

A Middle Ground Approach to Communication

Vision Hope International

by Rick Love, Ph.D.

As an international humanitarian organization, Vision Hope International (VHI) strives to link relief, rehabilitation, and development to promote long-term peace in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It uses the intercultural and interreligious expertise of its members to resolve and transform conflicts into opportunities for hope and reconciliation. VHI passionately advocates for a peace-filled MENA region in which wars no longer destroy communities and individuals.

In order to strengthen Vision Hope's intercultural and interreligious expertise, it has revised its vision, mission, and values (summarized in VHI's Identity Document). The goal of this process has been to describe a middle ground approach to communication between secularists, Muslims, and Christians.¹ VHI defines a middle ground approach as a common core of ethical values and humanitarian imperatives relevant to both people of different faiths and of no faith.² This approach helps create a culture of dignity amongst diverse groups of people by promoting communication that is ethical, inspirational, and conciliatory.

VHI has identified five key resources that shape this middle ground approach (the content of which will be described in the following pages):

1. The Role of Religion in German Development Policy,
2. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,
3. The Red Cross/Crescent Code of Conduct,
4. *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict* by Donna Hicks, and
5. *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions.*

Background: The Importance of a Middle Ground Approach to Communication

*We are not just technical relief and development experts.
We require our expat staff to learn the local language and to engage with the communities.*
-Matthias Leibbrand, CEO of Vision Hope

While VHI was founded and functions as a nonfaith-based organization, it has a history of engaging diverse and extremely conservative religious groups in Muslim countries, such as the

Houthis in Yemen, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. As a nonfaith-based organization, VHI does not endorse the religious views of these groups. However, it does acknowledge that their influences affect many aspects of life for the people that benefit from humanitarian projects. VHI also acknowledges the tensions that can arise when members of groups, such as those listed above, want to know if members of VHI are Muslim or Christian, and whether the organization has a religious agenda. Furthermore, tensions can arise when cultural norms clash with VHI's projects, as seen in the following example:

VHI conducted a Life Skills Program for youth in Yemen, which included a session about sexuality as part of its curriculum. This aspect proved challenging for conservative individuals, particularly in the Ministry of Education, who did not consider the topic of sexuality appropriate. CEO Matthias Leibbrand asks, "When we want to talk to the Ministry of Education, what is the basis of our communication strategy? A religious person would have his convictions. What do we say as VHI?"

People appreciate the work of VHI but often question its motives, seeing as its staff members are willing to sacrifice much to provide humanitarian aid to people in need. VHI employees can easily explain their personal motivations to do humanitarian work, but the challenge lies in articulating the motivation for VHI as an organization.

In addition to the challenge of communicating the motivation, Leibbrand learned that providing aid alone — such as food, medicine, or education — was insufficient to bring lasting change. There had to be a strong relational component to the work of VHI in order to achieve peace in society. Peace requires positive relationships based on respect, acceptance, and reconciliation.

In order to effectively engage with these realities — implementing projects in diverse communities, communicating the motivation to do humanitarian work, dismantling tensions that can arise, and creating the potential for peace — VHI has chosen to use the bridge-building wisdom of middle ground language.

Thus, the middle ground approach is both about the wise use of language in a diverse context and the relational component of humanitarian work. It is about building bridges with people from different religions and cultures. It is not just about a change in VHI's wording but also about a change in practice. This approach was formulated to become more effective in both describing and embodying Vision Hope's vision, mission, and values.

Learning to Respect and Embrace Diversity

VHI is not only facing communication issues within the Muslim societies mentioned above but also with the often secular-minded humanitarian community. Many secular people already understand from our name, Vision Hope International, that we are a faith-based organization, because hope is usually associated with people of faith. We learned over the years how important it is for people to have hope restored. We have developed values which we feel are important to restore the livelihoods of people and instill hope.

-Matthias Leibbrand, CEO of Vision Hope

As a nonfaith-based German organization, Vision Hope strives to follow the wisdom of the German government, as described in a brochure entitled, “The Role of Religion in German Development Policy.”³ This document outlines the following principles:

“[We] respect and protect cultural and religious diversity.”

“We have great respect for [the] potential that religion holds for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.”

