

Jewish–Muslim dialogue in light of Jewish–Christian relations

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Abstract

Interfaith dialogue, as we understand it today, has been taking place between Christians and Jews for nearly a century, but Jewish–Muslim dialogue is a more recent phenomenon. Jews and Muslims have much in common, but relations are overshadowed by the failure to address the impact of the Middle East conflict. For most Jews, the creation of the State of Israel is an ancient promise fulfilled – the ingathering of exiles and a guarantee of physical and spiritual security. Yet many Muslims term the same events ‘The Disaster’, a time when an Islamic society was uprooted and became a minority. In Jewish–Muslim dialogue it is essential to be prepared for conflicting views.

Keywords

Jews, Muslims, interfaith relations, Israel, Palestine, Scripture

Interfaith dialogue, as we understand it today, has been taking place between Christians and Jews for nearly a century, symbolized by the establishment of the London Society of Christians and Jews in 1927, which is still functioning today. Jewish–Muslim dialogue, on the other hand, is a much more recent and fragile phenomenon. It is relatively uncharted territory.

At around that time, Christian scholars such as Travers Herford and George Foot-Moore began to offer new reflections on the significance of the Jewish origins of Christianity for understanding the formation of Christianity; discussion of what St Paul called the ‘mystery of Israel’ has become more common in Christian theological writings.¹ Notable in recent years also are the messages of repentance, expressed most fully when many Christian churches have repented of the history of antisemitism and attempted to purge their tradition of latent anti-Judaism.²

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Some Christian theologians have today even begun to reflect on how Christianity can differentiate itself from Judaism without asserting itself as either opposed to Judaism or simply the replacement of Judaism.

To a lesser extent, but noticeable since the late 19th century, Jews have engaged in dialogue with Christians, initially to challenge Christian ignorance and prejudice towards Judaism but also to ponder the purpose behind the creation of Christianity;³ some have even reflected on the significance for Jews of Jesus being a Jew, considering the implications of 2 billion followers of the Jew Jesus reading the Jewish Bible;⁴ most recently, in September 2000 *Dabru Emet* was published, which is a reflection on what Judaism may now say about Christianity, and a response to the Christian statements about Jews and Judaism.

However, similar questions about Islam are all too rarely considered by Jews. What is the significance of Muslims sharing many of the same customs and practices as Jews, adopting similar stories and traditions and adhering to a strict monotheism?

There are some Muslim thinkers today, such as Tariq Ramadan and Akbar Ahmed, for whom developing a dialogue with Jews and Judaism is increasingly important. They represent the beginning of contemporary Muslim dialogue with Jews, a dialogue that includes reflection on difficult issues such as the significance to Jews of the State of Israel. Prince Hassan of Jordan, a leader of interfaith dialogue for over 40 years, has stressed the need for Muslims, particularly in the Middle East, to internalize the meaning of the Holocaust the better to understand relations with Israel and the wider Jewish world.⁵

One further point in my introductory remarks: since the Centre for the Study of Muslim–Jewish relations was established in 2006, I have come to understand a number of features that are specific to relations between Muslims and Jews and require understanding before engaging in dialogue. First, Jews need to be reminded that Islam is a religion, not an ethnicity – for example, not all Arabs are Muslim, and the majority of Muslims are not Arab. Indeed, there are Christian Arabs,⁶ and the most populous Muslim country in the world is not located in the Middle East but in South East Asia: Indonesia (207 million), followed by Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, thousands of miles away, before the first Arab nation, Egypt at 72 million, is listed as the distant, fifth most populous Muslim state (based on UN figures in 2007).

For their part, Muslims (like Christians) face the challenge in their encounters with Jews not to view Judaism as though it were a religion only. This is erroneous since Judaism also consists of a people, in which religion is an important part. A man who converts to the Jewish religion becomes ‘Abraham the son of Abraham’ (or for a woman, ‘Sarah daughter of Sarah’); in other words s/he inherits the history of a people and culture that s/he now joins as part of his/her religious conversion. It is a challenge for Muslims (like Christians) to learn not only about the religious varieties that make up Judaism, but that a significant proportion of Jews are also secular. Although there are signs of a secularist Muslim movement, and a slightly larger secular Christian movement,

this remains marginal in Islam and is seen by the majority of Muslims as a Western innovation.

