



# Faith-Based Peacebuilding in Cyberspace

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## Abstract

The contemporary world is filled with tensions, challenges, conflicts, and wars among humans, nations, and states. To overcome this situation, it is crucial to establish an atmosphere of kindness, reconciliation, and collective efforts towards peacebuilding. Another significant aspect of modern human life is the existence of a second life facilitated by advancements in communication technologies. This virtual existence replicates the complexities and intricacies of real life, including behavioral and communicational dynamics. Faith-based peacebuilding emerges as a promising approach to address human conflicts and foster peace, stability, and a harmonious faith-based life within both physical and virtual realms. Faith-oriented activists utilize this model to overcome conflicts, promoting a blissful existence for the human community. By exploring key research terms in this field, the present study aims to propose a faith-based peacebuilding model encompassing all four categories of conflicts in cyberspace.

**Keywords:** Peacebuilding, faith-based, cyberspace

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## General Concepts

To start, let us provide an overview of the key terms relevant to the current research area.

### 1. Faith

Faith is commonly understood as the belief in the teachings of a particular religion. The term "religion" encompasses a range of literal meanings, such as habit, status, worship, serving, wrath, edict, tradition, reflection, providence, piety, nation, and reluctance (Ibn al-Manzūr 1375 AH, 13:170; Murtaḍā al-Zubaydī 1414 AH, 9:208).

When examining its usage in the Quran, the term "religion" encompasses several meanings, including recompense, reckoning, rule, the revealed law, serving Allah, total submission, Islam, ways and methods, and monotheism (*tawḥīd*) (Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī 1414 AH, 175; Ṭurayḥī 1375 Sh, 76-77; Ghorashi Bonabi 1352 Sh, 2: 380-81).

In its technical sense, the term "religion" has been used at times to signify a compilation of rules, rites, and laws. At other times, it is employed to encompass a set of faith-related matters, in addition to the aforementioned issues (Makarem Shirazi 1373 Sh, 2: 369). In essence, the technical meaning of religion includes both descriptive and doctrinal propositions.

Drawing upon the diverse definitions of religion offered by Muslim thinkers, a comprehensive understanding of this concept can be formulated as follows: religion encompasses a body of theoretical and doctrinal knowledge, accompanied by practical laws, rules, and moral instructions that pertain to various aspects of human personal and social life. These teachings are in harmony with human intellect and innate disposition and have been revealed by Allah to His prophets as a comprehensive guide for both material and spiritual aspects of human existence. When implemented faithfully, this comprehensive plan ensures the salvation and prosperity of individuals in both worldly and otherworldly realms (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1378 Sh, 2:130, 16:193; Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1386 Sh, 2-3; Javadi Amoli 1372 Sh, 3; Mesbah Yazdi 1384 Sh, 1: 28).

It is important to highlight that in the context of Islam, being the final and most comprehensive religion revealed by Allah, the aforementioned rules, laws, teachings, and instructions are derived

through a profound comprehension of the Four Principle Sources: the Quran, the Sunnah, reason, and consensus. This pursuit has been the focus of Islamic scholars and jurists throughout history, as they have diligently fulfilled their duties in interpreting and applying these sources in their respective time periods.

## 2. Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding is a comprehensive term that encompasses several related concepts (for further details, refer to Schirch 2008):

- Conflict Resolution: Many individuals perceive conflict resolution as the ultimate outcome of the peacebuilding process. However, conflicts are often complex and protracted, making resolution a challenging and time-consuming endeavor.
- Conflict Management: This focuses on guiding conflicts towards the resolution of underlying issues. It entails strategies and approaches to effectively handle conflicts and navigate them towards constructive outcomes.
- Conflict Mitigation: Some state organizations employ this term, emphasizing the reduction of pain and suffering caused by conflicts. Critics argue that while mitigation can alleviate the immediate consequences of conflicts, it does not address their root causes.
- Conflict Prevention: This involves proactive peacebuilding efforts aimed at preventing violent conflicts from occurring. Certain perspectives suggest that conflicts, under specific circumstances, can create opportunities for positive change. Therefore, the focus should be on preempting the violence rather than the conflict itself.
- Conflict Transformation: This concept highlights the need for a fundamental transformation in the nature of conflicts, rather than solely managing or resolving them. However, proponents of this idea have not clearly outlined the specific processes of this transformation or identified the precise elements that require transformation.

It is worth mentioning that certain individuals favor terms like coexistence or reconciliation when discussing the enhancement of intergroup relations. However, some states have undermined the credibility of these notions through superficial actions and by

neglecting the fundamental aspects of conflicts, namely their criminal, judicial, and economic dimensions.

