

**Descended from Abraham:  
Exploring the common Heritage of Jews, Christians and Muslims**

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. The encounter with Islam, on the other hand, is a much more recent and fragile phenomenon.

For many years, Christians have reflected on the significance of the Jewish origins of Christianity for the formation of Christian self-understanding and notable also are the messages of repentance, for a history of antisemitism and an attempt to purge a tradition of latent anti-Judaism. Some Christian theologians have begun to reflect on how Christianity can differentiate itself from Judaism without asserting itself as either opposed to Judaism or simply as the replacement of Judaism.

To a lesser extent, but also noticeable since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jews have pondered the purpose behind the creation of Christianity, reflected on the significance for Jews of Jesus being Jewish and considered the implications for Jewish theology of 2 billion followers of the Jew Jesus reading the Jewish Bible. The ability within Judaism to face and hopefully overcome a history of being persecuted and to be open and participatory in dialogue with Christianity provides a message of Jewish-Christian reconciliation, after a history of conflict and hostility.

However, similar questions about Islam have been and are all too rarely considered. What is the significance of 1.6 billion Muslims sharing many of the same customs as Jews and Christians, adopting similar stories and adhering to a strict monotheism? From a Jewish perspective, to what extent should Islam be viewed, alongside Christianity, as part of God's plan?

In the last 20 years, Christian reflection on Islam is becoming more common among theologians and an increasing number of studies of Christian-Muslim relations are being published. The Bridges for Peace Project, initiated by the Archbishop of

Canterbury, is an example of the growing Christian-Muslim dialogue programme. Nevertheless, even though more University Departments of Theology include Christian-Muslim relations in their curriculum, as do Christian ministerial training programmes, the Christian dialogue with Islam is just beginning, remaining delicate and vulnerable.

As for Jewish-Muslim relations, this is relatively uncharted territory. There are some Muslim thinkers today, particularly in the West such as Tariq Ramadan (from Oxford) and Akbar Ahmed (Washington via Cambridge and London), for whom developing a clearer understanding of and a meaningful relationship with Jews and Judaism are under increasing consideration. For them, Muslim engagement with Judaism can be understood as contributing to the formation of Islam in the West. In one sense, Islam's relationship with Jews and Christians can be dealt with under the familiar theme of supersessionism, since Muslims believe that Islam was the final religion revealed by God through the Prophet Muhammad (c.570–632). Islam sees itself as perfecting the two monotheistic religions and the Qur'an calls both Jews and Christians *ahl al-Kitab* (People of the Book). One consequence of Islamic supersessionism on Jewish-Christian relations is that it provides Christians with an insight into the difficulties raised by traditional Christian supersessionism of Judaism and what is sometimes called replacement theology.

These scholars are even beginning to reflect on how Muslims should understand the significance to Jews of the State of Israel. Prince Hassan of Jordan, a pioneering leader of interfaith conversation and dialogue, has stressed there is a need for Muslims, particularly in the Middle East, to internalise the meaning of the Holocaust (cf. recent exhibitions in West Bank) so as to better understand relations with Israel and the wider Jewish world

Why is it crucial to have good relations with the world of Islam? There are many important reasons for **all non-Muslims** to have strong, stable and positive relations with the cultures and peoples of Islam. Perhaps most important for Jews (and Christians), is the fact that Islam is very much part of the Abrahamic triangle. I shall discuss this in more detail shortly.

Today, the Islamic world includes approximately 60 nations (of which Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Mauritania, Oman and Iran are governed by Islamic law), one of which at least is a nuclear power and in the next few decades there are likely to be several more joining the nuclear club. Statistics show that almost one out of four people on our planet is Muslim – 1.6 billion (compared to 2.2 billion Christians). The number of Muslims in the UK is approximately 1.75 million (compared to 250,000 Jews), of whom 70% are under 25. Islam in the UK is a dynamic and growing community.

There are 120 countries with a Christian majority but only one theocracy – the Vatican. There is one Jewish state (Israel) based on secular law although there is an increased blurring between nationality and religion).

