

# **The Bible and The Quran**

## **Revelations, Commonalities and Differences**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Similarities of the teachings of the Quran and the Bible</b> By Ejaz Naqvi, M.D. Ejaz Naqvi, M.D.	5
<b>Tanakh, Holy Bible and Quran</b> By Rabbi Pamela Frydman	14
<b>The Role and Position of Women in the Bible: A Critical Look at the Prevailing Interpretations</b> By Despina Namwembe	23
<b>Pluralism in Quran: Results of Divisive Interpretation</b> By Iftekhar Hai	29
<b>Brief Bios for the Authors and Presenters</b>	33



# Similarities of the teachings of the Quran and the Bible

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## Introduction and Background:

Religion has been used to divide people and is blamed for violence throughout the history. In more recent times, Islam and its teachings have come under the limelight, especially after the geopolitical events of the past fifteen years or so. Despite this newfound fame, the teachings of the Holy Quran remain arcane. Many mainstream polls in the U.S.A. have consistently shown that most Americans view Muslims, or Islam, unfavorably. Muslims scored the lowest points (40% favorable) in a recent Pew research study, compared to Jews (63%) and Catholics (62%)<sup>2</sup>. Zogby Associates showed a similar trend. According to their findings, attitudes towards Arabs declined from 43% in 2010 to 32% in 2014. Attitudes toward Muslims declined from 35% in 2010 to 27% in 2014.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, most people who have a negative opinions about the teachings of the Quran and the Bible have actually not read these scriptures from cover-to-cover and their sources of information are often secondhand and frequently cited out of context. This was confirmed by the same study, showing that 64% of Americans “do not know enough about Islam and Muslims.” This clearly implies a need for American Muslims to engage in outreach and become more involved in the mainstream.

In addition to the perception that the Scriptures promote hatred and violence against each other, similar misperceptions and myths are prevalent about how women are perceived in the Scriptures of the Abrahamic faiths. But do the Quran and the Bible really send their followers conflicting messages? Do the Quran and the Bible truly render women as second-class citizens? This paper will analyze various passages from the Scriptures to answer these questions.

Religion has been used to divide people for centuries. Jews, Christians and Muslims have been at odds with one another at various times during the past two millennia. Many believe that the teachings of the Scriptures are the root cause these problems, socio-political complexities notwithstanding. It may, therefore, come as a surprise to many that the teachings of the Quran and the Bible have more in common than in difference. When I started to study the Quran in earnest some twenty years, it became quite apparent to me that the teachings of the Quran are universal and inclusive. The study of the Quran actually prompted me to read the Bible and that's when I started to realize that the Quran and the Bible have much more in common than commonly perceived. This paper will mainly focus on the similarities of the core teachings of the Scriptures, while acknowledging that significant differences do exist. The Scriptures cited below are the Quran, the Old Testament (Tanakh) and the New Testament.

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<sup>1</sup> Ejaz Naqvi, MD, is the author of the Amazon bestselling book, *“The Quran: With or Against the Bible? A Topic By Topic Review For The Investigative Mind.”*

<sup>2</sup> “How Americans feel about religious groups”. Pew Research Center. [www.pewresearch.org/religion](http://www.pewresearch.org/religion) . July 16, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> American Attitude towards Arabs and Muslims. Arab American institute. July 29, 2014.

## Common Teachings:

The common teachings of the Quran and the Bible may be grouped into three broad categories.

- A. Core beliefs
- B. Code of conduct
- C. Prophetic stories

Due to the limitation of space, only an outline of the aforementioned teachings will be presented here. For the same reason, a very small set of verses will be mentioned to support each argument. My colleague, Rabbi Pam Frydman is covering some of the prophetic stories in her paper. This paper does not cover those stories, but I do want to mention that the stories of Adam, Noah and the floods, Moses and the Israelites and Joseph's stories are strikingly similar in the Quran and the Bible.

### A. Core beliefs:

Belief in God, prophets, angels and the Day of Judgment are common to the teachings of the Quran, New Testament and Old Testament, though we must also realize that the meaning of "believer" may and does vary.

1. **Belief in God:** It is widely understood that the belief in God is essential. The attributes of God are also very similar. Indeed the Abrahamic Scriptures can be easily labeled as God-centric. The book of Genesis (the first book of the Torah, Tanakh, and Holy Bible) starts with the mention of God and His creation.<sup>4</sup> Not only does it start with God, but also one of His key attributes is clearly emphasized, namely, that He is the Creator of everything. Similarly, the Quran starts with "*In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.*"<sup>5</sup> Every chapter (surah) of the Quran starts with this verse, except chapter 9. Note that not only does the verse begin with His name, but it is also followed by two of His attributes. It is also worthy of our contemplation that He chose to use these two attributes as opposed to attributes reflecting His powers (such as Almighty, All-Powerful, the Judge, etc.). Perhaps this should serve as a reminder as to how we should view Him as in our daily lives. The first surah (chapter) of the Quran, named Al-Fatiha (The Opening) is considered the heart and soul of the Quran. It starts with "*Praise be to Allah, the Lord of all the worlds ("Alhamdu Lillahe Rabb ul Alaimeen")*".<sup>6</sup> Note that the Quran emphasizes that Allah is *Rabb ul Alaimeen*, or Lord of the worlds, and not just the *Rabb ul Muslimee,n* or Lord of Muslims, once again pointing to the pluralistic message of the Quran, right from the very beginning.

2. **Oneness of God ("Tawheed"):** Another key message of the Bible and the Quran is that God is One. This is more than a numeric concept, as the mutual belief is that God is beyond our imagination and beyond limits, and therefore, assigning a number does not seem accurate. Indeed this attribute refers to His *uniqueness*; more than his numeric attribute and that there is no one like God.<sup>7</sup> The Oneness of God serves as a foundation for the Islamic belief and serves

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<sup>4</sup> "In the beginning, God created heavens and the earth." Genesis 1:1 (NLT)

<sup>5</sup> "Bismillah Ar Rehman Ar Raheem"

<sup>6</sup> The Quran 1:1

<sup>7</sup> The Quran 42:11, Exodus 8:10, Deuteronomy 4:32 and 33:26, 2 Samuel 7:22,

as the first half of “Shahada” for Muslims.<sup>8</sup> This is emphasized repeatedly in the Quran and the references here are a small sample of such verses: *“Your god is one God; there is no one worthy of worship except Him, the Compassionate, the Merciful.”* Or *“ That surely your God is One...”*<sup>9</sup> Another myth, at least in the minds of some Muslims, is that the Bible does not emphasize *Tawheed*, or Oneness of God. But the fact is that the Ten Commandments of the Torah start with declaring *Tawheed* and the prohibition of polytheism.<sup>10</sup> The Hebrew prayer *Shema* starts with a verse from Deuteronomy, *“Hear O’ Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one.”*<sup>11</sup> The Hebrew word *Ekhad* used to describe God’s Oneness is phonetically similar to the Quranic word *Ahad* with the same meaning.

**3. Submission to God.** Islam means “submission (to God’s will)”. It is one of the key commandments, repeatedly emphasized in the Quran. *“Nay, whoever submits his whole self to Allah and is a doer of good, he will get his reward with his Lord; on such shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.”*<sup>12</sup> However, the submission to God is a subject of the Bible as well. For instance, the New Testament Book of James commands the followers to do just that: *“Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and the devil will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”*<sup>13</sup> Similarly the concept of “d’veikut”, meaning, “clinging “ (to God) with faith and devotion is a key concept in Judaism. The daily Jewish prayer, *Shema*, starts with declaration of God’s oneness and is followed by, *“ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might....”*<sup>14</sup>

**4. Other attributes of God:** Both in the Quran and the Bible, God has been referred to as light<sup>15</sup>, Kind and Loving<sup>16</sup>, the Creator<sup>17</sup>, God is the First and the Last<sup>18</sup>, God is *the Judge*<sup>19</sup> and Almighty<sup>20</sup>. This is, of course, a very small sample, not only of all of God’s attributes mentioned in the Quran and the Bible, but also of the verses that reflect these attributes.

**5. Beliefs in prophets, angels and the Day of Judgment:** The Quran and the Bible mentions various prophets and angels and that they served as His messengers to mankind, or to a specific group of people in history. The agreement is not complete, however. Judaism does not recognize Jesus or Muhammad, peace be upon them, as prophets. Christians do recognize the Hebrew prophets, but not Muhammad. The Quran asks its followers to recognize and respect all of these prophets and, in fact repeatedly, mandates the followers to not make any distinction between prophets.<sup>21</sup> However, the Quran also calls certain prophets more exalted than the others (*Ulul Azm* prophets). These are Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad.

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<sup>8</sup> “There is no god but God, and Muhammad, PBUH, is His (final) Prophet.”

