

THE ARAB WORLD: ONE GOD, ONE COMPOUND

Interreligious prayer (also commonly referred to as inter-religious rituals and interfaith worship) is one of the most challenging and controversial forms of interreligious dialogue. It confronts believers with delicate issues of fidelity and integrity and, as such, has traditionally been approached with caution and reserve by the world's major religions. Nevertheless, over the past few decades, religious scholars have identified a trend of interreligious prayer facilitated by greater contact among people from different religions.

There are several motivating factors for interreligious prayer. One is universalizing theological doctrines, which assert that different religious traditions are particular manifestations of a unified and transcendent divine reality. In monotheistic religions, for instance, universalizing theologies stress the existence of a singular God that watches over all of providence and cares for the whole of humanity. These theologies emphasize that particular visions of God in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity are secondary expressions. Universalizing theologies support shared prayers that rest on universal spirituality and individual search for an inner connection to the transcendent reality.¹

Interreligious prayer can also be motivated by social considerations: to express solidarity towards another religious group, to promote religious reconciliation, and to gain a better appreciation and understanding of the religious other.

Marianne Moyaert, a scholar of religions, argues that engaging with another religion's prayers and rituals allows one to reach a deeper level of familiarity with it, which would not have been possible through other forms of interreligious dialogue. This is because religious rituals embody tacit knowledge – the non-codified, experience-based knowledge of a religion. This tacit knowledge is the primary religious language that forms the basis of socialization into a religious tradition.

As Moyaert explains, “the devout spiritual life is rooted in concrete, seemingly arbitrary and non-essential practices.” The tacit knowledge carried within religious rituals can never be made fully explicit in scripture or religious text. Therefore, those who seek to gain a fuller understanding and appreciation of other religious traditions may be drawn to interreligious prayer gatherings.²

In 1986, Pope John Paul II gathered 160 religious leaders representing 32 Christian religions and 11 non-Christian world religions, including Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, among others, to the World Day of Prayer of Peace in Assisi, Italy. However, as the Pope stressed, the religious leaders came together to pray for peace and not to pray together. The day began

¹ Julia Ipgrave, “Case Study 3: Religious Rituals,” in Julia Ipgrave, ed., *Interreligious Engagement in Urban Spaces: Social, Material and Ideological Dimensions* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2019), pp. 213-221.

² Marianne Moyaert, “Inappropriate Behavior? On the Ritual Core of Religion and Its Challenges to Interreligious Hospitality,” *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 27:2 (2014), pp. 222-242.

with separate prayers by each religious group in a different church. Then, in the evening, they all gathered in the square before the Tomb of St. Francis, where each religious leader came forward to say a prayer for peace according to their tradition while the others listened in silence.³

The case of the World Day of Prayer for Peace represents one model of interreligious prayer gatherings, known as serial interfaith occasions or multireligious prayer. In this model, each religious group performs their own prayers in a sequential order, while participants from other religions listen and watch but do not actively participate. The rationale of this model is to show respect and appreciation for the religious traditions of others while maintaining the integrity of one's own.

Another common model of interreligious prayer is the guest/host model, where participants from one or more religious groups serve as guests at a gathering organized by a different religious tradition. The guests are generally allowed to participate as they wish or not at all, as long as they adhere to certain basic "rules of the house." The guest or host prayers often have social objectives rather than spiritual or religious ones.⁴

A third interreligious prayer model is inter-riting, united interreligious prayer, or integrative religious prayer. Unlike the other models, these prayers are intended for people to come to pray together rather than coming together to pray. There are no clear hosts or guests, and the goal is for everybody to participate in a common prayer. In inter-riting, there is an attempt to reach the "highest common denominator," seeking to find the uniting themes among the different religious traditions. These types of prayers pose a particular challenge to the believer because they actively participate in rituals that are foreign to their own.⁵

As Moyaert notes, rituals and prayers have objective meanings in religious traditions that transcend the personal concerns and intentions of the believer. This means that even if one does not believe in the meaning assigned to a ritual, they can still be viewed as committing, in a fundamental sense, to that religious tradition.⁶

Alongside these three models identified in the academic literature, we can identify a fourth, more novel, yet fascinating, model of interreligious prayers commonly known as interreligious worship spaces. While the traditional models encapsulate singular events that bring different religious faiths together, interreligious worship spaces permanently house two or more religious groups under the same compound. They offer believers the chance to encounter and experience religious diversity on a daily basis. In most cases, there is some degree of physical separation between the houses of worship of different religious groups.⁷ This could serve to generate a profound sense of security among worshipers, alleviating anxieties about the potential dilution of one's own faith.