There is an odd quality about relations between Muslims and Jews, which require reflection. Firstly, 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. Thus, there are Christian Arabs (as well as Jewish Arabs, cf Rachel Shabi, *Not the Enemy: Israel's Jews from Arab Lands*, 2009) although their numbers have declined significantly since 1948 and this is a relatively unknown story). The most populous Muslim country in the world is Indonesia (207 million), followed by India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, thousands of miles away from the Middle East, before the first Arab nation, Egypt at 72 million, is listed as the distant 5<sup>th</sup> most populous Muslim state (based on 2008 UN figures).

For their part, Muslims face the challenge (like Christians) in their encounters with Jews not to view Judaism as though it were a religion only, like Islam. This is a basic error since Judaism is a culture, a civilization, in which religion is an important part, but it has always been also a peoplehood. A man who converted to the Jewish religion became ‘Abraham the son of Abraham’, (or for a woman, ‘Sarah daughter of Sarah’); in other words he inherited the history of a people which he now joined as part of his religious conversion.

It is therefore important for Muslims to not only realise the religious varieties that make up Judaism but also that a significant proportion of Jews are secular and identify

with Judaism in terms of culture or peoplehood. 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 lies in the number of adherents: 1.6 billion Muslims and 2.2 billion Christians in comparison with 15 million Jews, or about 1% of the number of Muslims (or 0.75% in comparison with Christians). To compare these groups as equivalent is not only an error but can also contribute to the all too common antisemitic fantasy of a Jewish world conspiracy (cf. *Protocols of Elders of Zion*).

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 cultural heritage.

While talking of violence, you would have noticed that there is one topic I have not yet discussed: one of the most difficult topics is of course Israel-Palestine. I will not avoid discussing the topic – that would be a mistake, tempting to be sure, but a mistake. However, in my experience of dialogue and exploring a common heritage it is important to start with what people have in common, **not** where they differ and certainly not where they differ most. Israel-Palestine – the ‘elephant in the room’ – must not be ignored since it is the core issue in the Muslim-Christian-Jewish encounter. But it is not the place to start. **(Cf CMJR e-learning course)**

Creating a constructive relationship and fostering real understanding begin with building bridges and establishing what is held 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. By beginning with commonality, Christians and Jews seek minimum levels of knowledge (faith literacy) which result in increasing trust, respect and sensitivity. They are then better equipped to move onto the more tricky issues.

So it is with Jews, Christians and Muslims. They share many of the same reasons (both positive and negative) why it is important to engage in dialogue. Some may start for defensive reasons – to respond to the ignorant and negative stereotypes. **(cf. cemetery desecration)**

A lack of knowledge provides a seedbed for prejudice, demonstrated by increasing antisemitism, anti-Christian prejudice and Islamophobia, both outside and inside our communities. This makes the work of academic centres like the Woolf Institute, as well as grassroots initiatives (such as Project Mosaic) important for the pursuit of knowledge and furthering understanding and overcoming prejudice and ignorance.

Whilst carrying out research about Muslim attitudes around the world, Prof Akbar Ahmed asked: “what do you think is the number one problem for Muslims in the world today?” He expected the answer: Israel-Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan. However, to Muslims in Damascus, in Karachi, and in Indonesia, in London, New York and LA the number one problem was the perception that Islam was deliberately being distorted in the West; that Islam was under attack. (Cf *Journey into Islam* 2007 and *Journey into America* 2010.) This siege mentality resonates with the Jewish community and 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 and less able to engage in mutual understanding and empathy.

Positively, Jews and Muslims may engage in dialogue because they learn from how each other face similar challenges and share similar concerns as minorities in Western society. Both share the experience of being minority communities in the UK and throughout Europe, with parallel challenges. They share the challenge of developing a vibrant, distinctive but integrated minority community.

One initiative worth highlighting is the publication of the world's first Letter in modern times (2008) from Muslim leaders to the Jewish Community calling for peace and understanding.<sup>1</sup> This Letter should be viewed as part of the process of

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘An Open Letter : A Call to Peace, Dialogue and Understanding between Muslims and Jews’ (25 February 2008), at <http://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/cmjr/assets/pdf/letter.pdf>.

reconciliation and building bridges- **handout**. The initiative behind the Letter came from Muslim scholars, Dr Amineh Ahmed Hoti and Sheikh Michael Mumisa who collaborated with leading Muslims from the UK and Overseas. Tariq Ramadan spoke of its significance: 'I really think that this 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'.