“We want to better harness the potential of religion for sustainable development and peace.”

VHI recognizes and respects the diversity of convictions between people of faith and people of no faith. For example, secular humanists have worldviews that, though diverse, generally exclude God, while belief in one Almighty God is a fundamental fact for Muslims. Christians also believe in one Almighty God, yet their understanding of God differs from that of Muslims.

VHI’s commitment to a middle ground approach does not mean minimizing these differences or compromising integrity. Rather, it means each community seeks to be authentically faithful to its beliefs and finds within those beliefs the resources to respect one another and work together for the common good.

Peace and Human Flourishing

In all of VHI’s humanitarian work, its primary goal is to work toward “positive peace”⁴ – to help heal relationships, equip communities to resolve their differences without resorting to violence, and show communities how to negotiate disagreements in a way that respects the dignity of all.⁵ Positive peace is not about merely the cessation of violence but rather creating an environment in which individuals have the ability to thrive. Another way of describing positive peace is human flourishing. Human flourishing is a holistic concept that includes physical, psychological, and social well-being. People of faith might also include spiritual well-being in the definition. Two ways that VHI promotes human flourishing are by helping refugees in Jordan integrate into host communities and by equipping disenfranchised youth in Tunisia with the skills they need to contribute to society.

The concept of human flourishing was originally addressed by Aristotle and is part of the secular-humanitarian imperative.⁶ The Islamic vision of peace (*salaam*) and the Christian vision of peace (*shalom*) depict the promotion of human flourishing, as well.

Global peacemaker Mohammed Abu-Nimer describes the concept of *salaam* like this: “Peace in Islam is understood as a state of physical, mental, spiritual, and social harmony, living at peace with God through submission, and living at peace with one’s fellow human beings by avoiding wrongdoing. Islam obligates its believers to seek peace in all [of] life’s domains. The ultimate purpose of Qur’anic revelation for Muslims is to create a peaceful and just social order.”⁷

The biblical concept of *shalom* includes human flourishing in all dimensions of life. As Nicholas Wolterstorff says, “In shalom, each person enjoys justice, enjoys his or her rights. There is no shalom without justice. But shalom goes beyond justice. Shalom is the human being dwelling at peace in all [of] his or her relationships: with God, with self, with fellows, with nature.”⁸

The graphic below helps depict how the concept of human flourishing overlaps in meaning among secularists, Muslims, and Christians, thus reflecting middle ground language. This approach might be called a three-dimensional (3-D) approach to communication, since it focuses on middle ground language between three audiences.⁹

