasties, such as the Almohads, for the most part they did not face the kind of ongoing persecution that Jews faced in other areas around the globe. Much of the Jewish intellectual, cultural and literary traditions developed alongside Muslim communities engaged in the same pursuits.

## Demographics

It is important to remember, however, just what a small part of the global population Jews constitute. Of the nearly 8 billion people living on the planet, Jews are roughly 15 million in 2022. About 90% of all Jews live in two countries, the United States and Israel, with the next largest communities in France, the UK, Canada, Argentina, Russia, and Australia.

The small size of the Jewish people also gives perspective to the horrific events of the Holocaust, the attempt by the Nazis to systematically annihilate all the Jews of Europe during World War II. In the year

1939, Jews made up 17 million people across the world. By 1945, the Nazis and their allies destroyed six million Jewish lives—1.5 million of them Jewish children—simply for being born into the wrong race and religion. In addition, the Nazis targeted and killed millions of others for their political, sexual, racial, and other identities. The Holocaust destroyed half of the Jews in Europe and wiped out a third of all Jews in the world. Many Jews living today are children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of people who survived this tragedy.

Despite the size of the Jewish people, Jews have made an extraordinary positive impact on the history of humankind. The ideas that emanated from the Bible were embraced and shaped by Christianity and Islam and taken to populations across the globe. These other traditions that see the Jewish experience as a part of their own narrative have spread the idea of a God who calls us to ethical and righteous behavior and who desires universal peace among peoples.

In Modern times, Jews have been major contributors in the world of science, humanitarian causes, social justice, art, politics, business, and other fields. The Nobel prize winners offer an excellent example: Jews make up 0.2 percent of the global population, and yet they make up twenty-two percent of those who won prizes in the sciences and the arts and in establishing peace. Jews are not the only religious group that contributes to collective human flourishing, but our tradition of education and the values of caring for all of humanity make “giving back” a part of Jewish culture.

## **Diversity**

So, who are the 15 million Jews who live across the globe today?

Religiously, we might think about two kinds of Jews. Most Jews throughout history were amongst those who believed that the written Torah and its oral traditions came as the direct word of God. In more recent times since the so-called European “Age of Reason” and scientific critical thinking applied to every field, including religion,

other streams of Jewish belief emerged. Many of these understood our sacred texts differently, believing that they did not emerge as a direct divine message, but that they were written by men (and sometimes women), striving to understand what God called us to do. There is much theological debate about these topics, but most Jews define themselves falls into one of those two categories.

Amongst those who believe that our sacred texts are of divine origin see the commandments, the *mitzvot* (for more see above) of those books as binding obligations upon Jews throughout eternity. Most Jews who believe in this traditional view fall into the category of what we call today “Orthodox Jews.” Orthodox Jews believe they live in accordance with the same laws as Jews have always practiced, although with adaptations with changing circumstances over the centuries. In most of the countries of the world, Orthodox Judaism remains the dominant religious expression of Judaism.

Among the groups that have found a different way to approach Jewish texts and law in the last 200 years are those who allow for greater use of independent reasoning when interpreting tradition. The group known as “Conservative Judaism” for example, also believes the Bible is of divine origin, but they believe God gave greater flexibility to change the laws to meet the needs of the people. “Reform” and “Reconstructionist” Jews believe that in each era men and women using our God-given wisdom and sense of ethics and culture must ensure that Judaism is in keeping with the wisdom and culture of the times.

Over the course of history Jews lived in different parts of the world, and each setting left a cultural imprint on those communities. Those whose tradition came from European origin are known as *Ashkenazi* Jews, and their practices developed in conversation with European culture. Those whose historic roots are in Spain and the Mediterranean European basin are known as *Sephardi* Jews, and their practice follows the Spanish Jewish tradition of centuries past.

Jews whose communities lived in Arab lands for millennia are called *Mizrahi Jews*. In each setting, distinct cultural expressions emerged, even as the basic practices and beliefs of Judaism remained unified.

So, Jews define themselves in a variety of ways, by religion, by culture and by ethnicity. But the Jewish sense of peoplehood also leads some to define along nationalistic lines, by their connection to their historical homeland, Israel. While the Jewish story and Jewish religion was always connected to the Holy Land, in Modern times the rise of nationalisms and the nation state encouraged some Jews to form their own nationalist movement, which came to be known as Zionism. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was important for Jews around the world, even as it regrettably created conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Tragically that conflict remains unresolved until this day, and Palestinian people do not have a sovereign state. The conflict, however, is a political conflict between Israel and the Palestinians; it is not a religious conflict between the Muslim world and the Jewish world or between Islam and Judaism.

## Unity Amidst Diversity

The robust diversity found among the Jewish people is a product of 3000 years of historical experience in various settings and contexts. What Jews share, however, is belief in the one God, the belief that our sacred texts should guide us in creating a better world, responsibility for the broader Jewish family, and a spiritual attachment to the historic homeland of the Jewish people.

