

THE RELIGIOUS FOUNDATIONS OF A MORE PEACEFUL WORLD

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The Dual Nature of Religion

The most constructive way in which religion can contribute to a peaceful world at the present time is for those who are committed to religion's value to acquire a sober view of its dual nature. The religions of the world have all contributed at one time or another to the creation and perpetuation of ethical values and behaviors that are indispensable to peace and civil society. It is equally within the capacity of the world's religions to generate, justify, and even exult in the most cruel and barbaric behavior that human beings are capable of experiencing. Religions go through periods of history in which one or the other of these two alternatives will dominate, and it is also invariably the case that there are always individual members, at any time of history, who devoutly embrace one or the other of these alternatives.

How and when the pendulum shifts between these alternatives is governed by a broad range of external factors which influence the internal dynamics of a religion's leadership and the predominant interpretations of myths, symbols, texts, laws and customary practices. These external factors include, the level of inequity or equity felt by the populations in question, levels of security and insecurity, levels of fulfillment in terms of structures of meaning and community, levels of injury from war, and many other factors too extensive to enter into here. [\[1\]](#)

Rage, Clerical Power, and the Search for Peace

Historically speaking, the world's most salient examples of mass violence have almost always included two major factors: a generalized rage of the public in search of an outlet, and leaders who know how to manage their ideological constructs in such a way that uses that rage to further their aims and their power. Religion is no different. There is an uncanny power to religious leaders when they stand behind the presence of generalized rage in search for an outlet. Some clerics will shrink from followers who demand greater radicalism, and greater militarism in their worldview. But others will seize the opportunity to further their own militarized view of their religion and its aims. Much of this in recent times is also mediated by the degree to which a clerical class is socialized to modern constructs of the state, and coexistence with other religions and secular institutions. Many of the world's great religious leaders and clerics have made their peace with a religious vision that is not one of hegemony and domination. While others are deeply offended by modern arrangements.

The reasons why populations may be enraged are largely due to external factors in the world that create a prison of their existence. Militarized religion and accompanying constructed identities appear to them to be a way out. But they would not and could not move the religion hermeneutically in the direction of ultimate violence if it were not for a class of clerics hungry to achieve leadership and power in this way. In rare instances, it is not about local clerical needs for empowerment, it is about fantasies of global cataclysm and ultimate domination.

Scopes of Inclusion/Exclusion in Mythic and Ethical Constructs

There are two aspects of religion that are most relevant to our subject: 1. The power of religion in terms of worldview, myth, and ritual, and 2. The power of religion as an architect of ethical constructs of the human mind, in addition to its effect on the character of community.

Both of these aspects tend to augment the power of violence and the power of peace. Religious zeal is an enhancer and catalyst of basic human tendencies. Mythic religion can create new and better realities, coexist with and enhance already good elements of society, or destroy society. Ethical values can be creative or destructive depending upon the degree to which pro-social values are extended to others who are different. In other words, the scope of inclusion in one's ethical universe is the core determinant of the constructive/destructive ratio, not the beauty or exaltedness of the ethical idea. This scope can be very broad, though nuanced, such as special care for family and co-religionists alongside universal commitments to justice, compassion, or, at the very least, limitations on aggression. Or the scope can be extremely narrow such that only true believers who are men have rights and are deserving of dignity and respect.

Superordinate Educational Goals and Values

We live in a world where too many members of liberal religious elites around the globe have been so busy articulating the most beautiful and exalted visions of inclusive ethics emanating out of their traditions, that they have been completely unprepared for the power of rage, and its corrupting influence on religious leadership. Furthermore, they have been unprepared to guarantee the most basic outer limitations on religious behavior, such as what is beyond the pale of any legitimate religious behavior. The most salient example is the killing of noncombatants. By this stage of history, and after a hundred years of beautiful multi-faith international gatherings,

there should have been a realistic set of agreed upon taboos that are not only articulated by famous religious personalities at the United Nations, but taught in every religious school on the globe. This should have been done by multi-faith international treaties long ago. In other words there should have been a move from political statements to educational policy. But this has not been done for even the most rudimentary taboos, such as the deliberate targeting of civilians. I know of no religious curriculum coming out of one religious community that teaches at a young age something akin to, 'all the major religions of the world have agreed that it is right to aid the poor, wrong to kill noncombatants in war, right to welcome strangers etc.'. If and when they teach such values, it is in the name of their own religion, generally in a chauvinist fashion that suggests that only their religion contains the best expression of these values.

The best asset, however of religious communities and their leaders is that they are fabulously gifted in the promotion of myths that give meaning, structure, and a desire to be good. Nothing is more indispensable to building a global culture of peace and justice. This theme will be revisited shortly.

Rights Merging with Duties

A major clash afoot between the world of religion and the secular construct of states that must be addressed in the future is the dichotomy of rights and duties, where the liberal state is constructed upon rights, and religion's main claims, especially in monotheism, are constructed upon duties. Forward thinking people, who want to avoid a global clash between organized religion and the state, should more creatively investigate and articulate integrated constructs of the modern state that give honor to both rights and duties, with due acknowledgement that we are not always in

agreement on the specifics of those duties. For example, we know that the world over, in countless cultures and religions, there could be a commitment to a duty to protect human life. But we know that there are disagreements about whether a fetus is included in that duty, or, in other words, whether a fetus is human life. We could still construct international sets of duties, however, with full acknowledgement of where we agree to disagree. It is the overarching sets of moral duties, the superordinate values and goals, in addition to superordinate rights, that will strengthen the modern state, while giving due honor to cultures and religions, but without allowing any religion to tyrannize the public order or the life of the individual.