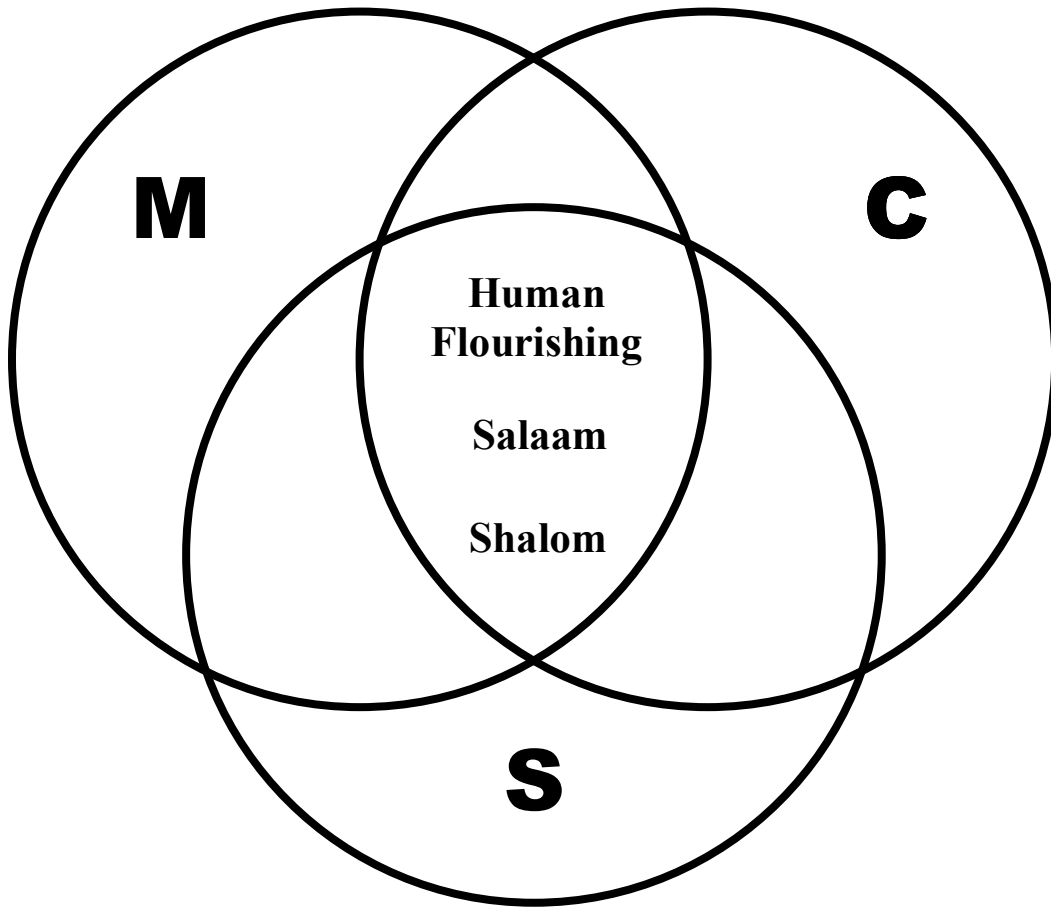


Figure 1. The Semantic Overlap between Human Flourishing, Salaam, and Shalom.

The concepts of human flourishing, *salaam*, and *shalom* are distinct and not to be confused with each other. Furthermore, there are divergent views of what human flourishing, *salaam*, and *shalom* mean among the diverse populations within secularism, Christianity, and Islam. However, there is enough overlap among the general understanding of the concepts for VHI to use them as part of its middle ground approach to communication.

Intergroup Peacemaking as Part of Human Flourishing

When VHI engages with people in the MENA region, one of its objectives is “intergroup peacemaking.” Interpersonal peacemaking focuses on specific conflict resolution between individuals, whereas intergroup peacemaking focuses on barriers between groups (which can include racial, religious, or class differences and can involve a specific conflict or no conflict). In intergroup peacemaking, the goal is to break down prejudices and stereotypes that both groups face.

From a middle ground perspective, intergroup peacemaking begins with the understanding that good communication is receptor-oriented. In other words, one must shape communication to the person or people engaged. What counts is not what is said, but what the recipient of the communication hears. In VHI, the middle ground approach means VHI members respect the beneficiaries and their communities enough to learn the language, cultural norms and mores, and other modes of communication. Additionally, they seek to build trust through relationships and middle ground language.

The challenges of engaging with people of different worldviews and religions are compounded by the traumas, many of them from war, experienced by many of VHI’s beneficiaries. Trauma leaves people “disordered, disempowered, and feeling disconnected from other people and from life.”¹⁰ As such, VHI’s beneficiaries may very well be suspicious of the organization’s intentions. As peace ambassadors, members of VHI need to be aware of possible prejudices and how they could affect the ability to implement humanitarian projects. For example, a VHI staff member who is a secular German should consider the fears, suspicions, or stereotypes that a conservative Muslim cleric in the MENA region might have regarding a secular German working in his community. If his understanding is shaped by Western media, then he might fear that VHI will teach the people immoral practices that would pollute or compromise their faith. If an American Christian engages with the same cleric, he might also fear that this individual wants to convert the people to Christianity.¹¹ The middle ground approach requires that VHI members build trust with community members, especially those who harbor suspicions about VHI.

Because the relational aspect of humanitarian work, especially for the purposes of peacebuilding, is so crucial, VHI encourages its members to build relationships with individual beneficiaries and community members. Doing so demonstrates integrity on the part of VHI and, by earning the trust of community members, can help ensure that the projects implemented are successful.

