

# **Embracing Peace...In Hopes of a Better Tomorrow**

**by Dana Alsaadi**

In present day society, comprehending and appreciating the roots of peace in each of the three Abrahamic practices-Judaism, Christianity, and Islam-can lead to religious understanding in each and every community. These originally Middle-Eastern faiths have many similarities, even in the role of peace! Rather unfortunately, they are, at times, a great factor in causing misunderstanding between the general public. This is why I believe that in order to increase religious tolerance and unity between the people, each community should devise a specific plan to implement with the goal of religious awareness as its central theme.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have many similarities that should be noticed by those who are subjected to religious misapprehension. This fact should not come as a surprise, since these faiths appeared at different times from the same region, each one incorporating ideas from the preceding faith.<sup>1</sup> All three of these traditions are monotheistic, and they share old ideas, such as the basis of creation and the story of Adam and Eve. These faiths all believe in angels and in an afterlife in which the righteous are rewarded and the wrongdoers are punished. They uphold the same moral values such as the Golden Rule that decrees for people to treat one another the way they would like to be treated. It is also true that the three major religions share most of their important figures. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Joseph, Lot, and David are prophets revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. Jesus, for example, was Jewish. He is worshipped by Christians as the Son and considered to be a great prophet by Muslims. The Virgin Mary is also a great figure, one who is revered by Christians and Muslims alike. The

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Laurence Michalak.

Bible states, in regards to Mary, “The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the Quran says, “And when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! God hath chosen thee and made thee pure, and hath preferred thee above all the women of creation.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Moses is considered a special messenger of God. This is because he is believed to be the only prophet who spoke with God directly.

The Abrahamic faiths are also similar in that they partake in the belief that Jerusalem is a holy city. Jews believe the last judgment will take place there, Christians believe that Jesus was crucified and buried and that he rose from the dead there, and Muslims believe that the prophet Mohammad ascended into heaven from there. Jerusalem is also home to the Wailing Wall, once part of the Temple of Solomon sacred to Jews, the Church of Ascension, sacred to Christians, and the Dome of the Rock, sacred to Muslims.

At times, two of the Abrahamic religions might share a similar belief that the remaining religion does not partake in. The three Abrahamic traditions, for instance, all believe in Abraham’s sacrifice. Muslims, however, believe that Abraham was about to sacrifice his son Ishmael, unlike the Jewish and Christian belief that he was going to sacrifice his son Isaac. In addition, Judaism does not have faith in Christianity, and both do not recognize the teachings of Islam, a religion that succeeded them. Islam, however, acknowledges that Judaism and Christianity are revelations from God; in fact, it could be considered an amalgamation of Jewish and Christian traditions, though Muslims believe that the “People of the Book” slightly distorted

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:28 New International Version.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:42.

their authentic traditions. Furthermore, unusual though it is, the fact remains that Judaism and Islam have no major differences. They both believe in one God and value His prophets. Jewish and Islamic law mutually deal with prayer and rituals, diet, rules regulating personal status (birth, death, marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.), and observance of holidays such as Yom Kippur and Eid Al-Adha.<sup>4</sup> Islam and Judaism both stress many of the same moral deeds such as generous hospitality, visiting the sick, and comforting mourners. Thus accordingly, the three faiths are similar even if only two share a particular idea.

The three Abrahamic faiths are additionally alike since they emphasize the importance of peace. *Shalom*, or peace, is one of Judaism's most revered values. It is a traditional greeting among Jews, and it is also a name used for God. The hope and pursuit of peace, along with the expectation of a time of peace at the end of history are among Judaism's most basic tenets. Likewise, Christianity calls attention to the need for peace. The Bible says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."<sup>5</sup> Islam is a religion that comes from the Arabic word *salaam*, or peace. In the Quran, God commands believers to bring peace and security to the world. He declares, "God calls to the Abode of Peace and He guides whom He wills to a straight path."<sup>6</sup> If peace is a fundamental idea in the three Abrahamic religions, then why is there so much religious conflict in our world today?

In modern day society, all individuals suffer from religious misconceptions and stereotypes, whether they are aware of them or not. Stereotypes are the greatest barrier to communication and understanding known to man. Ironically, when we humans are born, we are

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<sup>4</sup> "Religion: Three Religions, One God."

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:9.

<sup>6</sup> Matthes 10:25.

not yet raised according to our backgrounds about how we view others. Eventually, family members, peers, media, and various writings distort our perceptions and pure outlooks. Jews are often interpreted as sly, clever, and miserly, while Christians are deemed arrogant. Muslims are perceived only as oppressed, submissive, and unreceptive. Where is the truth?

What is more unpleasant is the fact that society often judges miscreants based on their religion. Nothing could be more unjust, since there are both noble and wicked people on this earth. There are depraved people in every religion, so blaming a certain faith that does not even endorse foul acts committed in its name is ridiculous. In the United States, Muslims, for example, have been greatly discriminated against since the terrible terrorist attacks of 9/11. This is a good example of how fanatical extremists in every religion that misinterpret and abuse their faiths cause great animosity between the average population. After the terrorist attacks, Muslim women were often jeered at or harmed because they wore the traditional headscarf called the hijab. All true Muslims, however, denounce the terrorism that God has cursed even in the Quran, and people of other faiths should recognize that the acts of a few cannot represent such a large number of people.

