

# Gardens of Peace

by Eliza Adelson

According to the great philosopher Cicero, “In nothing do humans approach so nearly to the gods as doing good to others.” Although Cicero comments on the divine nature of God’s will in very general terms, each of the three Abrahamic traditions require good works as a pathway to salvation. If the holy texts demand kindness, why does violent conflict permeate the societies which observe them? Muhammad says, “To do unto all men as you would wish to have done unto you, and to reject for others what you would reject for yourself.” The so-called Golden Rule presents itself in the rhetoric of almost all cultures, cutting across gaps of religion, and uniting many through a common conception of morality, but in reality, it is often ignored due to cultural differences within the Abrahamic traditions. This should inspire all beliefs to join together to promote peace. By collaborating on a mutually agreed upon good work, the three Abrahamic faiths can foster kindness, understanding and tolerance of each other.

The belief in one god, monotheism, provides an all-knowing, omni-present force responsible for the well-being of all believers; in return, these believers gain security and unconditional love and an afterlife. Over 1.5 billion people, approximately half the total world population, practices Monotheism<sup>1</sup>. Muslims, Christians and Jews share and acknowledge the same God, whom, according to religious writer Louis Cassels, is “both immanent and transcendent.” God represents “the Supreme Being,” and the source of existence and life, completely incomprehensible to mankind. Those who practice the belief in an omnipresent, all-

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<sup>1</sup>Louis Cassels What’s the Difference? (New York: Doubleday, 1965) 17-21.

knowing God are known as “people of the Book.”<sup>2</sup> The shared belief in the same peace-seeking God should promote religious understanding; however long-standing historical stereotypes and misconceptions block many chances for collaboration.

In addition to the core belief in a singular divine being, these three faiths also share overlapping stories and myths present in their sacred texts. The Qur’an, the Islamic holy book, contains many references to the Old Testament, Jesus and Christianity. For example, Sura 12, of the Koran, contains the biblical story of Joseph. Some Christians and Jews originated from Muhammad’s immediate family, and inhabited Mecca and Medina during the time of Islam’s birth.<sup>3</sup> All three monotheistic religions hold faith above reason as part of the divine relationship with the singular God<sup>4</sup>. According to Ruthven, author of Islam in the World, “Ultimately in Islam, as in Christianity, the gap between the need for a morally coherent and rationally ordered universe and the observable fact that innocence often suffers can only be filled by faith.” Faith implies a trust in the goodness of universe and in the divinely assigned part that every individual plays in society. All three religions possess the “rationalist morality” that those who disobey the laws of God are ultimately hurting themselves and will be punished as a result of their actions. As the Quran commands, “Whatever good happens to thee is from God; and whatever evil befalls thee is from thyself” (Quran 4:79) God’s eternal surveillance provides unparalleled security and guidance that rivals no other force in the lives of humans.

Christians, Jews, and Muslims are related by a common history. Although Christians rely on the Bible and Jews on the Torah for guidance, Cassels emphasizes that Christianity began as?

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<sup>2</sup> Cassels 17-20

<sup>3</sup> Peter G. Riddel, and Peter Cotterell Islam in Context (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003) 64-67.

<sup>4</sup> Malise Ruthven Islam in the World (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) 135.

a Jewish faith. He explains, “*All* the people who founded the Christian Church were Jews.” The tale of Moses and the Israelites, detailed in Exodus, concludes when Moses climbed Mount Sinai, where God revealed the Ten Commandments. These Ten Commandments established a distinct moral code ordained by God regarding human relationships. According to Peter G. Riddel, Jews and Christians lived in close proximity with Muslims in Mecca and Medina. Although he documents differences, he also noted similar values. He says, “From time to time the refugees received news from Mecca, but meanwhile they were exposed to the form of Christianity practiced in Ethiopia. The ideas they encountered were clearly similar...the same concern for the poor, the same care for the aged and widows, the same emphasis on one God...”<sup>5</sup>

Parallels between these religions do not overshadow the fundamental religious differences present in the texts. In the Qur’an, Sura 5, verse 45 tells Muslims, “And We prescribed to them in it that life is for life, and eye for eye, and nose for nose, and ear for ear, and tooth for tooth, and (that there is) reprisal in wounds; but he who foregoes it, it shall be an expiation for him; and whoever did not judge by what Allah revealed, those are they that are the unjust.”<sup>6</sup> Muslims are taught that Muhammad’s words in the Qur’an are the final authority on all societal issues; however one must realize that these words were written during a time of territorial warfare and persecution. Although some portions of the Qur’an prescribe violence towards non-believers, many moderate Muslims believe it is not relevant to our times. Like modern Christians and Jews, they believe that ancient texts should not be interpreted literally but rather in the context of our times.