While the people that VHI works with may have distorted and biased views about the organization or the culture and faith of individual members, the fact is that most individuals — those in VHI included — have their own prejudices and stereotypes about other groups. Taking a middle ground approach requires honesty about one’s own prejudices before addressing the prejudices of those with whom VHI works. By being honest about their own selves, VHI members can then begin these crucial discussions with the right motives, resolving to put aside prejudices or potential prejudices.¹² Only then can VHI be a peacebuilding institution by engaging people with empathy, integrity, and compassion.

Questions and Reflections:

1. Which term do you prefer to use when you talk about the good life or a better life for the people you serve and why? Peace? Human Flourishing? Or ...?
2. This section noted that “providing aid alone, such as food or medicine, was insufficient to bring lasting change. There had to be a strong relational component to the work of VHI to achieve peace in society. It demands positive relationships based on respect, acceptance, and reconciliation.” What are the most relevant practices mentioned above that can help you build positive relationships? Why?

The Foundational Concept of Human Dignity

The concept of dignity provides both an ethical foundation and humanitarian inspiration for the work of VHI. Moreover, the concept of human dignity reflects middle ground language.

As a nonfaith-based resource, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides guidance for VHI’s engagement with diverse populations, as well as for individuals, particularly secular humanists, within VHI to describe their motivations for doing humanitarian work.¹³ An analysis of the declaration provides an excellent and fairly detailed description of the importance of dignity, which is a core value for VHI. The declaration uses the word “dignity” five times to describe human beings:

- The preamble speaks of the inherent dignity of all members of the human family.
- The preamble also speaks of the dignity and worth of the human person.
- Article 1 says, “All human beings are equal in dignity and rights.”
- Article 22 says that economic, social, and cultural rights are indispensable for a person’s dignity.
- Article 23 says that existence worthy of human dignity involves the right to work and the right to a just and favorable remuneration (equal pay for equal work).

In addition to being a crucial concept for the secular humanist, human dignity is also relevant for Muslims and Christians. The Qur’an attests to the dignity and worth of all people in¹⁴ the creation account, where it says, “Behold your Lord said to the angels, I will create a viceregent (Khalifah) on earth” (Qur’an 2:30; see also 17:70). This Khalifah is a representative, steward, or deputy.

According to the teachings of Islam, each individual is a Khalifah to God. Muslims, in particular, must strive to adhere to and advance God's will by establishing a society that reflects human dignity and justice.¹⁵

The Christian view of dignity is rooted in the biblical teaching that human beings are created in the image of God. “God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27; see also Genesis 9:6; New Living Translation)

Man in his entirety is the viceroy of the earth. He is to be to the earth what Yahweh is to the entire universe ... Man is made for filial fellowship with the divine and intended to express the family-likeness in righteousness, holiness, and integrity ... All men and women ...are thus created. The doctrine of the image of God is the foundation for human dignity and for the biblical ethic.¹⁶