In general we must think of what religion's assets are in the construction of a vibrant, sustainable, peaceful human civilization at the same time that we acknowledge and protect ourselves from the dangers.

It is useful to focus on one example at this point of a region and a set of religions which desperately need the constructive and creative side of religion to be injected into war prevention and the search for peace. Let us then explore the Middle Eastern conflict and, in particular, the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Abrahamic Myth as a Fateful Bond

Relatives, such as father, mother, brother, sister, and cousin, seem to be pervasive as metaphors the world over for deep collective human entities and their relationships. In the Middle East, in particular, the use of the metaphor of family, specifically the family of the Biblical Abraham, to describe the cultural and religious origins of people, is remarkably pervasive. In this metaphor of Abrahamic family identities are established. In this metaphor old wounds are expressed. Ancient competitions and

conflicts are given a quality of cosmic significance. In this metaphor victory over the forces of ignorance and idolatry is celebrated, and those forces are seamlessly conflated with whoever is an enemy of the Abrahamic tribe.

The Abrahamic tribe is also held to strict standards of devotion to a single God whose betrayal has harsh and violent consequences. But in this metaphor there also resides some profound possibilities of a nonviolent future, which we will explore shortly.

What is possibly even more remarkable is that this family of Abraham is truly mythic, in the sense that there never has been and probably never will be any evidence--independent of the Bible and the Qur'an--for the existence of Abraham or his family. The Bible, even by traditional counting, was written many centuries after Abraham's existence. In recent times, centuries of scholars have doubted that the book of Genesis was written earlier than at least a thousand years later than when Abraham would have lived.

The Abrahamic family myth lives and breathes an independent reality, nevertheless, in the minds and hearts of hundreds of millions of Jews, Christians and Muslims. It is a critical means of organizing the world and making sense of one's history, one's origins, and even one's future. However, it is a story mediated through different lenses, depending on the religious group, with innumerable variations, based on the sub-groupings and individual predilections of millions of interpreters.

Yet the unifying power of the metaphor is unmistakable. The persistence of the Abrahamic myth over millennia becomes a metaphor, in and of itself, of an abiding connectivity that monotheistic peoples feel toward each other, even though that connectivity has often expressed itself as jealousy, competition, disappointment, and

brutalizing murder. In a word, monotheists often act as relatives in an intense but troubled and murderous family.

I am using “myth” in the sense of a story that contains some ultimate and enduring truth, and a way of making sense of amorphous reality, for those who believe in it. Whether the myth is believed to be literal history, approximate history, or simply didactic legend, depends on the believer.

But myth means something much deeper and more important for conflict and peacemaking. Myth that is shared has a way of bringing infinitely complex problems into a manageable cognitive structure of reality. This allows problems of dizzying proportions to be understood by the human mind and absorbed by the human heart. This, in turn, is a perfect tool for motivating large groups of people to violence—or to peace.

Myth is not static, despite fundamentalist facades, and this is the most essential point. Myth has always been characterized by development through repetition, communication and interpretation. It has allowed communication to proceed by means of the myth itself expanding and developing, or extending itself, to contemporary, “real time” constructs that often elude rationalistic methods of negotiation and diplomacy. And the less education in rationalistic constructs of the religion the more prone people are to the expansion of myth.

This is how millions become motivated to hatred by the manipulation of symbols. But this also creates possibilities, rarely utilized by liberal elites, in the pro-social development of human relations. Mythical possibility is the midwife of cultural conflict resolution and peacemaking [\[2\]](#). It provides the dramatic construct for

thinking about and treating enemies in a fundamentally new way—which at the same time becomes embedded in familiar myth.

Let us outline the parameters of the Abrahamic myth by stating at the outset that the mediation of this myth by all three traditions is extremely varied, and that, roughly speaking, the mediated interpretations of the myth generally serve the interests of each respective corporate religious entity. Islamic versions will confirm the centrality and importance of Arabian ancestry in Abraham and the confirmation of Abraham and Ishmael as the first believers and servants of Allah. Jewish mediations of the story will centralize the importance of Isaac and Israel as the inheritors of God's favor. Christian retellings of the story are much more rare but generally emphasize Abraham as the first man of faith in one God. [\[3\]](#) All will claim the special favor of God proven through their telling and re-telling of the story.

Let us begin with the Hebrew Biblical myth. Abraham was a man who discovered a monotheistic worldview in the midst of an idolatrous culture. In particular, he developed a relationship with a God who promised that Abraham would be the father of many peoples, *av hamon goyim*. [\[4\]](#) Abraham and his wife Sarah were unable to have children until a very old age, but Abraham had a child, Ishmael, with Sarah's maidservant, Hagar. Abraham was promised another son, and Sarah gave birth to Isaac.

Abrahamic Family Tragedies

The Hebrew Biblical tradition is clearly focused on the fate of Isaac as the ancestor of the Jewish people. In fact, Sarah, resenting or suspecting the influence of Ishmael on her son, insists that the maidservant and son be thrown out of the house, which Abraham does. Thus, in addition to being willing to sacrifice his son, Isaac, Abraham is also willing to send his other son and wife to the desert, both times with the

approval or command of a divine voice. This is the first in a series of subtle presentations of family tragedies in the Genesis stories, which will have consequences for inter-group relations later.