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, much of which has been overshadowed and even hijacked by modern politics.

There are also important similarities between Islam and Christianity since both have a strong sense of mission to people of other religions and Jesus is revered by Muslims as a prophet. The 2007 letter from Muslim scholars to the Christian world, *A Common Word*,<sup>2</sup> outlines the similarities between the two faiths. Tensions also exist, demonstrated by outbursts of violence between Muslims and Christians in Africa (e.g. Nigeria's *sharia* riots in 2006 and again in 2008 in which hundreds of Muslims and Christians died) and the fall-out from Pope Benedict XVI's controversial Regensburg address (2006),<sup>3</sup> in which he was accused of fermenting anti-Muslim feeling. Anti-Christian violence followed in parts of the Muslim world.

Outbreaks of violence demonstrate that the three faiths, particularly Islam, have difficulty with their fundamentalists. For example, Islam's Wahabi sect, which has a following among many Muslims, including among Diaspora communities in the West, seeks to return to an idealised form of certain early Islamic values, and strongly condemns many other forms of Islam, as well as other religions.

---

<sup>2</sup> 'An Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI' (13 October 2007), at <http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/CW-Total-Final-v-12g-Eng-9-10-07.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> 'Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections', Pope Benedict XVI's Address to the University of Regensburg (12 September 2006), at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html).

Christian and Jewish fundamentalism also exists and is growing (alongside similar movements in Hinduism and other world religions). Jewish fundamentalists generally focus on issues related to the Land and State of Israel and many take hardline political positions. In recent years they have emerged as a significant political and religious force within Israel as well as in the Diaspora. *Haredi* fundamentalists not only affirm the literal truth of the Bible, but seek to impose many biblical and Talmudic laws and ordinances upon the State of Israel. Some, both within and outside Israel, have joined with Christian fundamentalists in calling for the building of a third Temple in Jerusalem. Some ultra-orthodox Jewish beliefs have similarities to those of some evangelical Christians who believe the creation of the Jewish state in 1948 and the yet-to-be-built Third Temple are theological prerequisites for the Second Coming of Jesus. Some of these same fundamentalists also actively seek the conversion of Jews to Christianity.

Fundamentalists reject modern scriptural criticism, particularly the documentary theory of biblical scholarship, the Darwinian concept of human evolution and are profoundly opposed to abortion and euthanasia. Christian and Jewish fundamentalist leaders have sometimes worked together, advocating a broad public policy agenda that opposes the strict separation of church and state and 'secular humanism', a pejorative term used to describe opponents of fundamentalism. Often, fundamentalists have a special loathing of co-religionists whose views do not fit their own: for example, the al-Qaeda movement(s) has been quite as prepared to kill other Muslims as it has Jews and Christians, Americans and British, and other perceived enemies.

So it is clear there exists a challenge to uncover a common language and appreciate potential symbiosis. Perhaps the most difficult obstacle is that collective memories prevent dialogue: for example, Jews think of Christianity in terms of suffering and persecution; while Muslims have not forgotten the Crusades, and see in Western aspirations for world hegemony the old crusader mentality in a new guise. All three religions have wide experience in polemics and apologetics, but interfaith dialogue remains limited to a minority.

## Abraham

Abraham is often regarded as a symbol of hope in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim encounter and acclaimed as a spiritual mentor and guide. For example, Karl-Josef Kuschel calls for ‘an Abrahamic ecumenism’, in which Jews, Christians and Muslims work together in mutual respect and for the common good.<sup>4</sup> The first decade of the twentieth-first century has witnessed a number of interfaith initiatives adopting the term ‘Abrahamic’ in their title. Since Judaism, Christianity and Islam all trace their spiritual ancestry to Abraham, viewing him as a paradigm of the human–divine relationship, there is an attempt to depict him as a figure who can help reconcile three related but divided religions, (the ‘Abrahamic Faiths’).

Whilst Abraham is certainly an important figure to the three faiths, it is just as possible that his significance to each can be interpreted as undermining his importance to the others because they have not interpreted him appropriately. For example, for Jews the Bible’s descriptions of Abraham’s encounters with God are viewed most commonly in terms of God’s promises concerning continuity of family and inheritance of the land of Israel. Jewish claims to be the inheritors of the land of Israel through the promises of Abraham have been and remain a source of controversy between Jews, Christians and Muslims.