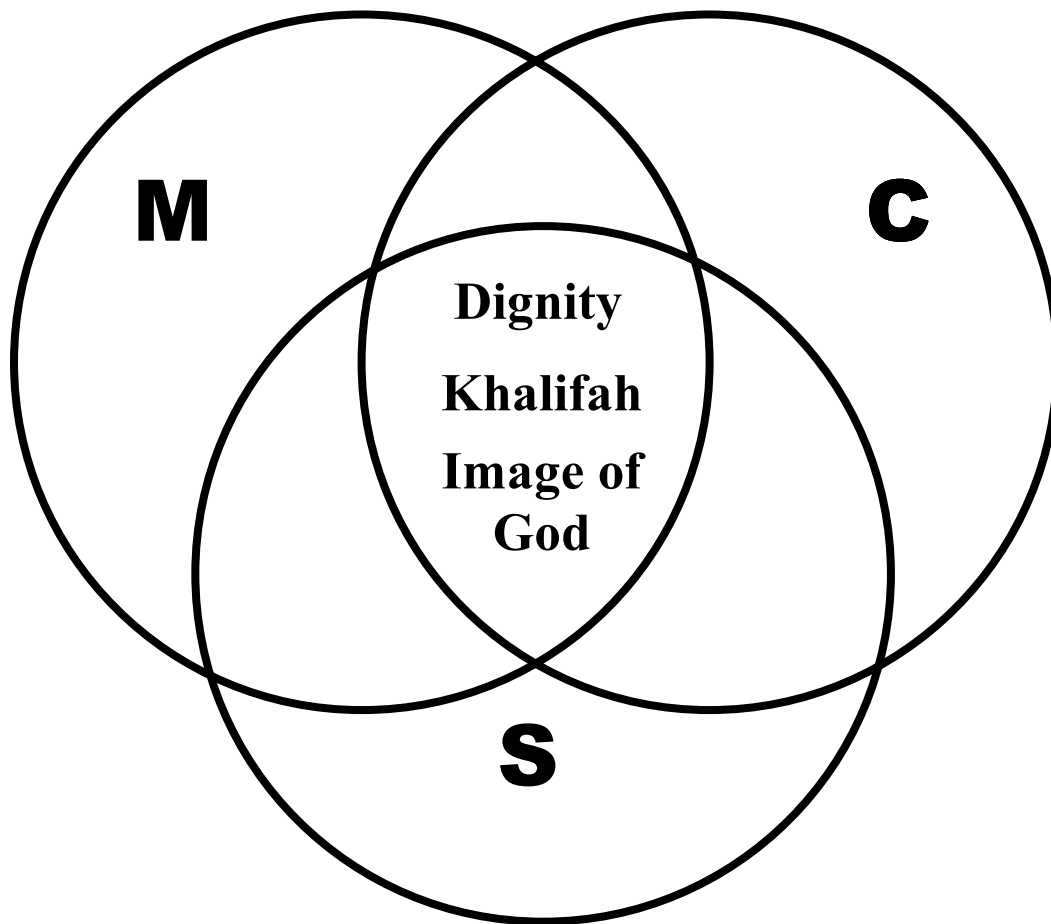


Figure 2. The Semantic Overlap between Dignity, Khalifah, and Image of God.

The third major resource for VHI’s middle ground approach is the Red Cross/Crescent Code of Conduct. VHI is a signatory to this code of conduct, which is summarized in ten core principles.¹⁷ Five of the ten principles explicitly describe the priority of human need over religious creed

(principles 1, 2, 3, 5, and 10), thereby emphasizing the imperative of respecting human dignity. For example, principle two reads, “Aid is given regardless of the race, creed, or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone.” Thus, this Code of Conduct tacitly highlights the dignity of all people, which in turn demands a humanitarian response during disasters and wars.

Dignity and Conflict Resolution

According to Harvard associate and global peacemaker Donna Hicks, the concept of dignity plays an essential role in resolving conflict. In an article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Hicks describes her experiences:

Inevitably, in these intractable conflicts—like the ones that I’ve worked on in Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, the Balkans, and an array of countries in the Middle East—it wasn’t just about politics. That’s what was presented as the problem, but what I found was that underlying all of these political issues was this overwhelming undercurrent of unaddressed dignity violations between the warring parties.¹⁸

Hicks’ detailed account of dignity in her book, *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict* (Yale University Press, 2011), provides the fourth resource for VHI’s middle ground approach. She notes, “It was almost always the loss of dignity that drove the perpetrators to the awful acts they had committed. It was dignity regained that enabled them to face their victims. And it was dignity - the perception of worth in the other - that made reconciliation possible.”¹⁹

Hicks asks the question, “What would it be like if our inherent dignity were recognized on a daily basis? Would it more than fulfill the principles stated in ... the Universal Declaration [of Human Rights]?”²⁰ The rest of her book indicates that the answer is yes.

So how does VHI’s understanding of human dignity impact the work that its members do? A person’s dignity is violated when he or she is perceived as not having worth and is therefore

- denied access to basic nutrition,
- denied access to basic education,
- denied access to sanitary conditions during birth,
- denied access to political or social participation,
- denied access to gainful employment,
- denied equal pay for equal work.

In other words, the ultimate aim of all of VHI’s programs — whether they provide emergency food aid, employment, life skills training, or any other domain — is to help restore people’s dignity, because VHI recognizes the significance of dignity in conflict resolution and achieving self-determination. Dignity is a crucial aspect of intergroup peacebuilding, earning the trust of those who are suspicious, and ensuring that humanitarian projects continue to have an impact long after they have ended.

