

## Social Ethical Currents in Islam and Christianity for Global Peace

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### Abstract

Religion plays a major role in the life of believing men and women. On many occasions, it has been used as a tool to achieve major personal as well as social objectives. One of the unmatched potentials possessed by religion as seen throughout history is its role in mobilizing masses for peace, reconciliation and also for destruction. There have been plenty of discussions and books written on the topic of comparative study in the field of theology, yet this article distinguishes itself in its effort to highlight the common social ethics in Islamic and Christian teachings in order to achieve a peaceful world. Islam and Christianity are of special importance to global peace as the adherents of these two religions constitute almost half of the people around the globe. The socio-ethical currents in the two divinely followed religions will be compared though descriptive methodology. It gives the followers of the respected religion a way forward in their interaction with each other. The result of such comparative study demonstrates the capacity embedded in these religions wherein a person can be a firm adherent to his/her belief yet be good to his/her neighbors or brethren in humanity.

**Keywords:** Social ethics in Islam, Social ethics in Christianity, Social Ethical currents.

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## Introduction

In today's multi-religious and multi-cultural world, it is a norm to have neighbors, friends, family etc. from different religions and cultures. Our conduct with them speaks of our belief. If our belief towards the other is positive from within, we will express it in a positive way and similarly if our belief towards the alter is negative, it is only natural that our interaction with them would be a negative one. The origin of ideology in religious people is based upon the religion they follow. Therefore, different religions lead to different beliefs and ideologies which result in different behaviors. With the amount of diversity available in our societies, understanding religious social ethics is of utmost importance. It is important to know the ideologies of our religion, as well as the ideologies of various other faiths. Only after knowing the stance of our own religion will we be able to act in accordance to it. Whereas failing to do so will inevitably lead us to act for our religion in a way denounced by the religion itself. The result of which manifests itself in intolerance, discrimination, racism, slander, murders, wars etc. which are visible in today's world. This article has taken upon itself the responsibility of explaining some of the common principles of social ethics in the religion of Islam and Christianity in order to attain global peace. Islam and Christianity are the two major religions having the most followers in the world. Followers of these religions can be found in almost all parts of the world. However, before mentioning the common ethical codes it deems necessary to know what is intended by Social Ethics and Global Peace.

## Social Ethics

Social ethics are those ethics –sometimes unwritten- which are accepted by a society having social communality. This communality can be formed in a small area like in a residential complex or it can be on a larger scale like in a particular locality. What is acceptable in one place can be taboo in another. Similarly, the basis of social ethics can be mutual agreement between any two or more agents, laws of the country, religion etc. Since the topic of this article are the ethics which have their bases in religion, the basis for these ethics would be formed from divinely and authentic sources of Islam, i.e. Quran, the Sunnah and the intellect and also from the divine and authentic sources of Christianity, i.e. Bible and the church. Since God wrote His Word to teach us throughout time and history, it is a book full of principles that can be applied in any time or place. Therefore, Islamic and biblical principles of decision making can be applied in all societies and time periods.

In order to explain what type of ethical investigation is involved here when discussing ethics, it is necessary to point out that there are three types of ethical investigations: the descriptive, the normative and the meta-ethical. It also needs to be specified that, in this article it is not intended to

differentiate between ethics and morals even though the difference between the two is acknowledged in terms of their roots as well as their implications.

Descriptive ethics is an empirical study of moral codes or practices of a certain individual or group or society or religion or the like. For example, a descriptive ethicist may undertake to provide us with an account of the morality of Socrates or ancient Greek ethics or Islamic or even Marxist ethics. The method here is just descriptive, in order to provide an exact report on what should be there. Thus, there is no evaluative judgement required here (Frankena, 1973).

Normative ethics studies moral theories on rightness and wrongness. It replies to questions such as: what makes an action morally right or wrong? Is an action good or right if it brings about pleasure or happiness? or rather is an action good if it is good in itself regardless of its consequences? Normative ethics also discusses the moral status of a particular subjects e.g. "Is abortion good or bad?" (Ibid)

Meta-ethics or analytic ethics does not deal with empirical or historical facts. Neither does it deal with any evaluative or normative judgement. It rather investigates questions about ethics including: What is the meaning or usage of expressions such as 'right' or 'wrong'? can moral and evaluative judgement be proved? If yes, how? What is the nature of morality? What distinguishes the moral from the non-moral? What does 'free' or 'responsible' agent mean? (Ibid). The approach taken in this study is of descriptive nature. The goal as mentioned earlier is to point out the common social ethics in Islam and Christianity in order to achieve sustainable global peace.