The Talmud shares a beautiful teaching on the guiding principles of the Jewish people in the world as follows:

Simon the Righteous was among the remnants of the Men of the Great Assembly and he used to say: the world stands on three things: *Torah* (study), *avodah* (worship), *gemilut hasadim* (acts of loving kindness). (*Mishnah Avot 1:2*)

Those are the three rubrics of life. Torah, or Jewish study, is central to who we are as a people. Avodah, or Jewish worship, is a foundation of Jewish religious life. But so is the idea of acts of love and kindness, *gemilut hasadim*, the idea that we must be tools of God to bring greater social justice to the world for the good of all humanity.

### Judaism as a Way of Life

Jews have a system of beliefs and a sense of peoplehood, but Judaism is also a way of life, a system of practice that governs how Jews make meaning and bring God's holiness (*kedushah* in Hebrew) into our lived experiences.

The central unit with which Jews understand what God expects of them in terms of practice is called a "*mitzvah*," a Hebrew word which means commandment (*mitzvot* in the plural). Tradition teaches that there are 613 commandments, and Jews organize them in several ways. In books of practical law, they are often organized by topic—prayer, holidays, food laws, family law, business law, etc. For those books that list the commandments, they are often thought of as those things one must do, such as caring for the orphan and widow, and those things one must avoid doing, such as stealing or idol worship. However, Jews also think of their commandments as divided between *mitzvot* that are *bayn adam l'makom*, between a person and God, and those that are *bayn adam l'havero*, between people.

The idea of these last two types of obligations flows out of the very idea of God's creation. That God created the world means that there are things that one owes to God. That all humans are God's creation means that we have sacred obligations to one another as well.

Since Judaism places an emphasis on practice, there are Jewish practices for nearly every area of life, including at major lifecycle events, throughout the course of a year, and in every single day.

## Lifecycle Events

From birth to death, Judaism has special rituals that accompany each stage of a person's life. While many of the basic practices are shared by all Jews—such as burying the dead or circumcision of Jewish males at 8 days after birth (provided they are healthy)—some of the specific ways of celebrating events vary among Jews by cultural background.

Consider, for example, the Hebrew names that Jews give to their children shortly after birth. Ashkenazi Jews (European cultural background) often name children to honor the memory of someone who has passed away, and so they do not give a child the same name as a living relative. On the other hand, Mizrahi Jews (those of Middle Eastern background) see the naming of a child after a living relative as an honor to that person, and they do so often. Mourning practices are another example. All Jews practice a special period of mourning after a close relative is buried, which involves sitting low to the floor in one place and receiving visitors who offer comfort. Traditional Jews will observe this custom for seven days, while many in the more liberal streams of Judaism observe for only three days, and some Jews choose to observe only for one day.

A short essay like this cannot capture the entirety of Jewish practice in all its details and diversity, but for nearly every occasion in the life of a person, there is a Jewish practice to mark it.

When a Jewish baby is born, they receive a Hebrew name, and male children are circumcised, as just mentioned. Births and naming ceremonies are often an occasion for celebration with one's family and Jewish community, either in the home or synagogue. As a child grows, most Jewish families educate their children to celebrate Jewish holidays, to study Jewish tradition, and to learn some of the Hebrew language.

Jews mark the entrance into adulthood for Jewish children at age 12 for Jewish girls and at age 13 for Jewish boys. The occasion is called a *bat mitzvah* (for girls) or *bar mitzvah* (for boys) and celebrates their commitment to practice the ways of the Torah and to fulfill its



expectations, the *mitzvot*. For many Jewish children the celebration includes reciting a portion of the Torah in synagogue, leading community prayers, teaching the community about a part of the Torah, and a festive celebration with family, friends, and community.

When Jews get married, they sanctify the relationship with special practices of Jewish marriage. These often include saying special blessings under a canopy (*huppah*), the signing of a marriage contract (*ketubah*), the giving of a ring, a period of seclusion for the couple and the celebration over a festive meal. If a marriage needs to end in divorce, there is an official document that is drawn up to dissolve the relationship.

Jews do not seek out converts and do not believe that all people should become Jews. However, if someone wished to enter the covenant of Judaism, there are practices for conversion. Judaism has many special practices, and so people seeking to convert usually spend at least one year of formal study of Judaism and observation of the practices of a Jewish community. The conversion ceremony involves a formal acceptance of the Torah's expectations before a group of rabbis, purification in a ritual bath called a *mikvah*, and for male converts, ritual circumcision. The Torah and Jewish tradition teach that Jews are to treat the convert to Judaism with special care and affection so that they do not feel alienated in any way.

