

Religion and peace: christianity and islam's contributions to peace



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The notion of peace is complex and multi-faceted. Peace is not merely the absence of hostility, violence or war but encompasses a larger concept wherein there are various contributing factors such as healthy interpersonal or international relationships, security in matters of social or economic welfare and equality and fairness in political relationships. The nature of peace is also tied to concerns of the causes for its absence or loss of which may be social injustice, economic inequality, political and religious radicalism.

With so many existing issues, peace is, in reality, more a perpetual goal rather than a prevailing truth. In this sense, religion and peace are fundamentally united. The role of religious expressions is largely guiding the individual adherent and community to a state of peace. In more ways than one, religion is simply a discipline, an ideology, of peace. Christianity and Islam, two Abrahamic religions, actively promote peace supported by sacred texts.

Peace is central to the Christian message; it was at the heart of the life and ministry of Jesus and henceforth translated into the lives of his followers. On this basis, teachings are drawn primarily from the New Testament in the Christian bible – the foundational source of teaching for all Christians. The subject of peace in the New Testament is an all pervasive theme conveyed as a primary message of God. The term ‘ peace’ alone is mentioned over ninety times in the Gospels.

One of the most common Christian teachings about peace for individuals is that of unilateral accommodation centred on Jesus’ words: “ I tell you not to

resist an evil person. Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also” (Matthew 5: 39). This means that the individuals themselves must adjust in the face of any controversy; to respond to an aggressor or issue without violence. This concept of unilateral accommodation is a matter of profound practical wisdom and perhaps one of the only possible formulas for peace.

Although, when applied to larger groups or societies, it does not come without dilemmas as is evident in Christianity’s history of pacifism during the Emperor Constantine’s reign in the 4th century, where such docility welcomed maltreatment and threats to freedom (both religious and otherwise), material assets and personal security. The challenges over time led to the development of a Just War Theory. The Just War Theory aimed to establish guidelines under which it was morally acceptable to engage in warfare for the maintenance of peace for larger society with consideration of religious beliefs.

The theory is a doctrine; a codification of beliefs or “ instructions”, principles or positions of the Christian faith on military ethics. In order to be a morally justified war seven principles must be met; at the most basic tenets include distinctions between combatants and non-combatants, limited war objectives [no unconditional surrender or victory], proportional means, along with several other criteria. Understandably, The Just War Theory is problematic in theory as well as in practice; it and war itself is inherently contradictory – no war has ever met all seven requirements.

Another teaching and belief of Christianity regarding peace is forgiveness and forbearance. Christians are encouraged to forgive, to be tolerant, to act with love and to avoid selfish motives in order to establish and maintain peace with others and with themselves by preventing rather than treating conflict. The New Testament states: “ You shall be the children of the Highest. Be therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful. Condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven” (Luke 6: 35-37).

Hence, peace is achieved through the integrity and fidelity of Gods will. The New Testament guides the Christian community and individual adherents to achieve peace, that is: for one to live out Gods will one is obligated to be a promoter of peace. Just as Christianity, Islam is a religion of peace in the complete sense of the word. The name Islam alone signifies peace; the derivative words of Islam are selm and Salam meaning peace in Arabic. Islamic teachings about peace are found in the sacred text the Qur’an supported by the Prophet Muhammad’s word the Hadith.

The Qur’an is the written word of Allah and refers to Islam as “ The path of peace” (5: 16) and the mission of the Prophet Muhammad is regarded as one of “ peace and mercy” to humankind. (21: 107). The ultimate goal of Islam is submission to Allah and in this submission peace is found. Clear paths to achieving this goal are found in the Qur’an – the most important of these being the five pillars or the pillars of Islam (arkan al-islam). These duties and beliefs are foundational for all adherents of Islam. The five pillars are comprised of Shahada, Salat, Zakat, Sawm and Hajj.

Shahada means 'to bear witness' and is the most basic and important of the pillars. The profession of faith "there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger" signifies the adherent's complete submission to Allah. Salat is the requirement of ritual prayer five times a day. The prayers are an act of obedience and direct link between the worshipper and Allah and contribute to the purity, peace and sense of well being of the person. Zakat or almsgiving to the needy is required of every Muslim although is not limited to monetary offerings; in the Hadith the Prophet said, "Even meeting your brother with a cheerful face is an act of charity."

The word zakat means both "purification" and "growth". Sawm or fasting during Ramadan aims to focus and individual on his or her purpose in life by constantly being aware of the presence of God by cutting oneself from worldly comforts. God states in the Qur'an: "O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed to those before you that you may learn self-restraint." (Qur'an 2: 183). Finally, Hajj or the pilgrimage to Mecca is required of an adherent at least once in their lifetime. It is a journey of Abrahamic origin and represents the ultimate submission to the will of Allah.