³ Michael Amaladoss SJ, "Inter-religious Worship," in Catherine Cornille, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 87-98.

⁴ Kathleen Mary Black, "Interfaith/Interreligious? Worship/Prayer? Services/Occasions? Interfaith Prayer Gatherings," *Religions* 13:6 (2022), p. 489.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Marianne Moyaert, "Inappropriate Behavior? On the Ritual Core of Religion and Its Challenges to Interreligious Hospitality," *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 27:2 (2014), pp. 222-242.

⁷ Wikipedia: Interfaith Worship Spaces (2023), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interfaith_worship_spaces.

While still rare, interreligious worship space initiatives have become more prominent in recent years, motivated by spiritual, social and political objectives. One of the most ambitious projects in this spirit is the Tri-Faith Commons in Omaha, Nebraska. Formally established in 2020, the center brings together in permanent residence a church, a mosque, a synagogue, and an interfaith center on 15 hectares in the American heartland. The four structures are connected by the Abraham Bridge, which serves as a focal meeting point for the three religions. There is also a Tri-Faith Garden and Orchard, where the different congregations come together to grow vegetables and fruits for those in need. The Common's programs, which are open to the general public, champion religious pluralism, dialogue and social justice. One such program is Taste of Tri-Faith. The project comprised an annual series of weekend worship services in the three worship houses where visitors can learn about the communities while breaking bread.⁸

Another interreligious worship space that is currently under construction is the House of One in Berlin. The sanctuary, supported and funded by the German government, is set to house a church, a synagogue and a mosque under a single roof on Leipziger Strasse. On this site, the oldest church in Germany stood for 750 years.

The three worship places in the House of One will surround the central hall (the largest room in the building where the three religions will engage in cultural, artistic, academic, and religious exchanges). A loggia above the central hall, standing 32 meters above the ground, will give visitors a beautiful view of the city. Upon laying the first cornerstone of the building in May 2021, President of the Bundestag Wolfgang Schäuble called it a “location of tolerance and openness” and stressed the importance of the project for promoting interreligious dialogue and fighting fanaticism and violence.⁹

The relatively new and yet underexplored model of interreligious prayer is at the core of two unique projects that have emerged in the Arab world in recent decades and took significant steps forward in 2023. These are the planned interreligious complex on Mount Sinai and the Abrahamic Family House complex in Abu Dhabi.

In the late 1970s, Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat became the first to propose, during peace talks with Israel, the creation of an interreligious complex on Mount Sinai (Jabal Musa) – the historical cradle of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This spiritual center was intended to house a synagogue, a mosque, and a church, all built side by side as a symbol of fraternity, tolerance and coexistence among the monotheistic religions.

In August 1980, during the holy Muslim month of Ramadan, while secluded in his holiday residence at the foot of Mount Sinai, Sadat called upon believers of all faiths to join him in his historic mission to establish a shared religious complex that would “illuminate the path for

⁸ Tri-Faith Initiative (2023), <https://www.trifaith.org>.

⁹ German Federal Ministry of Housing, Urban Development, and Housing, German Federal Ministry of the Interior, Berlin Senate, House of One, 2023, <https://house-of-one.org/en>, and Kate Connolly, “‘House of One’: Berlin Lays First Stone for Multi-faith Worship Center,” *The Guardian*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/27/berlin-lays-first-stone-for-multi-faith-house-of-one-worship-centre>.

future generations.” Egypt began collecting donations for the project, and Egyptian, French, and Israeli designers were selected to draft its architectural plans.¹⁰

Henry Kissinger, who played a pivotal role in the Yom Kippur War armistice agreement and subsequent Israeli-Egyptian negotiations that preceded the 1979 peace treaty, wrote about the profound importance Sadat attached to the Mount Sinai vision. The two became close friends and confidants in Sadat’s final years. As Kissinger recalls, during their last meeting in Washington, DC, in September 1981, Sadat initially invited Kissinger to participate in celebrating the Sinai’s return with the Egyptian people the following March.

