

Interreligious Cooperation in the Family of Abraham

by David Rosen

In our rapidly changing world of technological advances, there is a widespread desire for moral and spiritual guidance. A distinguished rabbi points out that the Abrahamic traditions not only share major religious-ethical values, they can address contemporary challenges more effectively together.

The historical relationship between the “children of Abraham”—the faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—has predominantly been one of internecine competition and struggle, rather than cooperation and dialogue. For most of that parallel history, Jews have been a vulnerable minority within both Islamic and Christian societies, though there can be no denying that the Jewish experience under Christianity was far worse than under Islam. The reason for this is to be found in a number of factors, but it was clearly conditioned by Christianity’s theological view of Jews and Judaism. It is here that we have seen in recent decades arguably the most remarkable modern transformation in traditional theological thought and teaching. Undeniably, this was facilitated by the scientific spirit of modern society that provided for both historical perspective and self-critique. But it was substantially influenced by the impact of the Nazi Sho’ah: the systematic extermination of six million Jewish men, women, and children. The horror at what had taken place within ostensibly Christian societies, and the growing sense that the image of the Jew that had been nurtured by Christianity down the ages had facilitated the demonization and thus the dehumanization of the Jew, making the terrain fertile for those horrors, led to the beginning of a remarkable process of self-reckoning within the Christian world.

Within the Roman Catholic church this process was galvanized by the personal commitment of Pope John XXIII, who was undoubtedly influenced by his experiences and activities on behalf of Jews during the Second World War, as well as by his personal encounters, especially that with Jules Isaac (see E. L. Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews*, Paulist Press, New York, 1985). As a result, the Second Ecumenical Council that he convened, in its epoch-making document *Nostra aetate*, issued the historic categorical repudiation of that “teaching of contempt” toward the Jewish people, ushering in the “positive revolution” in Catholic teaching regarding the Jews and Judaism that has continued over the last more than thirty years. In addition to condemning anti-Semitism, *Nostra aetate* re-

jected the idea of any particular Jewish corporate and continuous responsibility for the death of Jesus. It furthermore affirmed the “divine covenant” with the Jewish people as eternal and unbroken. This reappraisal led to significant changes in liturgy and above all in religious education.

Parallel developments took place within the Protestant denominations, reflected in the relevant World Council of Churches’ statements in Amsterdam (1948), New Delhi (1961), the report to the Faith and Order Commission in 1968, and the Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish-Christian Dialogue issued in 1982. As examples of notable



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relevant declarations on the part of specific Protestant denominations over the last three decades, one might mention the statements of the Synod of the Reformed Church of Holland (1970), the Synod of the Protestant Church of the Rhineland (1980), and that of the European Lutheran Council (1990).

Since *Nostra aetate*, the Catholic church has produced a number of further significant documents and statements promoting the course of Catholic-Jewish reconciliation. Mention must also be made of Pope John Paul II's personal involvement in, and commitment to, this impressive process of reconciliation. Notable in particular was his historic visit to the synagogue in Rome in 1986 and his repeated statements reaffirming Catholicism's unique bond with Judaism, as well as the latter's integrity and essential place in the divine plan for humankind (see *Spiritual Pilgrimage, Pope John Paul II, Texts on Jews and Judaism, 1979-1995*, ed. Fisher and Klenicki, Crossroad, New York, 1995). Particularly significant was his personal support for the establishment of full relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel. The absence of these relations—even though the result of political factors—had suggested to many that the idea of the return of the Jewish people to assume sovereignty in their ancestral homeland still presented theological difficulties for the Catholic church.

The Fundamental Agreement between the Holy See and Israel, signed at the very end of 1993, normalizing relations between the two, finally laid these doubts to rest. Indeed, in the preamble of the agreement recognition was given to the fact that this was not just a diplomatic accord, but part and parcel of a historic "reconciliation between Catholics and Jews." Accordingly, this was in many respects the culmination of the new beginning in the Catholic church's relationship with the Jewish people that formally commenced with the promulgation of *Nostra aetate* in 1965.

The extent to which Christian-Jewish relations have advanced in recent years is evidenced in the growth of the International Council of Christians and Jews, established some fifty years ago, which has now burgeoned into a truly international umbrella organization, embracing some thirty national organizations promoting Christian-Jewish relations.

These developments have been substantially facilitated by a modern sociocultural context. Therefore, where such a spirit has *not* been part and parcel of the social and cultural fabric, little change in theological attitudes and teaching has taken place. This is the case with the overwhelming majority of the Eastern Orthodox churches. Moreover, within secular society itself there have been significant antimodernist reactions to the cultural and moral challenges of the times by religious movements that have accordingly rejected the ecumenical and interreligious spirit. Furthermore, there are still many places in the world where despite the changes in official Catholic

doctrine, the majority of Catholics themselves are still unaware of these changes in their church's teachings.