In Jewish rabbinic interpretation, Isaac is the key to Jewish lineage, Ishmael to Arab and Islamic lineage, and Esau, Jacob's brother, is the key symbol for Roman/European/Christian lineage. The separation of these three relatives--and their animosity--is the key to the rabbinic mythical account of later history and later tragedies. [\[5\]](#)

That Abraham expelled Hagar and Ishmael is mediated somewhat by some later rabbinic myths that Abraham went seeking after Ishmael, concerned with his welfare and who he would marry. [\[6\]](#) On the whole, however, the moral problematic of this expulsion is not confronted in most rabbinic literature. [\[7\]](#) On the contrary, the expulsion is seen as a necessary way to protect Isaac from Ishmael, and to prepare Isaac to be God's chosen, the patriarch of God's people. [\[8\]](#)

Sarah clearly instigates the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael (Gen. 21:10), and it seems to be based on some actions of Ishmael involving the verb, *metsahek*, a difficult word to translate. She sees Ishmael "making sport", or perhaps it means ridicule. We really do not know from the Biblical text, which is why rabbinic literature elaborates and interprets. Rabbi Akiva claims that Sarah saw Ishmael bringing idolatry into Abraham's house. Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai is very telling. He claims that the "ridicule" was motivated by all the attention being given to Isaac as the son of Abraham who will inherit a double portion. But Ishmael says that he is, in fact, the eldest, and by right (Deuteronomy 21:17), should inherit the double portion.

We have right here in the rabbinic literature the essence of the tragic relationship of brothers--and competing monotheistic religions. They compete over who is idolatrous and who is authentic, and they compete for the love of the father, embodied in the double portion of inheritance.

Contemporary Reverberations

Rabbinic defensiveness over the expulsion of Ishmael and Hagar betrays ambivalence over this historic relationship, and this defensiveness is further confirmed as we read some modern interpreters. Aviva Zornberg, for example, a modern Orthodox Jewish Bible interpreter who resides in Israel, sees Sarah's insistence on expulsion as a necessary response to the dangers for her son. She emphasizes Ishmael as a mortal danger to Isaac. [\[9\]](#) Furthermore, in a progressive reversal of traditionalist rabbinic gender typologies, Zornberg portrays Sarah as the embodiment of incisive analysis and calculation of danger, versus Abraham who is "too entangled in emotions" (a characterization generally reserved in Jewish and Western culture for women) to make the tough, analytical decision for expulsion. Ironically, however, this embrace of the Jewish Sarah as a strong model of female analytic capacity is coupled in Zornberg's interpretation with an uncritical embrace of the expulsion of a woman and her child without any protection! This is a feminist position for Jewish wives only but not for gentile maidservants.

The mortal fears of Jews from Ishmael, that is Arabs, in the Israeli context must be seen as part of the interpretive emphases and hermeneutic choices of contemporary interpreters such as Zornberg. When she concludes that the brothers seem to be playing together but that they cannot coexist "for there is murder in the wind", this sounds like a strong echo of one contemporary attitude on Arab-Israeli coexistence.

The latter reverberates in both Jewish and Arab circles, always accompanied, of course, with partial and selective evidence. [\[10\]](#) Interpretation of myths is often an unconscious way to structure predictable reality and repeat all the tragedies of the past. Self-fulfilling prophecy in enemy systems is comforting at a deep existential level even if it is self-destructive in reality.

Hated Brother Myths Revisited

As stated, there is a tendency in ancient Jewish rabbinic culture to justify the expulsion, and to paint both Isaac as well as Jacob as vulnerable to the wildness or simple evil of their respective brothers, Ishmael and Esau. But the Hebrew Bible has a subtle and complicated relationship to both brothers. Ishmael is, in fact, blessed. Esau is later embodied in Edom, and there is a specific prohibition against hating Edom in the Bible. [\[11\]](#) Furthermore, despite the tendency to see Ishmael as utterly other in rabbinic Judaism, there are some curious issues, such as the fact that Ishmael, through the voice of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, cited above, does make a good Biblical case for why Ishmael, not Isaac, should inherit the double portion. This is enormously telling, in terms of the dramatic and tragic tension between these two monotheistic people, concerning who is the one that is favored by God, or who has the purest faith. In the Jewish sources the emphasis is on who is favored and loved. In the Islamic case it tends to be described as who has the purest faith, the true Islam.

Another interesting point in the Hebrew Bible complicates the relationship to Ishmael. When the Bible records the death of Ishmael, it uses a classic ethnic/national metaphor of death that is usually seen as a deeply unique place of Jewish reunion. It says Ishmael was “gathered unto his people”, [\[12\]](#) a phrase generally reserved for the most important figures of Jewish life! [\[13\]](#) Who could Ishmael have been gathered

into other than the family of Abraham? And if so, what does it say about the nature of this family? Is there consciously or unconsciously embedded in ancient Jewish tradition, a Jewish family, a family of Adam or humanity, and then some in-between family? An Abrahamic family perhaps that includes both Jews and gentiles, or at least all Semites? If so, why has this been left undeveloped in Jewish theology? We will leave this open for now, except to point out the rich texture of hermeneutic possibility, the curious way in which this subject has been repressed or ignored, and the way in which hermeneutical observation is intimately related to the believer's horizon and psychological context. [\[14\]](#)

Islam's Abrahamic Family

Arab culture and Islam share the belief that Abraham existed, was the founder or restorer of monotheism, and that Hagar and Ishmael are the key ancestors of the Arabian peoples. But whom God has chosen is a different matter. The Biblical account of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael is accepted in Islam in a certain way. It is elaborated upon later, however, in critical ways. According to Al-Baizawi, Abraham does expel them, due to Sarah's jealousy. [\[15\]](#) According to one tradition, Abraham accompanies them, but then leaves them in Mecca. According to another tradition, Abraham takes them to Mecca, leaves them with a bag of dates, and then prepares to leave. Hagar beseeches him to stay, and asks if God commanded him to do this, and he says, "yes". And she says that God will cause no harm to come to her. Then later Abraham prayed for them that others may be kind to them. [\[16\]](#)

The spring that God provided for Hagar's survival, according to Islamic traditions, is seen to be in Mecca. This spring or well is called Zamzam and it sprang miraculously from beneath the foot of Ishmael. The hills that are critical to this myth are Safa and

Marwah, and to run between them is a rite of pilgrimage to this day. Ishmael and Hagar are believed to be buried in *hijir ismail*, an enclosure right next to the *ka'abh*. [17] Hagar and Ishmael are critical to the mythic interactions of every pilgrim to Mecca, now and throughout all these past centuries.