However, after a brief moment of reflection, Sadat decided that Kissinger’s Jewish background might cause undue pain to the Israelis if he took part in the celebrations. Instead, he proposed an alternative plan, suggesting that they “let the territory come back. And then, a month later, you and I alone will take a trip through the Sinai, and we’ll go to the top of Mount Sinai, where I intend to build a synagogue, a mosque, and a church. And this will be a more meaningful celebration of the peace process than if you come to Cairo.”

Tragically, just two weeks later, on October 6, 1981, Sadat was assassinated before he could realize his vision.¹¹ Over the years, there have been some calls in Egypt to resurrect Sadat’s project, primarily because of its economic potential to enhance religious tourism to the historic sites of Mount Sinai and the Monastery of Saint Catherine. According to certain traditions, this is where God revealed Himself to Moses, imparting the Ten Commandments and the location of the biblical “burning bush.”¹²

Over the last decade, Egyptian President ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi responded positively to these calls by initiating two projects. The first is an annual conference at the foot of Mount Sinai in Saint Catherine titled “Sinai: The Forum of Divine Religions... Let’s Pray Together.”

The first conference, held in December 2015, was intricately connected to the challenges that the new regime in Egypt has faced following the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood from power in July 2013. These included the construction of an anti-Islamist national identity; the establishment of a new religious discourse to counteract the radical Islamic ideas of ISIS and support Egypt’s fight against terrorism, especially in the Sinai Peninsula, where there were thousands of casualties and where significant damage was caused to the tourism sector; and a shift in focus to mitigating interreligious tensions between Egyptian Muslims and Christian Copts.

Thus, since 2015, these international interreligious conferences have officially aimed to denounce terrorism and extremism, highlighting Egypt’s pluralistic and rich religious heritage,

¹⁰ “Nida’ al-Ra’is al-Sadat ila Kull al-Mu’minin li-Isham fi Binaa’ Majma’ al-Adyan al-Thalatha bi-Sina,” August 6, 1980, <http://www.anwarsadat.org/>.

¹¹ University of Maryland, Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace & Development, “Remarks by the Honorable Henry Kissinger,” May 4, 2000, <https://sadat.umd.edu/events/remarks-honorable-henry-kissinger>.

¹² Sayyid al-Qimni, “Ka’bat Sina,” *al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin*, March 21, 2010, <https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=208570>.

restoring Sinai's reputation as a safe destination for tourism and promoting interfaith dialogue.¹³ Participants included religious leaders from around the world, some of whom explicitly supported the revival of Sadat's plan for a religious compound.¹⁴

The conferences' primary goal was to strengthen Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt and beyond, with limited Jewish representation and without Israeli participation. At the October 2019 conference in Saint Catherine, the leader of Egypt's Jewish community, Majda Haroun, expressed her joy at representing her faith and attending a forum that unites the three monotheistic religions in a friendly atmosphere.¹⁵ However, since the Covid-19 pandemic, plans to resume the conference have been delayed.¹⁶

The second project, initiated by the Egyptian government in 2020 under the direction of President al-Sisi, is "Tajalli," or in its full name, "The Great Transfiguration on the Land of Peace." With a budget of four billion Egyptian Pounds (roughly 130 million US Dollars), this project aims to develop the area of Saint Catherine, strengthen its spiritual status, and establish it as a global center for religious tourism for Jews, Muslims, and Christians.¹⁷ According to President al-Sisi, this is where God's revelation occurred, prompting the need to develop a vision that pays homage to such a remarkable event.¹⁸

The project was supposed to be inaugurated in 2023, but its official opening has so far been delayed due to financial difficulties – a common occurrence for national projects in Egypt. In May 2023, the Egyptian Minister of Housing visited the project with the Governor of Southern Sinai to oversee its progress.¹⁹

Construction continues, albeit at a slower pace than planned, suggesting a commitment to see the project through, but a new inauguration date has yet to be set. Local officials expressed their hope of welcoming one million tourists annually, as Mount Sinai is the only place of revelation recognized by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (distinguishing it from Jerusalem and Mecca).²⁰

While the "Tajalli," project in Saint Catherine drew some inspiration from Sadat's idea, the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi closely aligns with his original vision. The Emirati initiative to construct a shared religious complex featuring a mosque, a church, and a synagogue was

¹³ "Sinai: The Forum of Divine Religions... Let's Pray Together," State Information Service, September 28, 2017, <https://beta.sis.gov.eg/en/media-center/events/sinai-the-forum-of-divine-religions-lets-pray-together/>.