The New Testament reveals both continuities and discontinuities with the patriarch. Jesus descends from the seed of Abraham but ancestry from Abraham is not sufficient to avoid divine wrath. Narratives of the early church reinforce the division between those who believe in the Christ and are spiritual, and Jews who adhere to the Torah.

The Qur’an describes Abraham as the *hanif*, the God-seeker *par excellence*. Muslims revere Abraham as a holy figure, and trace their lineage back to his son Ishmael. Muslim traditions elaborate the biblical narratives, understanding for example, the object of Abraham’s sacrifice narrated in Genesis 22 to be Ishmael rather than Isaac. For Jews and Christians, the child of the promise is Isaac: it is through Isaac that Abraham becomes the father of the people of Israel and of the nations.

---

<sup>4</sup> Karl-Josef Kuschel, ‘Children of Abraham: On the Necessity of an Abrahamic Ecumene between Jews, Christians, and Muslims’ in *Convergence* 10 (April, 1999), 34-40.



The Qur'an designates Islam as 'the religious community of Abraham' (*millat Ibrahim*) and portrays Muhammad as a follower of the monotheistic faith of Abraham (16.123). But who does Abraham belong to? According to a common translation, the Qur'an affirms that:

Abraham was not a Jew nor yet a Christian; but he was true in Faith, and bowed his will to Allah's (Which is Islam), and he joined not gods with Allah. Without doubt, among men, the nearest of kin to Abraham, are those who follow him, as are also this Messenger and those who believe: And Allah is the Protector of those who have faith. (Q3.67f.)<sup>5</sup>

The translator's interpretative gloss, "which is Islam", shows how Abraham has been claimed as a Muslim possession, the father of those who truly submit in faith to God, and do not associate other gods with him; namely, Muslims. Note the difference with a more recent translation of the Qur'an published by Oxford University Press:

Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian. He was upright and devoted to God, never an idolator, and the people who are closest to him are those who truly follow his ways, this Prophet and [true] believers – God is close to [true] believers.<sup>6</sup>

The resolution of theological and communal differences between Jews, Christians and Muslims will depend upon how carefully they negotiate the virtues of Abraham that belong to all three traditions **and** appreciate the particular claims made by each of them. Clearly, Abraham can be a model of faith for the three but the point at issue is whether each one of these religions can allow him to be a model for members of the other two. Even if Abraham is not as promising a figure as many assume or press him to be, the long history of suspicion and bloodshed between Jews, Christians and Muslims surely motivates them to search for common ground.

---

<sup>5</sup> 'Surah 3. The Family Of 'Imran, The House Of 'Imran', at <http://www.islamicity.com/Mosque/QURAN/3.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> M.A.S Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

## Memory and Identity

Unlike national identities, religious identities are sacred to those who hold them and their key events have usually occurred much further in the past than most national events. For example, Muslims find contemporary meaning in the *hijra*, the emigration from Mecca to Medina of Muhammad and his followers in 622 CE. Likewise, Jews view the exodus from Egypt as of contemporary significance, as Christians view the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Let's take Passover as an example. For Jews, Passover is connected to the historical commemoration of the exodus from Egypt and the Torah commands the Israelites to recall this event (Deuteronomy 16:2, 6–7). Deuteronomy 16:3 refers to unleavened bread as 'the bread of affliction', remembering the Egyptian oppression. Christians for their part associate the festival with the death of Jesus. The eucharistic liturgy during the Easter season includes the words: 'Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast.' These words derive from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (5:7–8), where he compares clearing out the bad elements of their lives with getting rid of the old yeast or leaven.

For Jews, Christians and Muslims, the inheritance of the past is important to their religious identity and their encounter, but so too is the continuing relevance of this past. Learning from the past does not require us to live there but there are some believers who wish to restore the past, by force if necessary and others who wish to forget:

Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"(Isaiah 43: 16-18)

So spoke Isaiah, prophet of the Exile to his people, encouraging the Israelites to believe that there was the hope that they would return to the Land of Israel. Strikingly, the prophet speaks in terms of forgetting the past, for the sake of the future. To what extent we should forget the past clearly has an impact on memory and on identity.

