

## A Commentary on Religion and Domestic Violence

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Religion is a fact of life in the United States for the vast majority of people. Whether in childhood or adulthood, most people have had some association with a faith tradition. For some it has been positive; for others, negative. But many retain and rely on values and doctrines that they received within a faith community. Because of the extraordinary diversity within the United States, many different traditions exist among us: Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Native Americans, plus many varieties of Christians including Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, Mainline Protestants, Pentecostals, and so on.<sup>1</sup> One chapter cannot do justice to the richness of these many traditions. Rather, here we provide a discussion of the basic understanding of the place of religion in addressing domestic violence, illustrated through three western religious traditions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION: ROADBLOCKS OR RESOURCES?

The crisis of domestic violence affects people physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Each of these dimensions must be addressed both for victims and those in the family who abuse them. Certain needs and issues tend to be disregarded when the issue is approached from either a secular or religious perspective alone. This reflects a serious lack of understanding of the nature of domestic violence and its impact on people's lives. Thus, the importance of developing a shared understanding and cooperation between secular and religious helpers for addressing domestic violence cannot be emphasized strongly enough.

Religious traditions, teachings, and practices represent a fundamental aspect of culture for the vast majority of Americans. The intertwining of religiosity and culture are common and complex. For example, secular Jews may not participate in a synagogue but still identify themselves as Jewish and honor Jewish values. Many Korean immigrants are closely affiliated with Korean Christian churches, so issues related to Christian teaching and practice will be common. For many people, their racial/ethnic heritage is bound to their faith history, such as with African American Baptists, Irish Catholics, Russian Jews or Sudanese Muslims. This is one of the reasons that cultural competency in addressing domestic violence must include some awareness and appreciation of religion and faith traditions.

Occasionally, a social worker, psychotherapist, or other secular service provider will wonder, "Why bother with religious concerns at all?" The answer is a very practical one: religious issues or concerns which surface for people in the midst of crisis are **primary issues**. If not addressed in some way, at some point, they will inevitably become roadblocks to the client's efforts to resolve the crisis. In addition, a person's religious beliefs and community of faith (church, mosque or synagogue) **can provide** a primary support system for an individual and her/his family in the midst of an experience of domestic violence.

For a pastor, priest, rabbi, imam, or others approaching domestic violence from a religious perspective, there is little question about the relevance of religious concerns, which are paramount for them. They may, however, doubt the importance of dealing with concerns for shelter, safety, intervention, etc. "These people just need to get right with God and everything will be fine." Such a perspective overlooks the importance of practical issues. Domestic violence is complex and potentially lethal. Consequently, seemingly mundane concerns represent immediate and critical needs.

When confronted personally by domestic violence, most people also experience a crisis of meaning in their lives, as occurs with all other crises, whether chronic or unexpected. Very basic life questions arise, often expressed in religious and/or philosophical terms. Questions like, “Why is this happening to me and my family?” or “Why did God let this happen?” or “What meaning does this have for my life?” all indicate people’s efforts to understand, to make sense out of experiences of suffering and to place the experiences in a context of meaning for their lives. We recognize these questions to signal health, because they represent an effort to comprehend and contextualize the experience of domestic violence, allowing the individual to regain some control over their lives in the midst of crisis.

Many individuals and families in crisis express the questions of meaning in religious terms, and more specifically, in terms of Judaism, Islam, or Christianity, since the vast majority of people in the United States today grew up with some association with these traditions. Many continue their involvement with a church, mosque or synagogue into adulthood. In addition, religious values overlap with a majority of American culture’s values. (Most Americans carry a set of cultural values, consciously or not, which are primarily religious in nature.)

Religious concerns can become roadblocks or resources for those dealing with experiences of domestic violence because these concerns are central to many people’s lives. The outcome depends on how they are handled. Misinterpretation and misuse of religious texts and traditions have often had a detrimental effect on individuals and families dealing with domestic violence. Misinterpretation or misuse can contribute substantially to guilt, self-blame, and suffering among victims. Likewise, they can contribute to rationalizations used by those who abuse. For example, “But the Bible says...” is frequently used to explain, excuse, or justify abuse by one family member to another. This need not be the case. Re-examining and analyzing those sacred texts can result in reclaiming the traditions in ways that support victims and abusers, while confronting and challenging abuse in the family.

A careful study of sacred texts makes it very clear that while it is possible to misuse texts to justify abuse of persons in the family, the texts do not in fact serve to justify abuse. Misuse is a frequent practice (see below). Teaching people simple answers to the very complex issues faced by many is another potential roadblock within contemporary teachings of some faith groups. Thus, religious groups often have not adequately prepared people for the traumas that they will face at some point in their lives: illness, death, abuse, divorce, and so on.

- “Keep the commandments and everything will be fine.”
- “Keep praying.”
- “Just accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and you will be healthy, prosperous, popular, and happy.”
- “Get closer to God.”
- “Be patient, and you will be rewarded.”
- “Go to services each week.”
- “Pray harder.”

Although these teachings may be fundamental to many religious faiths, alone they are inadequate to deal with the complexity of such an experience of human suffering as domestic violence. When offered as simple and complete answers to life’s questions, they may create illusions of simplicity that leave adherents vulnerable to becoming overwhelmed by suffering. Furthermore, the teachings may set up a dynamic that blames the victims for their suffering.

- “If you are a good Christian, a good Jew, or a good Muslim, God will treat you kindly, or take care of you, or make you prosper as a reward for your goodness.”
- “If you suffer, it is a sign that you must not be a good Muslim, a good Christian or a good Jew and God is displeased with you.”