<sup>9</sup> The Quran 2:163, 16:51, 17:22-23, 37:4-5, 112:1-4

<sup>10</sup> “ I am the Lord, your God...You shall have no gods before me”. Exodus 20:2-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21

<sup>11</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4

<sup>12</sup> The Quran 2:112

<sup>13</sup> James 4:7-8

<sup>14</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4-9

<sup>15</sup> The Quran 24:35, Isaiah 60:19, Revelation 21:23

<sup>16</sup> The Quran 1:2, 85:14, 2:2017, 59:10, Psalm 36:7, Nehemiah 9:31, 1 John 4:16

<sup>17</sup> The Quran 6:1,36:36, 39:62, Genesis 1:1-4, Psalm 148:2-5

<sup>18</sup> The Quran 57:1, Isaiah 44:6, Revelation 1:8

<sup>19</sup> The Quran 95:8, Psalm 7:11, James 4:12

<sup>20</sup> “Al-Qadir” and “Al-Jalil” in the Quran, Joshua 22:22, Job 36:32, Revelation 1:8

<sup>21</sup> The Quran 2:136, 2:85, 3:84 & 4:152

## Similarities of the teachings of the Quran and the Bible

In addition, the Quran also exalts David and Adam. “*Allah did choose Adam and Noah, the family of Abraham, and family of Imran above all people*”.<sup>22</sup> Special peace and salutations are offered to Abraham and Muhammad. Abraham is widely viewed as the father of monotheistic faiths. In fact, the Quran calls Islam the “*Deen-e-Ibrahimi* (The religion of Abraham): “*Say (O Muhammad) Surely (as for) me, my Lord has guided me to the right path, a most right religion, the faith of Abraham....*”<sup>23</sup>. Many other references to Islam being the religion or way of Abraham are mentioned in verses 2:130-131, 2:135-136, 4:125, 16:120-123 and 22:78. The Quran considers all prophets as Muslims (submitters), since they all brought the same basic message from the same God. **Therefore, it should not surprise anyone that the Quran asks its followers to recognize and respect all prophets.**

Angels are mentioned in the Quran and the Bible, some more specifically, such as Gabriel (*Jibraeel*), considered to be an archangel. They are assigned various functions, including conveying the message of God to certain prophets. Muslims believe God spoke to Muhammad, PBUH, through angel Gabriel. The Quran also mentions that God spoke directly to some (Moses)<sup>24</sup>, though it is also implied that Abraham also spoke with God directly.

Both the Quran and the Bible speak to eschatology -- death, the end of times and a Day of Judgment, where there will be only one judge. However, the Scriptures vary greatly in terms of the details of the life hereafter. By far, the most detailed accounts are found in the Quran, and the least detailed are in the Old Testament. The New Testament is somewhere in between in this respect. The Quran teaches that we all came from God and to Him is our return, making “life” a two-way trip and death being a transition, and not merely an end of life. “*To Allah we belong, and to Him is our return*” is a frequent verse that Muslims recite when hearing about the death of someone.<sup>25</sup> Life on earth is viewed as a transit. This fact is variously narrated in the Old Testament as well. “*I am here on earth for just a little while, do not hide your commands from me*”.<sup>26</sup> “*Remember how short my life is, how empty and futile this human existence! No one can live forever; all will die...*”<sup>27</sup>

### **B. Code of Conduct:**

Both the Quran and the Bible repeatedly command their followers to pursue a certain code of conduct in their daily life. The overarching theme being summarized in the Quran as *Amr bil Maroof* (Enjoin what is good) and *Nahi Anil munkar* (forbid what is evil). “And from among you, there should be a party who invites to good and enjoins what is right and forbid what is wrong”.<sup>28</sup> *Ma’asim tovim*, meaning good works and actions, may be viewed as the Hebrew equivalent of *Amr bil Maroof*. The Jewish Talmud describes 613 commandments, derived from the Torah, of which 248 are “positive commandments” (The “Do’s”), and 365 are “negative commandments” (the “Do Not’s”). They cover a wide range of personal and social life, including worship, charity, marital laws, treatment of servants, judicial system and code of conduct during wars.

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<sup>22</sup> The Quran 3:33

<sup>23</sup> The Quran 6:161

<sup>24</sup> The Quran 4:164

<sup>25</sup> The Quran 2:156

<sup>26</sup> Psalm 119:19

<sup>27</sup> Psalm 89:47-48

<sup>28</sup> The Quran 3:104



The Quran commands the followers to conduct themselves in the best of a manners that includes being honest and truthful<sup>29</sup>, to avoid anger and to be forgiving<sup>30</sup>, and to be kind to each other<sup>31</sup>. In fact, a Hadith (saying of Prophet Muhammad) asks the followers to go even beyond showing kindness to fellow humans. *“Those who are kind and considerate to Allah’s creatures, Allah bestows His kindness and affection on them. Show kindness to the creatures of earth so Allah may be kind to you.”* In multiple places, the Quran commands kindness to parents (6:151), spouses even in the setting of divorce (2:229), the orphans, the widows and the needy. The Quran asks the followers to be humble and modest<sup>32</sup>, avoid slander<sup>33</sup>, and considers adultery a big sin<sup>34</sup>. Verse 2:177 defines “righteousness” and in many ways, summarizes the beliefs and many of the “good” deeds: *“It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the East and the West, but righteousness is this that one should believe in Allah and the last day and the angels and the Book and the prophets, and give away wealth out of love for Him to the near of kin and the orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and the beggars and for (the emancipation of) the captives, and keep up prayer and pay the poor-rate; and the performers of their promise when they make a promise, and the patient in distress and affliction and in time of conflicts-- these are they who are true (to themselves) and these are they who guard (against evil).”*

Similarly, the Bible emphasizes on the righteousness: *“And the LORD our God commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear Him so He can continue to bless us and preserve our lives, as He has done to this day. For we will be counted as righteous when we obey all the commands the LORD our God has given us.”*<sup>35</sup>. The Bible asks the followers to show kindness, mercy and forgiveness towards each other: *“Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you”*<sup>36</sup>. Jesus, in one of his many sermons to his followers, tells them to guard against slander, bad language, lust and immorality.<sup>37</sup> Similar emphasis is applied to humility<sup>38</sup>, and the virtues of humility are well summarized in one of my favorite passages- *“But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”*<sup>39</sup>

### **The Golden rule:**

Variations of the golden rule may be found in many religions, not just the Abarahamic faiths. Various religions asks the followers to treat others the way they would like to be treated, assuming that every one would like to be treated with dignity, justice, kindness and in a good manner, without harsh words and prejudice. If everyone followed their own version of the golden rule, it can be safely assumed that many of the social injustices would be eliminated, leading to peace and harmony among people of various faiths. *“In everything, therefore, treat people the same*

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<sup>29</sup> The Quran 9:119, 40:28

<sup>30</sup> The Quran 42:37, 3:134, 42:40, 42:43

<sup>31</sup> The Quran 4:36

<sup>32</sup> The Quran 31:18, 25:63, 31:19

<sup>33</sup> The Quran 49:12, 24:23

<sup>34</sup> The Quran 17:32, 25:68

<sup>35</sup> Deuteronomy 6:24-25

<sup>36</sup> Ephesians 4:31-32

<sup>37</sup> Matthew 5:21-22, Colossians 3:5-9, James 1:19-20

<sup>38</sup> James 4:6-7, James 4:10

<sup>39</sup> Matthew 23-12, Luke 14:11

Similarities of the teachings of the Quran and the Bible

*way you want them to treat you, for this is (essence of) the Law of Moses and the Prophets.”<sup>40</sup> The Jewish version of the golden rule is derived from the teachings of Hillel. It is based on of a verse from Leviticus 19: 18 that states: *You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk. Love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.* It is reported that once a gentile came to Hillel and asked to be converted to Judaism under the condition that the entire Torah be explained to him while he stood on one foot. Hillel responded with what is now regarded as the golden rule of Judaism, *“What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn.”<sup>41</sup>**

Similarly, a Hadith from Prophet Muhammad states *“Not one of you truly believes until you wish for your brother (others) what you wish for yourself.”*

### **Women as second-class citizens?**

I will only briefly review some issues related to women in my paper as one of my colleagues, Despina Namwembe has reflected upon this issue in more detail in her paper. I will also limit most of my discussion concerning the Quranic passages as my colleague Iftexhar Hai has reflected upon them in his paper.

Both the Quran and the Bible have been accused of treating women as second-class citizens. Given some of the images of women in some Muslim countries, the Quran perhaps has received even more scrutiny, at least in recent times and in mainstream western media. Hijab has been viewed as a sign of oppression. Some practices, such as not allowing women to drive in Saudi Arabia, are seen as universal Islamic practices. There are reports of women still having to sit in the back of public buses in certain Ultra Orthodox Jewish areas in Israel, though some do not view this as a sign of mistreatment, but rather of respect, so as to not to allow males to look at females from behind. There are also published reports of Ultra Orthodox Jews refusing to sit next to women on airplanes.<sup>42</sup> Are these practices consistent with the teachings of the Scriptures? Are Scriptures really teaching us to treat women as second-class or are we misinterpreting the Scriptures based on our own biases and socio-cultural background? Let us review the teachings of the Quran to separate the myths from the realities.

