

Catechist

Background  
Information

## Truths Jews, Christians and Muslims Hold in Common

By Msgr. Joseph M. Champlin

Rather than dwell on differences and disputes, Jews, Christians and Muslims need to focus on religious beliefs that can bring us together in peace.



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Jeanne Kortekamp

THE DECEMBER 2001 issue of *National Geographic* holds a tantalizing cover story, "Abraham: The Father of Three Faiths." Author Tad Szulc, in a carefully researched and illustrated essay, demonstrates how Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious traditions each deeply revere the patriarch Abraham.

But Abraham is not the only spiritual commonality these faiths share. In this article, I will examine 10 among many, including our father in faith, Abraham. A greater awareness and appreciation of these religious commonalities could help build unity among the sharply divided peoples in this world of ours.

### △ 1. One God

To be a Muslim in essence means privately and publicly believing in the one, divine, transcendent, omnipotent God, *Allah* in Arabic. Interestingly, the root of this Arabic word for God is identical to the root of the Jewish word for God.

Muslims use many beautiful names for Allah, each describing a divine quality. The most common terms are The Beneficent One and The Merciful One. Those concepts of God provide a theological understanding for the Muslim customs surrounding prayer.

Connected with that faith in the one God is a belief that Muhammad is God's messenger. This prophet is neither the founder of the Muslim religion nor a divine individual. Rather, he is the last of God's many messengers to this world that include Abraham, Moses and Jesus.

Belief in these two points allows a person to enter Islam and become a Muslim.

Reading through the Bible's Old Testament, also known as the First Testament or Hebrew Scriptures, one discovers the revelation of this one God to a chosen people. God commands these Jewish persons—living in the midst of polytheistic cultures—to be faithful by clinging to a monotheistic religion even though surrounded by temptations.

"I am who am," God says to Moses, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:14-15).

In giving the Chosen People the Ten Commandments, the Supreme Being declares, "I, the Lord, am your God.... You shall not have other gods besides me.... You shall not bow down before them or worship them. For I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God..." (Deuteronomy 5:6-9).

Followers of Christ accept this teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures and have faith in the one true God. Trinitarian Christians, however, also believe in Jesus'

teaching about God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That central mystery of the Trinity is problematic for Jewish and Muslim people.

Nevertheless, despite such a significant difference, Christian, Jewish and Muslim believers should be very comfortable together discussing and worshipping the one God they hold in common.

## ± 2. Divine Assistance

Christians take seriously these words of Jesus: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7); "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28); "All that you ask for in prayer, believe that you will receive it and it shall be yours" (Mark 11:24).

Belief in those words leads to every type of prayerful petition for every conceivable need. We who pray in this way have faith that God does intervene in our lives and responds to our prayers.

Jewish history, as recorded in the Old Testament, views such divine intervention or assistance as a given. The Passover angel, Red Sea parting and manna from heaven are but a few examples of what God has done for them in the past, is doing right now and will continue to do in the future.

Psalm 88 reflects that confidence: "O Lord, my God, by day I cry out; at night I clamor in your presence. Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my call for help" (Psalm 88:2-3).

The Muslim prayer of supplication can be equally intense, but more general in its direction. These petitions focus rather on submission to the will of the Beneficent and Merciful One. They ask for divine help to stay the course, for guidance and for aid following Allah's plan during the midst of adversity.

All three religious groups believe that God comes to our assistance, and their members pray accordingly.

## ± 3. Daily Prayer

A practicing Jewish person is expected to utter acclamations of praise or a *berakah* prayer at least 100 times daily. A brief exclamation, "Blessed are you, Lord," acknowledges with adoration and gratitude the major and minor gifts from God received each day: for example, sleep and water, air and food, friends and work, health and medicine, a rainbow and a sunset.

An invocation before eating and a gathering with several others for small-group daily prayer in the synagogue are likewise common elements of the Jewish tradition.

Muslims must pray five times a day with each prayer requiring five to 10 minutes. These occur at dawn, afternoon, later afternoon, following sunset and at night.

The prayer is recited facing Makkah or Mecca, the sacred spot where Muslims maintain that the Angel Gabriel first spoke to Muhammad. The believer kneels on a prayer mat, if possible, with forehead touching the ground. The posture and words convey a sense of submission, adoration and trust.

