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PEACE ACCORDING TO THE HISTORICAL LITERATURE OF ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS: FOUR PRINCIPLES OR ALTERNATIVES IN THE SEARCH FOR COEXISTENCE

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Abstract. *The quest for peace among the Abrahamic religions is a complex and multifaceted endeavor. By nature, religions are intended to be forces of peace, and any deviation from this reflects a distortion of their essential purpose. This study, informed by historical literature, outlines several approaches to fostering interreligious harmony, articulated through four distinct models that emphasize tolerance. These models, exemplified through specific cases, include: (1) the avoidance of direct conflict by maintaining neutral or defensive postures; (2) engaging in constructive dialogue and fostering respectful, thoughtful consideration of other religious traditions, with an emphasis on shared values; (3) identifying direct links between religions through their common historical and ideological foundations; and (4) promoting a framework of collaboration and cooperation that transcends historical stereotypes, advocating instead for a culture of peace cultivated through education within religious communities.*

Keywords: Peace, History, Christianity, Judaism, Islam

1. Introduction

Discussing peace based on Abrahamic religions is both interesting and challenging. The challenge arises not merely from the difficulty of finding consensus among the diverse doctrines of these religions but from the complex historical context that reveals a multitude of scenarios and possibilities. These varied historical experiences make it difficult to fit them neatly into a few models of coexistence, peace, and tolerance that can be universally applied across different times and places.

My aim is to briefly outline a few models derived from historical religious literature. Religious culture frequently emphasizes and utilizes the concept of peace. In Christianity, the teachings of Jesus highlight peace and reconciliation as

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essential ways of living and demonstrating religious faith. The Sermon on the Mount and other teachings, such as loving your enemies (Matthew 5:9, 5:44), are particularly noted for their emphasis on peace and nonviolence. According to the Bible, Christ appeared to the disciples after His resurrection, and as described in John 20:19-21, He speaks of peace twice:

"On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.'"

Examining patristic interpretations, we find that Ishodad of Merv, an Eastern exegete from the 9th century, comments:

"[...] so He says, 'Peace be with you'; because before the Passion He had said to them, 'Peace I leave with you, My own peace I give to you.' After He was risen, He bestowed peace upon them three times on the same day, to show that He is the one who promised them peace at that time; both for the mystery of the truth of the resurrection of His humanity and for the mystery of their unity in one faith, one hope, and one love."[1]

Syro-Aramaic Christians, deeply rooted in the traditions and origins of the early church, greet each other with the word "shlomo" (peace), making the "giving of peace" a blessing. In Christian liturgical service, particularly in Orthodox liturgy, the concept "peace to all" (Εἰρήνη Πᾶσι) holds a central significance.[2] Peace in Christianity, especially within its spirituality and monasticism, encompasses both external and internal harmony. It represents a state of self-peace that believers must attain through ascetic efforts and by living in respect and synergy with others.

According to Cyprian of Carthage, an early bishop and author from North Africa, "God is the teacher of peace and harmony who taught unity" (*Deus pacis et concordiae magister qui docuit unitatem*).[3] In the context of Christian practice, prayer for peace, as exemplified by Christ's actions, constitutes a fundamental aspect of worship within the Christian church. Prayer is not merely a personal endeavor but a communal one. A Christian is called to extend their prayers beyond their own needs and concerns, encompassing the entire community. This broader perspective is eloquently captured by St. Ignatius of Antioch in his Letter to the Ephesians. He emphasizes that "nothing is more precious than peace," a divine gift

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[1] *The Commentaries of Ishodad of Merv, Bishop of Hadatha*, ed. and transl. Margaret Dunlop Gibson, with an introduction by James Rendel Harris (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1911) vol. 1, p. 284.

[2] See "Peace-Eirene (Greek Word Study)", accessed August 24 2024, online at https://www.preceptaustin.org/peace_eirene

[3] *Sancti Cypriani episcopi Opera*, Pars II. *Ad Donatvm. De Mortalitate. Ad Demetrianvm. De Opere et Eleemosynis. De Zelo et Livore*, ed. M. Simonetti. *De Dominica Oratione. De Bono Patientiae*, ed. C. Moreschini (Brepols, Tunholt, Belgium, 1976) Part 2, p. 93 (*Or. Dom.* 8).

through which all forms of conflict-whether celestial or earthly-are resolved.[4] By praying for the community, Christians contribute to the cultivation of this profound peace, fostering unity and reconciliation both among people and within the spiritual realms.