In general, individuals who prioritize broader aspects of peace and security over the specific issue of conflicts tend to favor the term "peacebuilding." This preference arises from the understanding that terms associated with the concept of conflict often emphasize its negative aspects, drawing from experiences that revolve around various conflicts, while overlooking the potential for peace.

### 3. Faith-Based Peacebuilding

Religion has emerged as a significant factor in contemporary politics, and policymakers recognize the influential role it can play in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. While there have been instances where religious individuals seemingly instigated conflicts, it is important to acknowledge that religious teachings can also serve as a vital tool in resolving conflicts and alleviating tensions.

Given these observations, faith-based peacebuilding represents a distinctive model for conflict resolution and the promotion of peace. This approach emphasizes the constructive influence of religion and faith-based institutions within society. It recognizes their potential to contribute positively to peacebuilding efforts.

Faith-based peacebuilding activists strive to assist societies affected by war, advocating for peace by embodying religious teachings and drawing upon moral and spiritual principles derived from their respective faiths. Their efforts encompass mediating between conflicting parties, fostering goodwill, facilitating dialogue, promoting disarmament, cultivating stability, and upholding principles of integrity.

Faith-based peacebuilding encompasses a diverse array of actions rooted in primary religious sources, such as the Quran and the Sunnah. These actions include defense and support, education and training, inter- and intra-religious dialogue, mediation, as well as oversight, guidance, and the promotion of justice. These indicators demonstrate the path towards faith-based peacemaking.

Faith-based reformers possess notable advantages, including a profound religious motivation, unwavering dedication, and an enduring presence in conflicts throughout history. Their purpose is to guide the warring parties towards peace and stability, driven by their strong commitment to their faith.

#### 4. Cyberspace

The term "cyberspace" originates from the Greek word "cybernetics," which connotes "ruling" or "guidance." Plato frequently employed this term in his works with a similar connotation. In English, we can interpret it to signify knowledge associated with guidance, control, self-direction, or self-governance.

In modern times, the term "cybernetics" has, to a certain extent, retained its original meaning, signifying the knowledge that empowers both humans and machines to govern and exert control (Motamed Nejad 1395 Sh, 41-42).

In its contemporary usage, particularly in reference to cyberspace, the term denotes an imaginary realm where computer communications occur (as per the Oxford Dictionaries Website). It gained significant popularity in the 1990s alongside other computer science-related terms like the internet, networking, and digital communication. The term cyberspace had the capacity to encapsulate and represent these emerging concepts and ideas.

According to Kramer et al. (2009), there have been twenty-eight distinct definitions put forward for cyberspace, with the most recent being an operational domain defined by the utilization of electronics and the electromagnetic spectrum. It encompasses the creation, storage, modification, exchange, and exploitation of information through interconnected and internet-enabled information systems along with their associated infrastructures.

The virtual space comprises various elements, including:

1. Infrastructure and telecommunication devices that enable the connection of communication and network technology systems.
2. Associated computer and software systems that ensure the fundamental functionality and connectivity of a specific domain.
3. Interconnected computer networks.
4. A network formed by the organization of multiple computer networks.
5. User access to network interfaces.
6. The network of networks, commonly known as the internet. (Mayer, et al. 2014)

## Religion in Cyberspace and its Phasing

Understanding and elucidating the presence of religion in cyberspace necessitates a structured approach, which can be outlined as follows:

1. Digitalizing religious contents by religious individuals;
2. Religious authority websites affiliated with Islamic experts and religious centers;
3. Interactive Q&A websites related to various religious fields;
4. The experience of religious life in virtual reality.

## The Faith-Based Peacebuilding Model in Cyberspace

The conceptual and schematic model of Islamic peacebuilding encompasses a systematic framework that accounts for the different stages of digitalization. It also anticipates the future trends of Islamic peacebuilding in the realm of religious life within virtual reality. Furthermore, it envisions the potential for establishing a network-based international community grounded in peace and faith.

The proposed model consists of the following elements:

### 1. Peacebuilding

Religious peacebuilding portrays Islam as a proponent of peace (Quran 2: 208), with Muslims characterized as individuals who refrain from causing harm to others through their words or actions. They are entrusted with the lives and possessions of others (Sadūq 1361 Sh, 1: 239). These Muslims, who embody these qualities, are envisioned as the peace builders and mediators who strive to resolve conflicts among people, particularly during the End of Time (see Sadūq 1361 Sh, 1: 239).

