

## A Divine Economy: Cooperatives, Religion and Peace by Andrew McLeod

The three religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam have values that are more alike than they are different. Many teachings and practices of those who embrace these faiths reflect a God with a preference for justice, as well as sharing of power and responsibility. These are hallmarks of cooperation.

The history of these three religions has been a turbulent one, but we have also seen a number of extremely hopeful examples of cooperation, both within each religion and among them. One of the great potentials of cooperatives is that they provide a way for people to work together with those who share their values, rather than trying to force those values upon others through government actions. Their presence doesn't rule out such imposed morality, but it at least provides an alternative.

Jews worldwide have also played essential roles in the cooperative movement, although not always for religious reasons. Meanwhile, the history of Israel has been marked by a high degree of cooperative economics. Many Israelis live in cooperative communities called *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*, and these communities have formed many federated cooperatives to purchase supplies and market their produce. Some of the nation's largest companies started out as cooperatives, including supermarkets, banks, and transit companies. Cooperatives have been closely tied to Zionism, but also deeply involved in working for a just peace.

Christians have created many credit unions, cooperatives for sharing healthcare expenses, and dozens of intentional communities in which people live and work together and hold property in common. Some Christians have started co-ops for home schooling and food distribution. Christians are also behind some of the world's largest cooperative systems, including the Mondragon cooperatives—owned by 80,000 Basque employees—as well as several federations in Canada and Italy, which include millions of members.

Muslims have created some of the world's largest mutual insurance companies, operating on a principle of *takaful*, or guaranteeing each other. They have also created widespread cooperative financial practices in order to avoid paying interest, started credit unions in the U.S. and elsewhere, and developed innovative methods of cooperative home purchase, one of which is located in Thurston County. They have also created cooperatives to help people pay for pilgrimages and other religious duties.

Cooperatives have also provided a structure through which people can voluntarily join their futures together and build trust, including Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam village in Israel, and a recent joint effort by women in Israeli and Italian cooperatives to help Palestinian women develop their own microenterprises. The Mirembe Kawomera coffee co-op in Uganda has been a bastion of peace in a troubled land, while the UK's Olive Co-op has pursued peacemaking through fair trade imports from Israel and Palestine.

This common thread of cooperation is no coincidence, as all three worship the same benevolent deity who commands us to love each other.

Judaism is well known as the soil out of which Christianity originated, but it is also true the Islamic Qur'an recognizes both the Hebrew Torah and the Christian Gospel as revelations from Allah, and even instructs Muslims to study their older cousins' holy books, "Lest ye should say: The Scripture was revealed only to two sects before us, and we in sooth were unaware of what they read" (6:156)

Cooperation first appears almost immediately in that Scripture, when God shifts from the prior solitary acts of creation, and suddenly makes a proposal: "Let us make people in our image, to be like ourselves." (Genesis 1:26).

When the Israelites asked for a king, God was not pleased, saying to the last judge Samuel, "it is me they are rejecting, not you. They don't want me to be their king any longer." (1 Samuel 8:7) God then went on to list all the oppressions that the people would experience under a king, but they were not swayed.

The era of kings was marked by corruption, oppression and violent power struggles. Some kings were good, but most were not and the nation split in half and was later conquered, beginning a long period of exile that ended with the servant leader Nehemiah, who organized the people of Jerusalem to rebuild the wall, with each neighborhood taking the nearest section, and the political leaders and their children working alongside everyone else. (Nehemiah 3)

The Christian scriptures tell that the first followers of the Way of Jesus engaged in even more explicit examples of cooperation. "They sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with those in need." (Acts 2:45)

This sharing was voluntary, but when divisions begin to develop between the Greeks and Hebrews about the distribution of the common food, the Apostles called a meeting of all the believers and told them that the work of managing the collective finances should not be in their hands. They said to "look around among yourselves, brothers, and select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We will put them in charge of this business." (Acts 6:2-3)

The need for equality was emphasized by James, who wrote, "Yes indeed, it is good when you truly obey our Lord's royal command found in the Scriptures: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you pay special attention to the rich, you are committing a sin, for you are guilty of breaking that law." (James 2:8-9)

The Qur'an includes several passages that teach us to live in cooperative ways. As is the case with Judaism and Christianity, some Muslims have taken passages out of context and ignored the broad scope of teachings that God, Allah, does not want us to force morality upon each other.

For example, "Say: O disbelievers! I worship not that which ye worship; nor worship ye that which I worship. And I shall not worship that which ye worship. Nor will ye worship that which I worship. Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion." (109:1-6)

This live-and-let-live approach is also taught for leaders within Muslim communities: "And if they (thy kinsfolk) disobey thee, say: Lo! I am innocent of what they do." (26:216)

So we see that these religions' expressions of cooperation stem from teachings of

love and justice, combined with a strong tendency toward leaving moral decisions between the individual and God. These values are not always practiced, but through an understanding of faith-based cooperation, religion may be shifted from a source of division to a source of unity.

BIO: Andrew McLeod is a cooperative development specialist. He presented on the subject of religious cooperation at the International Cooperative Alliance Research Conference in Italy this October. The full paper is available at <http://bookofacts.info/home/images/stories/hcx3.pdf>. His first book, *Holy Cooperation!: Building Graceful Economies*, addresses Christian cooperation and is available from Wipf and Stock publishers.