The highest form of “gender equality” in the Quran is considered the spiritual equality. No one is “superior” and no one is ‘closer” to God, except by their faith and good deeds, whether men or women. There is a wide perception among the followers of the Scriptures that women are spiritually inferior. However, as we will see here, this is not consistent with the teachings of the Quran. *“Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has Faith, verily, to him will We give a new Life, a life that is good and pure and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions.”<sup>43</sup>* A similar theme is presented in another verse: *“So their Lord accepted their prayer: That I will not waste the work of a worker among you, whether male or female.”<sup>44</sup>* Yet another verse emphasizes the same, without mentioning women, men or any race. *“Verily, the*

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<sup>40</sup> Matthew 7:12

<sup>41</sup> Shabaath 31 a, Babylonian Talmud

<sup>42</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/30/orthodox-jewish-flight-delay\\_n\\_5902078.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/30/orthodox-jewish-flight-delay_n_5902078.html), September 30, 2014

<sup>43</sup> The Quran 16:97

<sup>44</sup> The Quran 3:195

*most honored among you in the sight of God is the one who is most righteous (period)...*<sup>45</sup>. This means we are **not** judged by our gender, race, socioeconomic status, nationality or religious title, but rather by the righteous deeds, which are variously spelled out in many verses in the Quran. Prophet Muhammad also further communicated this theme in his famous last sermon at the occasion of Hajj as follows: *“All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over a white – except by piety and good action.”*

Jewish views about the separation of men and women in certain settings is discussed at length by Jewish commentators.<sup>46</sup>

### **Husband-Wife relationship:**

The Quran declares that the union between men and women is a holy one since His name is invoked. Not only that, but this relation must be built upon a foundation of love and kindness. *“And one of His signs is that He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest in them, and He put between you love and compassion; most surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect.”*<sup>47</sup>

One of the chapters in the Quran is in fact named Al Nisa, or The Women. It spells out the roles and rights of the women, though in maintaining the tradition of the Quran, the chapter is not exclusive to the women’s issues. In pre-Islamic Arabia, there was a practice of practically selling women as gifts for marriage. The Quran prohibited that and declared that women cannot be given as wives against their will. The Quran goes on to command the followers to treat women as equals. *“O you who believe! You are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should you treat them with harshness, that you may take away part of the dower you have given them, except where they have been guilty of open lewdness; on the contrary live with them on a footing of kindness and equity...”*<sup>48</sup> Moreover, this command to be kind to women was **not only** during marriage, but even in the setting of a divorce, men are commanded to be fair and kind. Divorce must be considered only as a last resort when all attempts towards reconciliation fail. The verse ends with a warning to those who take undue advantage of women. *“When you divorce women, and they fulfill the term of their (’Iddat) (practically a cooling off period), either take them back on equitable terms (in kindness) or part with them on equitable terms (in kindness); but do not take them back to injure them, (or) to take undue advantage; if any one does that; He wrongs his own soul. Do not treat Allah’s Signs (verses) as a jest (mockery)...”*<sup>49</sup>. A similar message appears in verse 65:2. A review of Prophet Muhammad’s life clearly shows he exemplified these Quranic principles. His relationship with his first wife Khadija, and his youngest wife Aisha, clearly reveals a relationship built upon trust, love and respect. Aisha is known to have openly argue, and even questioned Prophet Muhammad on some occasions, once again showing that the relationship was built on equal footing despite Prophet Muhammad’s undisputed status as a religious, spiritual and state leader at the time.

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<sup>45</sup> The Quran 49:13

<sup>46</sup> Here are two examples: <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/jewfaq/women.htm> and [http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/letters/default\\_cdo/aid/1440261/jewish/Why-Separate-Men-and-Women-in-the-Synagogue.htm](http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/letters/default_cdo/aid/1440261/jewish/Why-Separate-Men-and-Women-in-the-Synagogue.htm)

<sup>47</sup> The Quran: 30:21

<sup>48</sup> The Quran 4:19

<sup>49</sup> The Quran 2:231

Similarities of the teachings of the Quran and the Bible

We should remember that the woman (Eve) came out from the man's (Adam's) ribs (side). Not from his feet to be walked upon. Not from his head to be superior. But from his side to be **equal**, under his arms to be protected, near his heart to be loved.

### **Hijab:**

This is probably the most misunderstood aspect involving women, both by Muslims and people of other faiths. There are many myths such as:

- a. Hijab means head covering;
- b. Hijab is for women only;
- c. That *this* Hijab is commanded by the Quran;
- d. That *this* Hijab is commanded for Muslims only.

A critical review of the Quran actually shows that none of the above are true, at least not entirely.

Hijab, in its larger meaning, refers to a code of conduct based upon modesty for **both** men and women. The word Hijab, or its derivative, is mentioned in the Quran seven times, but **not once** related to head covering, as we now know it. Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf has written a beautiful article on this subject, outlining various prevailing myths and misinterpretations.<sup>50</sup> He states, *"the word is used in the sense of a "barrier" or "screen," for example between Heaven and Hell (7:46) or between the Prophet and unbelievers (17:45)."*

There are two verses in the Quran that do address modesty and head coverings. *"Tell the believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity, and not to display their charms beyond what may be (decently) apparent thereof; hence, let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms".*<sup>51</sup> It is of note that when the Quran does talk about modesty, it addresses men **first** in a verse that immediately precedes verse 24: 31 noted above. This a fact often overlooked by zealous Muslim men eager to enforce Hijab on their women. Another verse commanding the followers to practice "Hijab" is found in verse 33:59.

It is noteworthy that the practice of the veil or head covering preceded the revelation of the Quran. The Old and New Testaments have variously described women wearing a veil and a head covering. For example: *"Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening; and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, camels were coming. Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she dismounted from the camel. She said to the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field to meet us?" And the servant said, "He is my master. Then she took her veil and covered herself."*<sup>52</sup> And in the following set of verses, Paul addresses Timothy in one of his letters, giving him many instructions. *"And I want women to be modest in their appearance. They should wear decent and appropriate clothing and not draw attention to themselves by the way they fix their hair or by wearing gold or pearls or expensive clothes. For women who claim to be devoted to God should make themselves attractive by the good things they do."*<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2014/08/19/To-wear-scarf-or-not-to-wear-scarf/>

<sup>51</sup> The Quran 24:31

<sup>52</sup> Genesis 24: 63-65

<sup>53</sup> 1 Timothy 2:9-10

Mary is considered an exalted woman in the Quran, Many of the images of Mary found in churches and Christian drawings depict her wearing a headscarf. Nuns have been required to cover their heads until recently. During my presentation, I will show an old picture of a nun from the St. Joseph School in Karachi, Pakistan, wearing a "Hijab". It is also interesting that a seemingly Muslim woman next to her is actually the one **not** wearing the "Hijab".

### **Conclusion:**

It must be emphasized that the only Quran that is considered to be "the Quran" is the Quran in its original language -- Arabic. All translations from the original Arabic are considered just that -- translations. They introduce a human element along with their inherent biases based upon social, cultural and personal knowledge, biases and limitations. The same may be said about the Bible, realizing that the original Tanakh was revealed in Hebrew, and that we may not have the "original" version of the Tanakh available. Thus, the Tanakh is also subject to the same biases and limitations as the Quran. It is also common knowledge that Jesus spoke Aramaic, but the original Gospels were written in Greek many years after the time of Jesus, and these Gospels were then translated back into Aramaic years after the "original" was written. These are important facts to remember when debating the teachings of the Scriptures.

It is my hope that -- despite these limitations -- I was able to demonstrate that the core messages of the Quran and the Bible have much in common, whether related to our belief system or to our daily lives and code of conduct involving relationships between men and women, relationships with our neighbors and other issues related to social justice. It is natural to have disagreements and varied viewpoints, and when we do, we should agree to disagree in a civil manner. Given the commonalities, it is further hoped that realizing and celebrating our common values will result in building strong relationships between people of various faiths, hopefully resulting in long lasting peace and harmony -- Amen/Ameen.



# Tanakh, Holy Bible and Quran

By Rabbi Pamela Frydman<sup>54</sup>

Parliament of World's Religion  
October 17, 2015, Salt Lake City, UT

## Introduction:

The Tanakh,<sup>55</sup> the Holy Bible and the Holy Quran have much in common. One commonality is that each was revealed in a language, and has been translated into many other languages.<sup>56</sup> Translations are essential for those not fluent in the original language. However, translations tend to lose the original linguistic idiom and are limited by the spiritual capacity and motives of the translator. This is discussed at some length by Dr. Ejaz Naqvi in his article entitled, "Similarities of the teachings of the Quran and the Bible" and by Iftekhar Hai in his article entitled, "Pluralism in Quran: The Results of Divisive Interpretation." Notwithstanding the challenges posed by a world of human beings who speak diverse languages, I believe it is possible to learn from our own respective scriptures as well as from one another's.

## Background:

The Jewish scriptures are called Tanakh or Hebrew Bible. Tanakh is a Hebrew acronym. "T" stands for "Torah," meaning "Teaching." The Torah includes 5 books, sometimes called the Five Books of Moses. "N" stands for "Nevee'eem," meaning "Prophets." Nevee'eem contains 8 books. "K" stands for "Ketuvim," meaning "Writings." Ketuvim contains 11 books.