Another important factor is the number of adherents: 1.6 billion Muslims in comparison with 15 million Jews, or about 1 per cent of the number of Muslims (or 0.75 per cent in comparison with Christians). To compare these two groups as equivalent is not only an error but can also contribute to the antisemitic fantasy of a Jewish world conspiracy.⁷

Finally, it is important for both Jews and Muslims to remember that neither are – nor ever were (even in antiquity) – a united force. They were and are a community, and one outstanding shared characteristic is that they develop not despite, but because of, unending and sometimes quite violent internal conflicts caused by diverging interpretations of the same heritage.

Similar concerns for Jews and Muslims in the UK

Creating a positive and constructive relationship and fostering dialogue begins by building bridges and by establishing what is in common. Modern Christian–Jewish dialogue began, for example, not with an exploration of Christian anti-Judaism and antisemitism, but with a rediscovery of the Jewishness of Jesus and the Jewish origins of Christianity.⁸ Awareness of commonalities results in minimum levels of knowledge, which is required if genuine dialogue is to follow.

So it is with Jews and Muslims. One recent initiative worth highlighting is the world's first Letter in modern times from Muslim leaders to the Jewish Community calling for peace and understanding (published in 2008). The Letter acknowledges the striking commonalities of Islam and Judaism and those historic periods and places of remarkable cooperation and cross-fertilization between the two faith communities. It followed a few months after the publication of *A Common Word*, a declaration by Muslim scholars and leaders to Christians in 2007.

The initiative behind the Letter came from Muslim scholars at the Centre for the Study of Muslim–Jewish Relations. They called for 'positive and constructive action that aims to improve Muslim–Jewish relations'. Tariq Ramadan, who spoke at its launch in Cambridge, explained that 'the Letter is a signal that we are ready to call for dialogue... We need to get beyond "tolerance", which is saying that "*I put up with you but I would rather you were not here*", to a mutual knowledge and a mutual respect.' He described dialogue with Jews as 'a risk but a necessity'.⁹

Jews and Muslims share many of the same reasons (both positive and negative) for engaging in dialogue. Some may start, as they do with Christians, for defensive reasons – to respond to ignorant and negative stereotypes. Needless to say, ignorance is not only unhelpful but is also not one-way. Ignorance among both Jews and Muslims provides a seedbed for prejudice, specifically antisemitism and Islamophobia, both outside and inside their communities.

Jews and Muslims may also engage in dialogue because they can learn from how each faces similar challenges and shares similar concerns, as minorities in Western society. Both have the experience of being minority communities in the UK and throughout Europe, with parallel challenges, such as developing and maintaining a vibrant, distinctive and integrated minority community.

This is illustrated by a visit made by my students, both Jewish and Muslim, to the Cambridge mosque. A university lecturer in Islamic Studies, Tim Winter, was present. In his talk, he made these observations about the situation of Muslims in Britain:

- The community had a sense of corporate identity in materialistic and often hostile surroundings.
- The *madrasas* (religious schools) taught to various degrees outdated curriculum from the mother countries.¹⁰
- A major problem the community faced was a generational gap and the transmission of Muslim values and culture to children.
- Schisms and tensions within the community were generally related to ethnic identities.

This sounds extraordinarily familiar to a Jewish ear. Jews also have faced discrimination in British society and have experienced difficulties in integrating. Jews also are concerned about their children's education and the challenge of generational transition.¹¹ The context of these concerns is, of course, living in the Diaspora. It is too rarely pointed out that, perhaps for the first time, both Jews and Muslims are minorities in the same country. Both are living alongside one another in a Diaspora existence.

One specific challenge faced by contemporary Western Muslim Diaspora communities is how to adapt from living in a Muslim-majority environment to living as a minority in a non-Muslim society. This is quite different from the Jewish experience, for Jews have nearly always been a minority (and even when they are a majority, as in the present State of Israel, they feel a minority).

Relocation is bound to affect ways in which people understand their identity, and both Jews and Muslims have had to adapt to new cultures and situations. Since this is so, it is possible that Diaspora communities will produce rather more creative interpretations of their beliefs and practices than might happen in 'homelands'. (This happens intra-religiously too; Diaspora Orthodox Churches are often much more 'advanced' in their thinking than their co-religionists in Russia and elsewhere.)