Peace is a central concept in the Abrahamic religions, which frequently structure their arguments and rhetoric around it. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have foundational texts and teachings that emphasize peace, justice, and reconciliation, although interpretations and applications of these teachings have varied over time and across different contexts.[5]

In addition to its use among Christians, the concept of peace is also significant in Jewish tradition, where it is articulated through the Hebrew term "Shalom." This word, which translates to "peace," serves not only as a common greeting but also embodies a deeper spiritual and ethical ideal. The phrase "Shalom aleichem," meaning "peace be upon you," is a traditional salutation that reflects the importance of peace in interpersonal and communal relationships within Jewish culture. The Talmud, a foundational text in Rabbinic Judaism, explores the multifaceted nature of peace (Shalom) and its role in the pursuit of justice. The Babylonian Talmud, particularly in Tractate Baraitha Kallah, underscores the centrality of peace in the ethical framework of Judaism: "Love peace, for the world is based upon it. Love all people and beware of pride, for it is unbecoming to any man."[6] This passage highlights the integral role of peace in maintaining social harmony and moral integrity.

Similarly, Jeremiah 6:14 critiques false prophets who proclaim peace where there is none, saying, "Peace, peace, when there is no peace." Historically, Jewish communities, as part of diverse and multi-religious societies, have been actively engaged in peace-making and fostering peaceful relations, as mentioned in Jeremiah 29:7: "Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."[7]

The principle of peace is prominently reflected in Islamic expressions as well. Muslims frequently use the greeting "As-salaam alaikum," which translates to

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[4] *The Epistles of St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch*, transl. by S.H. Srawley (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, UK, 1910) vol. I, p. 52 (*The Epistle to the Ephesians*, XIV).

[5] See Georges Tamer (ed.). *The Concept of Peace in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses 8, De Gruyter, Berlin, Germany, 2021).

[6] *Minor Tractates of the Talmud: Massektoth Ḳeṭannoth*, ed. A. Cohen, 2 vols. (The Soncino Press, London, 1965), 2.448–49.

[7] Rabbi Shalom Carmy, "These People": or, a Malkhut Shel Hesed, if you can keep it, ”*Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, 50:3 (Fall 2017), "Special Tribute to Rabbi Shalom Carmy Editor (2005-2019) Divrei Shalom: Collected Editor's Notes", Avraham Wein Guest Editor, May 2019, p. 259–265, esp. 265.

"Peace be upon you." The customary response is "Wa-alaikum as-salaam," meaning "And peace be upon you as well." The Arabic term "salaam," which signifies peace, shares its root with "Islam," highlighting the centrality of peace in Islamic philosophical teachings. Islamic legal literature emphasizes peace as a virtue that both religious and non-religious individuals are encouraged to uphold. Quranic teachings and Hadith literature frequently feature the importance of peaceful conflict resolution and the promotion of peace.[8]

2. The first principle

Finding common ground for peace among Abrahamic religions cannot be achieved through a simple or magical formula. However, a few models and possibilities for fostering peace, drawn from historical texts, have been employed throughout history. The first principle I will briefly illustrate is the avoidance of direct conflicts through separation employed by various religious communities. This approach often involves instructing adherents within their own religious frameworks to highlight differences and adhere closely to their own traditions. By emphasizing internal cohesion and reducing engagement and interaction with other faiths, this model effectively maintains a neutral and defensive stance within the religious landscape.

Historical texts from different regions of the Middle East reveal these perspectives. A case study dates back to the 7th century, a period when, amid the rise of Islam in southern Iraq near the Persian Gulf, the local Christian church solidified its identity. Under the leadership of Giwargis, the patriarch of the Church of the East, a local church council was convened on the island of Dirin in 676. During the assembly, Muslims were referred to as "hanpe," a term used to describe pagan communities.[9] This nomenclature underscores the church's intent to maintain a clear separation from the emerging religion. Simultaneously, the church was placing increasing emphasis on cultivating new, virtuous leaders to ensure its continued vitality and dynamism.