The Christian scriptures are called the Holy Bible. The Holy Bible consists of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Some Christian Bibles also include books of the Apocrypha.

The original text of the Old Testament is exactly the same as the Tanakh. However, Jews and Christians divide the books differently. Christians count First and Second Kings, First and Second Isaiah, and First and Second Chronicles as two books each, whereas Jews count them as one book each. Christians count the prophetic book *Trey Asar* as 12 separate books, whereas Jews count it as one book. Thus, the Old Testament contains 39 books and the Tanakh contains 24 books even though the word for word text of the Tanakh and the Old Testament are identical.

The second part of the Christian scriptures is the New Testament, which contains the revelation and teachings of Jesus and the Apostles. To the best of my knowledge, all Christians divide the text of the New Testament into 27 books. However, the ordering of these 27 books is different in the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions.

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<sup>54</sup> Rabbi Pamela Frydman is a Jewish leader; a teacher in Sufi Ruhaniat International and the Inayati-Maimouni Order; and author of *Calling on God, Sacred Jewish Teachings for Seekers of All Faiths*.

<sup>55</sup> Tanakh is pronounced "tah - nach". "Ch" is pronounced as in (Johann Sebastian) "Bach".

<sup>56</sup> The Book of Daniel is in Aramaic and Hebrew. The other books of the Tanakh/Old Testament are in Hebrew. The Quran is in Arabic. Some believe the New Testament was originally in Aramaic. However, most Biblical scholars believe the Greek text is the original and the Aramaic is a translation from Greek. I have been blessed to inherit Murshid Samuel L. Lewis' Hebrew-English New Testament with Hebrew translated from the Greek.

The Apocrypha includes such books as Judith, the Maccabees and a number of other volumes. Jews do not consider the Apocrypha to be part of the Tanakh. Some Christians consider the Apocrypha to be part of the Holy Bible, while others do not. Christian Holy Bibles that include books of the Apocrypha place them in three different configurations: between the Old Testament and the New Testament; at the end of the New Testament; and interspersed amongst the books of the Old and New Testaments.<sup>57</sup>

The Holy Quran consists of 114 surahs (chapters) of varying lengths. Each surah has a name and a theme. The content of each surah is distinct, yet all the surahs -- except surah 9 -- begin with the words, "*Bismillah, ar-Rehman ar-Raheem*," "*in the name of G-o-d, the Gracious, the Merciful*".<sup>58</sup> There are a number of possible derivations for the term "al-Quran." Two that I have learned are that al-Quran derives from "*al-Qar*," meaning "*to collect*," or from "*Qara*," meaning "*to recite*."

### **Common Teachings: universal divine revelation**

All three scriptures contain universal divine revelation. The opening surah of Quran -- surah al-Fatihah begins: "*In the name of G-d, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Praise be to G-d, Master of all the worlds. The Compassionate, the Merciful. Ruler on the Day of Judgment.*"<sup>59</sup> Dr. Naqvi points out that surah al-Fatihah says, "*Master of all the worlds*" and not "*Master of all the Muslims*". We see a similar phenomenon in the Tanakh and the New Testament. It says in the Tanakh, "*And God said, Let us make Adam in Our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So G-o-d created Adam in G-o-d's own image, in the image of G-o-d did G-o-d create Adam; male and female G-o-d created them.*"<sup>60</sup> This does not say that G-o-d created Jewish people. Rather it says that G-o-d created all people. Similarly, in the Gospel of John, it says: "*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with G-o-d and the Word was G-o-d.*"<sup>61</sup> John does not limit this teaching to Christians or to the Christian Word of G-o-d. Rather, he speaks of G-o-d in the universal.

### **Common Teachings: Yusuf, Yosef, Joseph**

In addition to teachings about G-d, the Judeo-Christian-Muslim scriptures also teach about human beings. Surah 12 of the Quran is called Surah Yusuf. Many of the stories in Surah Yusuf are also found in the Book of Genesis in the Tanakh/Old Testament.<sup>62</sup> In both tellings, Yusuf/ Yosef/Joseph is a youth, he dreams that the sun, moon and stars bow down to him and he tells the dream to his father. In the Quran, Yusuf's brothers throw him down a well. In the Tanakh/Old Testament,

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<sup>57</sup> See <http://sacred-texts.com/bib/apo/index.htm>.

<sup>58</sup> Bismillah, ar-Rehman ar-Raheem. I have also seen this holy phrase translated, "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful", "In the name of Allah, Most Compassionate, Most Merciful", "in the name of Allah, Most Beneficent, Most Merciful" and "in the name of Allah, infinitely Compassionate and Merciful".

<sup>59</sup> *Bismillaah ar-Rehman ar-Raheem, al Hamdu Lillaahi rabbil 'alameen, ar-Rehman ar-Raheem Maaliki yaumid Deen*".

<sup>60</sup> Genesis 1:26-27. *Vayomeyr Eh - lo - heem naaseh adam b'tzalmeynu keed-mu-teynu v'yeerdu veed-gat hayam uva'ohf hashamayeem uvabeheyimah uvechol ha-aretz uvechol haremes haromes al ha'aretz. Va-yeevrah Eh - lo - heem et ha-adam betzalmo betzelem Eh - lo - heem bara oto, zachar unekeyvah barah otam.*

<sup>61</sup> John 1:1

<sup>62</sup> The Biblical stories of Yosef/Joseph are in Genesis chapters 37 through 50. These chapters are known in Jewish as Parshiyot Vayeysheyv through Vayechi.



Yosef's brothers throw him into a pit. In both stories, Yosef/Yusuf is taken by caravan to Egypt where he is sold. In the Tanakh/Old Testament, Yosef is sold to Potiphar. Potiphar's wife desires Yosef and tries to seduce him. She takes hold of Yosef's garment. Yosef pulls away and flees, leaving his garment in her hand. She calls to her male servants and accuses Yosef of trying to lay with her. Yosef is sent to prison.

In the Quran, Yusuf is sold to Aziz. Aziz suggests to his wife that Yusuf may bring them goodness and perhaps they will adopt him. However, after Yusuf grows to manhood, the wife of Aziz desires Yusuf and tries to seduce him. Yusuf tries to flee and the wife of Aziz runs after him. As Yusuf makes his way to the door, she takes hold of his shirt and his shirt tears from the back. Aziz appears at that moment. Yusuf pleads his case and Aziz sides with Yusuf, because Yusuf's shirt is torn from the back, which supports Yusuf's claim that he was trying to escape. The wife of Aziz then prepares a banquet for ladies who have been gossiping about her desire for Yusuf. She arranges for a knife to be placed at each table setting. She asks Yusuf to come out before the gathered ladies who become so enamored that they cut themselves. Yusuf chooses prison over being seduced.

According to the Tanakh/Old Testament, Pharaoh's cup bearer recounts Yosef's capacity for interpreting dreams. Pharaoh has Yosef brought from prison in order to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. At first, Yosef tells Pharaoh that it is "*G-o-d who will interpret Pharaoh's dreams*" and then Yosef proceeds to interpret the dreams to Pharaoh's satisfaction. Pharaoh puts Yosef in charge of the storehouses of Egypt and elevates him to a role second only to Pharaoh himself. According to the Quran, the one who pours wine for the king arranges for Yusuf to interpret the king's dreams. The king sends a messenger to bring Yusuf from prison. Yusuf tells the messenger: "*Go back to your lord [the king] and ask him 'What is the state of mind of the ladies who cut their hands? For my Lord [G-o-d] is certainly aware of their snare.'*" The king asks the ladies what happened when Yusuf sought to seduce them. The ladies say, "*we do not know any evil against him.*" The wife of Aziz then says, "*Now is the truth manifest. It was I who sought to seduce him from his self. He is indeed of those who are true.*" The wife of Aziz goes on to say that she was never false to Yusuf in his absence. Muslim commentators contend that Yusuf and the wife of Aziz were in love, but Yusuf refused to act upon their love because of his fidelity to his master Aziz.

The king calls for Yusuf to be brought from prison and says, "*Be assured this day that you are, before our own Presence, with rank firmly established and fidelity fully proven.*" Yusuf asks to be placed in charge of the storehouses so he may guard them. Yusuf's power is, thereby, established in the land. The Quran teaches that Yusuf was destined to save both the Egyptians and his own extended family from starvation. The Tanakh/Old Testament contains the very same teaching. The Quran tells the story of Yusuf and the wife of Aziz as a story of unfilled love, whereas the Tanakh/Old Testament tells the story of Yosef and the wife of Potiphar as a story of unrequited love. The Tanakh/Old Testament portrays the wife of Potiphar as being vindictive. The Quran portrays the wife of Aziz as being vindictive at first, but later she repents and tells the truth.