If one accepts this simple formula (which makes a theological assumption about God’s unconditional love being conditional), then suffering can be interpreted as punishment or abandonment by God. The simple answer alone cannot withstand significant personal or familial suffering. When people use simple answers that prove insufficient, they can feel that their faith has failed them or that God has abandoned them. Jewish, Muslim and Christian religious teachings have the depth to adequately address the experiences of contemporary persons, but only when they are allowed to acknowledge the complexity, the paradox, and sometimes the incomprehensible nature of suffering. The most important resource which the synagogue, church or mosque can provide is to be available to support those who are suffering, to be a sign of God’s presence, and to be willing to struggle with the questions which any crisis may raise. Offering sweet words of advice to “solve” life’s problems reduces the experience of the one who suffers to a mere slogan, and denies the depth of the pain and the potential for healing and new life.

One’s faith tradition can offer spiritual resources as well as material resources to victim/survivors and their children as well as to repentant perpetrators. Whether it is the Psalms from the Hebrew Bible or teachings from the Qur’an or the life of Muhammad, or the Christian Gospels, religious teachings can comfort, reassure, and strengthen. Congregations also can provide material support in times of crisis.

#### **COOPERATIVE ROLES FOR SECULAR ADVOCATE/COUNSELOR AND MINISTER/RABBI/IMAM**

Both the secular advocate counselor and the religious leader have important roles to play when confronting domestic violence. Families in which there is abuse need the support and expertise of in times of crisis. Sometimes their respective efforts will come into conflict, as illustrated by the following situation:

We received a call from a local shelter for abused women. The shelter worker indicated that she had a badly beaten woman there whose minister had told her to go back home to her husband. The worker asked us to call the minister and “straighten him out.” Ten minutes later we received a call from the minister. He said that the shelter had one of his parishioners there and the shelter worker had told her to get a divorce. He asked us to call the shelter and “straighten them out.”

In the above case, both the shelter worker and the minister had the best interests of the victim in mind. Yet they were clearly at odds because they did not understand each others concerns for the victim’s needs. The shelter worker did not understand the minister’s concern for maintaining the family and the minister did not understand that the woman’s life was in danger. We arranged for the minister and the shelter worker to talk directly with each other, the victim and one of our staff to share their concerns in order to seek a solution, in the best interest of the victim which was accomplished successfully. The need for cooperation and communication between advocates/counselors and imams, ministers or rabbis is clear so that the needs of parishioners/congregants/clients are best served and the resources of both religious and secular helpers are utilized effectively.

**Role of the Secular Advocate/Counselor.** In the secular setting, an advocate, social worker or mental health provider may encounter a victim or abuser who raises religious questions or concerns. When this occurs, the following guidelines are helpful:

- Pay attention to religious questions/comments/references.

- Affirm these concerns as appropriate and check out their importance for the client.

Having identified and affirmed this area of concern, if you are comfortable and would like to pursue the concern, do so. Emphasize the ways in which the client's religious tradition can be a resource to her/him and can in no way be used to justify or allow abuse or violence to continue in the family. (See below.) If you are uncomfortable with these religious concerns yourself or feel unqualified to pursue them, refer to a pastor/priest/rabbi/imam who is trained to help and whom you know and trust.

**Role of Clergy.** The minister/rabbi/imam can most effectively help domestic violence victims and offenders by referring to and cooperating with secular resources. When combined both provide a balanced approach that deals with specific external, physical, and emotional needs while addressing the larger religious, ethical and philosophical issues.

When approached about domestic violence, the minister/imam/rabbi can use the following guidelines:

- Be aware of the dynamics of domestic violence and utilize this understanding for evaluating the situation.
- Use your expertise as a religious authority and spiritual leader to illuminate the positive value of religious traditions, while clarifying that they do not justify or condone domestic violence. (See below.)
- Identify the parishioner/congregant's immediate needs and REFER to a secular resource (if available) to deal with the specifics of abuse, advocacy, intervention and treatment.

If you are comfortable pursuing the matter, provide additional pastoral support and encouragement to help family members take full advantage of available resources.

The other important role that clergy and religious leaders can play is at the point of pre-marriage.<sup>2</sup> If a couple is planning a religious ceremony for their wedding, they will meet with their religious leader hopefully for reflection and counsel before taking this important step. This is an opportunity for the religious leader to do two things: first, to inquire about any history of abuse in the partners' families and second to teach about the religious values which support a healthy marriage and to correct any erroneous understandings that either partner may have. A couple needs to be able to share their family histories with each other and consider the impact on them. The pre-marriage meeting also provides an opportunity for the religious leader to be attuned to the dynamics of the couple's current relationship: if there is any concern about one partner attempting to control the other or the possibility of violence, the leader should meet separately with each partner to assess the situation.

## **SCRIPTURAL AND THEOLOGICAL ISSUES**

**Suffering.** The experience of physical or psychological pain or deprivation can generally be referred to as "suffering." When a person experiences suffering, often the first question is, "Why am I suffering?" This is really two questions: "Why is there suffering?" and "Why me?" These are classical theological questions for which there are no totally satisfactory answers.

Sometimes a person will answer these questions in terms of very specific cause-and-effect relationships:

"I am being abused by my husband as punishment from God for the fact that 20 years ago, when I was 17 years old, I had sexual relations with a guy I wasn't married to."

In this case, the victim of abuse sees her suffering as just punishment for an event that happened long ago and for which she has since felt guilty. This explanation has an almost superstitious quality. It reflects an effort on the part of the woman to make sense out of her experience of abuse by her husband. Her explanation takes the “effect” (the abuse), looks for a probable “cause” (her teenage “sin”), and directly connects the two. This conclusion is based on a set of theological assumptions that support her view: God is a stern judge who seeks retribution and God causes suffering to be inflicted as punishment.