There are those religious believers who are not prepared to forget about the past, just as there are those who prefer to forget. For the latter, the baggage of the past makes no sense. Of course, it may well be that their view is correct, but it does not necessarily follow that passing over the past is a constructive way to form memory and identity.

Commemorations of past events help preserve a sense of historical continuity, identity and even social integration. Collective memory contains a strong conservative force furnishing a community with a sense of historical continuity. However, a preoccupation (some might call obsession), with the past may be harmful. The memory of a founding event that is recollected and re-enacted may become a danger if it results in a negative identity and self-understanding, especially if becomes the only or primary lens through which reality and the changing world is viewed.

For example, the legacy of being a victim has left an enduring mark on the Jewish psyche and impacts on the Jewish encounter with Christians and Muslims. A history of being surrounded by oppressive nations has become a feature of Jewish memory and identity, leading to a sense of victimisation. Taking to heart the Bible's command to the Children of Israel to remember (*zachor*), because "you were slaves in the land of Egypt", Jews are reminded to remember the suffering of Israel in Egypt; the Torah also reminds them to remember the violence committed against the Israelites by the surrounding nations.

A modern example of a focus upon victimisation is the 614<sup>th</sup> commandment proposed by Emil Fackenheim, in his reflection on the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup> One dangerous consequence of demanding Jewish continuity so as not to give Hitler a posthumous victory, is that Jewish identity can easily become *Shoah*-centred, as can relations between Jews and non-Jews, especially Christians. The Holocaust reinforced a mentality in the Jewish world that Jews are a small minority and that the Jewish people, even Jews in Israel, are surrounded by hostile non-Jews. Consequently, a young Jew will easily construct a negative Jewish identity which, without the positive side of Judaism, will not be of

---

<sup>7</sup> Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), xix.

value to be handed down over the generations. A young Christian will come away with an exclusive picture of the Jew as victim, without an awareness of the positive aspects of Jewish culture. If the Jew disappears from the historical horizons from the death of Jesus in 33CE and only reappears again when Hitler came to power in 1933, not only will a negative identity be formed but Jewish-Christian relations will also be based on a victim-perpetrator relationship.

Like Jews, Muslims also tend to view the outside world as a threat, which may lead to a pre-occupation with a memory of suffering. As I mentioned earlier, Akbar Ahmed's recent studies of the views of Muslims in the twenty-first century<sup>8</sup> lists numerous examples of Muslims feeling "under attack by the West and modernity", which are viewed as a 'Judeo-Christian' creation.

Attitudes within the Muslim community in the UK had begun to harden in the late 1980s when the controversy around Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*<sup>9</sup> erupted and Muslims saw themselves depicted as little more than an angry community of book-burners. Often the target of racism and discrimination they resented the negative depiction of Islam in the media. The 1990s marked the coming of age of a new generation which was marginalized and alienated from mainstream society not only in the UK but also in the rest of Europe. Many Muslims were convinced that however integrated and Westernized they were, their Muslimness would still exclude them from being accepted as part of Western society.

### **Memoria Futuri - memory for the future**

One way to disarm an obsession with the past is to adopt a critical approach to it in order not to become victims of an ideological 'vindication' of the past that is nostalgic, dogmatic, and sometimes irrational. If the past is approached critically, it can reveal new interpretations and understandings of the world that can be liberating and constructive.

---

<sup>8</sup> Akbar Ahmed, *Journey into Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007); Akbar Ahmed, *Journey into America* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking Penguin, 1988).

For example, although reflection on and reaction to the *Shoah* are essential for an understanding of Jewish-Christian relations, positive relations cannot be built solely on responses to antisemitism and Christian feelings of guilt. Certainly, the past must be remembered and memories have to find a way to be reconciled so that horrors are not forgotten otherwise, as George Santayana coined, “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”.<sup>10</sup> However, no healthy and enduring relationship between people is built on guilt. If recent Christian soul-searching in the aftermath of the destruction of European Jewry leads to a new approach and a revision of traditional anti-Jewish teaching, so much the better. However, the future relationship cannot be built on the foundations of guilt. The sense of guilt is transient and does not pass to the next generation; moreover, it is unstable, inherently prone to sudden and drastic reversal. So, it is necessary to negotiate a better stance towards a compromised past in order to look forward to a more hopeful future. Indeed, redeeming a compromised past offers grounds for hope in Jewish-Christian relations but also in relations with Muslims and other faith communities.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, previous President of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews has called for a renewed *memoria futuri* and for Jews and Christians to reflect on the more positive aspects of memory. Religious remembrance, he argued, is not an act of nostalgia, but empowers in the present. For example, in liturgy, Jews and Christians remember not only what God has done for them in the past, but remember that God’s people continue have a role today.