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<sup>5</sup>Ruddel 69

<sup>6</sup>“The Holy Qur’an” (Elmhurst, New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc., 1997).

Although for nearly two millennia Christians referred to Judaism as a “failed religion,” recently both Roman Catholic and Protestant church authorities have publicly denounced anti-Semitism; this represents a preliminary step towards international religious tolerance.<sup>7</sup> In the wake of the Holocaust, the Roman Catholic church released the document *Nostra Aetate* which formally abolished anti-Semitic statements from church schooling, and as a result conduit Christians proclaim that the “church has replaced Israel in the divine scheme of redemption,” signaling the crucial acceptance of change of an ancient belief. Sara Lee, director of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education at Hebrew Union college, states that “It’s a Christian moral responsibility not to allow people to come to these texts without context,” indicating the importance of a sense of accountability in understanding and reading the historical context of the content of the all holy texts, including the Qur’an.<sup>8</sup>

The Qur’an emphasizes charity, peace and equality as prime objectives. In Sura 2, verse 219, the Qur’an says, “And they ask you as to what they should spend. Say: What you can spare,”<sup>9</sup> referring to Muslims requirement of surplus giving as charity, and furthermore contributing to Allah’s requirement for social peace. Through the establishment of social equality, Allah explains, global peace can occur through his guidance and teaching.

Islamic Fundamentalists preach violence as a means to conversion. However, according to verse 2:190, "And fight in the way of Allah *against those who fight against you but be not*

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<sup>7</sup>David Novak, et al, “Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement of Christians and Christianity. First Things Nov. 2000: 39-41, SIRS Researcher ProQuest Information and Learning, Holton-Arms School Library, Bethesda, MD, 27 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.sirs.com>>.

<sup>8</sup> Ben Birnbaum, “A Legacy of Blood” Moment Oct. 2001: 50+, SIRS Researcher, ProQuest Information and Learning, Holton-Arms School Library, Bethesda, MD, 27 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.sirs.com>>.

<sup>9</sup> Asghar Ali Engineer, "The Concept of Peace in Islam," Progressive Dawoodi Bohras, Oct. 2001, 29 Dec. 2005 <[http://www.dawoodi-bohras.com/perspective/islam\\_peace.html](http://www.dawoodi-bohras.com/perspective/islam_peace.html)>.

*aggressive*. Surely Allah does not love aggressors." The Qur'an does not advocate unprovoked violence, let alone war or personal revenge. According to Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer, author of *Rethinking Issues in Islam*, "Fighting in the way of Allah would mean fighting only for a just cause, not for power and wealth, fighting only if war is imposed on them and not involving personal or collective feeling of revenge." He goes on to explain that peace, or salaam, comes from the ultimate submission to Allah.

Misinterpretation of the Qur'an is used to justify Islamic fundamentalists' use of violence as a means to salvation. Only through education can this misinterpretation be reformed. Perhaps the clearest expression of Mohammad's wish for religious tolerance lies in the fifth sura<sup>10</sup>:

Unto every one of you we have appointed a [different] law and way of life. And if God had so willed He surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you understand all that on which you were wont to differ.

This excerpt from the Qur'an explains the coming of a judgment day, in which God proclaims the most holy religion, indicating this as solely God's task, not one to be done by mere humans, and more assertively not to be done through the use of violence. Those who hold faith in the modern Quranic world view must share their knowledge of tolerance with the rest of the Islamic community.

Religious misunderstanding undermines peace locally as well as globally. Although I and my peers attend secular schools, some still experience religious intolerance. A male friend, a

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<sup>10</sup> Ruthven 119

devout Jew, experiences constant teasing because of his faith. A Lebanese-Christian girl with an Arab surname is repeatedly asked if she is related to terrorists.

If children in these schools use racist language, they are severely disciplined. Religious bigotry is more tolerated. Teachers turn the other cheek when religious conflicts arise, perhaps because they are focused on cultivating a non-sectarian environment. However, these topics must be acknowledged if mutual understanding is to occur. Only through dialogue and discussion can tolerance conquer hatred.

Religion should provide the framework for doing good for others. Parts of the Old, and New Testaments and the Qur'an are contradictory if taken literally, however in modern times we must examine the context in which these ancient texts were written. The terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 brought world attention to extreme fundamentalist Islam. Many blame the Qur'an as the cause for this violence. On March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2005, an extreme Islamic website posted "Allah has promised us victory....Terrorizing enemies of God is our faith and religion, which is taught to us by our Qur'an."<sup>11</sup> At the same time, however, Islamic moderates argued against violent interpretations of the Quran. Professor Abdullahi an-Na'im, an expert in Islamic law at Emory University, said, "If moderates use the same methods as the radicals it just reinforces an aggressive, authoritarian paradigm. Islam needs a new approach: to get away from the Islam of the Middle East being the only point of reference." Islam must promote moderation through dialogue and collaboration with Christians and Jews to achieve peace. The Torah tells Jews, "He who has saved one human life has saved the whole world and he who has destroyed one human

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<sup>11</sup> Brian Murphy, "'Muslims Use Quran to Wage War Against Terror,'" Salt Lake Tribune Mar. 2005: A10, SIRS Researcher, ProQuest Information and Learning, Holton-Arms School Library, Bethesda, MD, 4 Jan. 2006 <<http://www.sirs.com>>.

life has destroyed the whole world."<sup>12</sup> This same value is found in the New Testament and the Qur'an. Why not take this principle for what it is (a call for peace through local action), and apply it in a global sense?