Likewise, when a Jewish person dies, there are prescribed practices for burial and for mourning. The close relatives of someone who has died come together with community for days of intense mourning where they sit low to the ground in torn clothing and receive comforting visitors. This is followed by 30 days of other mourning practices and a year of special prayers to remember the dead. Every year, Jews have special prayers for close relatives who have died on the anniversary of their death and on major Jewish holidays. Many will also light a candle on those occasions to signify that the soul lives on even after the body has died. Traditional Judaism also teaches that all souls will be resurrected by God at the end of days.

## Holidays

Like Islam, Judaism operates on a lunar calendar, and each of the twelve Jewish months begins with the new moon. The first day of each month is a minor Jewish holiday with special prayers, and there is hardly a month in the Jewish liturgical year that does not have a special day of celebration or fasting. Unlike Islam, however, the Jewish calendar has an added month approximately every 3 years to ensure that the Jewish calendar is roughly aligned with the solar calendar. This is because in the Torah, the major Jewish holidays are connected to the seasons and the agricultural cycle of the Holy Land.

So, for eight days each spring, Jews celebrate the holiday of Passover (*pesach* in Hebrew), which commemorates the Exodus from Pharaoh's Egypt. Jews participate in a Passover *seder*, a ritualized retelling of God's saving the Children of Israel from slavery with a special text and using specific foods. For example, Jews use bitter herbs to commemorate the bitterness of slavery; they dip a fresh vegetable into salt water to symbolize both the rebirth experienced in the Exodus and each year at springtime, but also the tears of the oppressed; and a simple flat bread cooked very quickly called *matzah*, that symbolizes both the subjugation of slavery, and also the speed with which the Children of Israel were taken from Egypt. In the times when the Holy Temple of Jerusalem was standing there was a special sacrifice of a lamb made by each family on Passover, and it was to be shared so that every person was able to eat and celebrate together. Today, Passover is also a holiday of welcoming strangers into one's home, connecting with family and community, and ensuring that everyone has food to eat.

And so it is with each season. At the beginning of the summer, the harvest season, Jews celebrate the holiday of *shavuot* which commemorates the date of the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai. In the fall, at the planting season, comes *sukkot*, when Jews leave their homes to eat in special temporary booths with leafy roofs to remember the protection that God gave the Children of Israel in the desert.

The Jewish New Year, *rosh hashana*, is a time when Jews believe God judges the world and sets its course for the year ahead. They celebrate with prayers, with charity and with self-reflection and repentance for shortcomings. Shortly after the Jewish New Year comes the Day of Atonement, *yom Kippur*, when Jews request forgiveness from God through prayer, fasting and abstaining from other enjoyable behaviors.

All of these holidays are described in the Torah even if the specific details of how they are practiced come in later texts of the oral tradition. However, Jews also celebrate several holidays that arose in post-Biblical times. For example, several Jewish days of fasting occur at different times in the year as an act of mourning the events around the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Another spring holiday, called *purim*, remembers the story of the Jewish people living in the ancient Persian empire were saved from destruction at the hands of the figure Haman as described in the Book of Esther. It is a day of joy, in which many people dress in costumes, bring gifts of food to their neighbors, and ensure that all the poor have money for food. Likewise, in the winter, another holiday called *hanukkah* extends for eight days each winter to remember the victory of the Jews over the Seleucid Greek occupiers of ancient Jerusalem and the rededication of the Holy Temple. Jews light candles for eight days and recite special prayers as part of the holiday.

So, the Jewish year is filled with days of celebration and also more somber days of remembrance. However, Jews also celebrate a special holy day each week, *shabbat*, which extends from Friday evening through Saturday night. *Shabbat* is a day to rest from our productive working lives to recognize God as creator. The Torah tells us that after creating the world in six days God rested, symbolically, to signify the end of creation. Traditional Jewish law lays out extensive restrictions on activities as a way of ritually “resting” on the day. These include cooking food, turning on lights, writing, handling money, and many other activities. Other Jews find their own way to rest even if they do not observe all of the restrictions. However, Jews who celebrate

*shabbat* light candles at its beginning with special prayers and a candle at its end with another prayer. They have festive meals with family and recite special prayers for the *sabbath* and read from the Torah in synagogue.

## Daily Practice

Jewish practice does not only happen at major life cycle events or at special times of year. Whether it is the special blessings—recited by many traditional Jews—each morning thanking God for the blessings of a new day or the prayers recited before bedtime, there are rituals and customs with which Jews can infuse every single day with holiness.

For example, formal Jewish prayers takes place three times each day, in the morning, afternoon and evening. Many Jews will pray in a quorum of ten people and at a synagogue and others do so in the privacy of their own home. As with any religious group, there are also Jews who choose not to pray and do not attend synagogue regularly. Each morning Jews who pray will put on *tefillin*, a ritual object made of leather that contains certain passages of the Torah and which one wraps around ones are and places on one's head. For the morning prayers, Jews also wear a square prayer shawl with specially tied strings on each corner, called a *tallit*.