The impact of living in a Diaspora can be explored in many ways. On a universalistic level, civil harmony and social cohesion, enhanced by conflict resolution, are key issues. On a particularistic level, one can turn to ways of combating particular prejudices such as antisemitism and Islamophobia. In such circumstances, Jewish-Muslim dialogue takes on the added dimension of mutual support and solidarity.

Israel–Palestine

By now, I hope I have shown that dialogue between Muslims and Jews can make a significant contribution to their relationship, though perhaps more marginally than we like to think because relations are overshadowed by the failure of both communities to address the impact of the Middle East conflict. For most Jews, the creation of the State of Israel is an ancient promise fulfilled – the ingathering of exiles and the creation of a vibrant nation-state, guaranteeing physical and spiritual security. Yet for many Muslims, the permanent existence of a Jewish state in the Middle East is a religious and political anomaly. It is not an uncommon view that Islamic rule must be returned to the Land of Israel

We need to recognize that because Jewish–Muslim dialogue lies so far behind Jewish–Christian dialogue, it is essential to be prepared for conflicting views. An authentic dialogue must allow for sharp differences. Yes, Jews view the creation of the State of Israel as an act of national liberation following nearly 2,000 years of powerlessness and homelessness, and are profoundly aware that over 40 per cent of the world Jewish population lives in Israel. Yes, many Muslims term the same events ‘The Disaster’, a time when an Islamic society was uprooted and became a minority in a land that was once *dar al-Islam*. Most Jews do not separate Zionism from its deep religious roots within Judaism; however, many Muslims make a distinction between Zionism and Judaism, either failing to recognize or rejecting the point that Zionism is an integral component of Judaism. On the one hand, Jews who survived the Holocaust found a haven in Israel. On the other hand, the creation of the state displaced around 700,000 Palestinians, who suffered a great loss: their homes, their land, their livelihoods.

So how could this be discussed in Jewish–Muslim dialogue? Let me give you one example from my annual ‘Introduction to Judaism’ intensive course. It concludes with an ‘Any questions?’ session. When I told a group of Muslim students that I was a Zionist, what they heard me saying was, ‘I am proud to condone the oppression of the Palestinians.’ This was followed by discussion about the choice of words. Were we discussing Israel or Palestine? Judah and Samaria or the West Bank and the Occupied Territories? Or was it the Holy Land or the Promised Land? Was it the State of Israel, the Land of Israel or simply the Zionist Entity?

I clarified that I personally supported a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. When I defined Zionism as the right to a Jewish homeland in its historic setting, we found a definition of Zionism that was understandable and apparently acceptable. Our classroom conversation also showed that it is difficult to apply Jewish–Muslim dialogue as a purely religious exercise, apart from a whole range of political dimensions, which tend to be dominated by the Israel–Palestine conflict.

This glimpse into one conversation symbolizes the enormity of the challenge to tackle the mutual antipathy and prejudice on both sides, thousands of miles away from the military and political conflict, which is given disproportionate attention. Muslim sympathy with the Palestinians is seen by some Jews as threatening to the Jewish community and feeding the rising antisemitism in the UK and elsewhere in Europe and the Middle East. Likewise, Muslims often see Jews as homogeneous in

their support and defence of Israel, unwilling to accept any criticism of the Jewish state. Look in any Jewish or Muslim newspaper and the Israel–Palestinian conflict will not only receive significant comment (and polemic!) but will also be reported with stereotypes that only serve to underline the irony that both Muslims and Jews feel vulnerable, misunderstood and under attack.