## Global Peace

The concept of peace has changed throughout recorded history as different groups and individuals have struggled to realize a harmonious state of existence. In the contemporary world understandings of peace varies from country to country within different cultural contexts. Many people think of peace as tranquillity or the absence of war. However, peace is a positive concept that implies much more than the absence of war. It is considered as a necessary condition for human survival. It implies that human beings resolve conflicts without using force, and it represents an ideal that humans have long striven to achieve. As peace researchers have pointed out, peace has both a negative and a positive connotation. In its negative meaning, "peace" implies stopping some form of violence, while "peace" in its positive connotation involves following standards of justice, living in balance with nature, and providing meaningful participation to citizens in their government. The pursuit of peace involves a worldly outlook that links local struggles to global aspects and vice versa. "Peace" is a state of existence where neither the overt violence of war nor the covert violence of unjust systems is used as an instrument for extending the interests of a particular

nation or group. It is a world where basic human needs are met, and in which justice can be obtained and conflict resolved through nonviolent processes and human and material resources are shared for the benefit of all people. It implies human beings working together to resolve conflicts, respect standards of justice, satisfy basic needs, and honour human rights. Similarly, it involves a respect for life and for the dignity of each human being without discrimination or prejudice. The ideal state of peace in international system is not just the absence of war but it also represents a balance of forces. It means sharing material resources to put an end to exclusion, injustice, and political and economic oppression. In addition, there are holistic systems of peace that focus on unity and diversity. Intercultural peace exists when different religious and ethnic groups live together harmoniously. Living peacefully involves defending freedom of expression and cultural diversity, as well as using democratic means to create a sense of solidarity that comes through the creation of inclusive communities. Although, due to human tendencies, societies will always have hostilities, disagreements, and arguments, therefore, the pursuit of peace does not strive for an idealized state of human existence with no aggression or conflict. It strives, rather, for the means to resolve differences without resorting to force, and formed them by their human rights. Peace is concerned with different forms of violence and operates at many different levels of human existence.

The creation of peace is one of the great unsolved human problems. Since the advent of organized societies, human beings have prayed for, dreamed about, and worked to achieve peace. As Albert Einstein said fifty years ago, we stand, therefore, at the parting of the ways. Whether we find the way of peace or continue along the road of brute force, so unworthy of our civilization, depends on ourselves. On the one side the freedom of the individual and the security of society beckon to us; on the other, slavery for the individual and the annihilation of our civilization threaten us. Our fate will be according to our deserts (Harris and Morrison, 2013)

### **Role of religion in Global Peace**

In this section, the focus is on how religion as a whole can be helpful in achieving global peace? Even though, the common hype among the masses is that, religion, more often than not, serves as a wheel to mobilise people towards violence and human atrocities, it can also be a vehicle towards sustainable peace. Religion is the nexus of attitudes, convictions, emotions, gestures, rituals, belief systems and institutions by which we come to terms with and express our most fundamental relationship with God (McBrien, 1984). According to theologian Richard McBrien, this relationship is disclosed by a process called revelation and thus religion is more or less the structured response to that revelation of God. Religion, however, continues to affect people and society at large in different ways. (Ibid). Even the United Nations Organisation along with other world bodies acknowledges

the vital contribution of religion to peace building. Little and Appleby maintain that the United Nations acknowledges this contribution when it states:

...Having established a reputation for integrity and service through constant and direct contact with the masses, a long record of charitable work among people in need and the moral example of its core members, a religious community commands a privileged status among segments of the population (Little and Appleby 2004). According to Johnston Douglas and Brian Cox conflict mediators believe that

.... religion is becoming an increasingly obvious double-edged sword. It can cause conflict and can abate it. Even in those instances where a particular religion may be viewed as part of the problem, whether it is either central to a conflict or has allowed itself to become a mobilising vehicle for nationalist or ethnic passions, such a religion includes in the core of its tradition extensive teachings that encourage neighbourly concern and the betterment of humanity (Doughlas and Cox 2003). According to religion and peace building analyst Cynthia Sampson, in situations where peace building requires restructuring and mediating between parties, addressing structural sources of inequalities that may be present in conflict and the transformation of violent destructive conflict into constructive, peaceful relationships, religion and religious members have been most effective (Sampson 1997). Although religious scholars agree that religious sentiments can be mobilised in violent conflicts, it is equally true that religion can be used to promote peace building and reconciliation between individuals and communities. As custodian of cultural norms and values, religion possesses the potential to address the most profound existential issues of human life, e.g. morality, freedom, fear, security and peace. Religion is deeply rooted in individual and social conceptions of peace. Therefore, the majority of religions have the potential to make a unique contribution to make the world a peaceful place by encouraging their subjects to engage with one another peacefully, using the resources within their own religious tradition to achieve harmony and coexistence on a global scale. On each and every level of peace and confrontation religion has a very high influence on individuals. Due to the belief in God, goodness, sacrifice and the hereafter the majority of the practicing believers especially within Islam or Christianity have a higher chance of tolerance and aim for ever lasting peace even if it leads them to sacrifice their own personal interests.