When a Fox News special regarding a Muslim private school near the nation's capital accused the school of instructing its students in terrorism, a Christian man wrote to the studios in objection to the bias. This man was the sports activities coordinator for Northern Virginia private schools, and having dealt personally with athletes from that school, he was upset that they were portrayed in a manner that he believed was inaccurate. This is a victory, though a small one, for all the people in the community that are viewed differently because of their religious preference. Even though grave misconceptions still prevail regarding people of certain religions, there are always ways to restore bonds and relations so we can become one community.

It is my belief that each community should implement a specific plan to reinstate religious acceptance between its peoples. Because every society is different, each should have its own particular proposal premeditated to sort out its own needs. Each plan, however, should teach the citizens within the community to acknowledge that they have stereotypes. The people should then try to resolve their prejudiced ideas, not erase them. A good proposal will teach the people to focus on the individual behind all of the false propaganda. These are the general rulings that should be present in each community's plan to increase the ties between those of different faiths.

In my community, there are many young citizens. These youths are fortunately still yet to be completely influenced into thinking in a discriminating manner. With so many fresh, young minds, I believe that an inter-faith youth group will help the next generation of Americans overcome typecasts and promote understanding between peoples of different religious convictions. Adolescents are, like children, still constantly learning, and they are more open-minded than adults. In this youth-group, those between the ages of eleven and nineteen that practice an Abrahamic tradition will come together and discuss various issues regarding all subjects. They can meet weekly, in a local public area. First, they will become acquainted. They will play games, sing, dance, and laugh-just to break the ice. They will introduce themselves and tell their own stories. They will transcend the differences that cause barriers between races, and they will realize that we all seek to understand and be understood. These people will become friends. *This* is the major goal.

The youths participating in this noble cause will eventually realize many truths and make lifelong friends. They will begin planning activities, and they will learn many things through debate and discussion. They will become skilled at listening and respecting their peers through dialogues regarding how they view religion, the world, and how influencing their stereotypes are.

The youths will be given the opportunity to ask questions about the other faiths, such as, “Why is the mixing of meat and dairy forbidden in Judaism?” and, “What does the Holy Trinity signify to Christians?” and, “Why do Muslim woman wear the hijab?” They will talk about how their beliefs influence how they view certain topics, and they will debate about the best ways to solve the world’s issues, such as the long-debated Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This will not be achieved through only dialogue though. Just like any other organization for teens, this group will go on field trips and picnics, and engage in fun activities meant to increase their trust in one another and improve their teamwork skills. It will try new and innovative things that will surprise each and every member of the group, and even members of their families. This is because the group members would eventually introduce their family and friends into the circle. In this manner, the group will grow bigger and bigger until it finally threatens to distinguish those that attempt to keep the Abrahamic peoples apart. They can organize fundraisers and charity events, hold raffles and bake sales. In working towards a common goal valued by all three religions, the youths will realize how much they have in common, even if their backgrounds seem so different at first. They can have parties, or even host family game nights! Consequently, their families of different faiths will be brought closer together.

The youths will also try to carry out different rites practiced in each religion in order to increase understanding. Muslims and Christians will celebrate B’nai Mitzvahs, Jews and Muslims will witness Holy Communions, and Jews and Christians will listen to speeches given by the Imam at the Friday noon prayer. The bonds of brotherhood would be further increased if a child exchange program was organized by the youth group. In such a trial, the young members of the youth group would switch places for a few days with a fellow member in order to experience

affairs from a new viewpoint. How else will such tender minds discover how biased the media is, how untrue the sayings are?

Such a noble organization will teach many things. The Jews, Christians, and Muslims will have fun, and they will experience new eye-openers. The thoughtful American adults of tomorrow will learn to accept change. They will learn not to compare religious ideals to various practices. They will be trained to become self-critical and trusting towards one another. Above all, they will learn to work together. They will realize that alone, no one can ever conquer, but united, they can triumph over the evils of the world. Who knows, maybe they will even influence their own parents, who are most probably rooted in their own prejudices. Maybe they will show them how wonderful it is to escape the clutches of ignorance. Such a group would achieve so much... The extent of its far-reaching will, over time, unite the Abrahamic peoples.

Peace is an essential value rooted in the three Abrahamic traditions. Such knowledge, if widespread, would cause people to stop and think. They would become more appreciative of the other religions, if only they knew how important peace was in each one. Judaism, Christianity, Islam—they are so similar! But the common misconceptions that prevail in society today prevent the people from seeing the positive and approving it. That is why each community should develop a proposal intended to increase its religious understanding. I know that, if executed correctly, an inter-faith youth group in my community will enhance relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and broaden their horizons in hopes of a better tomorrow. Shalom, peace, wa alsalaamu alaikum wa rahmatullah wa barakatuh.

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