The Tanakh/Old Testament and the Quran do not reveal the wife's name, though she is named Zuleikha in Muslim commentaries. There are many other women in the Quran, Tanakh and Holy Bible whose names are omitted. This practice also permeates everyday life. In my office, I have a donation certificate that my mother, of blessed memory, presented to me as a gift. It says the donation was made "*by her mother Mrs. Ben Frydman.*" We are all aware that violence against women and girls, and the silencing of women and girls, are tragic realities around the globe. Yet in

the story of Yusuf/Yosef and the wife of Aziz/Potiphar, it is the woman who perpetrates violence against the man by tearing his shirt or holding onto his garment, and by causing him to go to prison. In the Quran, the woman finally speaks up on Yusuf's behalf; in the Tanakh, she never does. Despite the evolution of consciousness on many important issues -- including the rights of women and girls -- humanity is almost completely silent on the suffering of men at the hands of women. The lack of consciousness and caring about the abusing and demeaning of men through physical and emotional violence is a sad and silent epidemic.

### **Parallel Teachings: Religious Law, Teshuvah and Jihad**

Judaism has a practice called *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* refers to the process of turning away from evil and toward goodness; away from losing sight of who we really are and toward a returning to our true self. During *teshuvah*, we admit our wrongdoing, we apologize, we make restitution and we promise to not make the same mistake again. The story in Quran of Zuleikha telling the truth about Yusuf is a beautiful trans-religious example of what Jews call *teshuvah*. The Book of Deuteronomy is part of the Torah, which is at the beginning of the Tanakh/Old Testament. It says in Deuteronomy, *"If you go out to war against your enemies, and the Lord your God delivers them into your hands, and you take their captives, and you see among the captives a beautiful woman and you desire her, you may take [her] as a wife. You shall bring her into your home, and she shall shave her head and let her nails grow. And she shall remove the garment of her captivity and stay in your house, and weep for her father and mother a full month. After that, you may be intimate with her and possess her, and she will be a wife for you. And it will be, if you do not desire her, then you shall send her away to wherever she wishes, but you shall not sell her for money. You shall not keep her as a servant, because you afflicted her."*<sup>63</sup>

This Judeo-Christian teaching enshrines the despicable practice of forced marriage during war. It also provides that if the husband no longer desires the wife of his forced marriage, he must let her go free. The following is an excerpt from a teaching by Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Epstein<sup>64</sup> in which he says that *teshuvah* is the war against the evil inclination within ourselves: The Torah says, *"If you go out to war against your enemy..."* This is the war against a person's own inclination that misleads the person toward material desires and the study of Torah to attain honor for oneself. The Torah continues: *"And the L-o-r-d your G-o-d delivers them into your hand..."* G-o-d promises that you will be able to defeat your evil inclination if you keep at it. The Torah continues: *"and you take them captive,"* meaning you will capture your evil inclination that impels you to study scripture for improper motives. The Torah says, *"And you see among the captives a beautiful woman and you desire her and wish to take her as your wife."* Rabbi Epstein reminds us that the Torah is often referred to as a "woman," and that the word "woman" also refers to the Shechina -- the indwelling divine presence -- which may be called a woman of valor.<sup>65</sup>

When a person is aroused by the good inclination to study Torah, and the good inclination is held captive by unwholesome motives, one is allowed to study Torah for these unwholesome motives in the spirit of *"from doing it not for its own sake, it will come to be done for its own sake."* The

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<sup>63</sup> Deuteronomy 21:10-14

<sup>64</sup> Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Halevi Epstein (1754-1823) -- a disciple of Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk -- was the author of a volume known as Maor VaShemesh. I learned Rabbi Epstein's teaching from Rabbi Yonatan Cohen of Congregation Beth Israel in Berkeley, California.

<sup>65</sup> Shechina is a Hebrew name for the divine presence that dwells within creation.

Torah goes on to say, “*Should you no longer want her,*” meaning that if, heaven forbid, you have no desire for the Torah’s true essence, but your only desire is to gain honor and vanities, then “*you shall release her and you shall not sell her for money.*” It is better to let go of studying scripture than to study it continually for the wrong reasons. Using this trans-religious model, one might say that Rabbi Epstein’s teaching is an example of the Muslim practice of inner jihad, the holy war against the unfortunate inclinations within the self. Rabbi Tuvia Bolton<sup>66</sup> teaches that the meaning of war is to carry out the work that G-o-d assigned to Adam, the first human. According to the Book of Genesis, G-o-d created Adam and blessed Adam saying, “*Be fruitful and multiply, rule the earth and conquer it.*”<sup>67</sup> Who was the enemy that Adam had to conquer when he was alone in the world? He had to conquer himself and the entire creation in order to reveal the divinity embedded within himself and within all of creation. The only way Adam could achieve this was through self-sacrifice. According to Rabbi Bolton, that is why, after G-o-d created Eve, and Eve offered Adam the forbidden fruit, it was very difficult -- and in the end, it proved impossible -- for Adam to resist eating it.

As of this writing, the genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity being perpetrated by so-called-ISIL are unspeakably tragic and heart breaking, and they are also fomenting a great deal of misunderstanding about Islam. Many Muslim scholars and theologians are risking their positions, and even their lives, to speak out against so-called-ISIL and Boko Haram. There are numerous Muslim statements on the internet,<sup>68</sup> including an open letter to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, head of so-called-ISIL. This open letter begins with an executive summary<sup>69</sup> that includes the following teachings:

^ It is permissible in Islam [for scholars] to differ on any matter, except those fundamentals of religion that all Muslims must know.

^ Jihad in Islam is defensive war. It is not permissible without the right cause, the right purpose and without the right rules of conduct.

^ The re-introduction of slavery is forbidden in Islam. It was abolished by universal consensus.

^ It is forbidden in Islam to enact legal punishments (*hudud*) without following the correct procedures that ensure justice and mercy.”

^ After the death of the Prophet Mohammed, PBUH, Islam does not require anyone to emigrate anywhere.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Rabbi Tuvia Bolton is a Chabad rabbi who lives in Israel.

<sup>67</sup> Genesis 1:28

<sup>68</sup> See, for example <https://www.yezidis-assyrians.org/muslims-speak-out/> that includes links to numerous statements where Muslims are speaking out on this subject.

<sup>69</sup> Open Letter to Dr. Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri Alias ‘Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’ and to the Fighters and Followers of the Self Declared Islamic State. 24 Dhul-Qi’da 1435 AH / 19 September 2014 C.E.

<http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com>

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

I want to focus for a moment on the above teaching about jihad that says, "*Jihad in Islam is defensive war. It is not permissible without the right cause, the right purpose and without the right rules of conduct.*" In modern terms, we might refer to the "*rules of conduct*" as the The Geneva Convention. The Geneva Convention is not patterned after Muslim rules of conduct, nor after the rules of conduct any one religion. However, I believe that the Geneva Convention is an example of how secular treaties and agreements accomplish the same goals as religious rules of conduct.

In the Tanakh/Old Testament, Moses' father-in-law Jethro presents a judicial system to help Moses avoid burn out during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Jethro says, "*Listen now to my voice, I will give you counsel, and God shall be with you; Represent the people before G-o-d, that you may bring the causes to G-o-d; And you shall teach them ordinances and laws, and shall show them the way where they must walk, and the work they must do. And you shall choose out of all the people able men, such as fear G-o-d, men of truth, hating unjust gain; and place such over them, to be rulers of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. And let them judge the people at all seasons. And it shall be, that every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they shall judge; so it shall be easier for you, and they shall bear the burden with you.*"<sup>71</sup> The judicial model of a supreme court and lower national, regional and local courts parallels this Biblical model just as the Geneva Convention parallels the Muslim model of the rules of conduct of war.<sup>72</sup>

### **Common Teachings: Rahab, Moab, Ruth, Jewish Messiah, Jesus and al-Mahdi**

According to the Tanakh/Old Testament, Joshua was the successor to Moses. When Joshua was preparing for the conquest of the city of Jericho, he sent two spies to spy out the city. The spies entered the city and came to the abode of a prostitute named Rahab. Rahab provided the spies with valuable intelligence, and when Jericho authorities came looking for the spies, Rahab hid them and helped them to escape. In return, the spies arranged for the Israelites to save Rahab and her family. According to the Babylonian Talmud, Rahab was one of the four most beautiful women in human history.<sup>73</sup> Rahab became a prostitute at age 10 and there was not a prince nor ruler who did not have relations with her.<sup>74</sup> The Talmud goes on to say that Rahab converted to Judaism and married Joshua. Joshua and Rahab were ancestors of the Prophetess Huldah,<sup>75</sup> the Prophet Jeremiah and seven lesser known prophets.<sup>76</sup>

The Book of Matthew in the New Testament begins: "*This is the book of the generations of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*"<sup>77</sup> In the fifth verse, it says, "*Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of*

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<sup>71</sup> Exodus 18:17-27

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, "The Biblical Basis for Our Civil Justice System and Trial Lawyers," by Andrew Cochran, May 3, 2011. <http://7thamendmentadvocate.org/blog/2011/05/the-biblical-basis-for-our-civil-justice-system-and-trial-lawyers/>

<sup>73</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 15a

<sup>74</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Zevachim 116b. Other sources hold that Rahab was 12 when she became a prostitute.

<sup>75</sup> The prophetess Huldah is mentioned in 2 Kings 22, and 2 Chronicles 34.

<sup>76</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 14b. (The prophet Jeremiah is consider to be the author of the Tanakh/Old Testament books of Jeremiah and Lamentations.)

