

Religious belief systems have guided people for thousands of years, creating and unifying communities, and giving humans purpose and goals. At the same time, they have also caused tensions between different religious groups, or different sects of one religion. Both Buddhism and Islam have been around for centuries, and during this time, have spread throughout many regions of the world.

The main goal of Buddhism is to reach nirvana which is a state of being at one with oneself. Buddhists believe that Siddhartha Guatama founded this belief system and became known as Buddha, the Enlightened One. One reaches an enlightened state by accepting the 4 noble truths and following the eightfold path. In doing this a person is freed of desire and suffering through, for example, right thought, right speech, and right action.

Buddhism spread along the Silk Road by merchants and missionaries to the regions of China, Korea, and Japan. Merchants helped spread Buddhism by supporting the building of temples along the Silk Road, exposing more people to the belief system. Missionaries maintained the temples and actively sought new followers. From its origin in northern India, Buddhism traveled north and east along the Silk Roads. Since these East Asian regions already had their own belief systems such as Confucianism or Shinto, they incorporated aspects of Buddhism into their cultures.

Cultural diffusion through Korea brought Buddhism to Japan resulting in temples being built throughout the country. Buddhism became more or less the official religion after Prince Shotoku adopted it. He believed the various groups of Japan could be united by Buddhism. Even today, Japanese culture shows how Buddhism and Shinto exist side by side. The tea ceremony is a Buddhist ceremony

representing the spirit of harmony. In many homes Shinto and Buddhist altars are found side by side. For many, Shinto represents creative forces in nature like Mt. Fuji while Buddhism is often employed with sadder occasions like funerals.

Islam was founded in the 600's by a man named Mohammad who lived in the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. A religious experience caused him to preach monotheism in a society that worshipped many gods. In 622 he fled from Mecca. He arrived in Medina, another Middle Eastern city, bringing his beliefs along with him, where they became extremely popular. Mohammad and his followers returned to conquer Mecca and make it the most sacred city of Islam. Mohammad continued to preach the word until his death. After his death a series of successors spread the faith by conquest throughout northern Africa and into Europe. People all over the Middle East adopted the religion and it was spread along trade routes such as Trans-Saharan trade routes, Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea by merchants and missionaries.

Muslims everywhere are united in their commitment to the Five Pillars. The pillars include a statement of faith: there is but one God, Allah, and Mohammad is his prophet, offering charity to the poor, fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, praying 5 times a day facing the city of Mecca, and making a hajj to Mecca once in one's lifetime.

After forces from northern Africa conquered Gibraltar and southern Spain, Islam reshaped Spanish culture. Cordova became the capital and a great center of learning. Islamic scholars translated and preserved Greek and Roman findings in math, science, astronomy, and medicine. Huge libraries were built emphasizing the importance