Unfortunately, the woman’s explanation neither focuses on the real nature of her suffering (i.e., the abuse by her husband), nor does it place responsibility for her suffering where it lies: on an abusive husband.

Sometimes, people try to explain suffering by saying that it is “God’s will” or “part of God’s plan for my life” or “God’s way of teaching me a lesson.” These explanations assume God to be stern, harsh, even cruel and arbitrary. This image of God runs counter to a Biblical image (and a Qur’anic image) of a kind, merciful and loving God. The God of this Biblical teaching does not single out anyone to suffer for the sake of suffering, because suffering is not pleasing to God.

A distinction between voluntary and involuntary suffering is useful at this point. Someone may choose to suffer abuse or indignity in order to accomplish a greater good. For example, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. suffered greatly in order to change what he believed to be unjust, racist laws. Although the abuse he experienced was not justifiable, he voluntarily chose suffering as a means to an end.

Involuntary suffering, as which occurs when a person is beaten, raped, or abused, especially in a family relationship, can neither be justified nor is ever chosen. Involuntary suffering may be endured by a victim for any number of reasons, including a belief that such endurance will eventually “change” the abuser’s nature. This belief, however, is unrealistic and generally only reinforces abuse.

### **Nature of Suffering: Christian Perspective**

Christian tradition teaches that suffering happens because there is evil and sinfulness in the world. Unfortunately, when someone behaves in a hurtful way, someone else usually bears the brunt of that act and suffers as a result. Striving to live a righteous life does not guarantee protection from another’s sinfulness. A person may find that she/he suffers from having made a poor decision (e.g. by marrying a spouse who is abusive). But this in no way means that the person either wants to suffer or deserves a spouse’s abuse.

In Christian teaching, at no point does God promise that we will not suffer. In scripture, God does promise to be present with us during our suffering. This is especially evident in the Psalms, which give vivid testimony to people experiencing God’s faithfulness during suffering (see Psalms 22 and 55).

A person’s fear of abandonment by God is often strong in the midst of suffering and abuse, most often among victims of abuse who feel abandoned by everyone else -- friends, other family members, clergy, doctors, police, lawyers, counselors. Perhaps none of these believed the victim’s disclosures of abuse or they were simply ill-prepared to help. Many victims conclude that God has also abandoned them. For Christians, the promise to victims from God is that even though all others might abandon them, God will be faithful. This is the message found in Romans 8:38-39 (RSV):

“For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This reassurance can be very helpful to Christian victims of violence as well as to those who abuse them. Both victim and abuser should be reminded that God walks with them seeking healing for victims and repentance for abusers.

Sometimes, people who regard suffering as God's will believe that God is teaching them a lesson and/or that hardship builds character. Experiences of suffering can, in fact, be occasions for growth. People who suffer may realize, in retrospect, that they learned a great deal from the experience and gained maturity as a result. This can often be the case, but only when the person who is suffering receives support and affirmation throughout the experience. With the support of others, people who are confronted with violence in their family can end the abuse, possibly leave the situation, make major changes in their lives, and grow as mature adults. They will probably learn some difficult lessons: increased self-reliance; how to express anger; that they can survive better outside than inside abusive relationships; that they can be a whole person without being married; that they can exercise control over their actions with others; that family relationships need not be abusive and violent.

This awareness of suffering as the occasion for growth, however, must come from the individuals themselves, and is recognized only at a time when they are well on their way to healing and renewal. It is never appropriate, when someone is feeling great pain, to point out that things really are not so bad and that someday she/he will be glad that all of this happened. These words of "comfort and reassurance" usually benefit the minister/rabbi or counselor, not the parishioner/congregant or client. At a later time, it may be useful to share a perspective that new growth has taken place, and very simply to affirm the reality that this person has survived an extremely difficult situation. Suffering may present an occasion for growth; whether this potential is actualized depends on how the experience of suffering is managed.

### **Nature of Suffering: Jewish Perspective**

Jewish approaches to the meaning and purpose of suffering reflect many of the themes discussed above in the Christian Perspective above. There are biblical and rabbinic sources that understand suffering to be divine punishment for sin and wrongdoing. This is reflected in many ways in the liturgy, most noteworthy in the prayers made during the High Holidays (Rosh Hoshana and Yom Kippur), when an inscription is made in the Book of Life, dependent on a person's repentance, prayer and charity. Many Jewish teachings maintain, however, that divine punishment is not meted out at all in this world—it is left for the World to Come.<sup>3</sup> And all agree that it is not for us humans to exact divine punishment or, for that matter, any punishment outside of the judicial process. Acts of physical, sexual or emotional abuse clearly are not understood to be instruments of divine justice or of proper legal proceedings. It is the divine gift of free will, so very precious to human dignity, spirituality and growth, that unfortunately allows some to act in hurtful and sinful ways. The abusers, not God, are recognized as the source of suffering.

Judaism maintains that suffering may be a catalyst for personal and spiritual growth. In many ways it may serve a redemptive purpose. But, as stated above, the lesson is for the one who is suffering to accept, contemplate and internalize. The lesson is not one to be imposed by others. And those who suffer are to find comfort in the help and support of family, friends and community, and from God. Jews have a religious obligation to lessen another's burden and not to stand by callously or indifferently when another suffers.<sup>4</sup> Judaism maintains that humans reach their fullest human and spiritual potential through their acts of *chesed*—kindness, and compassion.<sup>5</sup> Comfort is found with God through prayer and study and because God not only empathizes with those who hurt, God identifies with them as well. It is for that reason, according to a rabbinic tradition expounding on the verse, "I am with him in trouble"

(Psalm 91:15), that the burning bush in which God appeared to Moses was a thorn bush: “just as they are suffering in Egypt, so too [God] appeared in a place of travail, a bush of thorns.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Nature of Suffering: Muslim Perspective**

The Qur’an teaches that this life is a test, and that the way an individual responds to this test that determines what type of life he or she will have in the hereafter.<sup>7</sup> Tests can come in a wide variety of forms, including illness, poverty, wealth, health, difficult relationships, and even oppression. Blessings like health and wealth are tests in the sense that believers must find a way to use these blessings in God’s service and must be continuously conscious and grateful for them. A Muslim’s goal is to respond to hardships by persevering and by continuing to turn to God for guidance and help. When a person does not lose his/her faith and strives to worship God despite the difficulties life is presenting, then God promises rewards both in this lifetime and the next. A person who turns away from God in disbelief, or who seeks help from some other deity, will receive punishment in the hereafter.