There are two ways to approach the problem of religious misunderstanding in communities. One would be to promote religious dialogue through formal discussions in which each religion would claim a position and attempt to clarify to the other faith the meaning of their argument. This dialogue often results in the attempted conversion from one religion to another; which undermines religious tolerance. Another method is more collaborative; participants would cooperate in a charitable endeavor. Working on a mutually agreed upon project for good has traditionally been a way to foster mutual understanding between groups.

I struggled with this decision because I feared that the dialogue could aggravate differences between religions and invite conflict. However, I also understood the need for religious discourse. I recently read Jennifer Miller's book Inheriting the Holy Land. Miller emphasized the need to see beyond cultural and religious differences to attain a greater good. She says, "As individuals, we are much greater than our religions, our nationalities, and our ethnicities. These are defining categories, but they are not unyielding."<sup>13</sup> Her knowledge of religious understanding comes from her experiences at the Israeli Seeds of Peace Camp. At this camp, Islamic, Christian, and Jewish youth gather each summer to not only discuss religious conflicts but also form solid friendships. Although she writes specifically about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, her book describes a more global transcendent message of peace from diversity.

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<sup>12</sup>Awraham Soetendorp, "Four Proposals for Greater Inter-Religious Tolerance," The Daily Star Jan. 2006: 4 Jan. 2006 <[http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_id=10&categ\\_id=5&article\\_id=21215](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=5&article_id=21215)>.

<sup>13</sup> Miller, Jennifer, Inheriting the Holy Land (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005) 31.

She recounts how graduates of Seeds of Peace disseminate religious tolerance in their home communities. She concludes her account with a message of hope. She says, “A summer at Seeds of Peace did not completely eradicate [campers’] stereotypes and fears, nor did it blot out the pains of history...yet I also saw how determine they were to pull themselves out, and more than this, to avoid such dangers altogether. Despite their youth, they’ve become familiar with the tools of navigation.”<sup>14</sup> This camp gave individuals the choice to join together in mutual peace and understanding and avoid stereotypes.

Following the Seeds of Peace program, I propose a project in which Muslim, Christian and Jewish youth groups collect money for a non-denominational charity. All three religions stress the value of charity as a means to salvation, and this common value should be used as a means to better the world. I propose a project in which youths plant either flower or herb gardens for members of their congregation. In groups of three, (a Muslim, Christian, and Jew) the participants would charge \$50 for installation, materials, and instruction on how to maintain the gardens. As the project progresses, the groups would meet to discuss the status of the overall endeavor. After the project was completed, the groups would come together for an evaluative meeting. Each participant would say something positive they learned about their partners. The youth groups would return to their congregations, where they would share what they learned about the other two faiths with their religious communities. Each participant would receive a certificate for completing the Gardens for Peace program.

My hope is that this project will show that different religions can cooperate for the same good cause. Friendships can be made without conversion. Before the start of this project, I knew

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<sup>14</sup> Miller 245-246

little about any religion other than my own. Upon completing the project, I learned how different faiths relate to each other with shared values and common acts of kindness. Religious understanding does not come from the mutual agreement on established principles as according to Bible, Torah, or Koran but rather from the cultural understanding and mutual desire to improve the world. Although Jews may never accept the immortality of Jesus, and Muslims the concept of the Holy Trinity<sup>15</sup>, they can see beyond religion and collaborate for the greater good of all people. We must think globally but act locally in our efforts to promote peace. I hope that my project will serve as an example of a literal and figurative grassroots collaboration for the greater good, and that all across the country other religious youths will be inspired by my call to peace. The gardens symbolize a potential for growth, an opportunity for enlightenment through their construction. Those who receive the flowers or herbs from the gardens welcome hope and understanding into their homes. According to the ancient Chinese proverb, written by Lao-tzu “A thousand mile journey starts with one step.<sup>16</sup>” We must take that step in the local community to begin the journey towards peace for the entire world.

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<sup>15</sup> Riddell 76

<sup>16</sup> *The Columbia World of Quotations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) [www.bartleby.com/66/](http://www.bartleby.com/66/), Jan. 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

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