¹⁴ Abu al-Sa'ud Abu al-Futuh, "Khabir Aathar Yutalibu bi-Ihya' Mashru' Mujamma' al-Adyan bil-Wadi al-Muqaddas," *al-Bawaba*, October 18, 2018, <https://www.albawabhnews.com/3328716>.

¹⁵ Ayman Muhammad, "A'shaqu Misr.. Ra'isat al-Ta'ifa al-Yahudiyya Tabki Athna' Takrimha fi Sant Katrin," *al-Balad*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.elbalad.news/4022198>.

¹⁶ Hani al-Asmar, "'Huna Nusalli Ma'an'.. Ihtifaliyyah 'Alimiyya 'ala Ard 'Sant Katrin,'" *al-Ahram*, October 20, 2021, <https://gate.ahram.org.eg/Massai/News/3051449.aspx>.

¹⁷ Rim Mahmud, "Ba'd Munaqashat al-Ra'is al-Sisi Lahu.. Mashru' 'al-Tajalli al-A'zam' fi Sutur," *al-Dustur*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.dostor.org/4154450>.

¹⁸ "al-Tajalli al-A'zam fi Sant Katrin," MAAT GROUP, April 8, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JxZ-NKzOz0>.

¹⁹ Isra' 'Abd al-Mutallib, "al-Tajalli al-A'zam fawqa Ard al-Salam.. Madha Hadatha bi-Sant Katrin Ba'd Ziyarat Wazir al-Iskan?," *al-Balad*, May 31, 2023, <https://www.elbalad.news/5789292>.

²⁰ "Huna Tajalla Allah... Aathar Shahida 'ala Tarikh al-Diyanat al-Thalath fi Sant Katrin," *Sputnik*, February 9, 2021, <https://sputnikarabic.ae/20210209>.

first introduced in 2019 following the signing of the Document on Human Fraternity by the Pope and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar in Abu Dhabi. The House was inaugurated in February 2023 and opened to visitors the following month. Despite the similarity in name, the Abraham Family House has no direct connection to the Abraham Accords signed in September 2020 between the UAE and Israel.

The three houses of worship are designed with equal stature, size, and materiality to eliminate any sense of hierarchy. The Mosque is oriented towards Mecca, the Church towards the East, and the Synagogue towards Jerusalem.²¹

The Moses Ben Maimon Synagogue is the first official Jewish prayer house to open in the UAE, providing respectful representation of the Jewish religion in the heart of an Arab capital and representing another significant milestone in the recent development of public Jewish communal life in the country.

Alongside the three structures, which are separated and isolated from each other to preserve their autonomy, the Abrahamic Family House offers shared interfaith spaces for learning, gathering, and connection. The complex also includes a research center and a library which houses a collection of books on biblical studies, Talmudic studies, Islamic studies, and interfaith studies. It offers educational programs designed to facilitate interfaith dialogue, it organizes seminars hosted by each of the three places of worship, and it invites academics and influencers for discussions, while avoiding controversial political topics.²²

Each house of worship maintains its distinct rituals and holidays, welcoming visitors from diverse faiths to discover them. Last September, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, about 150 Jewish residents of the UAE gathered at the Moses Ben Maimon Synagogue for traditional celebrations. They read Torah portions from a scroll dedicated to the memory of Sheikh Zayed, the founding father of the UAE. The scroll, presented in 2019 to his son Muhammad Bin Zayed by the local Jewish community, was transferred from the Presidential Palace to the synagogue in preparation for the first Rosh Hashanah in the sanctuary. During the Israel-Hamas war, the synagogue conducted special prayers for healing and redemption.

A guided tour of the Abrahamic Family House offers a brief overview of the three monotheistic religions and their shared representations and ideals, including the olive branch as a symbol of peace, concepts of purity and the significance of water in rituals. One instructor noted to the authors that Muslims adopted the practice of removing shoes upon entering a mosque from the biblical story of Moses. For him, a key message visitors should take and share from the House is that differences are the spices of humanity.

