



## Breaking down stereotypes: Religious violence in the Abrahamic traditions

by Amelia Morris

Can people of different religions coexist peacefully? How can we stop religious violence from happening? Ahead of the 11<sup>th</sup> National eConference, a free online webcast, delivered annually by The Broken Bay Institute, we spoke to presenter Emeritus Professor Terry Lovat from The University of Newcastle who has spent the past 20 years researching and studying Islam and establishing the differences and similarities between the Australian and Islamic cultures.

“The 2015 eConference will challenge people to broaden their horizons by exploring the historical and theological connections between Judaism, Christianity and Islam.” Professor Lovat said.

Tapping into current global issues, the topic of the eConference is ‘Religion: Catalyst for Violence or Peace? Probing the Abrahamic Traditions for Answers’.

“Whenever I present on this topic area, it comes as a surprise to people to know the extent of the connection between the faiths,” Professor Lovat said. “Most Christians have no idea that Islam believes in Abraham, Moses, large sections of what we call the Old Testament, and even Jesus. While Islam does not accept Jesus as the Son of God, it has a very reverent place for Jesus as a prophet. It seems he was Mohamad’s favourite prophet, on whom he modelled himself in many ways.”

But the similarities don’t end there, “Mary, Mother of Jesus, is a revered and powerful figure in Islam. There is actually more about Mary in the Qur’an than in the Gospels – she gets her own chapter. You’ll notice that many Muslim women are called Mirriam, Maryam, Mariam, etc., taking their names from Mary.”

Professor Lovat explained that it is the closeness of the historical and theological connections between the religions that is both part of the problem and the solution. “It’s a love-hate relationship, like you find in any family, and this is part of the problem that erupts in Jerusalem or Syria and Iraq today. You could almost describe them as family squabbles between the religions and within each of them. When family squabbles happen, the only way to solve it is to bring the family back together and work on the common ties.”

Professor Lovat’s eConference presentation will look at ways that the Abrahamic traditions can learn from Convivencia (a Latin term meaning ‘living together in peace’) which is a loose label given to the medieval period of harmony in Spanish history where there were many communities of Muslims, Christians and Jews living together in relative peace.

“The idea of Convivencia is a little like the idea of reconciliation as it’s used in Australia to talk about the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It connotes a harmony or a way of relating between people of different cultures or faiths. It was originally a Spanish Muslim inspired notion that was formalised in law in a lot of cases. “Islam at its best is actually very good at understanding the other two traditions and their relationship to it.”

The medieval Islamic civilisations in Southern Spain in the period of Convivencia are among the most enduring examples of the Abrahamic traditions cohabiting peacefully for centuries.

Professor Lovat hopes that the eConference will help to encourage acceptance and mutual understanding between the three faiths. “We need to be able to accept the claims of other faiths, without forcing each other to change.”