In VHI's day-to-day interactions, a person's dignity can be affirmed in ways that promote peace. When people feel safe with VHI, both physically and psychologically, their dignity is affirmed. When people's concerns, feelings, and experiences are heard, their worth is validated. When people are treated fairly, their person is valued. The concept of dignity not only provides an ethical foundation and humanitarian inspiration for the work of VHI; it also encourages a conciliatory tone in its language and practice, a crucial aspect of the middle ground approach.

The challenge comes when members of VHI engage with people who insist on their own agendas; or when, despite peacemaking efforts, they refuse to establish trust and overt prejudices remain. Members of VHI must still show these people the dignity afforded to all human beings.

Questions and Reflections:

1. If you were to describe "human dignity," what stories, images, or metaphors come to mind?
2. When was the last time you experienced a personal dignity violation? What did that feel like? How did you respond? Was somebody else's dignity violated by your response?
3. What practical things can you say and do to affirm someone's dignity?

A Global Ethic and the Golden Rule

The fifth major resource for VHI's middle ground approach is *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*.²¹

Irreconcilable theological differences exist between Muslims, Christians, and secularists. However, a middle ground ethic affirmed by virtually all religions and secular humanists is the Golden Rule: one should treat others as he or she wants to be treated.²²

There is a principle which is found and has persisted in many religious and ethical traditions of humankind for thousands of years: **What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others!** Or in positive terms: **What you wish done to yourself, do to others!** This should be the irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life, for families and communities, for races, nations, and religions.²³

The Golden Rule is yet another example of middle ground language. While the concept is more pervasive in religions, it is also relevant for the secularist. "Try to embrace the moral principle known as the 'Golden Rule,' otherwise known as the ethic of reciprocity, which means we believe that people should aim to treat each other as they would like to be treated themselves – with tolerance, consideration, and compassion."²⁴