<sup>77</sup> Gospel of Matthew 1:1, translated from the Hebrew in *The New Testament in Hebrew and English*, Cambridge, Great Britain: The Trinitarian Bible Society.

*Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.*"<sup>78</sup> At the end of the genealogy, it says, "*Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to [Jesus] the Messiah.*"<sup>79</sup>

The Book of Ruth in the Old Testament includes Ruth, Salmon and Boaz. According to the Book of Ruth, Ruth was married to an Israelite named Kilion. Kilion died and Ruth married Boaz who was a relative of Kilion. The Book of Ruth concludes: "*And Amminadab fathered Nahshon, and Nahshon fathered Salmon, and Salmon fathered Boaz, and Boaz fathered Obed, and Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.*"<sup>80</sup> Thus, the Tanakh/Old Testament and the New Testament both recount that Ruth and Boaz were the parents of Obed who fathered Jesse who fathered David. The lineage of Boaz is through Tamar. Despina Namwembe presents Tamar in her paper entitled, "The role and position of women in the Bible -- A critical look at the prevailing interpretations." I want to mention here that Tamar seduced her father-in-law Judah, without revealing her identity to him, in order to conceive a child by him. Tamar did this because her father-in-law failed to allow Tamar to fulfill the Israelite rite of yevum, allowing a widow to marry the brother of her deceased husband if she and her deceased husband did not have a child together. According to Judaism, Tamar is an ancestor of King David through Boaz, and thus, Tamar is an ancestor of the Jewish Messiah. According to Christianity, Tamar is an ancestor of Jesus through Boaz and King David.

I want to also mention the lineage of Lot's daughters who had sons with their father through incest. According to the Book of Genesis in the Tanakh/Old Testament, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. Before the destruction, Lot was married and he and his wife had grown daughters, some of whom were married, and two of whom were unmarried. Lot's unmarried daughters stayed in Sodom with their husbands and they and their husbands died during the destruction. Lot's wife turned to a pillar of salt during their escape from Sodom, and Lot found himself hiding in a cave in the hill country with his two unmarried daughters. These unmarried daughters thought that there were no more suitable men in the world because of the destruction they had witnessed. So they got their father drunk on two evenings and each one had sex with him on one of those evenings. One daughter gave birth to Moab who became the father of the Moabite people. Ruth was a Moabite. According to the Old and New Testaments, Ruth was an ancestor of King David, and according to the New Testament, Ruth was also an ancestor of Jesus.

The Jewish and Christian Messiahs are understood differently. According to Christianity, Jesus came to the world and will return. According to Judaism, the Messiah has not yet come to the world. Despite these and other differences, however, the Jewish and Christian traditions hold that the Messiah is or will be a descendant of a prostitute and a child born of incest. Muslims believe in Isa/Jesus. Muslims also believe that Isa will return to earth to assist al-Mahdi. At the end of al-Mahdi's rule, there will be a day of judgment for the entire human race. The interconnectedness of these lineages is profound. One does not need to start out being good in order to be part of goodness; one just needs to engage in *teshuvah*, repentance, or inner jihad. The One who forgives our wrongdoings is the Merciful, the Compassionate; the One who created Adam male and female; and the One whose very Word is G-o-d.

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<sup>78</sup> Matthew 1:5-6

<sup>79</sup> Matthew 1:17

<sup>80</sup> Ruth 4:20-22

**Conclusion:**

I can read and understand the Tanakh in Hebrew, although there are some words whose meanings are unknown or uncertain at this time in human history. I study the New Testament in Hebrew which is a translation from Greek. I also study the New Testament in English, which is likely also a translation from the Greek. I study Quran in English translated from Arabic. I am sure that all three scriptures contain divine revelation, but I rely upon translations to gain an understanding of the New Testament and the Quran.

The beautiful commonalities of the Tanakh, the Holy Bible and the Holy Quran are extensive and I have touched upon just a few: All three scriptures include universal divine revelation. All three include stories, and the people in the stories are very human, with both foibles and qualities of greatness. Women are not always named; women and men are not always treated fairly. Prostitutes and children of incest may rise to positions of prominence. Salvation is promised in all three faiths. May the Peoples who follow these three Holy Scriptures soon learn to live in peace amongst themselves, with one another and with all of humanity, and let us say, Amein/Amen/Ameen.

# **The Role and Position of Women in the Bible: A Critical Look at the Prevailing Interpretations**

By Despina Namwembe<sup>81</sup>

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## **1. Introduction:**

This presentation is based on my “lay believer’s perspective” that tries to embody my faith as a faith of love for all. Yet struggling with the issues and challenges that face me and those in similar situations today -- as women as well as men -- struggling for women’s equality in the spiritual world.

Christian Religion was highly welcomed in Africa in as early as the 1st century. It came with many incentives and opportunities, many of which were never seen in an African setting. Hospitals with modern medical care, schools, modern and permanent houses, and modern weaponry were some of the incentives that attracted most traditional Africans to Missionaries of that time. When the missionaries set out to evangelize, some of the negative cultural practices, like human sacrifices and extra judicial killings, were eliminated, and the Missionaries sowed the gospel of love and harmonious co-existence. Although the above were key components, the women still remained strongly controlled by men. This was both from a cultural as well as a religious perspective.

African tradition dictated a woman to be confined to the kitchen and to the nurturing of children. With the coming of Christianity with verses in it that emphasized that (1 Timothy 2: 12) ***a woman is not supposed to teach or say anything in Church***; (1 Corinthians 14: 34) ***women should not only keep quiet in Church but rather ask their husbands while at home***, etc., the communities welcomed it with open arms, especially the male gender and the already complacent women. After all, the men were the ones to be on the pulpits and not the women. Although the women had the highest statistical strength in both the traditional and modern religious places, their voice was, and actually continues to be, challenged in terms of full participation. This continues even today. Since African tradition gives more powers and opportunities to the male child, it has found a strong support in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, but also emphasizing those verses in the New Testament that promote male supremacy.

This reflection is mainly focused on three great women in the Bible, and they are Esther; Tamar, the widow of Er; and Mary Magdalene.

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<sup>81</sup> Despina Namwembe is Regional Coordinator for United Religions Initiative (URI) in the Great Lakes region of Africa and she coordinates women’s work for URI in Africa.

## **2. A Critical Look at the Biblical Women's Role:**

### **A. Women's Role: the Case of Queen Esther**

It is very important for the Bible or any other religious book to be owned locally through local theologies and understandings. Having a holy book and leaving it at that, without engaging in the connection between the Heavenly and Earthly experiences, leaves a lot of unfinished business in the lives of the current man.

In the Book of Esther for example, Queen Vashti defies the King. (Esther 1: 9-13) It is not clear why, but we clearly see that she also had a parallel party with only the women, and since the king was basically calling her to show her off as a beauty trophy to the rest of his male governors and other such leaders, this lady decides that she would rather party with fellow women than to be showcased as such. Esther, on the other hand, used her beauty to promote justice for her people through strong prayer and actions. (Esther 14:1-19) She knew that although her beauty would strike the king, she needed the grace of the Divine Being to intervene and change the status quo. She knew that Jewish lives were at stake because of planned selfish plots by those in leadership positions. She, therefore, set herself to bring about justice by ensuring that the vulnerable persons were either placed in situations of responsibility -- like Mordecai -- or that they were set free. Esther is a reminder of God's promise to His people. Upbeat with both beauty and divine intervention, the king gently asks -- in chapter 5: 1-3 -- "what do you wish, Esther? What is your request? It shall be given to you, even to half of my Kingdom."

What an offer! This was her chance and it is a good example to help women of today to utilize such incidences to their advantage to help other fellow women. If you are married to a person in a decision making position, yet you see situations of men who torture their wives, and you see other various gender based violence scenarios, it is important to use the opportunity to fight some of these injustices. However, one thing challenges me, and that is that many women in my community would rather support a man than their fellow women. Women will sometimes rally to fail a fellow woman. This is so because we are brought up in a situation of rivalry and competition over men rather than supporting and appreciating one another.

If God granted you utmost beauty as a woman, it would be good to use it positively to also uplift other fellow women and beat down on the social cultural stereotypes that deter women from working together. In many instances, men are always going to listen to a beautiful woman and can easily give in to her demands. By the time a man gives in to a woman's inner beauty, the one with outer beauty will have made recognizable mileage. Therefore, it is also up to the women to consider this gift of outer beauty as a divine gift that transcends personal benefits, and can also positively affect other fellow women and men in the process. The beauty being mentioned here can be either physical or professionally placed in the line of intellect in favor of women. These two attributes of Esther saved the Jews from extinction in those early days. Men are also usually attracted to intellectual women, and the way one uses this intellect can help support humanity from destruction.



## **B) Women's Role: the Case of Tamar**

There are two women named Tamar mentioned in the Scriptures. Both represent tragic sexual scenarios of women who were ruined by the neglect and abuse of close family members. Their stories seem to be included in Scripture for the purpose of providing historical and spiritual information about the Messianic lineage with Jesus. There is Tamar who was raped by her half brother Amnon in 2 Samuel 13: 1-22, and the other Tamar who sought justice from her husband's relative in Genesis 38: 1-11. For purposes of this theme, we shall concentrate on Tamar in the book of Genesis.