In the eyes of its founders, the Abrahamic Family House conveys spiritual messages. According to its official website, the vision is “for people to come together in peace,” celebrating diversity in faith. Its mission is to foster “common humanity through the exchange of knowledge,

²¹ “Our Mission & Vision,” Abrahamic Family House, <https://www.abrahamicfamilyhouse.ae/about-us#our-mission-vision>.

²² “Programming and Activities,” Abrahamic Family House, <https://www.abrahamicfamilyhouse.ae/education-dialogue#research-and-publications>.

dialogue, and the practice of faith.” Its core values are “peaceful coexistence, inclusivity, and the promotion of human fraternity.”²³

The target audiences of the House are twofold. On the international stage, it draws tourists from around the world, enhances the reputation of the UAE as a global advocate for religious moderation, and contributes to the fight against Islamophobia. One of its distinguished guests was the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, who visited the site in October 2023 and described it as an exemplary model for active exchange between faiths. Blinken, who is Jewish, added that “this is what the future of the region should look like.”²⁴

On the domestic front, the Abrahamic Family House aims to foster national cohesion and the UAE’s identity as a multicultural society, where communities from over 200 countries of origin and diverse religious backgrounds coexist harmoniously.²⁵ As of late 2023, approximately 1,000 worshippers attend Friday prayers at the mosque, and around 800 attend Sunday prayers at the church. Still, in contrast to the growing Muslim and Christian communities at the House, the synagogue’s Jewish community is much smaller as most of the Jewish population of the UAE resides in Dubai.

Both Egypt and the UAE encountered criticism regarding their efforts to establish interreligious venues. Egyptian dissidents accused President al-Sisi of following in Sadat’s footsteps, alleging a dubious agenda to sell Sinai to Israel and the Jews under the pretext of religious coexistence.²⁶ Critics of the Abrahamic Family House insinuated a conspiracy involving a Jewish-Zionist-American plot to create a new religion called “al-Ibrahimiyya,” which they believed could be detrimental to Islam.²⁷ These allegations were refuted by both Emirati officials and the Egyptian Islamic Research Center of al-Azhar.²⁸

Policy Recommendations

1. **Building on existing initiatives** that champion dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims, interreligious prayer spaces should also be promoted in Israel. Such initiatives should be carried out incrementally, commencing in areas where the likelihood of success is higher thanks to a history of interreligious pluralism and collaboration, such as Jaffa and Haifa.

²³ “Our Mission & Vision,” Abrahamic Family House, <https://www.abrahamicfamilyhouse.ae/about-us#our-mission-vision>.

²⁴ “US Secretary Blinken visits Abu Dhabi’s Abrahamic Family House,” *The National*, October 15, 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/2023/10/15/us-secretary-blinken-visits-abu-dhabis-abrahamic-family-house/>.

²⁵ Ibtisam al-Kitbi, *Dawr Dawlat al-Imarat fi Tamkin al-Diblumasiyya al-Diniyya* (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Policy Center, 2023), pp. 15, 30, 48-47, 71-66.

²⁶ “‘Sinaa’ Multaqa al-Adyan al-Samawiyya’.. Da’m lil-Iqtisad aw Naz’ al-Huwiyya?,” *Arabi 21*, September 24, 2017, <https://arabi21.com/story/1036388/>.

²⁷ Ofir Winter and Ella Aphek, “The Arab World: Antisemitic Attacks on Normalization,” *Antisemitism Worldwide Report – 2021*, The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry, Tel Aviv University, 2022, pp. 37-41.

²⁸ “Mujamma’ al-Buhuth al-Islamiyya bil-Azhar Yahsimu al-Jadal fi Mashru’ Bayt al-A’ila al-Ibrahimiyya,” *Bawabat al-Azhar al-Iliktruniyya*, March 18, 2023, <https://www.azhar.eg/magmaa/details/ArtMID/1097/ArticleID/69189/>.

2. **The ethos of East Jerusalem** as a shared interfaith prayer space for the adherents of the three monotheistic religions should be enhanced while respecting the autonomy of each religion in managing its holy sites. To ensure success, a bottom-up approach fostering dialogue and interactions among religious leaders and their communities should be prioritized.
3. **Bilateral religious tourism** between Israel and its Arab peace neighbors should be promoted to bring hearts closer, foster mutual understanding, emphasize shared values, and cultivate shared spaces of economic prosperity.

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