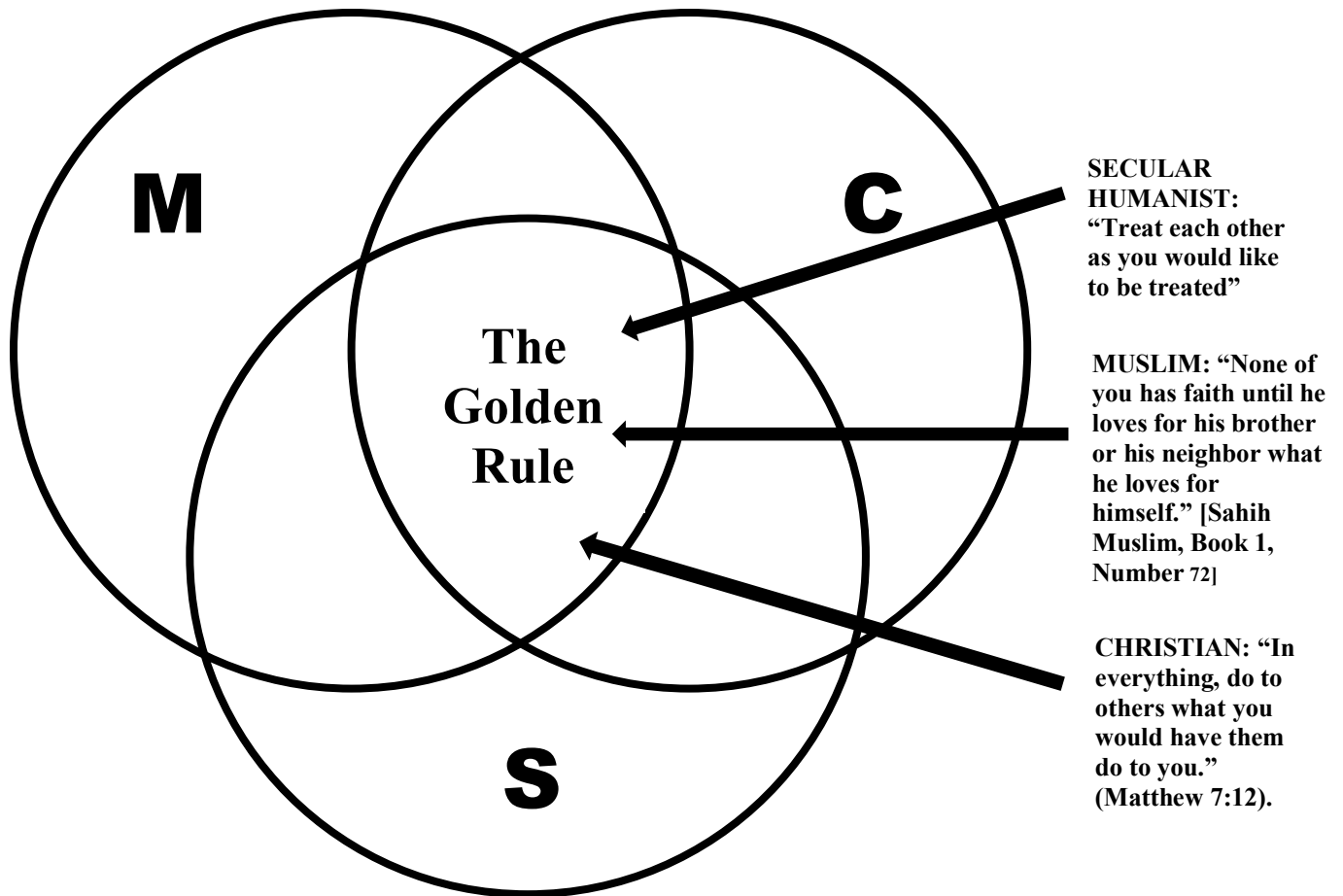


Figure 3. The Ethical Overlap between the Different Versions of the Golden Rule.²⁵

Conclusion

In summary, the German government’s focus on the importance of religion in relief and development; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, especially the concept of dignity; the Red Cross/Crescent Code of Conduct, with its practical ethical guidance reflecting human dignity; Donna Hicks’ research on the role of dignity in conflict resolution; and *A Global Ethic*, summarized in the golden rule, together demonstrate the middle ground approach of VHI that is relevant to secularists, Muslims, and Christians.

VHI believes that a middle ground approach provides a robust ethical foundation and humanitarian imperative for its members, inspiring them to be courageous and passionate in difficult conflict zones, as well as motivating them to work for peace. Because VHI embraces the equality and dignity of all, it is passionate about having a mission that is relevant to Muslims, Christians, and secularists.

APPENDIX 1: Storytelling to Explain Motivation

As a member of VHI, you may be asked, “Why do you do what you do? Why do you sacrifice so much to help people in dire need?”

Whether you are talking to government officials in Germany or clerics the Middle East and North Africa, whether you are talking to Muslims, Christians, or secularists, here are four practical steps you can follow to use a middle ground approach:

1. Introduce Yourself and VHI:

I am _____ and I work for Vision Hope International. Vision Hope International is a relief, rehabilitation, and development organization dedicated to advancing peace and human flourishing in the MENA region. We work toward this end because of our belief in the dignity of all people and the imperative to treat people as we want to be treated.

2. Tell one of your favorite VHI stories describing what we do.

VHI has a strong track record in the MENA region. Review some of its work and find the stories that inspire you. If you are inspired you will inspire others! Begin by saying, “In our work in _____, we ...”

3. Ask questions about the other person’s community and its needs. When you do, LISTEN carefully.

Ask clarifying questions. Ask if you can paraphrase to make sure you understand some of the key points. In some cases, you may want to ask them if you can take notes or even record the conversation (with the explicit understanding that the recording will not be published).

4. Try to find middle ground.

Note the areas they are concerned about, particularly regarding the mission of VHI, and explore ways that you could partner together for peace and human flourishing.

¹ VHI recognizes there is a great diversity of opinion among secularists, Muslims, and Christians. In other words, these are not monolithic categories but rather broad descriptors.

² VHI leaders have discussed whether this should be called a middle ground approach or a common ground approach. There is a difference of connotative meaning between the two terms. Common ground implies “shared interests” in a greater way than middle ground does, while middle ground implies a necessary “compromise” more than common ground does. In some ways, VHI does both in its communication and practice. It seeks shared interests but is willing to compromise when necessary to seek the common good. Thus, middle ground was chosen because of the expectation that VHI staff go beyond shared interests and compromise when necessary, in order to build relationships and serve the community.