Patience (*sabr*) is one of the important qualities of a believer that can help a person make it through difficult times. The Qur’an refers to this quality as an active stance that is often linked with striving or struggling for a cause. Sometimes, Muslims confuse the concept of patience and perseverance (*sabr*) with acceptance. In cases of domestic violence, a victim might mistakenly believe that by passively enduring the abuse, she is fulfilling her duty to be patient. However, the Qur’an is very clear that those who are experiencing a hardship should strive to end that hardship. In the case of an illness, one should seek treatment. In the case of injustice and oppression, one is obligated to do whatever is in one’s power to stop the injustice from continuing, including moving to another location where there is freedom from oppression.

Since all believers are promised to be tested, the notion that a test is God’s way of punishing someone for past deeds has no merit. On the contrary, a test is God’s way of offering His servants opportunity to prove themselves worthy of His mercy and reward. In fact, Islam teaches that God tests the most those whom He most loves. Evidence for this teaching is abundant in the lives of the prophets and righteous people throughout history.

The fact that people will be tested does not in any way relieve an abuser of being accountable for the violence imposed on others. The Qur’an emphasizes that each person is solely responsible for his or her actions, and that no one can blame another person (e.g. “she provoked me.”) as a way to justify their abusive behavior. In fact, the Qur’an describes oppressors as people who have wronged their own souls because their behavior will lead them to be punished in the hereafter.

The Qur’an also teaches that believers can avail themselves of God’s mercy and compassion while they are experiencing tests and tribulations. He says that He is closer to a person than the jugular vein, and that He responds to His servant when called upon. Because of God’s mercy, He provides ease in the midst of hardship. This ease might be in the form of an advocate providing resources to a victim; an imam providing guidance and inspiration; or a community providing financial assistance.

There are several relevant concepts that often provide comfort and assurance to victims of domestic violence. Islam teaches that God witnesses all and rewards efforts; this belief can provide motivation to continue in the face of criticism or lack of support from others. The belief that God holds each person accountable and gives each person his/her due provides some consolation for victims unable to satisfactorily hold the abuser accountable or enforce consequences. And finally, awareness of God’s

infinite mercy and understanding in the face of community resistance or denial can prevent a feeling of being alone and unsupported.

## **NATURE OF THE MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP**

### **A Christian Perspective**

Christian teaching about the model of the marriage relationship has traditionally focused heavily on Paul's letters to the Ephesians, Corinthians, and Colossians. Misinterpretations and misplaced emphasis on these texts create substantial problems for many heterosexual married couples. Most commonly directives on marriage, based on scripture, are given to women by clergy but not so often to men, and state that wives must "submit" to their husbands, a directive interpreted to elevate the husband/father as the absolute head of the household whom wife and children must obey without question. Unfortunately, this idea has also been misinterpreted to mean that wives and children must submit to abuse from husbands and fathers as well. Those who abuse their families rationalize their misdeeds through such interpretations, as do counselors, clergy, and the victims of the abuse themselves.

A closer look at the actual scriptural references reveals a different picture. For example, Ephesians 5:21:

*"Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."* (RSV, emphasis added)

This is the first and most important verse in the Ephesians passage on marriage and also the one most often overlooked. It clearly indicates that all Christians - husbands and wives - are to be *mutually subject* to one another. The word that is translated "be subject to" can more appropriately be translated as "defer" or "accommodate."

*"Wives accommodate to your husbands, as to the Lord."* (Ephesians 5:22)

This teaching implies sensitivity, flexibility, and responsiveness to the husband. In no way can this verse be taken to mean that a wife must submit to abuse from her husband.

*"For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, his body, and is himself its savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands."* (Ephesians 5:23-24, RSV)

The model suggested here of husband-wife relationship is based on the Christ-Church relationship. It is clear from Jesus' teaching and ministry that his relationship to his followers was not one of dominance or authoritarianism, but rather one of servanthood. For example, Jesus washed his disciples' feet in an act of serving. He taught them that those who would be first must in fact be last. Therefore, a good husband would not seek to dominate or control his wife, but would serve and care for her, according to Ephesians.

*"Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it, as Christ does the Church, because we are members of his body."* (Ephesians 5:28-29, RSV)

This instruction to husbands is very clear and concrete. A husband is to nourish and cherish his own body and that of his wife. Physically battering one's spouse is probably the most blatant violation of this teaching and a clear reflection of the self-hatred within the abuser.

It is interesting that the passages quoted above from Ephesians (5:21-29) which are commonly used as instruction for marriage, are instruction primarily for husbands. Nine of the verses address husbands' responsibilities in marriage; three of the verses refer to wives' responsibilities, and only one addresses

both parties. Contemporary interpretation, however, often focuses solely on the wives, misusing passages to justify wife-abuse. While spouse abuse may be a common pattern in a number of Christian marriages, it certainly cannot be legitimated by scripture.

