



**Harnessing Unresolvable Difference Across
Abrahamic Faiths to Resolve Religion-Related
Tangible Conflicts**

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Abstract

Inherent across the three Abrahamic faiths are unresolvable theological differences. To resolve religion-related tangible conflicts may require great and respected leaders to build capacity for holding to their beliefs while simultaneously holding in mind sometimes contradictory and even seemingly unassailable beliefs of adherents of other religions. The power that would emerge as religious leaders achieve civic fusion, defined as bonding to solve a common public problem, even as they sustain deep value differences, could be harnessed to resolve tangible conflicts.

***Keywords:** mediation, sacred lands, conflict resolution, civic fusion, Jerusalem, religion, religion-based conflict*

Introduction

The narratives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have both common and conflicting ideas, ideals, and theologies. Historically, religious adherents of Abrahamic faiths living as a minority within countries of a religious majority have sometimes fared well as a defined minority or within secular governance systems based on the separation of religion and state. On the other hand, religious difference has also resulted in sporadic violence, forced conversions, dispersions, killings, and genocide.

Critical religious differences may be relegated to the background during the times of prosperity and tolerance and when there is a powerful benefit from diversity during peaceful times. However, the differences remain and may be exacerbated during the times of uncertainty and exploited for political gain. In contrast, perhaps the forces unleashed when unresolvable differences become attuned may be harnessed to forge creative responses to religion-related conflict over tangible issues. Mediated negotiations in the context of parties holding deep understanding and acknowledgement of critical differences, even in the absence of toleration of the others' beliefs, may possibly result in what I've termed, "civic fusion."

Civic fusion is when people bond, even as they sustain deep value differences, to solve a common public problem. Public policy mediators assist disparate, passionate parties in negotiating actionable agreements. To do so, the parties must draw close enough together to overcome their polarization, or in other words, achieve civic fusion. To achieve and sustain civic fusion, interested parties engage in assumption-shifting discussions that contribute to unexpected bonding. They connect across common goals the parties share, and find mutual understanding and respect for their interests and those of others. In addition, they come to understand and accept the constraints of their complex situations. A steady stream of new understandings moves people beyond their long-held perspectives to create opportunities for productive negotiations and innovative ideas. Ultimately, the parties generate pragmatic consensus agreements even as they retain their deeply held and often opposing values and beliefs (Podziba, 2012).

Achieving civic fusion among leaders and actors creates the bonds needed to address shared public problems. The author has seen this occur among leaders engaged in value-based disputes and suggests that it may be even more powerful among those well versed in politics and theology.

The role of the mediator requires that he or she enters into the fine detail of disputes to assist the parties in preparing actionable and sustainable agreements. Religion-related conflicts over tangible interests require entry into unresolvable difference. These differences must be identified and clarified by the multiple parties in conflict. The mediator must then help the parties to hold in mind the multiple conflicting narratives simultaneously, while keeping each separate and allowing the contradictions to exist. Disputants gain understandings of the beliefs of others relative to the issues they must negotiate to solve their conflict and achieve their shared public goal; they do not embrace those beliefs as their own. As civic fusion is achieved, respect for difference and the understanding of how those differences may constrain choices contribute to the emergence of innovative solutions to tangible problems.

This paper describes how to build capacity, in the context of a mediated process, for

engaging and harnessing unresolvable difference across the Abrahamic faiths to resolve tangible conflicts.

Complex policy mediations often begin with negotiations over organizational protocols that frame expectations about decision making, the reaching of agreements, and roles and responsibilities of the negotiators and mediators. After reaching agreement on the protocols, the negotiators confirm the scope of issues that must be resolved to sufficiently address the public problem they seek to address. The scope of issues to be negotiated typically includes issues that range from easy and moderate to difficult and sensitive.

As substantive negotiations proceed, initial consensus is typically achieved first on “low hanging fruit,” as the group slowly moves through easy and moderately difficult issues. These issues tend to be conflicts of confusion and resolve as the meaning and intent of stated interests and constraints are clarified. More difficult issues involve a clash of interests in the context of severe political and resource limitations. The most complex issues are those in which the clash of interests occurs in the context of deep value differences.