Mythic Re-reading and Reconciliation

Is there room here for a hermeneutic re-reading of both traditions, Arabic and Jewish, in terms of mothers and sons, the pain of mothers in the threats of violence to their sons, but also the violence that mothers may encourage toward other or rival sons and mothers? Is this not a mythic backdrop for all violence and war where the sons must be sacrificed for the sake of the survival of the family? Are there not in every culture unique ways in which both mothers and fathers, in different venues, are simultaneously and paradoxically engaged in the nurturing and even exaltation of their sons, only to sacrifice them to violence and abandonment on the field of battle? Which eighteen year old dying on the field of battle does not cry out for his mother? Who cannot see the essential mythos and pathos of sacrifice in the movie *Born on the Fourth of July*, where Tom Cruise, in one of his best performances to date, embodies the favored son born to be abandoned and sacrificed? This movie is a must see for a classic contemporary rendering of the Abrahamic sacrifice stories.

We have here an historic opportunity for inter-cultural engagement on these fateful matters. Especially in the circumstances of the Israeli-Arab conflict, where several generations of mothers and fathers have now sacrificed their children to this battle, such discussion in familiar cultural terms may open a gateway for communication. Furthermore there may be an opportunity for a kind of cultural/psychological process of reconciliation and mourning in which Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael and Hagar become

the central mythic actors. This family's chronological distance, which is paradoxically combined with their cosmic significance in both communities, may provide the basis for a dramatic evolution of their relationship.

Let me digress with eye-witness testimony and evidence. I have seen mythic re-reading and evolution in action. I have watched courageous rabbis stand before their fundamentalist students engaged in deep study of Abraham and his family, weaving seamlessly a tale of Isaac's chosenness together with reconciliation between Isaac and Ishmael as the true will of God. I have seen an heroic Muslim Palestinian sheikh risk his life to show his love for Jews, even as he cries at night in his search to understand the continued violence, asking himself again and again, "why do the children of Abraham continue to harm each other?" Such people are often alone and unsupported, but only because the world has yet to understand the critical role of these extraordinary human beings for the future of peace on this planet.

Abrahamic Paths to Social Change

The key to the future is the strengthening of mythic readings and re-readings of coexistence by using the best moral and spiritual practices of religious traditions. There is one fundamental advantage to cultural processes of human social change, and one fundamental advantage to religious processes of change. The former expresses itself in an unabashed embrace of and dependence upon non-rational ritual and formalism as a way of transforming outer behavior as well as internal states of being. The latter expresses itself in an unabashed commitment to and dependence upon ethics and morality as a motivation of human behavior that has specific sanction by the highest sacred authorities, both human and divine. Cultures and religions affected by the Palestinian/Israeli conflict share both of these characterizations.

Both of these phenomena have been completely neglected by elite diplomacy and conflict resolution efforts in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, but only on a conscious level, I would argue. There is no doubt in my mind that one can find ritualistic and symbolic processes at work in the both the successes and failures of secular, high-level negotiations. But they are rarely admitted to, and thus lose their usefulness in terms of replicability and expansion to larger populations. While I applaud high-level processes, they are always vulnerable to rejectionist terrorism precisely because they dis-empower rather than empower, they exclude rather than include. Thus, the religious terrorist knows that he has to go a relatively short distance in order to overwhelm the public consciousness with fear of and revulsion at peace with the enemy other.

Our goal is to magnify a passion for peacemaking as broadly and as deeply as possible. Here is where culture and religion can be so helpful, and where elite processes must develop more humility. A major effort must be made to mine the depths of the ethical traditions of each monotheistic tradition, and elicit specific ethical principles that will give sanction to conflict resolution practices, as well as give expression to those practices in new ways that specifically reflect the cultures involved. But in monotheistic traditions (perhaps in all traditions) the religious/ethical prescriptions are inextricably tied to cultural habits and inter-personal expectations that elicit feelings of warmth and devotion, when adhered to, and elicit feelings of alienation and anger when violated.

Now these religious and cultural habits express themselves in two distinct kinds of human engagements: 1. informal and 2. formal or ritualistic. Both are vital for the future of conflict resolution. Various religious actors globally place different emphases on these two human engagements. For example, high level relationship

building between religious leadership, conducted by the World Conference on Religion and Peace, or by the Vatican, emphasizes formal contacts and conversations between key leaders, although this does not exhaust the range of their work. The origins of Moral Re-Armament (now called Initiatives of Change) in a Protestant, evangelical style, by contrast, has tended to emphasize the slow growth of interpersonal relationships over time between key figures of enemy groups, as well as some very direct appeals to emotions, sometimes in a rather anti-intellectual fashion. MRA members also have formal gatherings and interactions, but one of their great strengths has been the model of informal networking and relationship building. The latter has important theological roots for them, for it is in the “surprises” of human connections and chance meetings that they see the Divine Hand guiding human beings towards reconciliation with others and with God. As such, they have filled a void in many conflicts wherein fruitless, formal negotiations are endlessly engaged and disengaged, but deep human connection between enemies is missing entirely, off the radar screen of “pragmatic” priorities. The failures of so many formal negotiations due to the utter incapacity to bring populations along in peace processes makes one question who in this debate of methods is more devoted to pragmatism. Religious peace actors may sometimes be accused of an excessive faith in the transformative power of emotions to the point of impracticality, but elite representatives may be accused of excessive fear of emotions to the point of impracticality.