### **Role of Islam and Christianity in Global Peace**

According to conflict analysts Judy Carter and Gordon Smith, Islam and Christianity uniquely possess and offer a rich abundance of guidance and insight into peace building (Carter and Smith, 2004). The Qur'an and the Bible have ideas in common in terms of moral norms, values and the ethical tradition of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 1-17, Qur'an 17:22-



37). There is a common prophetic tradition which calls on Christians and Muslims to obey these commandments revealed to Moses who is accepted as a prophet of God by Christians and Muslims alike. Martin Bauschke argues in *Jesus and Muhammad as Brothers* that Islam and Christianity tend to unite God's numerous commandments into one most significant commandment, known as the Golden Rule, known in various forms throughout the world: "What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others" (Bauschke, 2008). This is at the heart of all ethical rules and is the basis for human behaviour in both Christianity and Islam (Watt, 1983). There is a similarity between the two religions in moral ideals and individual requirements, which provides an ideal platform to explore and seek a deeper understanding of each other's point of view.

A close reflection on their teachings reveals a striking similarity in their ethical foundations and underlying principles for peace and cooperation. These religious traditions preach peace and advocate a social code that admonishes adherents to love and respect the other. "Do unto other as you would have them do unto you" (the Golden Rule) (Carter and Smith, 2004). Both Christianity and Islam have scriptures (Bible and Qur'an) and have developed an impressive spiritual tradition. They regard faith in God, kindness, charity, compassion, honesty, justice, fairness, equality, sincerity, tolerance, respect, humility, nonviolence, forbearance, self-discipline, moderation, prayer, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace as virtues. The founders of these religions preached peace and lived in peace within their communities. These religions have remained the source of peace and strength for believers, a way of finding meaning to life, communal interaction, dialogue and meeting the spiritual needs of individuals and the community at large. Christianity and Islam offer Christians and Muslims ample resources to address issues of violence, religious stereotypes, the use of aggressive language and utter disrespect of the other. Moreover, the potential for peace and harmony in these religions is of justice, equality, respect for the rights and dignity of others. The Islamic and Christian traditions possess the potential to resolve conflicts, address hostilities and build peace in the world. The differences between the two religious traditions on how to apply God's law in human situations must not hinder cooperation and dialogue, but as the Quran instructs the Muslims and the Christians to hold on to the communalities of worshipping no one but God... (Quran 3:64)

## Human Dignity

The basic criterion for a peaceful world which is common between Islam and Christianity is the criterion of Human dignity. It can be constructed from the Quran as well as the biblical text that everyone has a right to be respected simply because it has a connection to God, the common creator. In Christianity the concept of human dignity is that human dignity

originates from God and is of God because we are made in God's own image and likeness (Gn 1:26-27). Therefore, Human life, regardless of anything else is sacred. Similarly, in Islam it is believed that human beings are the manifestation of God and have the potential of being his vicegerent on earth. The human person is the most central and clearest reflection of God amongst His creation. Human beings have superior worth and this value comes from God. This superiority and dignity is not based on any human quality, legal obligation, or individual merit or achievement. The Quran says, "And We have certainly honoured the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference." (Quran: 17:90) Therefore, Human dignity is inalienable meaning that, it is an essential part of every human being and is an intrinsic quality that can never be separated from other essential aspects of the human essence. And as the bible reminds us that, "When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God (Gn 1:27)."

## Love

In Christianity and Islam, love of God and love of neighbour are essential characteristics of faith in God. There can be no true faith in God without the love of neighbour (Volf, Bin Bhazi & Yar, 2010). The Bible and the Qur'an play a substantial role in the day to day life of Muslims and Christians all over the world. The respected scriptures provide the guide for social, moral and human interaction giving the background for both individual and group identity and also providing hope for the eschatological reign of God in both faith communities (Griswold, 2010). For instance, the Quran 49:13 reads, "O mankind, we created you from a single (pair) of a male and female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other..." while the Bible in Acts of the Apostles 17:26 it says, "from one stock God created the whole human race to live together throughout all the earth....". These scriptural passages acknowledge the fact that Muslims and Christians are of the same origin, created by God, thus they are neighbours and ought to love and respect each other. "People are all God's family, so the dearest people to Him are those who benefit his family the most" (Kulayni, 1987). According to this hadith similar to what is mentioned in the new testament, on the day of Judgement God will ask some people why they did not visit him when he was sick, why they did not feed him whilst he was hungry and why they did not give him water although he was thirsty. Those people will ask: how could these have happened, while you are the Lord of the entire universe? Then God will reply: So and so was sick and you did not visit him, so and so was hungry and you did not feed him and so and so was thirsty and you did not give water to him, did not you know that if you did so you would find me with him.? (Heydarpoor, 2002).