Values are not negotiable, but potential solutions regarding tangible issues must rest comfortably within the values of the parties even when those values conflict. Mediators carefully explore sensitive core issues with the parties. Although this may risk a collapse in the negotiations, not doing so would likely result in the parties’ failure to reach an actionable and sustainable agreement. Accurate understandings of the multiple perspectives that generate conflict may lead the parties to mutually acceptable arrangements, even as incompatible perspectives and values are maintained.

To achieve resolutions of religion-based conflicts may require mediators to assist negotiators in respectfully acknowledging their deep value differences and negotiating from a stance of simultaneously holding in mind their own reality as well as the multiple divergent realities of all the parties. The civic fusion that ensues results in connections and commitments to solve shared public problems.

An example of the power of civic fusion is illustrated by the abortion talks I facilitated among leaders of the Massachusetts pro-life and pro-choice movements after fatal shootings at two women’s health clinics. A primary goal of the talks was to reduce the violent nature of the rhetoric used in the abortion debates. Their vastly different worldviews and values required the participants to build a capacity for civic fusion. Some of the women believe that life begins at conception and others do not. Some believe that women have a right to terminate a pregnancy, which others vehemently oppose. Yet they became able to simultaneously hold in mind their views and those of the other, even as some absolutely abhorred the values held by their counterparts. In moments when they felt strong bonds across their differences, which is civic fusion, they sensed a powerful force. The women of the group inclined toward religious interpretation of life experiences described these moments of connection as sacred. All experienced these moments as having moved outside the realm of the ordinary. Each leader came to respect the individuals – though not their values -- as they came to understand that each acted from a moral system, even when that moral system contradicted their own. The sense of the other as immoral, or even evil, fell away.

After years of secret talks, which were made public via a joint article in the Boston Globe, the pro-life and pro-choice leaders all remained steadfast in their beliefs and positions related to

abortion policy. However, as a result of their deep connections, they took individual actions to protect against and reduce risks and threats of violence.

Mediators work to orient negotiators to be able to take in new information to gain a greater understanding of the reality of the conflict they are part of. In the allegory of Plato's cave (Republic 514a–520a), humans see only shadows and believe that those shadows represent the whole of reality. The role of the philosopher is to bring humans out of the cave to experience more of reality. Similarly, a mediator works to help disputants enhance their understandings of the totality of their conflict situation. In so doing, the parties may engage in productive negotiations to innovate their ways out of conflict.

Building Capacity for Simultaneously Holding Conflicting Views

To hold differing realities in mind at the same time may be a matter of building capacity amid practice. Usual political discussion is often an effort to make a position known and in that assertion to influence others toward it. In such conversations, as the speaker asserts, the listener thinks about his or her response rather than carefully listening to better understand the speaker's perspective. In disputes that include extremely sensitive components, such as conflicts rooted in religious beliefs and practices, discussions of core conflicts likely occur only rarely. Through a mediated process, leaders may build capacity to simultaneously hold in mind their own perspectives as well as those of others, which may seem inaccessible or even intolerable. Doing so may create possibilities for addressing the seemingly intractable religion-components of tangible conflicts.

The steps along a pathway toward building such capacity begin with recognition that different people see different realities and that multiple interpretations of the same stimulus are possible. In considering differences across religions, we may practice holding alternative views in the realms of time and space.

Seeing Different Realities

An internet sensation occurred when *the same dress* appeared to some as blue and black and others as white and gold. These are extremely different colors, not merely differences in shades.



Illustration 1: The original photo as posted on Tumblr.