In terms of sexuality in marriage, again this passage from Ephesians (see also Colossians 3:18-21) has been used to establish a relationship in which the husband has conjugal rights and the wife has conjugal duties. In fact, other scriptural passages are explicit on this issue:

“The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to the husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does: likewise, the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does.” (I Corinthians 7:3-4, RSV)

The rights and expectations between husband and wife in regard to sexual matters are explicitly equal and parallel, and include the right to refuse sexual contact. The expectation of equality of conjugal rights and sexual access and the need for mutual consideration in sexual activity is clear. The suggestion that both wife and husband “rule over” the other’s body and not their own refers to the need for joint, mutual decisions about sexual activity rather than arbitrary, independent decisions. A husband does not have the right to act out of his own sexual needs without agreement from the wife; likewise, the wife. This particular passage directly challenges incidents of sexual abuse (rape) in marriage that physically abused wives frequently report.

### **A Jewish Perspective**

The Jewish marriage ceremony is known as “Kiddushin” or sanctification; through this ritual a couple’s relationship is made holy and dedicated to God. This sanctification reminds Jews to strive to express their holiness through marriage and the home in a covenantal relationship that is based on mutual love and respect.

Judaism views marriage as necessary for personal fulfillment<sup>8</sup> and is the fundamental unit of community life. Marriage is part of God’s plan. In the early account of creation God observes that “it is not good for man to be alone.” (Gen. 2:18)

One of the fundamental values of Jewish family life is “*Shalom Bayit*,” peace in the home. “*Shalom*,” which is simply translated as “peace,” also signifies wholeness, completeness, and fulfillment. Domestic harmony encompasses the good and welfare of all the home’s inhabitants.

The rabbis consider domestic tranquility as one of the most important ideals because it fulfills the biblical mandate to “love your friend as you love yourself,” an obligation which speaks first and foremost to marital partners.<sup>9</sup> In addition, it is the essential forerunner to peace on earth. “Peace will remain a distant vision until we do the work of peace ourselves. If peace is to be brought into the world we must bring it first to our families and communities.”<sup>10</sup>

The concept of *Shalom Bayit* should not be invoked to place the onus of domestic harmony solely on the shoulders of a wife, nor should it be used to encourage maintaining an abusive marriage. . When domestic harmony is impossible because of physical abuse, the only way for peace may be dissolution of marriage. Although marriage is a sacred institution, divorce has always been an option according to the Jewish tradition.

In Judaism conjugal rights are obligatory upon the husband who must be available for his wife.

“A wife may restrict her husband in his business journey to nearby places only, so that he would not otherwise deprive her of her conjugal rights. Hence he may not set out without her permission.”<sup>11</sup>

Just as a husband is responsible for his wife’s sexual fulfillment, a wife, in return, is expected to have sexual relations with her husband. Jewish law, however, grants discretion in this area and requires consent on her part to every act of intimacy. And if she refuses sexual relations with her husband, . . . “she should be questioned as to the reason... If she says, ‘I have come to loathe him, and I cannot willingly submit to his intercourse,’ he must be compelled to divorce her immediately for she is not like a captive woman who must submit to a man that is hateful to her.”<sup>12</sup> This suggests that no wife is expected to submit to sexual activity with a husband she fears or hates. The arena of sexual sharing for Jewish couples is one of mutual responsibility and choice.

### **A Muslim Perspective**

The first verse in a chapter entitled “The Women” establishes the equal nature of men and women and reminds each gender that God is a witness to their fulfillment of their mutual rights. The verse states:

“O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single soul, created of like nature its mate, and from them both scattered (like seeds) countless men and women— Fear God through Whom you demand your mutual rights. And (reverence) the wombs (that bore you) for God ever watches over you.”<sup>13</sup>

The Qur’an provides guidance for male/female relations, and describes believing men and women as “friends and protectors” of one another. Needless to say, this relationship is expected to carry into the marriage. Marriage is described in the Qur’an as a “solemn covenant;”<sup>14</sup> it is a contract witnessed by God between two consenting adults who agree to live together in accordance to His laws. The Qur’an says that “He created for you mates from among yourselves that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts)...” (30:21).

The mutuality of the marital relationship is described in many teachings. One example is the Qur’anic reference to spouses as garments for one another.<sup>15</sup> This verse specifically refers to the sexual relationship between spouses, highlighting the accommodation that each spouse should make for the other, and the comfort that each should find in the other.

The Qur’anic teachings are exemplified and reinforced by the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad who said, “The best among you is the one who is best to his family, and I am the best to my family.” According to his example, husbands and wives are partners; they should encourage each other to live in accordance with divine laws, consult one another in decision-making, support one another emotionally, and accommodate each other’s needs.

Within this partnership, Islam recognizes that each partner may be better suited to particular areas in the relationship. For example, men have been given a leadership role, with the responsibility of providing financially for their families. Women, by virtue of their biological design, are obviously the only partner who can bear and nurse children. The roles of husband and wife are interdependent and complementary, perfectly manifesting the Arabic word for spouse (*zawj*), which means pair.

In his role as leader, a husband must remember his accountability to God and his responsibility to lead his family in accordance to Islamic values, which include justice, compassion, and equity. A wife should accept her husband’s leadership as long as he is living according to God’s teachings. She should never obey him or follow his lead in any matter that is contrary to these teachings.

