

PEACEMAKING AMONG THE ABRAHAMIC FAITHS: AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER OCHS

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In his book, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking*, Marc Gopin suggests that: “There have always been exclusive religious visions of a peaceful world. Never before in history, however, have so many leaders and adherents been inspired to work for a truly inclusive vision that is multicultural and multireligious.”¹ Do you think something historically new is happening in the area of inter-religious dialogue today?

¹ Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 4.

I can't speak about what is going on outside of inter-Abrahamic dialogue, but as far as interrelations among Muslims, Jews, and/or Christians, I don't think we've had an effort like this before. As far as inter-religious dialogue, it is a new epoch. Call it the third one.

The first epoch was one of separate Muslim, Jewish, and Christian self-definition and exclusive identity formation.

The second epoch was the modern one. The architects of modern dialogue were seeking an alternative to what they considered the oppressive and violent consequences of religious exclusivism. They assumed that the trouble lay in difference, that the difference lay in the most intimate details of each tradition's understanding of God and holiness, and that these details were the subject of Scripture and scriptural doctrine. So, seeking to avoid all discussion of Scripture, doctrine, and theology, they based dialogue on the non-intimate issues of public ethics and social relations. Models for hosting such dialogue were introduced, for the most part, by well-meaning liberal Christians, by which I mean Christians who identified God, at least in part, as the author of Enlightenment reason and universal ethics. Liberal Jews followed suit.

The success of the second epoch was to have introduced conditions of hospitality, where one religious group could, in the name of universal ethics and justice, invite others into dialogue. In many cases, the dialogue led to shared work for civil rights and equal rights, for overcoming discrimination against members of minority traditions, and for crafting a common (if naked) public square. But the major shortcoming of this epoch was a kind of reverse discrimination against particularity and local identity, which were misinterpreted to be the source of failures in the first epoch, rather than elements of the human condition itself. Attempting, on the whole, to elide these elements, rather than respect-but-redeem them, second-epoch dialogue was ultimately utopic—unconstrained, that is, by a realistic sense of human limits and unwarmed by affection for communal traditions and folkways.

Marc Gopin's work belongs, I believe, to the third epoch of inter-Abrahamic dialogue: one that is just now emerging out of the second. For Gopin, and other early participants in this third epoch, the second

epoch was noble in aspiration but also somewhat tragic, since it tended to overlook or undermine what might have been its most powerful resource: the love of God that animates the folk practices of many local communities and particular traditions. According to religious leaders in the first epoch, the One God “appears” only through the divine Word as it is embodied in lives shaped by specific scriptural traditions. Leaders of the second epoch sought to identify the meaning and ethical force of this One God through a single, universal discourse. Members of this third epoch are moved by a third vision: that the One God appears only through non-universal traditions of practice; that no individual human mind can construct universal images or principles that would unify these traditions; but that the God who speaks locally can also animate communities of dialogue among members of the three Abrahamic faiths.

You’re involved in a group called the Children of Abraham Institute that practices a form of this Muslim-Jewish-Christian cooperative religious dialogue that you just mentioned. The literature about the Institute suggests that:

...political leaders have failed for generations to address the role of religion not only as a source of...problems but also as a resource for resolving them. Since WWII, peace treaties and diplomatic initiatives that concern relations among Muslim, Christian, and Jewish peoples have consistently bypassed the religious discourses that are central to these people’s self-understanding.... The Children of Abraham Institute (“CHAI”) is dedicated to bringing indigenous religious interests back on the map as essential components of peace negotiations between people with a history of intense religiosity.²

Can you tell me more about the Children of Abraham Institute and the way inter-religious dialogue takes place among the members?

² <<www.people.virginia.edu/~7Epwo3v/chai/pages/about.html>>.

The group includes people interested in the Abrahamic religions, in the activities of dialogue and relationship among them, and in the ways in which that dialogue and relationship can serve as a resource not only for resolving inter-religious conflict, but also for reshaping Western diplomatic discourse.

What became the Children of Abraham Institute (“CHAI”) began with a group of Jewish scholars reading sacred texts together. We gathered as a very small group just for the sake of enjoying texts, not for any political goal or any subconscious reason. We practiced what we called “textual reasoning”: a way that Jews from any denomination and any academic discipline could join together for fellowships of sacred-text study. This was small-group study of Bible, biblical commentaries, and Talmud, undertaken as both an inter-denominational, religious practice and a way of reasoning together about crises in the Jewish community, in our own societies, both narrowly and broadly conceived. Our reasonings were always mediated through the reading of some finite canon of sacred texts, so that our individually divergent ideologies had no more and no less power than our individually divergent voices around the table. Despite our strong, individual differences in political or ethical ideology, our dialogue was sustained by shared commitment to the texts and to each other as persons. We also made sure to pepper our gatherings with food, song, and laughter. Meeting as we did at the annual convention of the American Academy of Religion, some Christian and Muslim colleagues observed our gatherings and suggested that they might like to try something like this, too: that perhaps we could somehow expand our canon of texts and our membership to all three faiths of Abraham.

