

ABRAHAMIC FAITHS PEACEMAKING INITIATIVE

American Clergy And Religious Activists Who Advocate Peacemaking

Peacemaking from the Heart of Christianity – Excerpts & Discussion Questions

Excerpt A:

“False and violence-making boundaries are overcome by Jesus’ vision of community. Under the corrupt imperial honor code, “neighbor” had been defined only as a peer – someone in one’s own clan, village, region, economic class or political faction; there was no imperative to include outsiders or people of lesser status. Jesus speaks of “‘*sheep who don’t belong to this fold*’” (Jn 10:16) – people outside of one’s own tribe who nevertheless carry God’s full blessing... This is Jesus’ vision of God’s true community of compassion. In contemporary life, followers of Jesus understand that the living Christ calls people to meet God in the lives of the marginalized – those in need of justice and healing care – whoever they are. Whole nations are ultimately judged by the manner in which they respond collectively to the estranged and the poor.”

For all: *What is meant by “violence-making boundaries”?*

When the authors write, “Whole nations are ultimately judged by the manner in which they respond collectively to the estranged and the poor,” who is judging them?

For Jews and Muslims: *Does your faith put equal emphasis on helping the neighbor or outsider? How does your tradition define a “community of compassion”?*

Excerpt B:

“The imperial Roman world Jesus entered was rife with systems perpetuating discrimination, violence, torture and injustice... But counter to the Empire’s reign of terror, Jesus invoked a different kind of reign – God’s Reign of

Shalom, or just peace. Jesus taught that this could be achieved in large and small ways in the present, through the pursuit of justice or through relations aligned with God's love. Where the Empire sought peace through military victory, Jesus sought peace through justice... The Gospel of Luke powerfully underscores the fact that Jesus enters into the Empire's reign of violence and oppression *in order to put an end* to this reign (Lk 20:42)... Jesus then takes up the deep roots of violence – self-promotion, greed and the impulse to judge others without looking inward – and rejects these as unworthy representations of God on earth. Jesus teaches that one aligns oneself with God, not by loving those who can or will return love, but by loving and praying for actual enemies, even when one has been abused by them.”

For all: *How does Imperial Rome differ from and coincide with the contemporary world? How does Jesus' teaching of peace through justice as opposed to peace through violence apply in a contemporary context? Is institutional violence and oppression different from violence between individuals? Why or why not? Do you agree with the assertion that the “deep roots of violence” are “self-promotion, greed and the impulse to judge others without looking inward”? Are there other qualities or actions that you would add to the list?*

For Christians: *What does it mean to have “relations aligned with God's love”?*

For Jews and Muslims: *How does your faith teach that you should respond to institutional violence and oppression? How does your faith instruct the powers of your community to act with “just peace”?*

Does your tradition teach that “one aligns oneself with God, not by loving those who can or will return love, but by loving and praying for actual enemies”?

Excerpt C:

The customary understanding of Jesus' crucifixion adheres to a doctrine of substitutionary atonement: the belief that God's wrath in reaction to human sin must be placated by God's sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as a substitute for sacrificing sinful humans. This lens has led many American Christians to validate, and even valorize, the notion of redemptive violence – a violence that purifies... [However,] the crucifixion of Jesus is a story of love overcoming hate, of compassion transforming vengeance. It is not a story about passivity. Jesus' death bears witness to the fact that God's response to violence is active nonviolence. Jesus refused to retaliate, but spoke words of compassion and forgiveness to the very persons who crucified him: "*Abba forgive them. They don't know what they are doing.*" (Lk 23:24).

This also is not a story of sin-cleansing sacrifice. It is not the violence Jesus suffered which redeems and liberates us; rather, we are liberated and saved by Jesus' rootedness in God's love and his refusal to embrace vengeance or hate, even in the face of his own death. It is his compassion toward the abusers that liberates even them and overcomes their violent choices. God provides in Jesus' death our strategy for how to behave towards those who wrong us and others and how to break the cycle of violence by engaging in active, transformative nonviolence.

For all: *What is meant by "active, transformative nonviolence"? What specifically might that mean in a contemporary context? Are there historical examples of successful "active, transformative nonviolence" that support Jesus' teaching?*

Why is it important to the authors to point out that Jesus' crucifixion is "not a story about passivity"?

Are there other schools of thought that promote the idea of "a violence that purifies"? How influential is this idea in American culture? What does it mean to "purify" in this context?

For Christians: *How does this understanding of Jesus' crucifixion challenge or support your own understanding?*

For Jews and Muslims: *Does your tradition have teachings that support the idea of "a violence that purifies"? Are there competing or contradictory teachings?*

How does your tradition teach that individuals and/or communities may be redeemed for sins or wrongdoing?

Excerpt D:

"How, then, to understand such teachings as "*Don't suppose that I came to bring peace on earth. I came not to bring peace, but a sword*" (Mt 10:34)? Placing this teaching in the context of Jesus' entire message, as well as in its immediate context, lends understanding... Jesus' consistent message of nonviolence and service to the outsider *elicited* violence and resistance. Jesus expected that this revolutionary vision would be met with opposition, such that even families would be split between those accepting and rejecting it... The sword used *against* Jesus and early Christians fell upon them because they directly challenged the brutality of the Roman Empire through an unwavering commitment to nonviolence... Jesus understood the transformational power of God's peace, yet also anticipated the oppressive reaction of those who refused the values of God's Reign. To infer, as some do, from a reading of the passages...that Jesus *endorsed* violence, however, amounts to a tragic misinterpretation of Matthew 10:34 and its context."

For all: *Why might violence be an attractive method of attempting to suppress teachings about peace? What are the possible outcomes of such a strategy?*

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For Christians: *Is this reading of Mt 10:34 consistent with the rest of scripture and the story of Jesus' life?*

For Jews and Muslims: *Are there stories in your tradition of violence being used against teachers advocating peace and justice? What was the result?*

Excerpt E:

Many U.S. citizens order their lives according to an ethic of acquisitive individualism. This unbiblical, unmindful ethic ignores ways in which...today's worldwide U.S. military dominance, rather than defending from outside enemies, functions to ensure the United States' continuing ability to consume a disproportionate share of world resources... Jesus does not despise or reject the wealthy, fearful and self-preoccupied. Instead, Jesus invites all to a richer life of compassionate solidarity with the poor, laying down the burden of fear-based self-absorption... Our willingness to be liberated from preoccupation with self-preservation becomes a key test of faith. This is the case with both personal and national security. Jesus teaches, *"That's why I tell you not to worry about your livelihood, what you are to eat or drink or use for clothing. Isn't life more than just food? Isn't the body more than just clothes?"* (Mt 6:25) Those who fear scarcity are, in their isolation, failing to trust God's generosity available through true community... Fearful alienation from God's generosity given in community leads to an ethic of self-inflation and the callous indifference toward and domination of others. There is a similar spiritual and national cancer in a "God Bless America" mentality. Jesus refuses to sanction tribal exceptionalism... From the new definition of neighbor, and from renouncing old ways of fear-based self-promotion, flows a new, inclusive ethic in which every child of God is valued, welcomed and embraced, and all are able to share in God's blessing of peace.

For all: *What forces in American life contribute to "acquisitive individualism"? How might these forces be countered?*

How does "fear-based self-absorption" prevent just peace?

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What is the relationship between indifference toward others and domination of them?

How might we balance a healthy sense of community (“us”) with “a new, inclusive ethic” of valuing and embracing “them”?