Deep Engagement with the Enemy

It has become clear to me over time that many of the same actors who stand for peace and peacemaking, and who commit themselves to difficult compromises, against the wishes of their own community, have little or no contact with enemies, and sometimes

do not want any. In fact they often have little contact with their own community, as well as that of the enemy, confining themselves to their own group of fellow believers. The latter group, while well-intentioned, has not been challenged by peace processes to really know the enemy other in a deep way, the enemies on all sides. But without this emotional ability and/or ethical directive, the deepest impasses of negotiations are not overcome.

It is time for the world to learn that the non-rational interaction is the grease for the wheels of “rational” negotiations. For some, like those in MRA, there is a teleological function of informal relationship building, bringing God into people’s lives, by bringing reconciliation. For others, such as Jewish religious peacemakers in Jerusalem, the relationship building acts are simple *mitzvot*, good deeds that represent an end in themselves, a very difficult act whose fulfillment represents a courageous offering to God. Of course, they too have a teleological agenda of religious vision. But their actions are felt to be deontological, to borrow from Kantian thought, a religious end in itself that fulfills a religious mandate which binds them to (and creates?) the Torah’s path of peace, something they believe in and create by their way of life. In either case, the point is that we must trace the vital role of both formalistic and ritualistic actions, on the one hand, and, on the other, subtle, informal, non-rational processes of interaction whose value to peacemaking is insufficiently appreciated. In fact, it is the hidden cornerstone upon which all courageous social change depends, secular or religious.

Symbol in the Ethical Encounter

Let us now delve into the specific significance of the inter-religious encounter, and the power of symbol and metaphor. We will begin the investigation of this kind of

encounter at its most elemental level. Let us talk about the human face, a rich topic for social psychology, phenomenology, cultural studies, and, less well known, for monotheistic ethics.

It cannot be overestimated how important the human face is to the success or failure of human encounters. This has not been studied sufficiently in terms of conflict resolution, because the interaction between communications theory, social psychology, and conflict resolution theory, is spotty, dependent on the scholarly background of various theoreticians. Obviously, those with a background in communications and social psychology have the “permission” professionally, in terms of their home departments, to highlight the importance of these phenomena. No one in the academic study of conflict, however, has the permission or the background to examine the effect of religious and ethical sanctions on the experience of inter-human and face to face encounter. At best this is studied in terms of taboo, but the power of religious ethics to impact the effect of the use of the face on peacemaking goes unrecognized and unappreciated.

In terms of monotheism, the face and the eyes become a crucial test of love or hate, the beginning or end of relationship. Charisma, a critical characteristic of the Biblical figure Joseph, and the evidence of his chosenness by God, is expressed by way of those who “find favor [*hen*] (charisma, sweetness, compassion?) in his eyes”. Many other examples abound. [\[18\]](#) The point is that the pro-social relations begin with the eyes and with the look. Clearly there are powerful effects of eyes on human behavior in the social/psychological orientation of the Bible. There is a level of concreteness of love or care in this view that does not allow it to be abstract. The face embodies one’s emotions and also one’s ethics.

The nightmare converse of peacemaking in this regard is the strange way in which murderous people in any number of circumstances seem to go berserk when looked in the eye. Looking in the eye is regarded as a dangerous challenge, and this appears to be the case among various primates as well. [\[19\]](#) If this is the impact negatively of the eyes and face, it stands to reason that this is an untapped resource for the emotions and ethics of pro-social engagement.

Monotheism understood this well. Thus, in addition to the uses of facial imagery in a descriptive fashion in the narrative Biblical portions, like the Joseph stories, it naturally occurs in the prescriptive, legal portions of the Bible. One is commanded to honor or beautify the face of the elder in one's community, [\[20\]](#) but not to honor faces with partiality in terms of legal judgments, in other words to let justice take its course, without allowing charisma or anything else to sway a judge towards one party's face.

There is also the notion of a hardness to the face which, in rabbinic Judaism is one of the quintessential sins. [\[21\]](#) The alternatives of a kind face, based on *hen*, or a hard, murderous face, is rooted in the alternative presentations of Divine imagery in the Bible. [\[22\]](#) There are Biblical precedents for withholding the kind Divine face from certain groups of people. [\[23\]](#)

Here is the most important point. The foundations and sanctions in all three monotheisms for the compassionate use of the face should be seized upon as basic to the peacemaking meeting, to training in peacemaking, to the evocation of peacemaking as a religiously sanctioned discipline. No cross-religious, cross-cultural training should neglect to problematize the ways to greet and engage the face of the other. This has immense potential to help change the engagement of enemies in formal and especially informal encounters, and to hurt those same encounters in which this vital cultural phenomenon is neglected.

The Centrality of Shame and its Antidote, Honor

In Judaism, there are specific commandments to prohibit the whitening of the face, in other words humiliation which, in rabbinic metaphor, leads to a loss of blood to the face. The rabbis seize on this as akin to murder, the shedding of blood. This moves us toward another key cultural/religious issue, honor and shame, one of the single most important issues in Middle Eastern conflicts, but truly a universal characteristic of most long standing conflicts.