Outside of prayer, many Jews also observe a form of dietary practice known as *kashrut*, eating only food that are *kosher*. Like the practice of *halal*, there are certain animals one may eat and others one may not eat; for animals one may eat ritual slaughter is required. While both Jews and Muslims do not eat pig products, many of the requirements of *kosher* and *halal* are different. For example, *kashrut* demands that Jews not eat dairy and meat/poultry products in the same dish or at the same meal. Jews keeping *kosher* do not eat shrimp, lobster or other shellfish. The laws of *kosher* are very many, but the basic idea of dietary religious practice is shared by Jews and Muslims.

Traditional Jewish law also speaks to how a person should interact with other people in their daily lives. Jews are encouraged to do acts of piety, whether in the form of giving charity (*tzedakah*), visiting the sick, or assisting those in need. Jews are forbidden from acting unethically in business or from taking interest on loans. There are even laws about how Jews speak, forbidding the telling of lies or spreading gossip. Jews are human, and so just like other peoples, not everyone lives up to these standards all the time. However, the Jewish religion encourages people to treat others the same way they wish to be treated.

## Conclusion

Judaism teaches that diversity is the will of God. That many nations and many cultures were created as part of the manifestation of divine glory. The Holy Quran also affirms this idea, when it says, “oh humankind we have made you from a single couple into peoples and nations so that you may know one another, (*Lita’arafu*)” (*Surat Al-Hujurat* 49:13). When people of the world do not know one another, we often come to all kinds of misunderstandings and prejudices about the “other,” and that can lead to hate and conflict. Conversely, when people are educated about each other’s traditions, they not only honor God’s diverse creation, but they also dispel stereotypes and promote peace. The biblical Book of Proverbs describes the way that most Jews see the Torah and Judaism, that “Her ways are the ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace” (Proverbs 3:17)

\*This document has been prepared for the Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (LKLK, for its acronym in Indonesian) program, October 2021 – June 2022

# RESOURCE PERSON PROFILE

## **Chris Seiple (Senior Research Fellow, University of Washington)**



Dr. Chris Seiple is Senior Research Fellow for Comparative Religion at the University of Washington's Jackson School of International Studies, where he first developed Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy. He is also the Principal Advisor to the Templeton Religion Trust and President Emeritus of the Institute for Global Engagement. He is widely known and sought after for his decades of experience and expertise regarding issues at the intersection of geopolitics, US foreign policy, Asia, conflict resolution, human rights and religion. He is a co-editor of the forthcoming Routledge Handbook of Religious Literacy, Pluralism, and Global Engagement. Follow Chris Seiple on Twitter: @cseiple

## **Henriette T. Hutabarat Lebang (Chair of the Advisory Council, Communion of Churches in Indonesia)**



Rev. Dr. Henriette T. Hutabarat-Lebang is Chair of the Advisory Council for the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI) for 2019-2024, where previously she was General Chair in 2014-2019. She is also a Member of the National Education Standards Agency in 2019-2021, and General Chair of the Indonesian Bible Institute for 2021-2023. Previously, she was Secretary General at the Christian Conference of Asia, being the first woman to chair the institution. She is also a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches and a member of the Senior Advisory Council on the Indonesia-US Council on Religion and Pluralism founded by USINDO. She holds a Master of Arts and Doctor of Education degree from the Presbyterian School of Christian Education, United States of America

### **Ari Gordon (Director of Muslim-Jewish Relations, American Jewish Committee)**



Dr. Ari Gordon is Director of Muslim-Jewish Relations for the American Jewish Committee, where he builds partnerships with Jews and Muslims around the world to enable them to work together on issues of mutual concern and promote civilized relations on issues where there is a difference. His work is based on the premise that good Muslim-Jewish relations will help both communities and strengthen the world.

### **David Rosen (International Director for Interfaith Relations, American Jewish Committee)**



Rabbi David Rosen, KSG, CBE, former Chief Rabbi of Ireland, is the International Director for Interfaith Relations of the American Jewish Committee. He is a member of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel's Commission for Interreligious Dialogue; and served on the Council of the Religious Institutions of the Holy Land. He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the King Abdullah International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID).

### **David Saperstein (Former United States Ambassador for International Religious Freedom)**



Rabbi David Saperstein was the former United States Ambassador for International Religious Freedom under President Obama and a member of the Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council on the American Jewish Committee. He is also Director Emeritus of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. Named by Newsweek magazine as America's most influential rabbi, for decades he led the Center, representing the largest segment of America's Jews in relations with Congress and the United States Government. The former President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism is also a member of the Steering Committee of the Alliance of Virtue which was founded by Sheikh Abdallah Bin Bayyah on the basis of the shared values of the Abrahamic religions.

