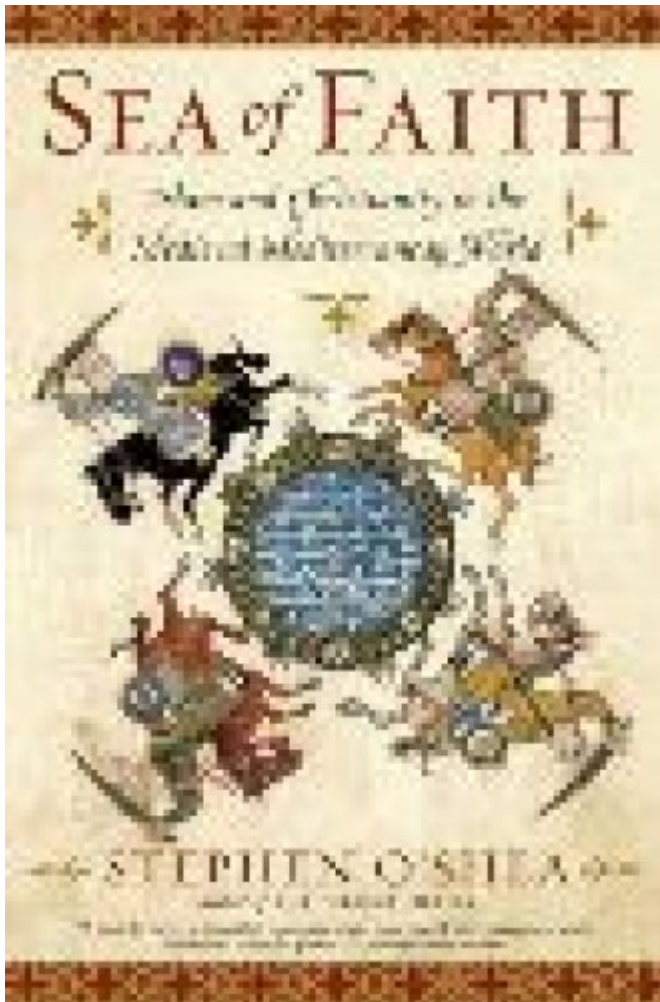


A shared history

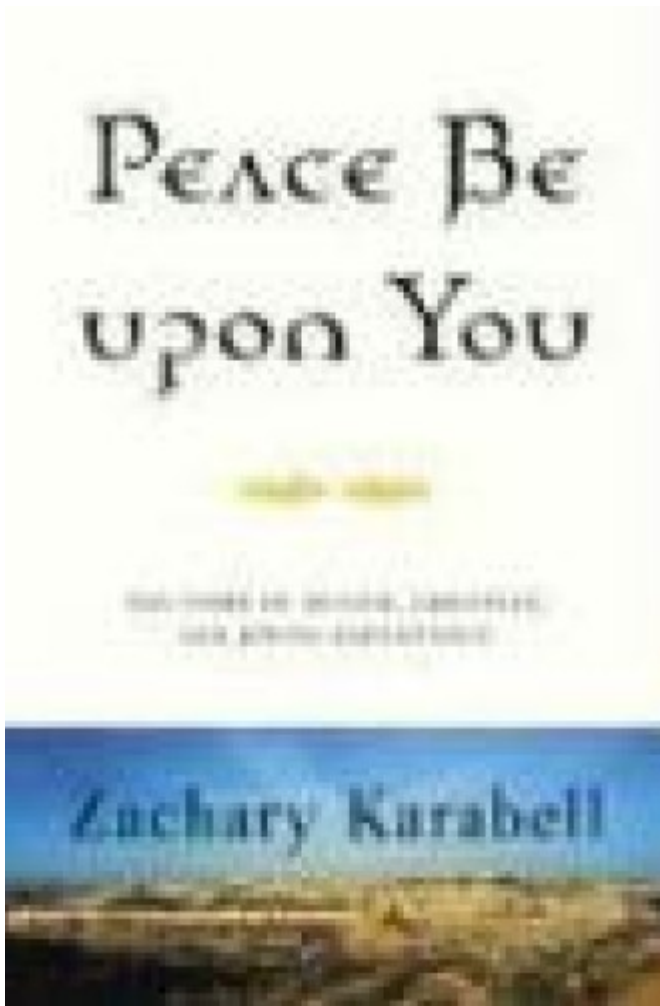
By [Stephen Healey](#) in the [November 27, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Sea of Faith: Islam and Christianity in the Medieval Mediterranean World

Stephen O'Shea
Walker



Peace Be upon You: Fourteen Centuries of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Coexistence in the Middle East

Zachary Karabell
Knopf

Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Coexistence in the Middle East -->

Since the end of the cold war, the status of Islam as a rival to “the West” has been fodder for scholarly analysis and popular deliberation. Many Muslims and non-Muslims assume that Islam must be at war with the West. Yet even a cursory examination reveals that Islam is an internally divided reality, not a monolith of pure evil or unsullied goodness.