In the case of domestic violence, abusers often distort or manipulate teachings to rationalize or justify their behavior. The same verse that holds men responsible for protecting and maintaining women financially also prescribes a process for men to use with a wife that has behaved in some immoral manner that compromises the integrity of the relationship (*nushuz*).<sup>16</sup> In a situation where there has been a serious breach, he is advised to talk to her first, then to sleep separately from her, and finally to chastise her if she does not change her behavior. This chastisement has been the subject of great controversy, with interpretations about its execution that range from a symbolic beating (using a handkerchief or something similar that would not cause injury) to abandonment. The goal of this verse is to preserve the marriage by bringing a wife back to the right path, not to give the husband a permission to be violent or abusive. In fact, there is a parallel verse that addresses how a woman can respond if her husband is guilty of the unacceptable behavior (*nushuz*).<sup>17</sup>

What is most important when considering the Islamic perspective on marriage is that teachings cannot be taken in isolation, rather the Islamic paradigm must be considered as a whole. Using a holistic approach, the teachings provide a model for healthy relationships, with guidance that prevents any kind of abuse or oppression. An important juristic maxim that guides legal rulings is, "Do not commit harm or allow reciprocation of harm." In addition, the teachings that reference equitable and just relations, mutuality, love, compassion and tranquility between spouse, all lead to the conclusion that violence has no place in a relationship between two God-fearing partners.

Although marriage is highly encouraged, and the preservation of a marriage is extremely important, the Qur'an also recognizes that not all marriages are sustainable. Couples are encouraged to either live together in kindness, or to separate in kindness if they are unable to live according to God's teachings. Divorce is provided as an option of last resort to protect individuals from experiencing any harm or from finding themselves in a situation where they may commit sins against the other out of their own misery. Unfortunately, in many cultures that are predominantly Muslim, divorce is surrounded by so much stigma that women may not even know it exists as an option. However, both the Qur'an and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad provide detailed instruction on the process of divorce, which can be initiated by either the husband or the wife.

### **The Marriage Covenant and Divorce: Shared Perspectives**

Strongly held beliefs in the permanency of marriage and sanctity of its vows may prevent an abused spouse from considering separation or divorce as options. For the Christian, the promise of faithfulness "for better or for worse... 'til death do us part'" is commonly taken to mean "stay in the marriage no matter what," even though death of one or more family members may be a real possibility when there is abuse. Jews view marriage as permanent, but "'til death do us part'" is not part of the ceremony. The Jewish attitude embodies a very delicate balance. Marriage is taken very seriously. It is a primary religious obligation and should not be entered into or discarded casually. Nevertheless, since the days of Deuteronomy, Jewish tradition has recognized the unfortunate reality that some couples are hopelessly incompatible and divorce may be necessary. Similarly, Islam emphasizes the importance of keeping a marriage and doing whatever is possible to maintain it. However, it also provides for divorce as a peaceful solution for those couples who are unable to live together in peace and tranquility, or who are simply unhappy together.

For some Christians, a strong doctrinal position against divorce may inhibit them from exercising this means of dealing with domestic violence. For others, a position against divorce is a personally held belief often supported by family and church. In either case, there is a common assumption that any marriage is

better than no marriage at all and, therefore, should be maintained at any cost. This assumption arises from a superficial view of marriage is concerned only with appearances and not with substance. In other words, as long as marriage and family relationships maintain a facade of normalcy, there is a refusal by church and community to look any closer for fear of seeing abuse or violence in the home.

There are any cultural values and attitudes that prevent Muslims from seeking divorce as solution. Divorced women often face criticism from families and communities who hold them responsible for the success or failure of the marriage. There is also a belief that two parents, regardless of what type of parent he or she is, is better than a single parent. This belief often keeps abused women in their relationships, unaware of the damage incurred by children who witness abuse. Marriage also provides a social status that many people are unwilling to lose, preferring instead to remain in an unhealthy relationship.

The covenant of Christian marriage is a life-long, sacred commitment made between two persons and witnessed by other persons and by God. Jews also regard marriage as sacred and intend that it be permanent. Muslims enter into marriage as a covenant witnessed by God, and by at least two other people. It is a relationship that is to be used as a vehicle for worshipping God. For Jews, Christians and Muslims, a covenant between marriage partners has the following elements:

- It is made in full knowledge of the relationship.
- It involves a mutual giving of self to the other.
- It is assumed to be lasting.
- It values mutuality, respect, and equality between persons.

A marriage covenant can be violated by one or both partners. It is common thinking in Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions that adultery violates the marriage covenant and destroys the relationship. Likewise, violence or abuse in a marriage violates the covenant and fractures a relationship. In both cases the trust assumed between partners is shattered. Neither partner should be expected to remain in an abusive situation. Often, one marriage partner feels a heavy obligation to remain in the relationship and do everything possible to make it work. This is most often true for women. A covenant relationship only works if both partners are able and willing to work on it. In all three traditions, it is clear that God does not expect anyone to stay in a situation that is abusive. In the Christian tradition, just as Jesus did not expect his disciples to remain in a village that did not respect and care for them (Luke 9:1-6), neither does he expect persons to remain in a family relationship where they are abused and violated.

Similarly, the Qur'an reminds those who are oppressed that "God's earth is spacious enough to move away from evil" (4:97), and that believers who are oppressed "(are not cowed but) help and defend themselves" (42:39). From these verses, it is clear that God would not want anyone to stay in an abusive or violent relationship.

In Jewish literature, the expectation is also clear:

"...if a man was found to be a wife beater, he had to pay damages and provide her with separate maintenance. Failing that, the wife had valid grounds for compelling a divorce."<sup>18</sup>

If there is a genuine effort to change on the part of the one who is abusive, it is possible to renew the marriage covenant, including within the renewal a clear commitment to nonviolence. With treatment for the family members, it *may* be possible to salvage the relationship. If the one who is being abusive is unwilling or unable to change, then the question of divorce arises. At this point in the marriage, divorce is really a matter of public statement: "Shall we make public the fact that our relationship has been

broken by abuse?" The other option, of course, is to continue to pretend that the marriage is intact. (A woman reported that she divorced only a month ago but that her marriage ended 10 years ago when the abuse began.)