Christians who follow the Roman Catholic Liturgy of the Hours pray seven times a day as the Psalm suggests. This covers the Office of Readings, Morning, Evening and Night Prayer, plus three brief Daytime Prayers. Others probably observe a more informal pattern of morning and evening prayers with a grace, blessing or prayer before meals. This type of informality lacks the precision and repetition of the Muslim and Jewish traditions, but reflects a commonly shared value of daily prayer.

#### **4. Weekly Worship**

Because of September 11, Americans are much more aware of Muslim religious customs. Some newspapers have published extensive reports on Islam in the United States, including the Articles of Faith and the Five Pillars of Islam. Stories also reported on the significant number of people who come to mosques each Friday for special prayers after midday.

While Friday is the day of weekly worship for Muslims, Saturday is the Sabbath observance for Jewish people. It is observed from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday and includes the synagogue service on Saturday morning and the day itself, dedicated to personal rest and family events.

Most Christians celebrate the Sabbath on Sunday, a move made in the early centuries as followers of Jesus recalled his Resurrection and the Pentecost descent of the Holy Spirit, both of which occurred on Sunday. The form of observance varies with different Christian traditions, but all would expect, ideally, attendance at a public worship service and avoidance of unnecessary work. Sunday celebrates God's creation of the world and Christ's efforts to save all.

The crucial point here is that the three religions observe a weekly day set aside for public prayer and personal re-creation.

#### **5. Fasting**

Christians, following the example of Jesus who fasted for 40 days and 40 nights, recognize the need for some fasting or self-denial in their lives. In the early centuries, Wednesdays and Fridays were generally observed as days of fast.

In more contemporary times, the Lenten season from Ash Wednesday until Easter Sunday is the extended period (40 days, if you count only weekdays) of Christian self-denial. That generic type of fasting takes many forms, but has as its purpose to recall the sufferings of Jesus and to purify or prepare our hearts for the Resurrection.

Jewish persons practice a strict and total fast on Yom Kippur, the major holy day in the fall, with no eating or drinking from sundown to sundown. They do it for reconciliation or cleansing from personal sins or misdeeds. Many also fast in August on Tisha B'av, in mournful memory of the Temple's destruction.

Muslims fast during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, which is based on lunar calculations.

The Ramadan fast makes Christian or Jewish fasts seem like child's play. For the Muslim, the fast begins with a light meal before daybreak, then no water, food or drink until after sunset. Moreover, during that time there is to be no sexual intercourse, tobacco, backbiting or lying.

Ramadan is for Muslims a long, hard month. Nevertheless, the fast helps them

to obey God, be more sensitive to the sufferings of others, develop self-discipline and appreciate their unity with all other Muslims fasting at the same time in similar fashion.

## ▲ 6. Almsgiving

The following words of Jesus in Matthew 25 can make any Christian uncomfortable. I was, he observes, hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, ill and in prison, but you did not care for me. "What you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me" (25:45).

In response, Christians try to share a portion of their time, talent and treasure with others, especially the poor, sometimes giving to individuals and sometimes channeling contributions to group efforts. For example, at our Syracuse Cathedral, an emergency center provides nearly 500 households each month with food donated by several local parishes. For a dozen years now, volunteer laypersons have funded and staffed a program that provides a hot breakfast every Wednesday to about 100 homeless men. The church subsidizes at great expense our school whose student body is mostly non-Catholic, black and drawn from below-poverty-level-income homes.

Muslims would applaud this almsgiving. The Prophet said, "He is not a believer who eats his fill while his neighbor remains hungry by his side." Every Muslim has the duty to pay a specified tax, the proceeds of which are used for good causes or for the poor.

These alms can be given directly, but Muslims are encouraged to give secretly. That prevents the giver from feeling superior and the poor person from being embarrassed.

Jewish persons likewise approve of such sharing with others. Early sections of the Hebrew Scriptures remind the Chosen People of their obligation to care for landless and thus poor persons—especially widows, orphans and strangers. A local rabbi, following that injunction, co-chairs the interfaith fund-raiser in Syracuse and dishes out food for a project that feeds a hot meal each afternoon to 200 homeless people.

## ▲ 7. Holy Places

Once in a lifetime, if financially and physically able, every Muslim is expected to make a pilgrimage to Mecca and participate in the five-day celebration surrounding that event. Among other things, Muslims recall their belief that the Angel Gabriel in 610 A.D. spoke here to Muhammad, the prophet of Islam.