Essentially, it is to this complete submission to Allah that the five pillars of Islam aim, aiding the individual in achieving a profound sense of inner peace. The 'struggle' to do Allah's will and serve his cause is termed Jihad as Muhammad stated: "The person who struggles so that Allah's world is supreme is the one serving Allah's cause" (The Hadith). Jihad involves greater Jihad – the internal-struggle against temptation and sin; a personal effort against evil and lesser Jihad – the external-struggle against wrong and evil; that is, the physical manifestation of the struggle against evil.
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Jihad is present in every aspect of a Muslim's life. It is not a goal to be reached but a continuous fight against all forms of evil, acting to do good and make peace, as the Qur'an states, " Let those who struggle in Allah's Cause sell this world's life for the hereafter. To him who fights in Allah's Cause, whether he is slain or victorious, We shall give him a reward. " (Qur'an 4: 74). The Christian tradition contributes significantly to peace at several different levels; public statements by Church leaders, programs of action at local and international levels, charity , peace organisations dedicated, courses of study, commemorative days etc.

Two such important contributions to peace are the work of the Christian International Peace Service and Pope John Paul XXIII The Christian International Peace Service (CHIPS) primary objective is to promote reconciliation. Practical ' development' activities are used as a way of helping to achieve this; CHIPS believe that sustainable development entails increasing a community's awareness of their own situation, and encouraging cooperation, primarily using their own resources, to improve that situation.

CHIPS is an organisation believing that Jesus Christ and God are peace both individually and corporately they therefore work to bring about God's peace on earth, as the Bible declares, " Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them his children! " (Matthew 5). With this vision, CHIPS have successfully worked in countries such as India, Uganda, Cyprus, England, the Philippines and Ireland to improve contribute to infrastructure, education, agriculture, resettlement and cultural relations.

At Present, since 1991, CHIPS have been working in Uganda for reconciliation between the conflicting Iteso and Karimojong tribes through work in water resources, agricultural, veterinary and community development. They encourage cross border co-operation, trade and friendship. In the Catholic community, a well known statement on peace by an individual was Pope John XXIII's "Pacem in Terris" (Peace on Earth) in 1963.

The statement explored social rights and responsibilities that must exist between people, citizens and their political authorities, between nations, and between people and nations on an international level – an issue of vital importance to the establishment of peace. Within this context, John XXIII addressed moral and cultural values, economic rights, political rights, disarmament, refugees, and the call to solidarity. At a time of war (the Cold War) such a message held great importance to the contribution of peace raising awareness for the need of churches to work to build a culture of peace in the world.

In recent times, peace initiatives in Islam have been somewhat inhibited by misconceptions arising from prejudice, political conflict and media.

Therefore, many peace groups in Australia work to overcome misunderstandings of Islam through education, addressing the cause of conflict. Regardless, several organisations and individuals of the Islamic faith have actively worked to contribute to the peace initiative. For instance, the organisation The Islamic Human Rights Commission in the UK aims to work for human rights driven by the many Qur'anic injunctions that command believers to rise up in defence of the oppressed.

For example, Allah says in the Qur'an: " O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah; even though it be against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, be he rich or poor" (4: 135). All work for the IHRC is done in the name of Allah and contributes significantly to addressing the abuse of human rights. Thus, the commission's work is broad including the submitting of reports to governments and international organizations, writing articles, monitoring the media, cataloguing war crimes, producing research papers, organizing vigils and taking on discrimination cases.

The IHRC also undertakes a number of country specific projects and research areas in places such as Central Asia, Turkey, Palestine and Nigeria. In addition to this is researching war crimes, campaigning for prisoners of faith and other prisoners held for their beliefs, campaigning against religious discrimination and persecution, as well as many other issues all over the world. The IHRC's work has thus far been a great asset to peace with successes such as the release prisoners of faith in Turkey and monitoring policies on the Hijab in the UK.

Another important contribution to peace of the Islamic faith is the work of the individual of Nurdin Abdul Rahman, a Muslim peace activist, university lecturer, human rights campaigner and political prisoner for 12 years who has worked tirelessly during the conflict in Aceh province in Indonesia. Like the IHRC, Rahman works to battle and raise awareness of the abuse of human rights; throughout his life he led several successful humanitarian NGO's and worked to provide the Indonesian people with vital resources such as food. Eventually, negotiations took place in Geneva over four years and resulted in a peace agreement in 2005 ending the ruthless hostility.

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Rahman now believes it is important for countries such as Australia to provide aid to community organisations in Aceh rather than to the Indonesian military to ensure that the rebuilding of broken communities can effectively take place (Indonesian troops sent to help distribute aid have instead been selling the supplies to the hungry and desperate victims).

Rahman's contribution to peace in Aceh has allowed vital changes to take place in the fight for human rights. In summation, it is clear that religious traditions have concurrently been and are committed to providing their adherents with a comprehensive understanding of the important duty of promoting peace; through the New Testament and Qur'an both Christianity and Islam have continued to guide adherents in an ongoing contribution towards the ultimate goal of peace for the betterment of humanity.