³http://www.bmz.de/en/publications/type_of_publication/information_flyer/flyer/booklet_religions.pdf?follow=adword

⁴ Peace in a political sense usually refers to treaties, to the end of a conflict, and the cessation of violence – what the peacebuilding community calls “negative peace.” While a necessary and admirable first step to positive peace, conditions of animosity and the underlying reasons for the original conflict usually still exist. Thus long-term, sustainable peace becomes impossible. That is why VHI focuses on positive peace.

⁵ Integrating peacebuilding skills with relief and development requires further training.

⁶ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/>

<http://pluralism.org/religions/humanism/humanist-tradition/humanism-as-a-belief-system/>

⁷ *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice* by Mohammed Abu-Nimer, University Press of Florida: Gainesville. 2003, p. 60.

⁸ Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 69.

⁹ The principle of overlap in meaning can be true with multiple languages/audiences.

¹⁰ *The Little Book of Trauma Healing* by Carolyn Yoder, Good Books, 2005, p 24.

¹¹ Rick Love’s organization, Peace Catalyst, focuses on Christian-Muslim peacemaking (www.peacecatalyst.org).

He shares the following story: “During a meal, one of my Muslim friends said, ‘Rick, do you know that many Muslims are suspicious of you?’ I responded, ‘That’s ok, Salaam. So are many Christians!’ As an evangelical peacemaker, many Christians think I am compromising my faith, and many Muslims are afraid we are trying to evangelize them. So Christian-Muslim peacemaking faces significant barriers and misunderstanding on both sides.”

¹² For more on this, see *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes are High*, by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler McGraw-Hill New York 2002, especially pp. 27-43. This is a key peacemaking practice in the Christian tradition as well (Matthew 7:1-5).

¹³ This declaration issues a universal humanitarian imperative and is arguably the most widely adopted document in the world (although it isn’t necessarily adhered to by many of the signatories). <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

¹⁴ This is a mainstream teaching of Islam. As noted previously, Islam, like Christianity, is exceptionally diverse. See <http://ammanmessage.com/the-amman-message-full/3/> for a summary of the diversity of Islam.

¹⁵ *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. Editor in Chief John Esposito, 2003, p 169.

¹⁶ *New Dictionary of Theology* edited by S.B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer, electronic ed., p. 329, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000

¹⁷ <http://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/who-we-are/the-movement/code-of-conduct/>

¹⁸ <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/10/conflict-resolution-donna-hicks-relationships/541857/>

¹⁹ *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict* by Donna Hicks. Yale University Press, 2011, p. ix.

²⁰ *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict* by Donna Hicks. Yale University Press, 2011 p. xii.

²¹ This historic document grew out of the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions, a gathering of over 6,500 religious leaders from virtually every religion. More than 200 scholars, religious leaders, and theologians from the world’s religions were consulted prior to the event during a two-year period.

<https://parliamentofreligions.org/parliament/global-ethic/about-global-ethic>

²² Below are some secular, Islamic, and Christian versions of the golden rule:

“Avoid doing what you would blame others for doing.” (Thales, 464 BCE)

“We should conduct ourselves toward others as we would have them act toward us.” (Aristotle, 384 BCE)

“None of you has faith until he loves for his brother or his neighbor what he loves for himself.” [Sahih Muslim, Book 1, Number 72, Sunni Islam]

“By Him in whose Hand is my soul, a servant does not believe until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” [Musnad Ahmad, Number 12734, Sahih, Sunni Islam]

“O my child, make yourself the measure (for dealings) between you and others. Thus, you should desire for others what you desire for yourself and hate for others what you hate for yourself. Do not oppress as you do not like to be oppressed. Do good to others as you would like good to be done to you.” (Nahjul Balagha letter 31, Shia Islam).

“Treat others the same way you want them to treat you.” (Luke 6:31)

“In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.” (Matthew 7:12).

²³ *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* edited by Hans Kung and Karl-Josef Kuschel Continuum: New York 1998, p. 23-24.

²⁴ <http://www.thinkhumanism.com/the-golden-rule.html>

²⁵ We inserted one Sunni quote for the golden rule in the graphic for the sake of simplicity but have noted the Shia version in footnote 23.