The church mandated strict adherence to Christian principles that community needed to remain firmly rooted in Christian values, as reflected in Canon 14, which prohibited Christian women from marrying men of other faiths, specifically referring to Muslims, to prevent potential philosophical or doctrinal conflicts between Christianity and Islam.[10] The church was adamant in its decree:

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[8] Abbas Yazdani, "The culture of peace and religious tolerance from an Islamic perspective," *Veritas: Revista de Filosofia Y Teologia* 47 (2020), 151–168, esp. 154–155.

[9] "The Synod of Giwargis I 676," ed. A. Becker, in *Corpus Christianorum Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Generaliumque Decreta.* Editio critica V.2: *The General Councils of the Eastern Christian Churches: The Synods of the Church of the East* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2023), p. 1319 (canon 14), p. 1321 (canon 18).

[10] "The Synod of Giwargis I 676," ed. A. Becker, in *GOGD* V2, p. 1319.

"whichever women dares this is distant from the church and from every honor of the Christians, by the word of our Lord."[11] Similarly, Canon 16 forbade bigamy and concubinage, viewing these practices as threats from the Muslim community.[12] Canon 17 further exemplifies the church's efforts to maintain doctrinal purity by addressing the behavior of Christians who, after receiving the holy sacraments, visited Jewish taverns to drink wine.[13] The church condemned such interactions as detrimental to the sanctity of the sacraments and sought to avoid any deviation from tradition and potential conflict.

3. The second principle

In contrast, another approach would advocate for well-intentioned, tolerant, and neutral interactions, focusing on the commonalities between religions rather than their differences. Eastern religions and confessions often embody this model of tolerance and harmony. An illustrative example of this approach can be found in the renowned apology by the East Syriac Patriarch Timothy to Al-Mahdi, the third Abbasid Caliph, composed in 781 in Baghdad.[14] During their debate, the Caliph accused Christians of altering the Gospels to support the divinity of Christ. In response, the Patriarch sought to highlight the shared elements between Christianity and other religions:

"Indeed, the Jews disagree with us on the meaning of some verbs and nouns, tenses and persons, but concerning the words themselves they have never had any disagreement with us. The very same words are found with us and with them without any changes. Since the Torah and the Prophets teach the truth of Christianity, we would have never allowed ourselves to corrupt them, and that is the reason why, O our victorious Sovereign, we could have never tampered with the Torah and the Prophets."[15]

He further argues that Muhammad's arrival was unforeseen because his name is not mentioned in the scriptures. However, the tone of his argument suggests that the Christian community's natural relationship with both Jews and Arabs is considered to be on equal footing:

"No, O our victorious Sovereign, we have not changed, not even one iota, in the Divine Book, and if the name of Muhammad were in the Book, how we would have expected his coming and longed for it, as we expected with an eager desire to meet those about whom the prophets wrote, when they actually came or they were

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[11] "The Synod of Giwargis I 676," ed. A. Becker, in *GOGD* V2, p. 1319.

[12] "The Synod of Giwargis I 676," ed. A. Becker, in *GOGD* V2, p. 1321.

[13] "The Synod of Giwargis I 676," ed; A. Becker, in *GOGD* V2, p. 1321.

[14] *The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdi*, ed. and transl. A. Mingana, (Woodbrooke Studies: Christian documents in Syriac, Arabic, and Garshūni), *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 12.1 (1928), pp. 137–298.

[15] *The Apology of Timothy*, p. 193.

about to come. Further, what closer relationship have we with the Jews than with the Arabs that we should have accepted the Christ who appeared from the Jews while rejecting the Prophet that appeared from the Arabs? Our natural relationship with the Jews and with the Arabs is on the same footing."[16]

Numerous other texts of a similar nature exist, including the Disputation between Patriarch John and a Muslim Emir, which is a Miaphysite document likely dating from the early eighth century.[17] The author suggests that there was an agreement between the religions concerning the acceptance of the Torah: "Just as the Torah is one and the same and is accepted by us Christians and by you Hagarenes and by the Jews and the Samaritans, but each people differs in faith, so also concerning the gospel's faith: each sect understands and interprets it differently, and not like us."[18]