We gradually formed an additional group: this time of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish scholars, attending to three, rather than just one sacred text tradition. We named our tri-dimensional practice “scriptural reasoning”: small-group study of texts from the Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur’an, undertaken as both an inter-religious activity and a way of reasoning together about crises that affect members of all three traditions. Despite our great differences, we found, to our surprise, that our study elicited bonds of friendship and overlapping lines of reasoning that were comparable to those some of us had experienced within the Jewish group.

How do sacred texts elicit give-and-take discussion among a group of scriptural reasoners?

Let me begin with textual reasoning. That first, Jewish group (now named the Society for Textual Reasoning) was moved by a rabbinic model of text study. The text is revered and sacred, but even though its words are authoritative, its meaning has to emerge out of the give and take of dialogue. Meaning is up for grabs. This means that debate is not hierarchically ordered: readers do not debate in order to recapture the one true meaning of the text, but to recommend meanings that seem more fruitful than other meanings. In this way, participants are democratized not in relation to each other, but in relationship to the text.

This kind of democracy begins when a sacred text is put on the table. It's important that the text be sacred. Those gathered around the table are moved first by awe for the text rather than for their own egos. But the text also needs its readers. The text says to them, so to speak, "I need you. I'm your boss as far as the words. Don't you ever change me. I'm the boss, but I can't tell you what I mean." The readers are empowered by the fact that meaning is displayed only through the process of reading. There is a relationship of give and take between the readers and the text. The text will say to its readers: "You need each other because no one of you will arrive at the complete meaning of the text. That doesn't tell you that your meaning is going to be asymmetrical. You need each other, but you could dominate each other." So that's rabbinic practice.

How does rabbinic practice become the basis for an inter-religious dialogue?

There has to be more than one text. The rules for scriptural reasoning are that you have a plurality of readers and a finite plurality of sacred texts. Minimally it could be, for example, a reformed Jewish understanding of the plain sense of the Bible and an orthodox understanding. Despite their appearances, these are already two different texts. But the prototype is to bring together texts from the three Abrahamic traditions: a text of Gospel, of Tanakh (Old Testament), and of Qur'an, or at least any two of these. The rule of the game is that dialogue mem-

bers revere one of the sacred texts, but also extend a relationship of respectful reverence or generosity to the other two. These relationships are therefore asymmetrical. Participants from each text tradition must indeed have greater love for their own Scriptures—this love marks their distinct identities and integrity. But these participants also offer hospitality to the others by inviting them to share in their scriptural study.

They begin by offering introductions to their own Scriptural texts, because they best know its language. But the rule of the game is that once members of the group agree that they been introduced to a given text, then members of that text tradition relinquish their authority over the discussion. Nobody rules. Two Muslim readers may therefore debate over the biblical text and believe that they have the better reading; a Christian reader may enter in with another interpretation, but everyone has equal voice. If the introductions are sufficient and the hospitality deep, then this unusual interplay of textual authority and readerly collusion generates scriptural reasoning as a form of social and inter-relationship as well as a form of thinking together about issues of shared concern.

After practicing this kind of study for a couple of years (two or three times a year, two to three days of study each time), we discovered two unexpected things.

The first was a new form of religious activity. Traditional, orthodox folks discovered that shared scriptural study served as a kind of inter-religious ritual with a sanctity of its own. While they did not share any liturgy, they felt they had experienced together some manner of divine presence.

The second thing was that outsiders said to the group: “this is peaceful.” The group was not initially interested in politics, but in late 2000, members decided to take stock of the broader theo-political implications of their gathering. Re-examining our several years of study, we discovered that several patterns of negotiation and hospitality were embedded in our practice. Perhaps we were observing patterns of peacemaking that are not usually evident in Western diplomacy; or in other forms of *laissez faire*, religion-neutral discourse; or, finally, within any one of the religious discourses alone.

To be sure, it is naive to think that people on the battlefield can sit down with each other, start studying scripture, and peace would blossom. We don't have any hopes of working magic within environments of active, violent conflict. But we do think, in a sober way, that we are in touch with methods of education and of socialization through which ethnic, religious, social, and political groups could be brought into processes of more profound dialogue than they have now available to them.