Christianity has recognized that past practices about and traditional views of Jews are wholly unacceptable and have worked to create a new relationship. The tackling of Christian triumphalism and the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition illustrates a shift from what was, for the most part, an inherent need to condemn Judaism to one of a condemnation of Christian anti-Judaism. It has also led to a closer relationship with “the elder brother” and not, as some feared, to the undermining of Christian teaching. The rediscovery of a positive relationship with Judaism facilitates a positive formation of Christian identity and memory.

---

<sup>10</sup> George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), 284.

For Jews, *memoria futuri* may help Jews view Diaspora life not primarily in negative terms (as an anti-Jewish environment and exemplifying a continuous history of oppression) but in positive terms (as a fruitful environment facilitating vigorous Jewish existence and dynamic development). Traditionally, Diaspora was equated with ‘*golah*’, ‘exile’, implying that life outside of Israel is a life of exile (an undesirable situation). However, Diaspora is a Greek word meaning ‘dispersion’, (a voluntary situation desirable to the individual), which can be a positive experience for the Jewish people living among the nations of the world, leading to constructive interaction.

As a minority, Jews have thrived, having lived in a Diaspora community since at least the fall of the First Temple in the sixth century BCE. After 70 CE, Jews had to create a sense of religious identity without the possession of Jerusalem or the Temple and arguably, Rabbinic Judaism survived and flourished precisely because it had not been so attached to the rites of the Temple as the Sadducees.

Thriving in a diaspora means that communities are affected by change in wider society. This leads to a change in an individual’s identity or the now more common notion of hybrid identity, when one’s identity is constituted by a multiplicity of different identities—cultural, religious, ethnic, linguistic, national—that were once considered distinct identities.

This is a relatively new development in Europe but has a longer history and is more common in the USA. An example of hybrid identity is an American-born citizen of Irish origins. With the increased communication and ease of travel today, many American citizens of Irish origin can participate in the cultural and religious world of Ireland while simultaneously participating in the cultural and linguistic world of the US. If asked about one’s identity, this person would most probably reply with a hyphenated response such as: American- Irish. Pushed further, one might find out even deeper layers of identity such as American-Irish-Mayo.

A consequence of hybrid identities is that people regularly cross boundaries that divide insider from outsider, thus blurring identity boundaries that were previously more clearly defined. In the process change occurs and because people have to

readjust and redefine who they are, their identities can become fragile. It is no easy task to redefine one's identity, the fragility of which can lead to prejudice as a defensive mechanism. The reaction against rapidly shifting boundaries of identity, especially when one or more identity is 'perceived' to be under threat inevitably leads to an over-rootedness in one's identity and a subsequent decrease in a desire to engage in dialogue with the 'Others.'

Hybrid identities can affect places of worship as well. For example, in East London, a highly populated immigrant area, the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid (mosque) presently serves local Bangladeshi Muslims. It was originally built in 1743 as a French Protestant Church, made into a Methodist Chapel in 1819, converted into the Spitalfields Great Synagogue in 1898, and finally became the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid in 1976. When the Jewish community decided to sell the building, they wanted it to continue being a house of worship. Therefore, they sold the building to the Bengali Muslim community for a low price, thus ensuring that the synagogue would become a mosque. As a relict of the inter-faith and communal past, there remains a sign in Hebrew commemorating some of its former Jewish community members.

This is a consequence of the growth of a multi-cultural society, which (*contra* Cameron) can bring Jews, Christians and Muslims together. Our multi-cultural society may lessen the sense of rivalry that characterised past relations and pave the way for joint approaches on issues of common interest, both at national leadership level and in local areas, demonstrated by Jewish, Christian, Muslim and other faith communities demonstrating together in the jubilee year (2000) against poverty and for the relief of third world debt. This led to further joint interfaith action such as the 200,000 people who travelled to Edinburgh during a meeting of the G8 leaders in 2005 to support the 'Make Poverty History' campaign.