The Apology of Al-Kindy, a work from the Abbasid period, also belongs to the genre of polemical literature. Written in Arabic, it was likely composed around the year 830.[19] The text claims to document a debate between a Muslim and a Christian. Initially, the Muslim invites the Christian to convert to Islam. In response, the Christian declines the offer and extends an invitation for the Muslim to embrace Christianity. Both interlocutors present arguments to support the truth of their respective religions, yet each maintains respect for the other's convictions.[20]

4. The third principle

A third model involves examining the direct connections between religions, such as the link between Christianity and Judaism, which are closely related through their shared origins in the early Judeo-Christian community. Pope Francis frequently advocates for journeying together as practitioners of faith and exploring our common roots. Christianity shares a biblical heritage with Jewish civilization, which the Pope describes as "one of the sacred roots of Christian identity." The

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[16] *The apology of Timothy*, p. 194.

[17] See also, Barbara Roggema, "The Debate between Patriarch John and an emir of the Mhaggrāyē: A Reconsideration of the earliest Christian-Muslim Debate," in *Christen und Muslime im Dialog. Christlich-muslimische Gespräche im muslimischen Orient des Mittelalters*, ed. Martin Tamcke (Beiruter Texte und Studien, 117, Orient-Institut, Beirut; Ergon Verlag in Kommission, Würzburg, Germany, 2007), pp. 21–39.

[18] Michael Philip Penn, "John and the Emir. A New Introduction, Edition and Translation," Le *Muséon* 121.1-2 (2008), pp. 65–91, esp. p. 86.

[19] *The Apology of Al Kindy, written at the court of Al Mâmûn (circa A.H. 215; A.D. 830), in defence of Christianity against Islam, with an essay on its Age and Autorship read before the Royal Asiatic Society* by Sir William Muir (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, UK, 1887), second edition, p. 22, n. 1.

[20] More on Al Kindy's Apology in: Pieter Sjoerd van Koningsveld, "The Apology of Al-Kindî", in *Religious Polemics in Context: Papers Presented to the Second International Conference of the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions (LISOR) held at Leiden, 27-28 April 2000*, ed. T.L. Hettema, and A. van der Koeij (Royal Van Gorcum, Assen, The Netherlands, 2004), pp. 69–93.

dialogue between Christianity and Jewish civilization should be viewed as a form of "complementarity," including the study and interpretation of "Hebrew biblical texts" and a shared commitment to justice.[21] Undoubtedly, Christians owe the early life and upbringing of Jesus to Jewish heritage, as well as the foundational elements of the early Church and its growth rooted in the Judeo-Christian community. The Semitic origins of Christianity, along with its evolution into a universal faith, biblical culture, and other foundational aspects, provide a basis for building bridges of peace and mutual understanding.

5. The fourth principle

The fourth model is an ideational approach aimed at fostering direct collaboration and eliminating historical clichés that place different religions in opposition regarding tolerance and peace. We are aware that genuine stories and evidence demonstrate that individuals who understand their common roots and peaceful missions often bridge the gaps between religions. The Institute for Advanced Studies for Levant Culture and Civilization (ISACCL) has developed a series of conferences titled *Levant: The Cradle of the Abrahamic Religions*. This platform engages experts in discussions to generate ideas for dialogue between the Abrahamic faiths, drawing on historical context and contemporary relevance.

In 2019, as part of its lecture series, ISACCL in Bucharest hosted a talk by Father Piotr Zelazko, a Roman Catholic priest from Jerusalem. The speaker who coordinates the Hebrew-speaking Catholic community of the Holy Land and serves as Patriarchal Vicar for the Saint James Vicariate - an institution with which we have established a partnership - presented a few models for promoting peace and cooperation among different religious communities in southern Israel. One notable example he discussed is the "Interfaith Initiative of the Negev," a project dedicated to "unity in diversity under the name of Abraham, 'the father of all believers'," as he describes it. This initiative operates in a desert climate and exemplifies how diverse religious communities can work together harmoniously.