What would it take for an individual or a group of individuals to be ready to enter into this kind of dialogue? My sense is that there were prior experiences that primed the individuals involved to be open to this kind of thing. It doesn't seem to me that the average Christian, Muslim, or Jew would want to do this. For example, the claim on CHAI's website that Muslims, Christians, and Jews believe in the same God is a highly contested one in many religious circles. Even the ability to confirm that statement would require a certain kind of thinking about the other faiths that is not that common.

What we're doing is comparable to the beginning of a religious movement in the sense that its articulation has to be top down. It's the discovery of a possibility. It is in no way a sociological claim that, if practiced correctly, each of the Abrahamic religions already call for this kind of dialogue. We claim only that the religions contain real possibilities for dialogue that have not yet been tapped. Since it is grounded in traditional religious practice, this is not a utopian vision; but it does call for an exceptional discipline that would take generations to popularize. In that sense, it is comparable to early visions of the Enlightenment: call it a re-Enlightenment project.

In what way is it a "re-Enlightenment" project?

All three religions produced movements of Enlightenment. The earliest were 9th–13th century Spanish Muslim and Jewish movements. Christians were the last group to pursue Enlightenment, but theirs was the longest lasting and most influential. In these terms, Enlightenment happened to Muslims, Jews, or Christians who had doubts that their religious traditions could guide them in their new encounters with Hellenism, with new forms of trade or science or discovery, or with one

another. “Enlightened” members of these faiths (*maskilim*, in Hebrew) adopted new practices of individual reflection as means of reforming what they found inadequate in their inherited traditions. That was Step 1 in the process of Enlightenment.

Step 2 was the claim that if one’s own religious tradition is inadequate for facing the modern world, then the other religions are as well. Step 3 was the claim that if a form of individual reflection offered one a way out of the limits of one’s own religious tradition, then it would offer others comparable ways out of the limits of their traditions. Step 4 was the claim—of which Descartes’ *Meditations* is a prototype—that there is therefore a single mode of reflection, which we may call “reason,” that provides the needed corrective to all religious traditions. Step 5 was the claim that reason is one (in the way that Abrahamic peoples say that “God is one”) and that the plurality and particularity of the religions is a mark of their distance from the universality of reason.

CHAI shares some features of the Enlightenment project in three of those five senses. Unlike Descartes, to be sure, CHAI participants trust in the overall efficacy of their religious traditions. They are, however, also critical of various failings in those traditions, and as critics they become individual thinkers as well as participants in a covenantal faith. Among other failings, they criticize their religion’s tendencies to delegitimize members of the other Abrahamic religions—to treat them disrespectfully or even violently. And this critique leads CHAI participants, like the authors of the Enlightenment, to work for peace among the various faiths and to do so, moreover, in the name of a single truth.

Unlike their Enlightenment forebears, however, they identify this truth with the name of God, alone, and they do not acknowledge the capacity of any individual mind to comprehend this truth. What is enlightened is not the individual mind, but a community of individuals engaged in dialogue about the meaning of God’s word. Whenever a community is involved, its concrete institutions are involved, too, so that dialogue about the divine word also entails dialogue about social institutions.

Whereas individual reasoning might not necessarily concern social institutions?

Right. Scriptural reasoning is a form of enlightenment that is in itself a miniature example of what it wants to produce. You take the three people whom you fear may kill each other—Muslim, Jew, and Christian. You have them engage in a process of meditation that is like Cartesian meditation, except that they are, as it were, meditating together rather than alone. What they come up with are not abstract thoughts, but a social conversation that entails analysis and discussion of concrete social realities. Scriptural reasoning is thus a social and religious practice that is itself a partial answer to the concerns that give rise to it. By bringing Muslims, Jews, and Christians into conversation with each other—about the relation between their social institutions and the divine word—scriptural reasoning illustrates the kind of practice that the members of CHAI believe is lacking in their religious traditions.

Part of what seems unique about this model is that you become different people in the process of practicing it. Another way to think about what you're doing is that the process is akin to exercising a muscle of generosity or hospitality. By extending generosity towards another's sacred text, you are practicing extending generosity to another person. The generosity towards the sacred text may seem easier or safer than extending generosity to a person from a different faith, but it is a first step towards that kind of relationship.

What you just said reminds me of Steven Kepnes's book, *The Text As Thou*.³ Steven is a Jewish member of our group, who has been there from the beginning. His book describes how the sacred text is a person, and how one learns through textual studies to love other people. That is, in the room when there are three texts and three people, there are six people.

³ Steven Kepnes, *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

The other interesting thing to me about this kind of inter-religious dialogue is the configuration of difference and commonality that appears in this practice. You don't attempt to democratize all the texts or traditions and treat them all equally. Participants still hold to their own religious traditions.

Yes, we depend on that.

You see your own tradition as being the most authoritative one, and yet you extend generosity to the other traditions, in a way that acknowledges their difference, but the generosity allows for some commonality to emerge.

