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## The Clash of Civilizations

### Samantha Kornblit, Architecture '11

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all are monotheistic religions that believe only one God is the origin and source of all that exists. Jews believe that God made a covenant, or pact, with their ancestors and that they are God's chosen people; they await the coming of a savior, the Messiah, or "the anointed one." Christians, on the other hand, believe that Jesus of Nazareth was their Savior, and the name "Christ" is derived from the Greek term meaning "Messiah." Christians believed that God took human form and preached among men and women, suffered execution, arose from the dead, and ascended to heaven after establishing the Christian Church under the leadership of the apostles. Muslims, while accepting the Hebrew prophets and Jesus as divinely inspired, believe Muhammad to be the last and greatest prophet of God, or Allah, and a Messenger of God through whom Islam was revealed some six centuries after Jesus' lifetime. These three major religions have many similarities, but also many cultural differences in underlying values and customs.

All three religions are considered "religions of the book," which means they have written records of God's will and words. In contrast, they all appeal to *different* books. The Jews pray using the Old Testament, the Christians use both the New and Old Testament, and the Muslims use the Qur'an, which is believed to be the Word of God as revealed in Arabic directly to Muhammad through the archangel Gabriel. While Muslims saw achievements in medicine, mathematics, science, philosophy, literature, music, and art, Christian secular and religious leaders in the early Middle Ages focused on needs for buildings and liturgical equipment, including altars, altar vessels, crosses, candlesticks, containers for reliquaries, vestments, images of Christian figures, and copies of sacred texts (Stockstad 284). Judaism differs from these two religions in that central authority is not vested in a person or group, but in sacred texts and traditions. Throughout the ages, Judaism has clung to its religious principles and values. Although similar in location and theism, the priorities of these cultures differ drastically ("Theism" 1).

Jews and Christians both believe in the Old Testament. Although they read the same book, their principles differ. The page from the Book of Genesis, also known as The Vienna Genesis, is believed by both Jews and Christians. The illustration of the story of Rebecca at the Well is shown in a single scene and mimics the continuous narrative of a scroll. Rebecca, the heroine of the story, appears at the left walking away from the walled city of Nahor with a large jug on her shoulder to fetch water. The painting reflects an earlier Roman painting tradition, and the unnatural purple of the background and the glittering metallic letters of the text remove the scene from the everyday world. The illustration is designed in Tempera, gold, and silver paint on purple-dyed vellum and is situated in Syria (Stockstad 264). This manuscript shows that both the Jews and Christians follow the same stories but interpretation and meanings differ between the two religions.

Muhammad's act of emptying the Kaaba of its pagan idols confirmed the fundamental concept of aniconism, the avoidance of figural imagery, in Islamic art. The Muslim faith

discourages the representation of figures in religious contexts. Islamic artists focus on a rich vocabulary of non-figural ornament, including complex geometric designs and scrolling vines sometimes known as arabesques. Islamic art focuses on surface decoration, linear manipulation, color, and pattern, and highlighting abstraction, organic form, and script (Stockstad 284). Similar to Islamic belief, Jewish law forbade the worship of idols as well. Jewish patrons depicted both symbolic and narrative Jewish subjects (Stockstad 235). While Europe thrived on iconic or representational art some forms were similar to Islamic art. For example, the 8th century High Cross called the South Cross, located in Ahenny, Ireland was patterned on metal ceremonial or reliquary crosses, which are cross-shaped containers for holy relics. The South Cross is outlined with ropelike convex moldings and covered with spirals and interlace (Stockstad 449). Differing from early European art, the Mamluk Glass Oil Lamp located in Syria and designed by Islamic artists is constructed in chrome enamel and gold and shows no signs of image worship at all (Stockstad 296).

Another cultural difference is the site in which congregational worship occurs. Muslims pray in a mosque like the Masjid-I Jami, Isfahan located in Iran (Stockstad 297). This mosque has twin minarets and a façade of brilliant blue glazed tile that wraps around the entire courtyard. Christians, on the other hand, pray in a Church like the Palace Chapel of Charlemagne in Germany, constructed in 792 CE (Stockstad 452). This church contained precious relics and after the emperor's death, the imperial mausoleum. Jewish people gather in synagogues for study and worship. A synagogue can be any large room where the Torah scrolls are kept and read publicly, for example in the Wall with Torah Niche constructed in 244 CE in Syria (Stockstad 236). These places of worship have different architectural layouts because they are used in different manners.

In 711 CE, Islamic invaders conquered Spain. Mozarabic comes from the Arabic word *mustarib*, which means "would-be Arab." When these communities migrated to Northern Spain, they brought the Mozarabic style with them (Stockstad 449). Mozarabic style increased dramatically with the production of manuscripts. The metaphorical description of the triumph of Christ over Satan created in Spain in 975 CE, exemplifies the assimilation of cultures (Stockstad 451). The text tells us that a bird with a powerful beak (Christ) covers itself with mud to trick the snake (Satan). The Christian church often used such symbolic stories, or allegories, which combined recognizable images that make religious ideas accessible to people at any level of education.

Although Judaism, Christianity, and Islamic religions all originated in the same geographic location and share similar beliefs, they differ in culture, tradition, and values. Christianity and Judaism both read from the Old Testament, but their interpretations differ. Judaism and Islam both believe that icons should not be represented but their art is different in various ways. All three religions have distinct places of worship, although when Muslims conquered Spain, much of their artwork was assimilated into Christian representations. These cultures have defined their own, distinct religions, and their artwork is a major characteristic of each unique religion.

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