Without a doubt if the communities around the world would be able to adopt this trait the world with all its short comings would be as peaceful as heavens.

## Forgiveness

Errors are a part and parcel of every human's life. Some of them are so small that we hardly consider them as an error and forgive them without thinking twice about them. However, the real test comes when a person is in a situation where he has been forced to go through physical and emotional torture and pain and yet after having the power to punish them forgives them. One of the great arts in life is to learn and master what to forget. Many people harbour their wrath to keep it warm; they brood over their wrongs until it is impossible for them to forget them. Christian love has cultured the great lesson of forgetting (Barclay, 2004). If we absorb these lessons of love, of regulating our tempers and fighting the urge for revenge only then will we be able to practice and later, teach these essential components of the way of peace. The story of Joseph and his brothers is narrated in the Quran as well as in the bible who meet again after a painful history of jealousy, betrayal, guilt and grief. His brothers sold him into slavery, and after many years, they were sitting face to face in dialogue for the purpose of reconciliation. Although the version of the story might be different in both the narrations however the main concept is similar that sincere reconciliation overcomes crises, restores the dignity of individuals and opens up the path to development and lasting peace between peoples at every level. Therefore, there is need to develop a spirituality of peace by forgiveness and reconciliation among neighbours. To forgive and be truly forgiven involves letting go of aggrieved feelings along with thoughts that underlie the feeling of being hurt. Giving up a view of self as a victim and making a sincere physical and spiritual effort to forgive and be forgiven brings a sense of renewal - a shift where blaming others is dismissed and the courage to reach out in a new relationship of friendship and peace is found (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1994).

## Tolerance

'Anger is the root to all evils', says Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his household) (Muhammadi Ray Shahri, 2012). In order to have a peaceful society on a smaller scale and a peaceful world on a larger scale, there are no other alternatives to this priceless ethical value. Religious tolerance recognises that everyone is free publicly and privately, to profess religious belief in teaching, worship and observance. Moreover, human beings are created by one God with the ability to know God. Both the Qur'an and the Bible recognise the diversity of religion (Quran 2:140; Acts 17:22-23). The diversity of religious beliefs in the contemporary world necessitates



tolerance and respect for religious differences. The increase in urban population, and changing social patterns shown in diversity of life and religious beliefs demands understanding for peace and harmony. The crucial challenge for Muslims and Christians alike is, apart from simply imparting the logical and religious basis of tolerance found in the examples of Muhamad and Jesus, to implement them. Religious tolerance challenges Christians and Muslims to accept and respect the integrity and right of the other to be different. Developing an attitude of mutual listening and interest are some of the means to foster peace. Diversity offers opportunities for positive encounters, friendships and collaboration.

## Justice

The biblical and Qur'anic interpretations consider justice to be a vital part of righteousness. One cannot reach righteousness unless being just. One of the primary goals of divine personalities was to establish justice in this world "Indeed, we sent our messengers with clear signs, and sent down with them The Book and The Scales of Justice that people may establish justice" (Quran 57:25). In the bible prophet Amos emphasizes that, "I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:21–24 NIV). This is some of the strongest language in the Bible about worship and justice, and it clearly makes a connection between the two. God "takes no delight" (as some other translations say) in the "noisy" worship of his people if their worship is disconnected from justice — from making things right for those who are poor and oppressed. Exuberant worship can even aloof us from the realities of an unjust world, creating a distance from the God of justice, who is passionate about the world he has created and about all of his children. Consequently, the only way worship can please God is to "let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream." There is an interrelationship between justice and righteousness in the eyes of God. A worshipping community is accepted to God only if its affiliates make justice more possible in the world and act in accordance to it which is itself an act of worship. The act of Practicing justice is considered among righteous acts. This consideration can be seen in the Qur'an as well: "Be just, this is nearer to Righteousness" (5:8). The verse makes it very clear that justice is an integral part of righteousness. So justice, most simply, means placing things in their right places. This act makes us religious and righteous. It also strengthens and restores our relationship with God. Moreover, it demonstrates our love for God and our love for his creation which in turn makes our own worship authentic.