To come specifically to Judaism, Jews have to acknowledge the deep ambivalence within the Jewish world about the nature and possibilities of dialogue. Jonathan Magonet (*Talking to the Other: A Jewish Interfaith Dialogue with Christians and Muslims*, 2003) has argued that to a large extent, Jewish reluctance is understandable in terms of Jewish experience under Christianity and Islam over the centuries. One need not recount here in detail the fate of Jewish communities at the hands of Christians: pogroms, forced conversions, expulsions, accusations of ritual murder and subsequent destructions of entire communities, ghettoization, the Inquisition, public burnings of Jewish sacred writings, and in the last century the horrors of the Shoah (Holocaust) that took place within Christian Europe. All the above were underpinned by deep Christian theological ambivalence about the continued existence of the Jewish people, whose religious beliefs should have been long superseded by accepting Jesus Christ as the messiah. However, there are dangers to the Jewish tendency to insist on the same historical issues, such as a sole focus on the Holocaust, an inability to note changes in attitudes within Christianity and a continuing failure to allow the changes in Christian–Jewish relations to percolate to wider segments of the community.

Muslims face similar concerns. For example, while researching for his book *Journey into Islam* (2007), Akbar Ahmed asked Muslims from around the world: ‘What do you think is the number one problem for Muslims in the world today?’ He expected the answer: Israel, Iraq and Afghanistan. However, to Muslims in Damascus, in Karachi and in Indonesia, the number one problem was the perception that Islam was deliberately being distorted in the West; that Islam was under attack.¹² This siege mentality resonates with the Jewish community. Facing hostility, perceived or real, is a motivator for both Jews and Muslims. Of course, criticism is valid and necessary, especially in a democratic society, but when a minority feels on trial, it will feel threatened, as documented most recently by Yasir Suleiman’s report (2009).¹³

Judaism as middle ground between Christianity and Islam

As a Jewish partner in the dialogue with Christians as well as with Muslims, I am aware that, because of its history as a minority faith within Christian and Muslim societies, Judaism has borrowed from and contributed to both, while retaining its unique identity. One effect of these shared histories and interactions is that it should be relatively easy for Jews to enter into dialogue with both faiths separately as considerable common ground can be discovered.

Thus, with Christians, the Hebrew Bible or ‘Old Testament’ is a shared religious text, even though differently organized and augmented in particular Christian traditions. Effectively the Bible provides Jews and Christians with a tool for opening a two-way discussion and debate, as I showed in my book *Bound by the Bible* (2004).

But beyond this, Jews, like Christians, have gone through the upheaval to religious traditions brought about in the wake of the Enlightenment: the historical-critical challenges addressed to the biblical and related religious traditions, the loss of power of religious authorities, the secularism and the individualism that characterize Western society. We share the same kind of spiritual space and seek the same kind of solutions.

On the other hand, Jews and Muslims share a rich vocabulary because of the similarities between Hebrew and Arabic and the fact that the entire mediaeval Jewish philosophy was developed within an Islamic milieu, which also contributed both to concepts and to the Hebrew language itself. Jews provided the translations of Arabic texts that made their way into Latin via Hebrew. Mediaeval Hebrew religious and secular poetry is a direct consequence of exposure to Arabic models.

In comparison, the treatment of Jews under Islam has been considerably better, though not without destructive experiences under occasional fanatical regimes and the abuse of the *Dhimmi* status. On the positive side, it is also clear that much that is central to Jewish thought and practice arose during these same centuries and was deeply influenced by the Muslim environment, through a selective absorption of the surrounding ideas and values, but also through contributions to the host culture. Symbiosis and conflict went hand in hand.

But even more significant is the fact that Judaism in its classical form, like Islam, is based on law, a law that comprehended every aspect of private and public life. Thus religion and politics belonged together as inseparable parts of a total worldview or, as it is commonly expressed, 'Judaism (and in this sense Islam) is not a "religion" but a "way of life".' Thus the approach to day-to-day issues and concerns, from food laws to marriage and divorce, is similar in both traditions, as are the legal methodologies used to address such matters.

Today, however, it is no longer sufficient simply to translate each other's writings, although that would be an important start. How should Jews and Muslims practically progress the dialogue? A foundation of mutual trust and respect is best built step by step, for example, by organizing reciprocal visits to synagogues and mosques, developing joint strategies on issues such as discrimination, and supporting each other's attempt to maintain a distinctive religious identity in a society that promotes conformity to the majority culture.

Tragically, today, the Middle East conflict makes this task difficult, but there remains hope that, while in the past we have defined ourselves in contradistinction and in opposition to one another, today we have to define ourselves in relationship to one another.