Since 9/11 and the commencement of wars in the name of national security, detractors and defenders of Islam have amplified their rhetoric. But aside from occasional references to the Sunni-Shi'ite divide, few historically particular accounts

of Islam have been offered. Also, far too little attention has been given to the interaction of Jews, Christians and Muslims over the centuries. Critics of Islam portray it as an incubator of dangerous ills, whereas its defenders assert that Islam is a religion of peace. Simplified portraits such as these may provide comfort, but they ignore the complexity of the historical record.

Jews, Christians and Muslims have a solution for this schoolyard rhetoric: it's in the notion of history to which all three religions are broadly committed. This does not mean that historically informed conceptions of the Abrahamic religions will ultimately show them to be unequivocally peace-loving. In fact, their shared history lends some credibility to theories of inevitable conflict. It is for good reason that most Jews, Christians and Muslims believe that the meaning of history is realized by God, not by human effort.

Several recent authors have helped to fill this gap of knowledge with histories of Jewish, Christian and Islamic interaction. In *Peace Be upon You*, Zachary Karabell, a Harvard-educated author of seven previous books, including tomes on the Suez Canal and Harry Truman, affirms that each religion "has a core of peace." It is true that blood has been shed by Jews, Christians and Muslims, he acknowledges, but to accent that and to use a "lens of conflict" to view the past distorts history.

Karabell wrote his book to tell ignored parts of the story—"to reclaim the legacy of coexistence" and thereby to revise readers' views of these religions, especially Islam. Whether the evidence he supplies will do this is an open question.

In *Sea of Faith*, journalist Stephen O'Shea focuses more narrowly on the history of Christianity and Islam in the Mediterranean world during medieval times. O'Shea is less convinced about possibilities of coexistence than Karabell is. Karabell ends his book by asking, "Is Dubai the future?" and he suggests that the future will see a large-scale integration of Islamic societies into geopolitical commerce (as in the city of Dubai, a business hub in the United Arab Emirates), with Jews, Christians and Muslims being drawn together by the possibility of economic gain.

O'Shea, on the other hand, concludes his book by claiming that the past "belligerence" of Christianity and Islam "cannot be wished away"; he insists that the shadows of formative historical experiences will always occlude the light of new centuries.

Together these books contain nearly 800 pages of comprehensively researched history. They give readers a window into the lives of historical persons such as Saladin and Moses Maimonides and into places such as medieval Palermo and Toledo. Both books possess admirable clarity. But the effort of showing the variety within a religious tradition can lead to drowning readers in a sea of details. O'Shea's volume contains a helpful glossary, eight pages identifying important people and a timeline of significant events.

Karabell's effort to help average readers revise their estimate of Islam is bound to be an uphill battle. The reason is that Karabell is honest with his sources, which do not show Judaism, Christianity and Islam to be uniformly religions of peace. Rather, the sources show that the Abrahamic religions hold potential to destroy as well as to heal, a dual potential noted also by O'Shea.

In every chapter of the Karabell book, one can find references to slaughter, bloodshed and antipathy alongside accounts of achievements of shared societies, startlingly candid theological debates, and expressions of tolerance and civility. Karabell situates violent acts and episodes within broader social and historical contexts and argues that during much of their history Muslims were more benevolent than others, including Christians. Muslims did not convert masses by the sword. Owing to the tribal origins of Islam, the earliest Muslims did not even seek to make converts. If anything, they treated non-Arabic converts to Islam as second-class citizens. Muslims remained in the minority even as the Umayyads and the Abbasids, and later the Ottomans, ruled over lands populated by Christians and Jews.

O'Shea also addresses the idea of coexistence, using the Spanish term *convivencia* to describe the shared society composed of Muslims, Christians and Jews that arose in medieval Spain. Like Karabell's, O'Shea's treatment includes moments of significant peaceful accomplishment mixed with moments of shocking violence.

The authors both address Western worries about the purported violent essence of Islam. One might wonder whether such worries contain a dimension of anti-Arabism. In *Semites and Anti-Semites: An Inquiry into Conflict and Prejudice* (1986), Bernard Lewis argues that before World War II's conclusion and the founding of Israel, Christian societies were on the whole less tolerant of Jews than were Muslim societies. Yet few people suggest that intolerance lies at the heart of Christianity.

The overall conclusion I drew from these two books is that history is a domain of struggle and violence lightened by moments of unexpected grace and tenuous cooperation. In a statement that was echoed by the great Christian realist Reinhold Niebuhr, G. K. Chesterton once said that “the only Christian doctrine for which there is empirical evidence is that of original sin.” If Karabell and O’Shea help us to think historically, I suggest, we will discover some empirical evidence of both original sin and original righteousness. These authors also provide evidence of the need for salvation—from the very religions that mediate our salvation.