The Interfaith Initiative of the Negev, established in 2015, arose in response to escalating political and social tensions in southern Israel. Initially, it began as an informal gathering during the Jewish festival of Chanukah, hosted in a Conservative synagogue in Omer, where leaders from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam met to engage in dialogue. These meetings evolved into regular study sessions that focused on exploring shared challenges, such as promoting tolerance and coexistence in a multi-religious society, with an emphasis on education. Over time, the initiative expanded to include broader social and educational groups, such as students,

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[21] *Excerpts from Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel), 24 November 2013*, in *Pope Francis and Interreligious Dialogue: Religious Thinkers Engage with Recent Papal Initiatives*, ed. Harold Kasimow, Alan Race Editors (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, USA, 2018), p. 9.

teachers, and community organizations, who invited religious leaders to participate in panel discussions. According to Fr. Zelazko, a notable development was the creation of a high school program designed to engage Jewish and Muslim students with religious leaders. The program involves three visits in which leaders present their perspectives on coexistence, culminating in a panel discussion where students ask questions of leaders from the three Abrahamic faiths.[22]

Piotr Zelazko highlighted a significant "side effect" of the program-the personal relationships that developed among the religious leaders. Over time, they began visiting one another's homes and celebrating religious holidays together, fostering mutual understanding.[23]

Zelazko also emphasizes the symbolic role of the biblical Abraham, "the father of all believers, in the initiative. Given Beer Sheva's historical connection to Abraham and the naming of local synagogues and a Catholic parish after him, Abraham's figure naturally resonates with the participants. His hospitality, which transcends religious and cultural boundaries, inspired the initiative's logo: an open tent symbolizing Abraham's welcoming spirit and the initiative's inclusive, open-minded approach.[24] Zelazko concludes by underscoring the profound significance of religious influences in shaping and sustaining peace across various periods and cultural contexts: "In the middle of political conflict religious leaders try to convince that the religion is not a reason of the conflict, but may have some solutions. A religious Jew, Muslim or Christian who wants to be faithful to his values, should always promote tolerance and common mutual respect."[25]

It is evident that today's conditions have evolved, with their interpretations and implementations taking on new forms and presenting novel challenges. Nonetheless, the fundamental messages of peace, justice, and reconciliation should remain central to the faiths of Jews, Christians, Muslims, and other believers. The historical instances where we have achieved models of tolerance and peace—even if only temporarily-provide us with hope that such peace can be restored where it is currently absent.

Indeed, numerous commendable efforts, projects, and initiatives around the world are dedicated to fostering mutual understanding and reconciliation. However, given the pervasive challenges of conflict and division in our world, these efforts are still insufficient. They remain isolated examples that should be highlighted and emulated on a broader scale.

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[22] Piotr Zelazko, "The figure of Abraham in the Interreligious Dialogue: From the Local Perspective of Southern Israel," in *Levant, Cradle of Abrahamic Religions. Studies on the Interaction of Religion and Society from Antiquity to Modern Times,* ed. Catalin-Stefan Popa, (Studien zur Kirchengeschichte, vol. 67, Münster: LIT Verlag, Germany, 2022), pp. 327–342, esp. p. 340.

[23] Piotr Zelazko, "The figure of Abraham in the Interreligious Dialogue," p. 340.

[24] Piotr Zelazko, "The figure of Abraham in the Interreligious Dialogue," p. 341.

[25] Piotr Zelazko, "The figure of Abraham in the Interreligious Dialogue," p. 341.

Education for peace within Abrahamic religions can start with each of us. It is never too late to champion peace and promote harmonious relationships. The focus should primarily be on the younger generation, as educating them ensures that the message of peace is carried forward and bears fruit in ongoing peace efforts. This principle is not new; it is rooted in the Bible, as evidenced by Isaiah 54:13, which states, "All your children will be taught by the Lord, and great will be their peace."

The principle is further explored in the Midrash and Talmud (bBerachot 64a), which are read during Shabbat morning services. Matthew Goff points out, that in this passage rabbis interpret Isaiah 54:13, "All your children shall be taught by Adonai, and your children shall increase peace," suggesting that "your children" (banayikh) could also be read as "your builders" (bonayikh). This interpretation implies that children are the builders through whom we can hope for peace in the world.[26]

To cultivate a culture of peace, it is crucial for children to participate in educational programs that emphasize peace, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution. These initiatives should be embedded within school curricula, highlighting the importance of peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding. Ultimately, the aspiration is that such peace-focused initiatives will extend and become a global reality, as they are urgently needed by humanity.

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