We see that Tamar, who never got the chance of bearing a child with her late husband Er, is promised by her father-in-law Judah to be married to her brother-in-law Onan, who purposely refused to have unprotected sex with her, leading to his death. (Genesis 38:10). Tamar is further promised to wait for the third and youngest son, Shelah -- a promise which is not fulfilled when the time comes. Realizing the situation to bare children from her husband's family lineage was becoming futile, she decided to trick her father-in-law by pretending to be a prostitute and conceiving by him. (Genesis 38:14) The consequences of her pregnancy without a husband are nothing but threatening. When she later reveals the father of her child, it is a mixture of embarrassment and later ownership.

Although Tamar's strategy of beating the system was unorthodox, it is clear that sometimes we need to do the extra ordinary to pursue justice. She knew that as a widow, her life was over, she neither could remarry outside the family, nor could she give her husband a chance to continue his family lineage.

I am not in any way advocating for incest in this case, especially in communities that are against it; but sometimes we need to stand strong against the odds. Like Tamar, in 2 Samuel 13:1-22, we see the disgrace with which these two women are treated. Tamar in Genesis 38 was considered unclean and undesirable, because she was considered a prostitute, a widow whose husbands ended up being killed. Tamar in 2 Samuel was raped and later discarded by her half brother Amnon.

### **3. The challenging circumstances that transcend today's women in the Church and in the Biblical world:**

The circumstances for both ladies -- Tamar in 2 Samuel and Tamar in Genesis -- in terms of the societal perception of uncleanness, and hence undesirability, are not of their own making, but are rather considered so by both Biblical and societal norms. We see these reoccurrences happening in many ways as concealed situations hidden in Religious Canons and social constructions, that deter women from fully participating in Church related rituals and functions. It is not in any way right, for example, to consider women unclean when they are having their menstrual periods. Because of this, they are not supposed to take Holy Communion in the Orthodox Church. Periods are natural and God created. Women in their capacity have no control over such.

These teachings, coupled with cultural norms and traditions, has greatly contributed to keeping the woman in the back. In many parts of Africa, a true African woman is the one who never directly responds to her husband, who is committed to the Kitchen, who is shy, and who doesn't speak her mind directly. For example, it is common knowledge that a "woman's no is a yes" in

## The Role and Position of Women in the Bible; A Critical Look at Prevailing Interpretations

most parts. Even when the woman means it, for example, in a situation of rape, she is considered to like the situation.

The male structured administrative centers in some religious groups are a major contributor to making the woman's voice less heard. Structures like the Synod -- which is a body of high ranking clergy from around the world in the Orthodox Church, The Episcopal Conference and the Catholic Church -- are some of those. Yet all these are run by men and the men are supposed to make decisions that affect women. Even when one goes lower, to the Metropolitan Councils (kind of Archbishop's Councils) which govern the Diocese, no women are represented and the same goes for the Catholic Episcopal Conference, which is a body of Catholic Bishops who are all men. Not that these congregations are bad; but there needs a voice that sits there listening in and contributing from an affected perspective of the female gender.

If Mary Magdalene was strong enough to withstand the complexities that stood in the way concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus -- thereby becoming the first to spread the good news -- I think that women should be considered major contributors, and hence, major partners in this spiritual journey.

The rampant social constructions, coupled with the Biblical provisions, have not only condoned women's control, but have also made women complacent to the prevailing circumstances of subordination. Such verses include (1 Timothy 2: 12), ***we see that a woman is not supposed to teach or say anything in Church.*** 1 Corinthians 14: 34 goes on to say they ***should not only keep quiet in Church but rather ask their husbands while at home.*** Finally, in Titus 2:5, ***they should be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.***

### 4. Conclusion:

All the above was, and is, considered true based upon the circumstances at that time. I am no master of the reasons as to why St. Paul and the others, like Titus, would come up strongly with such gender based laws, but I do know that they aimed at ensuring that certain rituals and customs are either deterred, or maintained, respectively, in as far as the laws of the land were concerned at that time.

Whatever the reason maybe though, some of these laws are seen as not important in the short time that Jesus ministered to his people. We see Him protecting the woman who was a sinner, who poured the expensive alabaster oil on His body. (Mathew 26:6) We again see Him ensuring that a woman caught in outright promiscuity is not stoned. We see him healing women. (Mark 5: 21-43) And finally, we see Him making a woman the bearer of the good news of His resurrection.

Women could not be disciples or Apostles at that time, because of the strong customs and laws that governed the land. But we see that many who were appreciative of what Jesus had done for them, by healing them, followed Him wherever he went, including providing for Him and His disciples, from their own resources. Some of these included Mary Magdalene; Joanna, the wife of Harold's steward; Chuza; Susanna and many others. (Luke 8:1-3)

These were laws of then, and Jesus did not want to cause a challenging situation with the authorities in many ways. That is why He was able to tell all that the most important

commandment was to fear God with all your heart and soul, and to love the other the way we love ourselves. (Mathew 7:12) This teaching is also found in all the various Religious backgrounds, Spiritual expressions and Indigenous traditions summarized as the Golden Rule. This, therefore, literary means that you cannot hurt, discriminate, hate, kill or torture the other, because you would not want the same to be done to you.

By virtue of their inherent gift of nurturing, and as caretakers of all, women can greatly transform the spiritual and interfaith world. This is so because they start this from their homes with their children, and then they bring it right into the society. In many religious, spiritual and indigenous traditions, women are the majority, not only by way of commitment, but also by their presence. Having women as equal partners is not a gamble, but is rather a reality of greater transformation for humanity.



# Pluralism in Quran: Results of Divisive Interpretation

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## Introduction and Background:

We are born accidentally or by chance of birth in whatever faith we are born. Usually, most of us live and adopt to the faith in which we were born. Some do question their faith, some convert to another faith or walk away from their faith, but that is separate from the points I wish to make here. Every faith is based upon divine principles. There is a teaching in 10:47, 14:4 and 16:36 of the Quran, and I can paraphrase that: *"to every people (was sent) a messenger in their own language and in their own country and that when their messenger comes (before them), the matter will be judged between them with justice, and they will not be wronged."* However, a lot depends upon how the Holy Scriptures are interpreted. There are good interpretations done by scholars with global vision and there are interpretations that are not good -- they are exclusive of other faiths and with limited vision. I call these Divisive Interpretations. Divisive Interpretation leads some people to believe that only their religion is right and all other faiths are wrong. This kind of divisive and exclusive interpretation has led nations to wars. Even today, some nations are victims of Divisive Interpretations that they are taught and they believe that other faiths are null and void.

In some Muslim countries, Divisive Interpretation is more widespread. Religious discrimination and violation of human rights emanate from the teachings of Divisive Interpretation. Divisive Interpretation has annihilated Pluralistic verses that are there in the Quran. Divisive interpreters have introduced the theory of Abrogation applicable to the Quran. In order to annihilate all the verses which are full of Pluralism and interfaith harmony, they say, "All the verses on pluralism are abrogated." Pluralism is never taught and translation is done in such a way that the real meaning of pluralism never comes out.

Some divisive interpreters have translated the verses on pluralism in such a way as to render them useless, meaningless and irrelevant. They only teach, *"People of other faiths are infidels or kafirs. They are not included as believers in God."*

The following are key words and verses that are the main cause of radical thinking that arises from Divisive Interpretation:

## Islam:

The word Islam means to submit or surrender to One God. This, in my view, encompasses all the people of any faith who say they believe in God. Divisive Interpretation has narrowed the definition to surrender and submission only as shown by Prophet Mohammed, PBUH. It considers every other person who is submitting to God as non-believers if they do not believe in Prophet Mohammed and the Quran. To radicals, it is not important if people believe in God; they say believing in Prophet Mohammed is more important. Such thinking lays the ground work for mistrust, enmity and wars.

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### ***Auliya* or Friends:**

Here is an example of a radical translation of Surah 5:51: “Do not take the Jews and Christians as your friends.” The correct translation should be saviors. “Do not take the Jews and Christians as your saviors.”

**Muslims are permitted to marry from among Christians and Jews. Marriage cannot happen if trust, love and friendship are not present. Marriage is always preceded by greater trust and understanding. Hence, translating the word auliya as friend does not make sense.**

The correct translation of the Arabic word *Auliya* should be saviors instead of friends. *Auliya* in Arabic means one who is *wali*, meaning God-centered with holy knowledge in the Quranic message. Of course, Jews and Christians have their own Holy Scriptures and their own Apostles. They do not generally know about Quran or Prophet Mohammed. This is the reason why Muslims are advised not to take Jews and Christians as saviors or spiritual guides regarding their spiritual life in this world or life in the Hereafter. All over the Quran, the wrong translation and interpretation is used for the word “*auliya*” as friend instead of as savior. This kind of preaching puts Muslims in a different mind-set with people of other faiths. Divisive Interpretation leads to a mind-set which becomes combative and self-righteous and causes people to be ready to put down other faiths.