But they revere other sacred places, especially Jerusalem. They believe that the Prophet himself ascended into heaven from the rock over which the Dome of the Rock, the earliest Islamic monument, now stands.

The site is also sacred to Jews, who recall its connection with the Temple. Jewish persons, of course, consider themselves the Chosen People and that God has designated today's Palestine as their home. Jerusalem is also sacred to them, as are many other locations in the Holy Land. Their liturgy suggests three pilgrimage festivals: Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot.

Christians believe that Jesus came and dwelt on this earth, for the most part in that area termed the Holy Land. Over the years, millions of Christians have come to this sacred place and are eager to visit locations where Jesus was conceived, born, grew up, taught, ate his Last Supper, sweated blood in

Gethsemane, died, was buried, rose and ascended into heaven.

Disputes over these places, especially in the Holy Land, have probably caused the sharpest divisions and hateful feelings—as well as the most violent actions—among Christians, Jews and Muslims. Perhaps an appreciation of each group's reverence for the same or neighboring sacred spots could eventually dissolve the hatred and lead to peace.

## △ 8. People of the Book

In the Old Testament we see the unfolding of the Jewish religion. Moses and Aaron are there; so, too, are Abraham and Isaac, David and Solomon. During the Sabbath synagogue service, the leaders draw back a veil, revealing richly ornamented scrolls containing these inspired words of God.

Christians, who call themselves spiritual Semites, accept these Old Testament writings, but judge that they lead to and find fulfillment in the New Testament books, together forming the Holy Bible.

Since the 1970s, Roman Catholics and most mainline Christian bodies follow on Sundays a three-year cycle of biblical readings. While these are excerpts only, they still contain samplings from almost all of the 46 Old and 27 New Testament books.

For Muslims, the Prophet is the messenger, but the Quran (Koran) is the message of God. It is not a structured book or set of arguments, but a collection of divine messages.

The Quran repeatedly labels Jewish and Christian persons as "people of the Book" and views their original Books as coming from God.

Yale University historian Jaroslav Pelikan maintains that the ignorance of otherwise well-educated Westerners about the religion of Muhammad and the message of the Quran is "not only abysmal, but frightening."

Learning about and appreciating these closely connected inspired books surely is an easy and readily available stepping-stone to unity.

## △ 9. Abraham

Certainly Christian and Jewish persons hold Abraham close to their hearts. They marvel at his trust in leaving home for an unknown new location. They admire that faith which brought about his holiness or righteousness. They rejoice in his dedication and obedience to God, which prompted a willingness to sacrifice even his only child and son.

In Eucharistic Prayer I for Roman Catholic Christians, worshipers hear these words: "the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith."

Muslims, too, hold Abraham in great esteem, regarding him as a great prophet and one of God's special messengers. During the days of their pilgrimage at Mecca, Muslims observe several rituals commemorating events in the life of Abraham.

## △ 10. Jesus and Mary

Muslims speak of both Jesus and Mary with reverence and respect. They believe that Allah or God gave revelations not only to Abraham and Moses, but also to Jesus and all prophets. For them Christ is not messiah, savior or divine, but one of God's holy messengers.

In the Quran, Mary is the only woman's name mentioned. Moreover, Surah 19, one of the longest chapters in the Quran, carries the title "Maryam: Mary." It is said that in our times as well Muslims have a special place for Mary in their devotional lives.

Jesus is the focal point for Christians. He is their teacher, healer and savior. He is a model for them. He is divine, the Son of God and the one who revealed the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity.

Mary's frequent appearances in the New Testament make her a necessary ingredient of Christian life. The honor given to Jesus' mother by Roman and Orthodox Christians is well known, although some Christian traditions tend to find that honoring excessive.

Respect and affection for Jesus represent a real challenge for Jewish people. They reject him as the long-awaited Messiah. They also disapprove of his divine claims and his teachings about the Trinity.

Still, he was born of a Jewish mother, grew up in a Jewish home and prayed regularly in a Jewish synagogue. He also frequently cited the Hebrew Scriptures, and many of his words are consonant with Jewish religious principles.