On the other hand, some practitioners of inter-faith dialogue are apt to overlook the fact that some of their colleagues in this enterprise are attached to their religion not because of faith in God but for community reasons, or because they like its artistic and aesthetic values. For example, a number of Christians go to church because of its liturgical and musical excellence or for cultural or other reasons. Likewise, many

Jews are secular but retain their identity as Jews in terms of culture. Secular Jews may have a rather tenuous connection with Judaism but are as likely to be involved in inter-religious conversation as observant Jews. The assumption that a strong, personal faith is at the heart of religion is often a Protestant Christian emphasis. Equally, however, outsiders often assume that Christians possess or at least declare such a faith when many, in fact, do not.

### **Israel–Palestine**

Nowhere is the subject of peace and understanding, or perhaps more realistically, violence and misunderstanding, more evident than in the Middle East, and more discussed than in the tea rooms and coffee parlours of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv as well as Ramallah and Bethlehem.

The 2008/09 war in Gaza is a reminder of what seems to be an intractable conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. A story is told about an Israeli and a Palestinian leader meeting with God and asking whether there will ever be peace in the Middle East in their lifetime. 'Of course there will be peace,' God told them. They looked relieved. 'However,' God continued, 'not in my lifetime'. 120 years after the beginning of modern Zionism, a peaceful solution seems some distance away.

For Jews, the centrality of the land of the Bible, as well as the survival of over a third of world Jewry, is at stake. 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. Christians, for their part, not only disagree as to the place of Israel in Christian theology, but many understandably feel particular concern for Arab Christians who live in Israel and in the future state of Palestine. 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

Israel is controversial because it cannot be viewed simply as a geographical and political entity whose emergence is like the establishment of any new state. Political, social, cultural and religious concerns all affect its place in the Jewish-Christian-



Muslim relationship. Dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims is sometimes mistakenly transformed into an Israeli-Palestinian or Israeli-Arab conversation, with national identity emphasised far more than religious issues.

For Jews, the will to survive in the Diaspora generated messianic hopes of redemption, which occasionally led to a high level of anticipation and the extraordinary claims of self-appointed messiahs such as Bar Kokhba and Shabbetai Zvi. One of the common features of these times of messianic fervour was that the Promised Land became a symbol of redress for all the wrongs which Jews had suffered. Thus, modern Zionism became in part the fusion of messianic fervour and the longing for Zion. Jews took their destiny into their own hands and stopped waiting for a divine solution to their predicament. This was a dramatic break from the Diaspora strategy of survival, which advocated endurance of the status quo as part of the covenant with God. For many Jews, the Jewish state offered the best hope not only for survival in response to the breakdown in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries but also for religious and cultural fulfilment.

While Jews may view the creation of the state of Israel as an act of national liberation following nearly 2,000 years of powerlessness and homelessness, 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*; when over 700,000 Palestinians lost their homes, their land, were displaced and became (and remain) refugees. Most Jews do not separate Zionism from its deep religious roots within Judaism. However, many Muslims make a distinction between Zionism and Judaism, unwilling to acknowledge that Zionism is an integral component of Judaism and not a 'racist' ideology. Relations between Muslims and Jews are overshadowed by the failure of both communities to address the impact of the Middle East conflict on our own communities. It is essential to be prepared for conflicting views. An authentic encounter must allow for sharp differences, especially since the modern dialogue is young and vulnerable.

Israel, the only Jewish state in the world, is situated in the heart of the Muslim world and it is essential to foster an environment of friendship so that the peoples of that region – both Israelis and Palestinians – can live as neighbours in the security and

peace, as they deserve. Developing good relations is in both their interests, however much their political and religious leaders fail the peoples.

There is 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 the Jewish state. Look in any Jewish or Muslim newspaper and the Israel-Palestinian conflict will not only receive significant comment (and polemic – **cf newspaper exercise**) but will be reported with ignorant stereotypes which only serve to contribute to the irony that both Muslims and Jews feel vulnerable, misunderstood and under attack. They share the experience of being minority communities in Europe and the USA and both have parallel experiences and needs. Xenophobia and prejudice know no boundaries.