If the challenges faced by Muslim-Jewish dialogue seem daunting, consider the significant advances in Christian-Jewish relations in the last 100 years. Surely one of the few pieces of good news in today's interfaith encounter, Christian-Jewish dialogue arose despite profound theological differences and many centuries of alienation and distrust. The fact that Jews and Christians have built mutual respect and understanding – even though they still face significant bumps in the road – does not, of course, mean that this model can be wholly applied to Muslim-Jewish

relations with the same positive results. Jews and Muslims today carry far different memories than the historical baggage brought to Jewish encounters with Christians. While there has been nearly a century of Christian–Jewish dialogue, Muslim–Jewish dialogue is in its early stages and represents a new challenge, often facing resistance within our communities. However, it is well overdue to give Jewish–Muslim dialogue the care and attention it deserves.

Notes

1. E.g., Mary C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2000); Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Das christliche Bekenntnis zu Jesus, dem Juden. Eine Christologie. Band 1* (Munich: Kaiser, 1990); Franz Mussner, *Tractate on the Jews: The Significance of Judaism for Christian Faith* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press/London: SPCK, 1984); R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996); P. van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish–Christian Reality*, Parts I, II, III (San Francisco, CA and London: Harper & Row, 1980–7).
2. See for example, European Lutheran Commission on the Church and the Jewish People (LEKKJ) ‘Statement on Antisemitism’ (2004); Church and Israel, ‘A Contribution from the Reformation Churches in Europe to the Relationship between Christians and Jews’ (2001); Pope John Paul II, ‘Universal Prayer: Confession of Sins and Asking for Forgiveness’ (2000); Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ‘We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah’ (1998).
3. One of the most important pioneers was Claude Montefiore (1858–1938), who wrote a number of important works on Christianity, notably *The Old Testament and After* (London: Macmillan, 1923).
4. Most notably Martin Buber (1878–1965), whose preface to *Two Types of Faith* (1951) became popular among Christians: ‘Since I was young I have felt that Jesus is my elder brother. That Christianity has seen and sees him as God and redeemer has always been a very serious matter for me which I must try to comprehend for his sake and my sake’ (*Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fisher, 1963), vol. 1, p. 657).
5. 22 June 2009, at a lecture at the Woolf Institute in Cambridge. Note also the Holocaust exhibition in January 2009 organized by Ni’lin’s ‘Popular Committee Against the Wall’ in the Arab village of Ni’lin in the West Bank.
6. It is also worth noting the existence of Jewish Arabs, recently discussed by Rachel Shabi in *Not the Enemy: Israel’s Jews from Arab Lands* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2009).
7. This can be illustrated by the all too common acceptance in Arab media of the ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion’ as historic reality. Written by Russian antisemites in the early 1900s, the Protocols claimed the existence of a powerful Jewish cabal that was plotting to take control of global society. In 2001–2, Arab Radio and Television produced a 30-part television mini-series entitled *Horseman Without a Horse*, which contained dramatizations of the Protocols and was broadcast on state TV in Egypt.
8. This can be illustrated by the controversy surrounding the title of Geza Vermes’ important book, *Jesus the Jew* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1973), which seemed revolutionary at the time. Now it is almost taken for granted in New Testament scholarship. See his, *Providential Accidents: An Autobiography* (London: SCM Press, 1998).

9. 25 February, 2008. For further details, see <http://www.woolfinstitute.cam.ac.uk/cmjr/lettersignup.php>
10. This is explored in the 2008 report, 'The Training of Religious leaders in the UK: A Survey of Jewish, Christian and Muslim Seminaries', eds M. Mumisa and E. Kessler. For the full report, see <http://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk>
11. Sacks, J., *Will we have Jewish Grandchildren? Jewish Continuity and How to Achieve it* (Ilford: Vallentine Mitchell, 1994)
12. See Akbar Ahmed, *Journey into Islam* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007) and *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010).
13. Yasir Suleiman, *Contextualising Islam in Britain: Exploratory Perspectives* (University of Cambridge, 2009).

Author Biography

Dr Edward Kessler is Founder and Executive Director of the Woolf Institute, www.woolf.cam.ac.uk, devoted to the study of relations between Jews, Christians and Muslims. His latest book, *An Introduction to Jewish-Christian Relations*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2010.