It also allows for friendly competition. One of our discoveries is that most of us in CHAI are deeply concerned by binary or dyadic practices, or those that set some A against B, as if only A were true in this world, and B were false. Like Descartes, we want to be critics and reformers, but, unlike Descartes, we want to offer our criticism of some institution as a means of transforming it rather than replacing it with its contrary. If, for example, the problem is that two religions seek to negate one another; we do not want the religions to lose their special and separate identities, but to express their identities in ways that are no longer mutually incompatible. In this case, the premise of CHAI is that two Abrahamic religions become mutually incompatible when they are each lacking some third something, in relation to which they are not mutually incompatible. This third is a form of relation to God, the re-introduction of which transforms the apparent incompatibility of these religions into complementarity. These complements remain different, and their differences also allow for competition.

Here is one example from South Africa, where the Muslims and Jews of Capetown have had very bad relations. Not too long ago the relations were violent; now they are just tense. In such a setting, the goal of scriptural reasoning would be to establish environments of scriptural study in which orthodox Muslims and Jews could discover that, however much they might dislike and criticize each other, they both love the One God. Seeing each care for the other's Scripture would not—and need not—remove their inter-religious competition, but that competi-

tion should be compatible with a sense of respect for the other who is also working for the glory of God's name. The participants' love of God, in other words, should be stronger than their enmity for certain humans, and the difference between this love and that enmity should provide sufficient condition for the beginning of relationship, which is the early beginning of a kind of peace. That is the vision, at any rate, of how CHAI should work. To test the vision, a small CHAI group has been set up in Capetown, and we shall soon learn how effective the approach may or may not be. Larger CHAI groups have been in place for several years at Cambridge University, the University of Virginia, the University of Indianapolis, and now Princeton, with smaller study circles underway or in process at several other cities in North America, Europe, and Asia.

Is it necessary to have Muslims, Christians, and Jews—members from all three faiths—participate for it to work?

We don't know yet. Many of us have done this for years in Jewish-Christian dialogues, and they are never the same. So we think it requires three.

Might it be that there's something in having three different perspectives that models the third that comes between the two—the third that you mentioned before?

I think that's it. It's like a mathematical discovery. Some believe it's really in the universe. I think the three is not just an application of Kantian or Trinitarian notions. I think it's natural to this model of peace.

Particularly when one of the goals of the model is to break down binary oppositions. Having three naturally helps you to do that.

We found that when we brought the third in—the Muslim was the last one to arrive in our history—it was the peacemaker. The third breaks up the competition between the other two and provides that with respect to which the other two can reason about their similarities and differences.

Let me play the skeptic. This sounds like a fun game that academics can play, but how does it move beyond that? Is it something that has a broader influence?

I've come to believe that it does. There are three kinds of evidence that scriptural reasoning is a realizable, rather than a utopian, possibility. The first evidence is that a few groups of religious Muslims, Jews, and Christians have already practiced this for a number of years, and practiced it for its own sake well before others suggested that it might have peace dividends.

The second evidence is the movement of Enlightenment in the West. The Enlightenment was, comparably, a top-down movement for change nurtured in part by academics. Western practices of humanistic education, of capitalism, of science, and of democracy were shaped to a considerable degree by intellectual visions, nurtured in university-like settings, by movements of thinker-practitioners. Scriptural reasoning is, in part, simply a call for reintroducing Abrahamic patterns of learning into the Western academy to reform Enlightenment visions rather than oppose them.

A third piece of evidence is that these three religions have long histories of practicing part of the vision of scriptural reasoning. Our hope is only to reform these practices. Scriptural reasoning should have practical consequences somewhat in the fashion of these religious traditions and somewhat in the fashion of the Enlightenment university.

Marc Gopin suggests that “Building trust is a moral task, an art, and perhaps even a gift. It requires painful acknowledgement of the past and broad-minded visions of the future.”⁴ His description includes three aspects—morality, aesthetics, and generosity—that connect with the description of what you’re doing.

That’s a beautiful description. It speaks of a ritual discipline, the way Western education is a ritual discipline. We take this for granted, but it

⁴ Gopin 227.

once seemed revolutionary and frightening to do the kind of learning we do in modern schools, seeking to liberate individuals from their prejudices. That learning required eight to twelve years of math study, literature, history, social science, a variety of ways to nurture enlightened minds. Western societies organize their entire public school systems to nurture their visions of rationality, science, and democracy. Visions for inter-Abrahamic peace require educational programs of comparable breadth and intensity. But this does not require starting from scratch. Scriptural reasoning is shaped from out of existing educational practices in both the Abrahamic *and* Western traditions. The urgency is to bring these traditions together in new ways.