How should Jews and Muslims practically progress the dialogue? A foundation of mutual trust and respect is best built step by step, eg., organising reciprocal visits to synagogues and mosques, developing joint strategies on issues such as discrimination, as well as supporting each other's attempt to maintain a distinctive religious identity in a society that promotes conformity to the majority culture.

If the challenges 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 encounter between religions, 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 does not, of course, mean that this model can be wholly applied to the encounter with Islam with the same positive results. We carry far different memories and issues than the historical baggage brought to encounters with Christians. While there has been nearly a century of fruitful Christian-Jewish dialogue, building positive Muslim-non-Muslim relations is in its early stages and represents a new challenge, often facing resistance within our communities. Indeed, the recent controversies in Catholic-Jewish relations (not to

mention Catholic-Muslim relations) bring home the ongoing challenge of interfaith understanding and dialogue - it is a long-term process.

### **Judaism as middle ground between Christianity and Islam**

Because of its history as a minority faith within both 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 is relatively easy for Jews to enter into dialogue with both faiths separately as considerable common ground can be discovered.

Thus with Christians, for example, not only was Jesus a Jew but the Bible provides Jews and Christians with a text for mutual discussion and debate, as I showed in my book, *Bound by the Bible* (2004). With Muslims, Jews share a rich vocabulary and the entire mediaeval Jewish literary corpus was developed within an Islamic milieu, which also contributed both to concepts and to the Hebrew language itself. Also in many ways, Judaism and Islam are not a 'religion' but a 'way of life, sharing customs (eg., dietary customs) and a similar legal tradition.

As a Jew I am familiar with (at home in) both Christian and Muslim culture and suggest that Judaism is ideally placed to act as an intermediary in the essential encounter between Christianity and Islam, between the West and East. The Middle East conflict makes such a role difficult but more urgent. Whilst in the past we have defined ourselves in contradistinction, today we have to define ourselves in relationship to one another. Jews, Christians and Muslims are called (as the Children of Abraham) to be a blessing for humankind. In order to be so, we must first be a blessing to one another.

---

Republished by  
The Matheson Trust  
with kind permission of the author.

### **Woolf Institute**

The Woolf Institute is dedicated to the study of relations between Jews, Christians and Muslims. It is an umbrella organisation for the Centre for the Study of Jewish–Christian Relations (CJCR, founded in 1998) and the Centre for the Study of Muslim–Jewish Relations (CMJR, 2006). CJCR is one of the world’s leading institutes in the study and teaching of all aspects of the encounter between Christians and Jews throughout the ages. CMJR is the first and only academic centre in Europe dedicated to fostering relations between Muslims and Jews through teaching, research and dialogue.

[www.woolf.cam.ac.uk](http://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk)

### **Dr Edward Kessler**

Edward Kessler is a leading thinker in interfaith relations and is Founder and Executive Director of the Woolf Institute and Fellow of St Edmund's College, Cambridge. In 2007 *The Times Higher Education Supplement* described him as “probably the most prolific interfaith figure in British academia”. His publications include *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (2004), *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations* (2005), and *What do Jews Believe?* (2006), which has been translated into 6 languages. In 2010 Cambridge University Press published *An Introduction to Jewish-Christian Relations*. Kessler also writes for the printed media and broadcasts regularly on BBC Radio.

### **Select Bibliography**

- A. Ahmed *Journey into Islam* (Washington: Brookings, 2007)  
H Ansari and D. Cesarani eds., *Muslim-Jewish dialogue in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century World* (Egham: Royal Holloway University Press, 2007)  
E. Kessler *An Introduction to Jewish-Christian Relations* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010)  
K-J Kuschel, *Abraham: a symbol of hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims* (London: SCM, 1995)  
J.Magonet, *Talking to the Other* (London: IB Tauris, 2003)  
J. Sacks, *Dignity of Difference* (London: Continuum, 2002)  
N. Solomon, R.Harries and T. Winter, eds., *Abraham's Children : Jews, Christians and Muslims in conversation* (London: T&T Clark, 2006)