This study specifically focuses on the faith-based peacebuilding environment for Muslim activists within cyberspace, a digital realm where a substantial number of users from around the world spend significant amounts of time.

### 2. Stages of Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding unfolds through various stages, which include:

- Announcing the religion: This involves presenting religious content and teachings in cyberspace, making them accessible to users.

Digitalization of religious content by religious individuals: As the presence in cyberspace has become a prevalent practice worldwide, religious individuals aim to convey their message of peace and faith. They achieve this by uploading digital religious content on the internet, attracting users' attention to the life-affirming message of Allah. The primary objective is to guide hearts towards faith and mindfulness of God.

It is important to note that during this process, the message of religion is shared alongside other voices without any coercive efforts to impose the religion or undermine the beliefs of others.

Simultaneously, users who lack knowledge and understanding of authentic religious teachings, and who may harbor prejudice or animosity towards Islam, can potentially gain awareness and insight through the religious content accessible in cyberspace. By encountering Islam's message of peace, their animosity is likely to diminish naturally. It is an undeniable reality that humans tend to be critical of or opposed to things they do not comprehend or are unfamiliar with (refer to Nahj al-Balāghah, aphorism no. 163).

The notable feature of this phase is the prevalence of religious texts, which are stored and shared as information, compared to other forms of religious interactions in cyberspace. Consequently, text-based websites with straightforward designs and user interfaces have emerged as a result of this approach.

This type of internet usage primarily revolves around the storage and accessibility of online information. Cyberspace serves as an ideal platform for storing religious texts, which is why the initial presence of religions in this realm was predominantly text-based. As a result, the first Shi'a websites that emerged on the internet, such as "al-Islam," "al-Kawthar," "aalulbayt" (al-Shi'a), and "hawzah," primarily contained the most authoritative and reliable Shi'a books and other reference materials.

According to the findings of the current study and the statistics available on the "Shiasearch" website ([www.shiasearch.net](http://www.shiasearch.net)), it has been observed that over 4,000 renowned Shi'a books and references have been uploaded to the internet as of today.

The phase of Religious and Scientific Authority involves the accreditation of content provided by real individuals, including religious authorities, Islamic experts, as well as legal entities such as religious seminaries and academic institutions.

During this phase, as users become attracted to religious teachings, they strive to find authentic religious content in cyberspace. In response, religious individuals who feel a responsibility to promote their faith create websites that serve as religious and scientific authorities. These websites aim to fulfill the users' needs for reliable and credible religious information.

The websites of religious authorities, Islamic seminary teachers, university professors, as well as seminaries, religious institutions, and centers, represent additional examples of endeavors to present religious content in a rational and well-documented manner. These initiatives aim to reference original and authentic religious sources, making them acceptable to users and religious researchers. Through these efforts, religious peacebuilding gains a strong and reliable foundation on which to build.

Additional notable examples of such endeavors include the development of software programs by the Computer Research Center of Islamic Sciences. This includes programs like "Noor al-Anwar" and "Jami al-Tafasir," which provide valuable resources for religious studies. Similarly, the Yasin Rayaneh Institute and the Ayatullah Golpaygani Seminary School have developed software programs like "Mu'jam Fiqhi" and "Mu'jam 'Aqā'idi," which offer comprehensive collections of legal and theological references. These software programs contribute to the accessibility and dissemination of religious knowledge in a digital format.

During this phase, religious authorities and scholars aim to establish their presence in cyberspace and extend the religious services that were traditionally limited to their physical offices. An essential aspect emphasized during this phase is the necessity of providing content in multiple languages. Recognizing the global nature of the internet, efforts are made to ensure that religious materials are accessible to diverse audiences by offering translations and resources in different languages.

In this stage, a significant number of religious websites receive support from dedicated state, public, and religious institutions, thereby enhancing the visibility of religion in cyberspace. In addition to religious scholars, institutions such as Al-Mustafa International University, Islamic Propagation Office, and Imam Khomeini Educational and Research Institute have expanded their operations in the digital realm (Jahangir, n.d.).



## Faith-Based Interactive Network

This phase encompasses both intra- and interreligious dialogues among users and between users and the religious webmasters.

This phase involves the inclusion of question-and-answer (Q&A) sessions pertaining to various religious domains. As the world experiences evolving challenges, users pose new questions that necessitate the provision of timely and reliable answers.

This phase encompasses various features, including peacebuilding across different dimensions of life. It also involves addressing the theoretical and practical challenges encountered by believers, offering solutions to navigate the complexities of daily life. By providing a way out of these challenging issues, this phase aims to promote peace and facilitate the resolution of difficulties faced by users.