In the days of the Crusades, all interpretation of Quran was anti-Christian. This was because Muslims were facing existential threats from the Crusaders and translations of Quran were focused on creating enmity with Christians and recruiting mercenaries to fight against the Christian Crusaders. These political conditions also had great influence on the science of interpretation. Divisive Interpretation was essential for survival in the days of the Crusades. **But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Muslim scholars are revisiting old interpretations against present day conditions.** More and more liberal perspectives are being brought out.

### **Universal Message of Pluralism:**

Living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as part of one humanity, scholars in the Muslim world are now looking at the interpretation of the Quran and Hadiths in a global context in light of establishing peace and harmony among religions. We find that the time has come for Muslim scholars to bring forward -- as part of the regular teachings in Muslim literature and sermons -- the true global values in the Quran as explained below:

### **Heart of Pluralism in Quran, Hadith and the Prophet’s Last sermon:<sup>83</sup>**

- 1) **Quran 5:48:** *“To you we have given the scriptures, just as WE have given the scriptures to people before you [Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, etc. Islam came after all these religions.] We have protected your Scripture [Quran] in its entirety. So judge among people from what knowledge has come to you. To each among you [this includes all religions and spiritual traditions...not excluding anyone] WE have prescribed the LAW [spiritual laws*

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<sup>83</sup> Words in brackets are the author’s commentary on the text of Quran, Hadith and Last Sermon of Prophet Mohammed, PBUH.

coming from Torah, Gita/Vedas, Bible, Quran, etc.] *and an OPEN WAY* [meaning spiritualists who follow their spiritually guided conscience and who do not have their own Holy Scripture, such as native Americans and indigenous Yezidis of Iraq. God is inclusive of all His creation for His Mercy and Compassion.] *If God would have willed, HE would have made all of you into one single community [religion]. But this is not part of HIS plan. HIS plan is to test you in all that HE has given you. So strive as in a race in all good works. God alone will tell you the truth in matters in which you dispute.*"

- 2) **Quran 10:47, 14:4 and 16:36:** Quran reiterates pluralism, *"To every people was sent an Apostle in their own language and in their own country."* Jews and Christians are considered as People of the Holy Scriptures. Most modern reformers and thinkers are now including people of all faiths as receiving the message of God. God does not discriminate based on their birth faith or ethnic origin.
- 3) **Quranic verses that strengthens Pluralism:** Muslims believe there are 124,000 prophets [which may be understood as numerous or countless] sent to every nation. All prophets are equal, (See Quran 2:136, 2:85, 3:84 and 4:152) and logically, the followers of any prophet are also equal, because the core message is to stand for fairness, justice and having faith in God and the Last Day. **This kind of Islamic knowledge defeats the radical thinking of divisive interpreters who attach superiority of Muslims over people of other faiths.**
- 4) **Prophet Mohammed's Last Sermon:** Here again, the Prophet reiterates pluralism: *"All mankind is from Adam and Eve. An Arab has no superiority over non-Arab and a non-Arab has no superiority over an Arab. Also a black person has no superiority over white and a white person has no superiority over black, except by righteous thinking."*
- 5) **Quran 2:62: Rewards for All Good people from any faith:** Having given examples of pluralism in Quran, I want to point out that God gives hope to all good people of any faith through rewards. Reward could be salvation, nirvana or Heaven .... Only God knows what the reward will be. No human can decide on this. Surah 2:62 says, *"Those who believe [in the Quran], those who follow the Jewish Scriptures, the Christians [of any denomination] and the Sabians, any who believe in God [here any means Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrians, etc. etc.], the Last Day and does righteousness [meaning to stand for justice as honest witnesses] shall have their rewards from their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve."* This verse is repeated twice more in Quran.

**Radical or Divisive thinkers have abrogated these verses which are repeated 3 times in the Quran.** By this strategy they are controlling the mind-set that is full of distrust and suspicion about believers in other faiths.

- 6) **Quran 2:256:** *"There is no compulsion in religion."* It would be wonderful if this principle were universally accepted by all countries. Divisive interpreters have killed this verse by applying the Theory of Abrogation. They say this verse applies to people who lived before the time of Prophet Mohammed and had not received the message of the Prophet. They believe present day people must accept Islam as the final religion.

**Conclusion:**

In the Muslim world, 80% of Muslims are non-Arabs and Arabic is not their mother tongue. Non-Arabs are reading translations of the Quran, which are now abundantly available all over the world. They are finding monumental differences in translations and interpretations of the Quran. The Theory of Abrogation has wrecked the peaceful and merciful message of the Quran. There are Muslim scholars who do not believe in the Theory of Abrogation and they are looking for a more realistic interpretation that will transform the radical interpretation and retranslate the Quran as a blessing to all humanity in its pluralism. They read the verses on pluralism and diversity with pride and they are ready to reform the minds of young Muslims. The unfortunate events of 9/11 have galvanized American Muslims to defeat the radical interpretations.

New translations and interpretations are coming from Western born Muslims as well as open-minded intellectuals from the Muslim countries, and they are stimulating a review of the traditional translations, contrasting with fundamentalist ways of thinking. It is certainly my hope that this is the beginning of the revival of the true spirit of the Quranic principles and that the entire Muslim world will begin to embrace the true global teachings that are full of pluralism, freedom of religion, democracy and human rights. If all these universal principles are put in proper perspective, then Secular Governance is the most logical outcome. We have a lot of work to do to achieve this with the full cooperation of all the people from around the world.



## Biographies of the Authors and Presenters

**Ejaz Naqvi, M.D.** is a board-certified Pain Medicine physician and a “born-again-Muslim.” Dr. Naqvi is an Amazon bestselling author of the book entitled, *The Quran: With or Against the Bible? A Topic By Topic Review For The Investigative Mind*. He is a past president of the Islamic Center of Zahra in Pleasanton, California and he serves on the board of the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County in the San Francisco Bay Area. He is a frequent speaker at interfaith events in local communities as well as in academic institutions and secular venues such as the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco. He has appeared as a guest on over thirty radio shows across the United States, and in 2013, he hosted his own talk show on Toginet Radio. The show was entitled, “Frank Talk with Dr. Ejaz,” and the focus was on interfaith relations as they are affected by politics and culture. Dr. Naqvi also serves on the Board of Directors of the Islamic Scholarship Fund, a non-profit organization that aims to promote the engagement of American Muslim students in the mainstream through educational scholarships and mentorship programs in the areas of liberal arts and humanities.

**Rabbi Pamela Frydman** was raised Orthodox as a child and Conservative as a teenager. She was founding rabbi of Or Shalom Jewish Community in San Francisco, now a Reconstructionist synagogue. She was ordained in the Jewish Renewal Movement and was the first woman to serve as President of OHALAH, the international association of Renewal clergy. She is Chair of Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel; former International Co-Chair of Rabbis for Women of the Wall; and a co-founder of the Rabbinic Advisory Council of Shalom Bayit, working to end domestic violence in Jewish homes. She is on the Organizing Committee of Beyond Silence, raising consciousness about abuse in the Northern California Jewish community. She co-leads “Yezidis–Assyrians.org Save Us From Genocide!!” on behalf of the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County, Marin Interfaith Council, Interfaith Center at the Presidio and Silicon Valley Interreligious Council. She is a teacher in Sufi Ruhaniat International, the Dervish Healing Order and the Inayati-Maimuni Tariqat of Sufi-Hasidim. She is the author of *Calling on God, Sacred Jewish Teachings for Seekers of All Faiths*.

**Despina Namwembe** is an Orthodox Christian. She is a social scientist who holds a masters degree in peace and conflict studies and has a passion for conflict resolution, gender issues, women and girl mentorships and interfaith relations. She serves as Regional Coordinator for United Religions Initiative (URI) in the Great Lakes region of Africa, where she coordinates over 23 self-organized grassroots interfaith organizations in Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and Uganda. She also coordinates women’s work for URI in Africa. She is a contributor to “*A force, such as the world has never known -- Women Creating Change*,” “*A girl’s walk*” and other related women’s literature. She mentors women and girls, often having face-to-face interactions in their locales and ensuring a shared solution strategy for the situations they face. She began her journey as a youth, representing girls at local and international events, and later representing women at international events. She has spoken in numerous countries on socio-cultural issues that affect the vulnerable, and she believes in human development and socio-cultural equality for all.

**Iftekhhar Hai** was a founding Director of United Muslims of America (UMA). Presently he is the founding President of the UMA Interfaith Alliance whose mission is to promote interfaith harmony through dialogue. He is a strong proponent of religious pluralism and has been a tireless interfaith

## Bios of Authors and Presenters

worker for decades. He has taught and interacted with leaders of a variety of faiths and has been a teacher of youth. He is an author and has served as an honorary lecturer in academic institutions. He has represented Islam at Conflict Resolution Conferences and interfaith seminars in a number of countries around the world. He has worked with United Religions Initiative, the Parliament of World's Religions, the San Francisco Interfaith Council, the American Friends Service Committee and a number of other religious and ecumenical endeavors. He presently serves as a translator from Hindi and Urdu to English for individuals seeking medical care in the San Francisco Bay Area.



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