In a home where one partner is abusive, divorce does not break up the family. *It is the perpetrator's violence and abuse that breaks up the family.* Divorce is often the painful, public acknowledgement of an already accomplished fact. While divorce is never easy, it is, in the case of domestic violence, the lesser evil. In many cases divorce may be a necessary intervention to generate healing and new life from a devastating and deadly situation.

### Parents and Children: Shared Perspectives

"Honor your father and your mother" is one of the Ten Commandments taught to all Jewish and Christian children. Muslim children learn the same commandment in the Qur'an. Unfortunately, some parents misuse this teaching in order to demand unquestioning obedience from their children. In a hierarchical, authoritarian household, a father may misuse his parental authority to coerce a child into abusive sexual activity (incest). Parents may use this commandment to rationalize their physical abuse of a child in retaliation for a child's lack of obedience.

For Christians, the meaning of the third commandment is made very clear in Ephesians:

"Children, obey your parents *in the Lord*, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother' (this is the first commandment with a promise) 'that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth.' Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up *in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*" (Ephesians 6:1-4, RSV, emphasis added)

Children's obedience to their parents is to be "in the Lord;" it is not to be blind and unquestioning. Parents receive instructions to guide and instruct their children in Christian values, i.e. love, mercy, compassion, and justice. Disciplining a child must be in the child's best interest. The caution to the father not to provoke the child to anger is most appropriate. If there is anything that will certainly provoke a child to anger, it is physical or sexual abuse by a parent.

Jewish tradition deals with the same concern explaining the juxtaposition of the two parts of verse which speaks about the obligation to have reverence for one's parents: "A person shall revere his mother and his father, and shall observe My Sabbaths." (Lev. 19:3). Both parents and children share an obligation to fulfill the divine law; the Divine will has priority over parental desires and all are duty bound to submit to its strictures.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, parents must be careful not to provoke their children unnecessarily.

"One is forbidden to beat his grownup child, the word 'grownup' in this regard, refers not to age but to maturity. If there is reason to believe that the child will rebel, and express that resentment by word or deed, even though children have not yet reached the age of maturity (12 for a girl, 13 for a boy), it is forbidden to beat them. Instead a parent should reason with them. Anyone who beats his grownup children is to be excommunicated, because he transgresses the Divine Command (Lev. 19:14) 'Thou shalt not put a stumbling block before the blind' (for they are apt to bring sin and punishment upon their children)."<sup>20</sup>

Even though Jewish law gives great authority to parents in relationship to their children, the requirement for restraint is clearly indicated. Again, the priority is the welfare of the child.

The other biblical injunction that is commonly used to justify abusive discipline of children is the Proverb generally summarized as: "Spare the rod and spoil the child."

"He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him." (Proverbs 13:24) This proverb is commonly interpreted to mean that if a parent does not use corporal punishment on a child, the child will become a spoiled brat. This is a good example of a misinterpretation based on a contemporary understanding. In fact, the image referred to in this Proverb is probably that of shepherd and the rod is the shepherd's staff (see Psalm 23.4: "thy rod and thy staff shall comfort me"). A shepherd uses his staff to guide the sheep where they should go. The staff is not used as a cudgel.

With this image of the shepherd guiding the sheep in mind, it is certainly clear that children need guidance and discipline from parents and other caring adults to grow to maturity. Children do not need to be physically beaten to receive guidance or discipline. Beating children as discipline teaches them very early that it is all right to hit those you love for their own good. This kind of lesson fosters early training for persons who grow up and subsequently physically abuse their spouses and children.

For Muslims, the emphasis on obedience to parents is contingent on the parents' not asking for anything that would be displeasing to God. While obedience to parents is second only to obedience to God, parents also have obligations to their children. Prophet Muhammad identified six basic rights for children from their parents: the right to live; the right to belong to a family; the right to a good name, the right to an education; the right to be provided for' and the right to be brought up according to Islamic teachings. He instructed parents to respect their children and teach them good behavior. As far as disciplining children, the Prophet Muhammad was known to have never hit any child. He always spoke to children in a gentle and respectful manner.

When parents obey God in raising their children in the best possible manner, then they deserve without a doubt to be held in the highest esteem and honor. Children, including adult children, are instructed to be kind to parents, avoid any words that are disrespectful, and "out of kindness, lower to them the wing of humility, and say: 'My Lord! Bestow on them your mercy even as they cherished me in childhood'" (17:24).

**Confession and Forgiveness.** The desire to admit wrongdoing experienced by an abusive family member is a healthy sign that he or she is no longer denying the problem but is ready and willing to face it. The offender may seek out a minister /imam/rabbi for the purpose of confessing.

Sometimes, however, an abusive father confesses, asks forgiveness, and promises never to sexually approach his daughter again, or a mother swears never to hit her child in anger again. The minister/imam/rabbi is then put in a position of assuring forgiveness and evaluating the strength of the person's promise. While the abuser may be genuinely contrite, without assistance and treatment it is the rare person who is able to end the abuse without assistance and intervention.

The minister/imam/rabbi needs to assure the person of God's forgiveness along with the expectation of repentance and change of behavior. The minister/imam/rabbi must confront abusers with the reality that they need additional help in order to stop the abuse. For some people, a strong word from a minister/imam/rabbi at this point is an effective deterrent: "The abuse must stop now." Sometimes this strong directive can provide an external framework for beginning to change the abusive behavior.