Through the power of faith-based synergy, users can experience a profound sense of religious brotherhood (Quran 49: 10) transcending geographical boundaries.

## Experience of Faith-Based Life in Virtual Reality

This phase encompasses multiple objectives, including the establishment of communities of faith in the digital realm and fostering meaningful connections among users through a network. Additionally, it aims to forge links with other faith-based networks, collectively working towards cultivating a virtuous and morally grounded atmosphere in the cyberspace.

Following the establishment of interactive websites as faith-based networks, an interconnected web of interfaith communication is formed. This network of networks facilitates various activities such as education, research, business, online religious rituals, and curated entertainment programs. Through this immersive digital experience, individuals can lead a faith-based life while fostering connections with fellow believers in the cyberspace. The realization of this vision gives rise to a virtual international community rooted in shared faith, providing a promising foundation for global harmony and the promotion of world peace.

One of the longstanding categories of ritual-based websites includes supplication websites like [www.duas.org](http://www.duas.org), which provide a rich collection of Shi'a supplications and Ziarats in various multimedia formats for diverse occasions. Additionally, numerous other websites are dedicated to commemorating the

martyrdom of Imam al-Ḥusayn. These websites predominantly focus on mourning rites and rituals, offering an array of content related to this solemn observance.

The emergence of ritual-oriented Islamic websites, along with their diverse contents and activities, has contributed to the development of innovative terminologies within the realm of religious online communications. These terminologies encompass concepts such as "online worship," "digital pulpit," "online pilgrimage," and "e-masjid."

It is worth noting that the term "online worship" is not exclusive to the Shi'a school or Islam in general, as other religions have also adopted similar terminologies. For instance, terms like "cyber church" and "cyber temple" have been employed to describe the online religious rituals and rites of various faith traditions.

Broadly speaking, the terms "virtual church" and "virtual temple" predominantly pertain to websites catering to Christian and Buddhist religious practices, aiming to provide users with a virtual experience of faith-based living. These websites offer a range of services, including the option to send religious prayers via email to their members and access religious texts, multimedia content, and more. Virtual temples often seek to recreate the ambiance and features of physical temples within the digital realm. They enable followers to navigate through different sections and engage in virtual rituals, simulating an immersive temple experience (Campbell, 2006).

The emergence of a faith-based network of interconnected networks that oversees virtual religious communities is generally regarded as a positive phenomenon. However, if faith-based peacemakers, particularly those within the Muslim community who actively work towards fostering unity and harmony among different Muslim schools of thought, fail to engage with these developments, it could potentially lead to the fragmentation and discord among various virtual communities.

However, it is important to recognize that even if confrontations arise, individuals with religious beliefs can also focus their attention on other aspects beyond these conflicts. By "others," I refer to those who hold different convictions and engage in active confrontations with individuals of differing beliefs. For example, Shi'a Muslims may feel threatened by Sunni Muslims, and vice versa. Muslims may feel threatened by the People of the Book, while the People of the

Book may feel threatened by Muslims. Monotheists may feel threatened by atheists, and so on. Consequently, the cyberspace becomes a virtual arena where diverse convictions and beliefs often clash and confront one another.

Undoubtedly, the outcome of online confrontations can give rise to concerning issues such as online Takfir, virtual terrorism, virtual jihad, and attempts to hack opposing religious websites. These activities pose significant threats to the online faith-based community and its overall well-being.

Believing peacemakers bear the responsibility of advocating for faith-based unity, promoting religious brotherhood, fostering the unity of mankind, and advocating for the equality of all individuals as fellow human beings (as emphasized in Nahj al-Balāgha, letter 53). These values, when embraced and practiced, possess the potential to transform the cyberspace from a realm of confrontation into a platform for peaceful online dialog and harmonious coexistence among all human beings.

One notable example of a dialogue-oriented website within the Shi'a community is the website of the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought. This platform has been established with the specific aim of promoting proximity and fostering unity among diverse Islamic schools of thought.

### **Peacemaking Strategy**

The peacemaking strategy comprises the following components:

- **Strengthening users' faith:** This strategy focuses on enhancing the faith of individuals, emphasizing the importance of inner peace and cultivating a sense of God-consciousness.
- **Faith-based networking:** This strategy involves promoting faith-based synergy among users within a dedicated network, emphasizing the significance of faith-based brotherhood and fostering connections within the community.
- **Embracing a faith-based life:** This strategy entails connecting various faith-based networks together and facilitating the experience of a faith-based life within the cyberspace. It serves as a stepping stone towards establishing a global faith-based community.

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