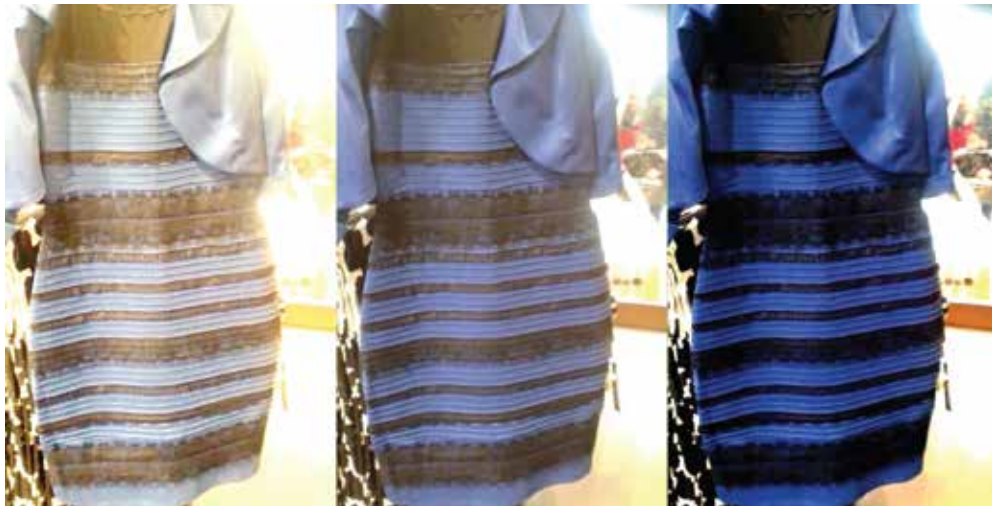


Illustration 2: The three ways people see the original photo.

After it went viral, people came to understand that both versions were possible human perceptions. In building capacity for holding two conflicting views in mind, consider this dress. It is easy to perceive the colors before you, but knowing that your neighbor sees completely different colors is difficult to fathom. Over time, some people came to accept that while the dress appeared to them to be blue and black, others saw it as white and gold. There was not a right and wrong answer. Can we hold in mind that different eyes perceived different colors and that some saw it differently from us, even as we continued to see only the colors we perceived? To do so requires people to understand that their brain translated the light in one way and their neighbor's mind translated in another. This is a situation in which two conflicting views are possible, and no one is required to change his or her own view, only to accept that another view is plausible.

Two Views at Different Moments

If the simplest case is when we see one thing and our neighbor sees another, the next level of investigation is the situation in which we can see two views at different times, but we cannot see them both at the same time. Here is the illusion of *the young woman and the old woman*.



Illustration 3: The Young Woman and the Old Woman

Focus on the small triangle at the left side of the photo beneath the upper black section. If you see the triangle as a nose, you see the young woman. If you see it as a mole, you see the old woman. In this case, the eye perceives one image, but can also see the other. It takes some effort to see the other, and our eyes can only discern one image at a time even as we know that both are there.

The optical illusion of *the young woman and the old woman* helps us build capacity for perceiving that multiple possibilities can exist simultaneously. In this example, the viewer is able to see both images, but not at the same time. As the viewer sees one image, he or she knows the other exists, but cannot perceive the second one. As in *the dress* example, neither perspective is wrong or right, rather both exist.

Recording and Counting Time

As we move into the realm of religion-based difference, time, perhaps, offers an accessible path for acknowledging multiple possible realities. The date of the Third Annual Conference of the International Center for Ethno-Religious Mediation (ICERM) was listed on the conference flyer as 2 November 2016. This date is in accordance with the Gregorian calendar, which begins its counting of time with the nativity. Dates that have occurred before the year 1 are marked as *Before Christ* (BC), although some prefer to use *Before the Common Era* (BCE). Dates from the nativity forward, when necessary to distinguish from time before the nativity, are marked as *Anno Domini* (AD) or for some, the preferred designation is *Common Era* (CE). The Gregorian calendar is a solar-based, and days start at midnight.

The Gregorian Calendar is used as an international norm for identifying dates, but there are many other calendars in use as well. According to the *Hebrew Calendar*, the date of the ICERM conference is 1 Cheshvan 5777. This calendar begins at the time of the creation of Adam and Eve, which according to the Book of Genesis is the sixth day of creation. It is a lunar calendar and days start at sundown.

Still another calendar is the *Hijri (Islamic) Calendar* according to which the ICERM conference is on 2 Safar 1438. This calendar begins with the year of the Hijra, the migration of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina. It is a lunar calendar and days begin at sundown.

Each of these calendars (and numerous others) is rooted in a religious narrative. For the purposes of learning to hold multiple realities rooted in religious difference in mind concurrently, we can think of the date of the ICERM's Third Annual Conference as simultaneously being:

2 November 2016,
1 Cheshvan 5777, and
2 Safar 1438.

And as the sun sets, it will be 2 November 2016, 2 Cheshvan 5777 and 3 Safar 1438 in New York for about six hours until it becomes 3 November 2016 at midnight.

Is it difficult to consider the ICERM conference date as 2 November 2016, and allow that for Jews it is also 1 Cheshvan 5777 and for Muslims it is also 2 Safar 1438? Note, it is not necessary to adopt the others' dates as your own, but merely to acknowledge that each date time according to another calendar.