## Common good

Most of the religions regard worship, sacred rituals and sacrifices as symbols of the religiosity, piety and spirituality of a person. Those who abandon their worldly obligations and leave cities and towns for forests and caves to 'meditate' are often called 'holy persons'. Whereas the one who involves himself in farming, trading and other professional activities is regarded as a worldly person. The ground-breaking approach taken by the Qur'an integrates what was traditionally understood as sacred with what was regarded secular. This is done through the Islamic system of Ibadat (devotions and worships) as well as through its teachings on the economy, political affairs and international relations. One important ayah in chapter 2, al-Baqara refers to this integrated approach in the context of social welfare and wellbeing:

‘It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces towards East or West; but it is righteousness to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practise regular charity, to fulfil the contracts which we have made; and to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, God fearing. [Al-Qur'an 2:177]. Similarly, in the Christian faith, justice is regarded as one of the four basic principles in Christian thought (Brunner & Hottinger, 2002). From a biblical perspective, it is primarily concerned with the manner of our conduct with relation to others, especially with regard to the rights of others (Pieper, 1954). The central idea of Islam and Christianity with relation to the other is that of goodness. Both of the divine religions proclaim and preach that one cannot attain true faith unless he/she desires for the other what he/she desires for him/herself. It is noteworthy that both speak of desire which apart from the actual act of giving has an inner meaning that indicates that both the religions preach that even our thoughts should be in such a way that we would want for others that which we would like for ourselves. This, even though many a time might not be practically achievable. One of the ways prescribed in both religions is to do charity. Charity is not only the giving of money to the needy rather it resembles a deeper connection between the creator and one doing charity. St. Augustine summarized much of Christian thought about charity when he says that Charity is a virtue which, when our affections are perfectly ordered, unites us to God. As it is only through those acts that unity and love for God can be realised. Using this definition and others from the Christian tradition, the medieval theologians, especially St. Thomas Aquinas placed charity in the context of the other Christian virtues and stated its role as ‘the foundation or root’ of them all (Britannica, 2016). While in Islam, the emphasis is to such an extent that giving charity is considered obligatory upon the believers and those who deny this obligation

have rejected their faith in Allah. In the Qur'an, Allah describes those who prevent the supporting of orphans and the feeding of the poor as "those who reject the faith" (Qur'an 107:1-3)

### Non-violence

Even though Islam and Christianity have been portrayed as supporters of violence, very little evidence can be found in their texts or doctrine. One may refute the above claim due to the presence of violent verses in Islamic and Christian text but as mentioned in the previous chapters the main ideology in both the religions denounce and reject violence. As Micheline Ishay has argued that the Qur'an justifies wars for mainly self-defence in order to protect oneself or to protect Islamic communities against internal or external hostility by non-Islamic populations. It permits physical jihad to defend itself from the wars waged against those who 'violate their oaths' by breaking a treaty (Ishay, 2008). British orientalist Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner stated that jihad, even in self-defence has been strictly limited and has its own conditions (Leitner, 1886). The instances mentioned for jihad are normally interpreted out of context for political gains. The conditions of aggression, violation of a treaty or self-defence are considered as every person's right and by no means considered to be violence. The Qur'an explicitly and comprehensively denounces violence saying, that the person who kills an innocent soul has killed the whole of humanity or as Jesus proclaims, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Race!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire" (Matthew, 21-23)



## Conclusion

Even though there are many ideological differences between the two major religions of the world, there are, as mentioned above, many common grounds on which the two divine religions can focus upon to bring about a change in the society for a peaceful world. If the followers of the two respected religions which constitute more than 50% of the total believing men and women on this planet were to believe that their religion instructs them to observe the socio-ethical codes of love, human dignity, tolerance, forgiveness, non-violence, justice and common good there would be a remarkable amount of decrease in crime, war, hatred, jealousy etc. A four-year longitudinal, stratified, random sample study of high school students in the Rocky Mountain region, published in 1975, demonstrated that religious involvement significantly decreased drug use, delinquency, and premarital sex, and also increased self-control (John and Jessor, 1975). A 1989 study of Midwestern high school students replicated these findings (Cochran, 1989) and as many other researchers have also found, believing people have significantly lesser chances to get into crimes. It is due to these qualities which gives the faithful community an edge over the others when it comes to social interactions. Because the more socially good we are the more it increases our faith, the more faithful we become and will be able to fulfil the goal of creation in accordance to our respective religious ideologies.



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