Honor and shame are central moral and spiritual categories in monotheistic ethics, particularly in Judaism and Islam. The bestowal of honor and dignity are critical to any listing of classic moral categories of Islam. [\[24\]](#) The same is true in Judaism. [\[25\]](#) It is something so fundamental to proper human relations, and to adhering to the personality paradigm of either the Prophet, in Islam, God, in Judaism, or Jesus in Christianity, that it seeps into the style and character of countless classical texts.

Honor and the prevention of shame are not only ethical precepts. They embody a way of being, a critical component of a metaphysical intentionality to the universe that has placed the human being in an exalted and responsible role of a caretaker. Therefore, the violation of human dignity is felt to be not only an ethical failure and an immense personal injury, it is also an affront to God and the Divine plan. Furthermore, because these traditions have such deep communal roots in the Biblical corpus, a personal affront to one human being is often seen as an affront to the Umma, in Islam, or Islam itself. In Judaism, an assault on the dignity of a Jew is an assault on a member of God's own people, and on the image of God that every human being reflects.

One of the subtle differences in the lived tradition and experience of the enemy groups in Israel and Palestine is that, at least for European Jewry, the interpretation of 'assault' as a generalized assault on God and goodness seems to be particularly activated when Jews suffer actual physical injury from gentiles, especially when they are singled out as Jews. This is what seems to activate for Jews the metaphorical drama of the victimized righteous of God, a drama that was etched in stone millennia ago by the exquisitely sensitive writing of the Psalmist, the essential book of Jewish prayer.

It is with injury and death, particularly of women and children, that so many religious Jews retreat to the safe space of historical prayers, where the righteous will survive, and enemies of God will be subdued and crushed by God someday. This is when feelings of honor, shame, and dignity betrayed, seem to reach fever pitch, with the Holocaust being the ultimate magnification of this dramatic tragedy and permanent fixture of God's strange and inscrutable, but ultimately just, universe. Much of this metaphorical drama is also played out in Christian literature, only now applied to the truly chosen lambs of God, the True Israel, the followers of Jesus.

This is not quite the same in the fusion of Arab culture and Islamic religion. In the lived experience of this culture and religion, particularly when it applies to this century of Palestinian/Israeli conflict, the dynamics of honor, dignity and shame, work themselves through this conflict in ways that are *sui generis*. This is a sensitive, difficult subject, and, in a certain way, the only proper response to this issue is to listen carefully to those involved, and let them determine and describe what has happened and how it has affected them.

What all this means is that, as Jews and Arabs gather, and begin to attempt peacemaking in a more lasting way than mere political negotiation, they had better

expect that their response to issues of honor and shame are different but equally sensitive. But they should also anticipate that the active effort to make the recovery of honor a central axis of peacemaking will yield some powerful results, if they do this carefully, listening to each other, and accepting the humble processes of trial and error.

What will it take to restore lost dignity? What will it take for rejectionists in the Jewish camp to feel that it is not only by the gun that the value and dignity of a Jewish life can be restored in this world? What will it take for a Palestinian family and clan to recover dignity in the wake of the humiliations and hardships of forced displacement, persecution, and merciless poverty? What about those who have good resources and education now, but incessant memories of lost property and a lost sense of place that just will not dissipate? And I speak here of both Palestinians and Jews, the latter having lost this in a different location. What will it take for those who have nothing in a refugee camp, and how much will the latter depend on the honest integration of cultural dignity and economic rights? What will restore honor?

How do you factor into this the complex way in which the deepest and most destructive humiliations of Jews, in many cases utterly indescribable in their horror, are embedded into most family memories from events that occurred elsewhere, in Europe? Yes, at the hands of non-Jews, gentiles who wanted them dead, but not the Palestinians. But now, in the Palestinian/Israeli war, how do these Jews distinguish between a non-Jew who wanted them dead fifty years ago for one set of reasons and a Palestinian who might want to kill them now for a very different set of reasons? Some can make the rational distinction, but can they distinguish the emotional response when the images of mangled, destroyed bodies of loved ones and kin are the same? How does one cope with this triangulation of humiliation and living nightmares?

There is only one answer that I know of to emotional damage, and that is the intentional reversal of that damage, humiliation being healed by sorrow and mourning, but ultimately, and more constructively, by honor.

That is the short answer. The long answer, and the humble answer, is that these are questions that should be posed to all people on both sides about themselves and about the enemy other. Of course, in the actual dialogic moment it would be obscene to tell the other side what it needs and does not need for dignity. That is not the intention. Rather, it is the empathetic psychology that needs to be stimulated. The exercise of anticipating the other's dignity and shame is not an effort to supplant the moment of encounter, but rather an act of preparation for it.

Deeds More Than Words

The most important point is that conversations about honor and shame may have some beneficial results, but nothing can compare to carefully crafted gestures and symbols of honor, ways in which enemies convey honor to the humiliated other. This is at the heart of peacemaking, and it is often completely overlooked by formal processes of peacemaking, except for the perfunctory requirements of diplomacy. Rarely have I seen a conflict in which both sides, no matter how many security or economic imbalances there may be, do not need and indeed crave gestures of honor from the other side.

As wounded and paranoid victims of war, we crave evidence of a safe, new world. We look for actions that speak volumes, and pious deeds more than pious words. We wait to see if there will be a new universe in which we can bind our wounds, or whether we must continue the battle with the ubiquitous enemy other.