For Jews the Hebrew term “*teshuvah*” is the word for repentance. “*Teshuvah*” literally means “return,” denoting a return to God and to a state of sinlessness. The repentance process requires a number of steps: contrition; admission of wrongdoing; confession; acceptance never to repeat the offense; and confession. Repentance and reconciliation only can be accomplished with corresponding changes in behavior. This is true both for violations of ritual as well as interpersonal sins. However, before one can be forgiven for sins committed against another person, one must first make amends by repairing any damage, appeasing and mollifying the victim for any hurt that was caused, and asking that person for forgiveness. Judaism teaches that God cannot and will not forgive repentants until the ones they have harmed have themselves forgiven their perpetrators.<sup>21</sup> Simply put, forgiveness needs to be earned.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, for Christians, Jesus provides a process in Luke’s Gospel:

“Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day and turns to you seven times, and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” (Luke 17:3-4)

This process turns on repentance which means a change in behavior. Repentance is possible when one is called to account. “Rebuke” means to call to account. This is the responsibility of the community when domestic violence is disclosed.

The issue of forgiveness often arises for victims of abuse. A friend or family member may pressure the victim: “You should forgive him. He said he was sorry.” Or it may arise internally: “I wish I could forgive him...” In either case, the victim feels guilty for not being able to “forgive” the abuser. But the transgressed know that somehow forgiveness is linked to healing. Forgiveness often is misinterpreted as forgetting or pretending that the abuse never happened. Neither forgetting nor pretending is possible. Abuse is never forgotten; it becomes a part of the victim’s history. Forgiveness involves the victim’s ability to say that the experience will no longer dominate her or his life; the individual can let go of the pain and move on. This usually requires some form of justice – whether formally (that is, legally) or informally. A victim’s forgiveness usually requires their abuser’s repentance. Real repentance is reflected in profound changes in an abuser’s behavior. This also assumes then that the victim/survivor is safe and on the way to healing. Another issue is timing. Too often the religious leader or counselor prematurely pushes the victim to forgive the abuser, in a misguided effort to assist the victim to finish and resolve the abusive experience. They try to use “forgiveness” as a means to hurry the victim’s healing process.. All victims, however, move to forgive at their own pace and cannot be pushed by others’ expectations. Their timing needs to be respected. It may take years before they are ready to forgive; they will forgive when they are ready. When forgiveness arrives, it becomes the final stage of letting go, enabling a victim to move forward in life.

While the Qur’an strongly encourages Muslims to forgive one another, it also takes into consideration the need people have for justice. The Jewish teaching of an eye for an eye is included in the Qur’an followed by, “but if anyone remits the retaliation by way of charity, it is an act of atonement for himself...”<sup>23</sup> The ability to forgive is a quality held by believers who strive to model themselves after God’s forgiving nature. But there is no time limit specified as to how soon forgiveness must occur. Forgiveness is a process that happens over time, as healing occurs. It cannot be rushed or imposed by others; it comes from within one’s own spirit.

## **CONCLUSION**

This commentary addresses some of the common religious concerns raised by people dealing with domestic violence within Judaism, Islam and Christianity. We attempted to help the reader begin to see

ways of converting potential roadblocks into valuable resources for those dealing with violence in families.

Personal faith for the religious person can provide much needed strength and courage when facing a very painful situation and making changes within. Churches, mosques and synagogues can provide a much needed network of community support for victims, abusers, and their children.

It is clearly necessary for those involved in religious congregations and institutions to address these concerns directly. In ignorance and oversight, we can do much harm. In awareness and action, however, we can contribute a critical element to the efforts to respond to domestic violence in our communities.

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This article also appears in *Domestic Violence: Intersectionality and Culturally Competent Practice*, edited by Lettie L. Lockhart and Fran S. Danis (Columbia University Press, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> For additional information on many of these traditions, see WALKING TOGETHER: WORKING WITH WOMEN FROM DIVERSE RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS, Jean Anton, Editor (FaithTrust Institute, 2005) www.faithtrustinstitute.org

<sup>2</sup> See Susan Yarrow Morris, OPENING THE DOOR: A PASTOR'S GUIDE TO ADDRESSING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN PREMARITAL COUNSELING (Seattle: FaithTrust Institute, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> Kiddushin 39b.

<sup>4</sup> See Lev, 19:16.

<sup>5</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, Pe'ah 1:1.

<sup>6</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Exodus, ch. 14.

<sup>7</sup> For some examples of this teaching, see Qur'an verses 18:7, 22:11; 29:2; 34:21; 47:31; 64:15.

<sup>8</sup> "A man who has no wife lives without joy, without blessing, and without goodness," Talmud, Yevamot 62b,

<sup>9</sup> Talmud, Kiddushin 41a and Niddah 17a,

<sup>10</sup> *Gates of Repentance* (High Holy Days Prayer Book) Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1978, p.67.

<sup>11</sup> Maimonides, Hilkhhot Ishut 14:2..

<sup>12</sup> Maimonides, Hilkhhot Ishut14:8.

<sup>13</sup> Qur'an 4:1.

<sup>14</sup> Qur'an 4:21.

<sup>15</sup> Qur'an 2:187.

<sup>16</sup> Qur'an 4:34.

<sup>17</sup> Qur'an 4:128.

<sup>18</sup> Maurice Lamm. *Jewish Way in Love and Marriage*. p 157.

<sup>19</sup> Talmud, Baba Metzi'a 32a.

<sup>20</sup> Kitzur Shulhan Arukh, ch. 143; Yoreh De'ah 240:25.

<sup>21</sup> Mishnah, Yoma 85b.

<sup>22</sup> See also Marie M. Fortune and Joretta Marshall, Eds., *Forgiveness and Abuse: Jewish and Christian Reflections* (New York: Haworth Press, 2002)

<sup>23</sup> Qur'an 5:45.