Mary, likewise, grew up in a Jewish home, practiced Jewish religious traditions and, according to some scholars, would have been of the house and lineage of David. Her famous Magnificat (Luke 2:46-55) bears a close resemblance to Hannah's prayer of praise in 1 Samuel 2 of the Old Testament.

### ▲ We Remain Divided

These 10 spiritual commonalities make it confusing and contradictory to witness hateful words and deeds done in the name of religion.

Jews and Muslims squabble over a mutually revered holy place in Jerusalem. Fundamentalist leaders in Afghanistan resent and arrest eight outsiders trying to bring Christianity to that country. Some cite the Quran, the sacred book of Islam, to support a holy war against infidels, the destruction of the United States and suicidal actions in the name of Allah.

In the midst of such hatred and disrespect, of such violence and division, a long-term solution exists which would replace hatred with love, disrespect with respect, violence with a just peace, division with unity. Recognizing, understanding and appreciating the many common spiritual elements which Christians, Jews and Muslims share with one another can contribute to this solution.

Dr. Anis I. Obeid, born in Lebanon and raised as a Druze Muslim, has practiced medicine in the United States for many years. During the course of that service, he became an expert in echocardiography, gaining worldwide recognition in this field. He would agree with my proposal.

This heart specialist strongly believes in a comment he once heard: "There are only two kinds of people—those I love and those I don't know."

Franciscan psychologist Father Jeffrey Keefe holds a somewhat similar view and would likewise support my suggestion. As a therapist, he observes, "The more I get to know my clients, the better I like them. As I hear in greater detail their stories, I appreciate better the complexity of their struggles. I am moved to a deeper respect for them."

Both seem to maintain this principle: The more I know about others, the easier it is to love them. And the greater understanding I possess of others, the better I can respect them.

### ▲ We Can Move Toward Harmony

The 10 spiritual commonalities shared by Christians, Jews and Muslims are indeed remarkable. But it would be inaccurate and naïve not to recognize that real differences do exist. Moreover, years of conflict have generated, among some, intense bitterness, hatred and mistrust.

Despite those divisions, if we know and understand each other better, then it should be easier for us to love one another more. Religion, instead of being a source of division, could become a basis for unity.

For such a positive global development to take place, we need to take some practical domestic steps. Individuals can educate themselves through print publications or Web sites such as the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs ([www.usccb.org/seia](http://www.usccb.org/seia)), Jewish-Christian Relations ([www.jcrelations.net](http://www.jcrelations.net)) and the Middle East Policy Council ([www.mepc.org/links/educat.html](http://www.mepc.org/links/educat.html)).

Families might discuss these 10 spiritual commonalities to deepen their own awareness and appreciation. Parishes could arrange for visits to both synagogues and mosques. Dioceses might facilitate public dialogue among Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders.

Each of us needs to take the important step of praying individually and with others "that we all may be one" (see John 17:21), just as our loving God has envisioned us from the beginning.

### ▲ The Pope Encourages Respect for All Faiths

"I wish to reaffirm the Catholic Church's respect for Islam, for authentic Islam: the Islam that prays, that is concerned for those in need."  
—September 24, 2001

"How happy we would have been to see our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters walk beside us in loving agreement and solidarity to restore the Holy Land's true face as a 'crossroads of peace' and 'land of peace.'"  
—December 13, 2001

"Let no one lose hope in the power of God's love! May Christ be the light and support of those who believe and work, sometimes in the face of opposition, for encounter, dialogue and cooperation between cultures and religions."  
—December 25, 2001

"Religious people and communities should in the clearest and most radical way

repudiate violence, all violence, starting with the violence that seeks to clothe itself in religion...."

—January 24, 2002

"True religious feeling leads...to a perception in one way or another of the mystery of God, the source of goodness, and that is a wellspring of respect and harmony between peoples: indeed, religion is the chief antidote to violence and conflict."

—January 24, 2002

*Msgr. Joseph M. Champlin, a widely published author, exchanged pulpits with a local rabbi two years ago, preaching in the synagogue, while the rabbi spoke at a Sunday Mass. This was a first for both their 150-year-old congregations. Last year, Msgr. Champlin invited Dr. Anis Obeid, raised as a Druze Muslim, to describe the basic articles of that religion at a Sunday Mass at Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Syracuse, New York, where the author is rector. Those exchanges and the tragedy of September 11 led to this article.*