In sum, religion must become the great ally in the process of peacemaking and diplomacy on a global scale. Ritual and legally sanctioned ethical action are cornerstones of religious traditions. No diplomatic discourse of negotiation for peace should proceed without a course of moral action and penitent gestures. In this way mind and heart are both engaged and challenged in a process of profound social change. The power of myth, symbol, and parallel courses of meaningful ethical actions must become the glue that holds together an emerging global social contract. We can no longer afford elite processes of global or state civil society building that do not enter into the hearts and minds of billions of believers, that does not enter into the texts and structures of their education. But if we work harder at an integration of these processes, thus undercutting the more unscrupulous leanings of power hungry clerics, we can struggle together, religious and secular, rich and poor, to create a global civilization of rights and duties that speaks to the hearts and minds of most if not all residents of the globe.

[1] See Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). The arguments of this article are more fully developed in my *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[2] I use these last two terms separately because conflict resolution, while appropriate to certain circumstances, has a rather limited usefulness in cultural contexts. Many cultures, for example, may have poor precedents for resolution of a problem between enemies, but may be more likely to have mythical constructs that maintain relationships in family and society, despite underlying differences. They also may be rich in common symbols and dreams that provide a nonviolent glue to the society, while at the same time not necessarily expressing this as a resolution of a conflict.

[3] Based on a particular Christian interpretation of Genesis 15:6, Abraham is seen as the “knight of faith” who is “justified” by that act of faith. This becomes an important justification of the Pauline move to emphasize faith over works and cast Abraham as the first true follower of the Pauline Jesus. See Letters to the Hebrews 11:8-12, 17-19; Galatians 3:6-9, 15-18. But see James 2:20-24 which suggests a different perspective in which Abraham is justified by both faith and works, the latter being much closer to the original Jewish position on Abraham.

[4] Genesis 17:5

[5] Esau is also called Edom (Gen. 25:30; 36). The enmity between the nation of Edom and Israel is apparent in many places in the Bible and parallels mythically the Jacob/Esau competition and struggle. In later history, especially when Roman persecution of Jews became intense, Esau and Edom became identified with Rome (*Talmud Yerushalmi Ta'anit* 4:8, 68d; *Genesis Rabbah* 65:21, for example). When the Roman Empire became the Christian Roman Empire, and the persecutions took on religious zeal and significance in the Church, Esau and Edom came to symbolize in Judaism everything that is evil about the persecution and the persecutors. As far as isolated positive statements about Esau in rabbinic literature, some rabbis admired his capacity for honor of father, while others believed that he expressed authentic compassion, and even repented of his cruelties (*Genesis Rabbah* 65: 16; 66:13). Furthermore there is a sense from some rabbis that the Jewish people paid a price for the suffering incurred by Esau when his birthright was taken by Jacob, that his cries are paid for by Jewish cries in later history (*Genesis Rabbah* 67:4). We have here at least some hermeneutic basis for remorse over the past relationship, and a perception of some good in the ancient fraternal enemy. It is a minority view in the classical Jewish sources, but new historical contexts and new relationships often become the basis hermeneutically for turning something minor culturally into something major and vice versa. That is the whole assumption of my work. As far as Ishmael is concerned, his identification with Islam is confirmed by Islam's own stories that clearly have an effect on Jewish sources. See next note.

[6] *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* 30; *Midrash ha-Gadol* Genesis: 339-340. For a translation, see *The Book of Legends*, eds. Hayim Bialik and Yehoshua Ravnitzky, trans. William Braude (New York: Schocken, 1992), 39: 43. Ishmael's two wives are identified in the rabbinic story as Ayesha and Fatima, who are Mohammed's two wives in the Qur'an! The influence of one on the other is obvious but not clearly understood historically or causally. Furthermore, the rabbinic story of Abraham's instigation of Ishmael's divorce from his first wife also appears in Islamic sources, though I have been unable to verify this for certain in Islamic sources. See H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers, *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1991), 179. Extra-Qur'anic sources are very hard to verify. Despite many negative evaluations, and support of Sarah's decision to banish Hagar and Ishmael, there are some positive evaluations of Ishmael by the rabbis. A man who sees Ishmael in a dream will be blessed (*T. Berakhot* 56b). Most importantly, Ishmael is seen to have repented completely at the end of his father's lifetime (*T. Baba Bathra* 16b). Here too there is an interpretive basis for nuancing the complicated relationship between these brothers on a Jewish spiritual level. Of course, the notion is a common one in the Abrahamic monotheisms of seeing the alienated other as good to the degree to which, through story and allegory, the other repents of his ways. The potential and the peril of this theological move is, once again, made clear through hermeneutics. If, on the one hand, such repentance stories signify mainly the potential for change and for goodness even in enemies then they are constructive for peace making and coexistence. If, on the other hand, the repentance stories about non-believers are meant to signify a conversion story then they are destructive for peacemaking and coexistence. In this form they only signify the absorption of the enemy other into the self, not an acceptance of the other's existence, and certainly not a love of the other, in any normal sense of that term. Thus, repentance stories about Jews in Christian and Islamic literature that are interpreted to mean or literally say that the end result is conversion hardly can be included in the hermeneutics of reconciliation. Of course in the Islamic case it is somewhat easier because how one defines the acceptance of Islam or the true worship of Allah is a subject of debate that is open to discussion. Liberal Muslims could conceivably read such stories not as conversion stories--if they wish to--but rather stories in which Jews in the time of Muhammad purified their own practice and worship as Jews as a result of contact with Mohammed. It would be impossible for Christians to read or re-read a story about a Jew who finds Jesus Christ as anything but a conversion story, although I should not preempt creative interpretation in any tradition.