Surely, not all will have the capacity or tolerance to do so. For some, accepting that others mark time according to an alternative religion-based calendar may seem to undermine the validity of one's own religion and / or require acceptance of the reality of other religions. Again, the capacity sought is the ability to acknowledge that others have a differing time-recording reality with no need to adopt it. The openness this requires is similar to that which is required of negotiators participating in a mediated process. They must delve into discussions that go beyond their perspectives that sustain their conflicts. If we can respect differing descriptors that people use to count and record time, we can hold these different dates in mind at the same time as we sit in this moment together. Is it plausible to expect that people can respect that others record time differently -- even when their starting points differentiate a sacred event so critical that it is their beginning point for marking time?

If people can master the capacity for holding differing dates in mind, perhaps they may also simultaneously consider passionate contradictory beliefs held by some and rejected by others.

During the abortion talks, pro-life leaders asserted the conviction rooted in their religion, that life begins at conception and that terminating a pregnancy is the taking of life. Pro-choice leaders prioritized a woman's right to control of her body, including the choice to terminate a pregnancy. These political positions, which include life and death, were in direct contradiction. Participants in the abortion talks, with deep respect for each other despite their life and death differences, peeked into each other's views. They continued to vehemently disagree on policy. And yet, their ability to create and sustain civic fusion, that is, to bond by vehemently maintaining one's values and at the same time perceiving the other's sometimes offensive worldview, resulted in actions to reduce the threat of violence against clients and workers at women's health clinics and

even to protect each other from potential attacks.

Is it possible to build this capacity in relation to sacred lands? It may be easiest to do so concerning uncontested sacred lands. For example, Mecca, the birthplace of Mohammed, is sacred land that is held and protected by and for Muslims throughout the world. Jews, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and most others recognize and respect these lands as sacred to Muslims. The Muslim claim is the sole claim to this land; there is no competing claim by other religions.

When non-Muslims respect the sacredness of Mecca, they acknowledge an historic Muslim event of great magnitude. Again, in a civic fusion approach to conflict resolution, people need not accept the reality of the other, but *perceive* and hold to their own reality even as they understand the perceptions of others.

Building capacity for civic fusion is much more difficult if we consider sacred lands for which there are competing claims. The three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all have sacred claims in Jerusalem, and all the more so for the Sacred Esplanade of Jerusalem, usually referred to as the Noble Sanctuary by Muslims, and the Temple Mount by Jews.

In deference to the extreme sensitivity of the conflicting claims over this sacred land and the capacities and preparations necessary for responsibly entering into the heart of this conflict, I will only wonder about such a possibility. (The abortion talks were held secretly over five years.)

Convening religious leaders for discussions on the Sacred Esplanade of Jerusalem, as with the abortion talks, would require an in-depth assessment to determine participants, necessary protocols for participation, and identify worthwhile, achievable goals that at a minimum do no harm. Such talks would also need to be carefully designed and implemented to create capacity for, initiate, and sustain civic fusion to enable religious leaders to harness the power of their differences to innovate solutions to resolve conflicts over tangible issues.

Religious adherents seek closeness with God. Practices and rituals and prayers provide mechanisms to cleave to God, to celebrate God, to satisfy yearnings and longings to be close to God. Perhaps humility before God might provide the space within which leaders can respectfully learn of others' relationships with God and hold those in mind even as they hold and prioritize their own above all others even when their beliefs demand adherence to an exclusive truth – as did some of the leaders who participated in the abortion talks. Might it be possible to sustain one's specific relationship with God in all of its detail, and to sit and even marvel with others as they detail their own pathways to God?

If, among its sacredness, Jerusalem is the foundation stone of the creation, the place of God's dwelling, the location of the passion and resurrection of Jesus, and / or Mohammed's landing place after time spent in Heaven, then there is sacred potential resident in her land. An attempt to access it may ask great and respected leaders to build capacity for holding their detailed beliefs about this land in simultaneity with deeply held, sometimes contradictory and even seemingly unassailable beliefs of other adherents. It is impossible to know what innovative resolutions of tangible issues, if any, might emerge from such an effort. It would require, in word, a leap of faith.

Reference

Podziba, S. L. (2012). □ *Civic fusion: Mediating polarized public disputes*. Chicago: American Bar Association.