[7] In almost none of the literature of any of the faiths is the tragedy and mistreatment of Hagar truly confronted. The Bible clearly shows God's care for Hagar, but not a true confrontation with Abraham's actions regarding this maidservant. No one, in any faith, seems to take Abraham to task for his decision. I presume that part of the reason for this is God's instruction to Abraham, according to the Bible, to listen to Sarah and expel Hagar and Ishmael. I am convinced, however, that the Deuteronomy text (21:17), cited interpretively by Ishmael himself, concerning the proper and improper treatment of multiple wives and eldest sons, seems to me to be an inner biblical exegetical repudiation of Abraham's choice--and God's own command in the Genesis story! The later, and authoritative, Jewish legal source on inheritance actually sides with Ishmael! What does this mean? How is a traditional Jew supposed to integrate the Deuteronomic instruction on inheritance and God's support in Genesis for the opposite? It seems to beg interpretation, more hermeneutic development, and perhaps opens the door for a contemporary re-visitation of the larger Abrahamic family as a religious entity.

[8] *Genesis Rabbah* 53:11. For a translation, see *The Book of Legends*, 39: 41.

[9] Avivah Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 134-136.

[10] Note the opposite Jewish modern hermeneutic trend about Arab-Jewish relations that can be found in Arthur Waskow midrashic readings about the Temple Mount, in Arthur Waskow, *Seasons of Our Joy* (Toronto; New York: Bantam, 1982), 216-218.

[11] Deuteronomy 23:8

[12] Genesis 25:17. I thank Yaacov Travis for pointing out this text and its significance.

[13] Just nine verses before Ishmael is “gathered unto his people”, the Bible records this of Abraham in Genesis 25:8. On Isaac: Genesis 25:39; on Jacob, Genesis 49:33; on Aaron, Numbers 20:24; on Moses, Deuteronomy 32:50.

[14] I use Gadamerian concepts throughout my work. See Hans Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

[15] *Tafsiru 'l-Baizawi*, p. 424.

[16] See, for example, Thomas Hughes, *A Dictionary of Islam* (London, W.H. Allen: 1895), 216-220.

[17] Cyril Glassé, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 193.

[18] Genesis 6:8; 34:11; Exodus 11:3; Esther 2:17. On charisma or grace as the most valued human asset, see Proverbs 22:1. It is a difficult word to translate but includes the meanings of grace, benevolence and favor, but with a special attachment to the facial metaphor. On the relationship of *hen*, and pity or compassion, *tahanunim*, see Zechariah 12:10. Zechariah has a vision of God who brings destruction on other peoples who are near Jerusalem, but who, at the same time, fills the House of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem with a spirit of *hen ve'tahanunim*, grace and compassion, as they lament over the dead of the other peoples, as if the dead were their own children, their own favored son or first born. This suggests a powerful prophetic precedent for the extension of *hen* to enemies, especially in the context of Jerusalem.

[19] See Stuart Altmann, "The Structure of Primate Communication," in Stuart Altmann, ed., *Social Communication Among Primates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 325-62; N.G. Blurton Jones, "An Ethological Study of Some Aspects of Social Behaviour of Children in Nursery School," in Desmond Morris, ed., *Primate Ethology* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967), pp. 347-68. See generally under “eye contact”, in *The Nonverbal Dictionary of Gestures, Signs, and Body Language Cues* (2000), by David B. Givens, at <http://members.aol.com/nonverbal3/refs.htm>, visited 11/17/00.

[20] Leviticus 19:32; 19:15; Exodus 23:3

[21] See Deuteronomy 28:50 and Daniel 8:23 as characterizations of evil empires and rulers in terms of this characteristic; *T.B. Ta'anit* 7b; *Otsar Midrashim* Messiah 3;

[22] See Psalms 34:17 on the face of God and the destruction of the wicked, but Psalms 42:3 on the desire to see the face of God. On beseeching the face of God and prayer, see I Kings 13:6; II Kings 13:4. On the face of God and

destruction, see also Jeremiah 3:12; Ezekiel 15:17. Psalms 27:8 suggests a powerful reconciliation through the metaphor of the face. "On Your behalf has my heart said, 'seek My face'; Your Face will I seek."

[23] Deuteronomy 7:2

[24] See in general Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam* (Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1994). Being honored is a coveted experience, but is dependent, according to the Qur'an, on righteousness, Surah 49:13; 95:4. Entering into another's home is a particular point of interaction that is either respectful or not. It is vital in Islamic ethics that this be done with honor and respect. See Surah 24:27-29. This relates strongly in context to sexual morality, but it is clear from the text that it also involves basic dignity issues regarding the home. Note also *Malik's Muwatta*, Book 49, Number 49.3.4:

Yahya related to me from Malik from Yahya ibn Said that Said ibn al-Musayyub said, "Ibrahim, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, was the first to give hospitality to the guest and the first person to be circumcised and the first person to trim the moustache and the first person to see grey hair. He said, 'O Lord! What is this?' Allah the Blessed, the Exalted, said, 'It is dignity, Ibrahim.' He said, 'Lord, increase me in dignity!' "

On honor as an Arab value predating Islam, see Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 30-31.

[25] The most famous quote is "Ben Zoma said, 'Who is honored? He who honors all God's creatures.'" *M. Avot* 4:1. Note also, for example, *Midrash Shohar Tov* 17, "Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said, 'When a human being walks down the street a coterie of angels go before him, proclaiming and announcing: Make way for the image of God (based on Genesis 5:1)!"