To be sure, only thirty-three years have passed since the promulgation of *Nostra aetate* and it will, of course, take much longer to ensure that the distortions and prejudices of the past become no more than a historical curiosity in the world. While there is a disproportionate historical onus in this regard on the Christian side, a gradual educational process has to take place within both faith communities to arrive at the realization that we are not meant to be competitors, but rather "partners" in a divine destiny for the benefit of all humankind.

As opposed to the Jewish experience in Christian lands, both the Jewish and Christian communities under Islam enjoyed the status of protected, albeit inferior, minorities. While this did not always totally guarantee their well-being, it certainly provided for a more secure environment than that which prevailed for Jews throughout most of Christendom. Furthermore, despite the fact that it does not share the same sacred scripture with Judaism as does Christianity, Islam was historically perceived by Jewry as much closer to them in religious lifestyle as well as theologically—devoid of the kind of theological problems (e.g., the Incarnation, the Trinity, and the use of effigies) that Judaism saw in traditional Christianity. Moreover, paradoxically the very fact that Islam does not share the text and history of the Hebrew Bible with Judaism meant that "religious competition" did not involve the delegitimization of the latter. At the same time, Islam does recognize Jews and Christians as "peoples of the book," and thus accords them a religious legitimacy, even if their status is perforce inferior to that of Muslims. Thus, notwithstanding religious polemical debate, there was no such parallel in Islam to the Christian "teaching of contempt" toward the Jews that prevailed until modern times. Furthermore, not only did Islam not present a theological obstacle to dialogue, it even advocated such (cf. The Qur'an, The Chambers, 49:13).

However, the modern interreligious dialogue encountered much suspicion from within the Muslim world. This had to do in large part with the cultural and political tensions posed by modern society itself. Similar to those reactions from within Christianity and Judaism against ecumenical and interreligious trends, there has been widespread alienation within Islamic society from the modern spirit that subjects even religious tradition itself to rigorous critical inquiry. This is exacerbated by the perception that the very freedoms of modern society facilitate much chaos and moral degeneracy. In addition, negative images and memories of Western behavior toward the Islamic world in the past have elicited suspicion even regarding the motives of the modern interreligious dialogue itself, which is sometimes suspected of being but another vehicle for Western domination. Of course, the particular relationship between Islam and Judaism has been especially

vitiated in the recent past by the politics of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Nevertheless, in recent years the Muslim presence in interfaith activity has increased greatly, not only from Asia but also from within the Arab world. Examples are to be seen in the impressive Muslim participation in the remarkable annual gatherings of religious leaders convened by Italy's Community of Sant'Egidio, which have continued the 1986 interfaith initiative of Pope John Paul II that took place in Assisi. Another example of this is to be seen in the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP), in which leaders of the World Muslim League (based in Mecca) and other major international Arab Muslim organizations, serve on its presidium.

One of the most important Islamic figures in the Arab



World religious leaders participate in an annual gathering convened by Italy's Community of Sant'Egidio to be united in prayer for future action for peace. Photo: Courtesy of the Community of Sant'Egidio.

world who has reached out to both Christians and Jews has been Prince Hassan of Jordan, who has pioneered the establishment of interfaith institutes and studies, both within the Hashemite Kingdom and internationally. His example had been particularly exceptional prior to the commencement of the peace process in Madrid in 1991 and the Oslo Accord in 1993.

However, since these historic milestones in the modern history of the Middle East there has been a far greater willingness within the Arab-Muslim world to participate in dialogue with Jewish religious leaders and representatives from Israel, as well as from the Diaspora. One notable example of this was the Jewish-Christian-Muslim conference on Religion and Peace held under the patron-

age of King Juan Carlos of Spain at the University of Alcalá de Henares in 1994, bringing muftis and ulema as well as Christian clergy from across the Arab world in dialogue with prominent rabbis and other Jewish leaders from Israel and Europe.

Similarly, in Israel itself the Islamic involvement in interreligious dialogue has increased substantially in recent years. Despite the presence of cultural and political factors that work against interfaith cooperation, the Directory of the Abraham Fund lists some *three hundred* institutions and organizations in Israel that foster coexistence and cooperation between Jews and Arabs. Undeniably, the vast majority of this activity has been of a general educational, civil, and philanthropic character, and little of it has been specifically interreligious. Nevertheless, the Interreligious

Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI)—which is the Israeli chapter of the WCRP—serves as an umbrella for some six institutions and organizations that have a specific interfaith commitment. Yet until recently not only were almost all of the only Jewish or Christian, but the participation in such interfaith activity was almost entirely made up of persons originating from Western pluralistic societies or who had been substantially exposed to them.

In the last few years, institutes of advanced Islamic studies have been established in Israel paralleling such developments in many non-Muslim countries. The leadership and staffs of these institutions not only reflect self-confidence in relation to the dominant Jewish society but also are extremely open to interreligious dialogue and

cooperation. At the same time, there is an increase of local Jewish interest in Islam. Accordingly, Islamic-Jewish study groups as well as trilateral programs are now taking place in Israel, reflecting the desire on all sides to benefit from the significant Islamic presence in the local interreligious dialogue.

Much of this growing Islamic involvement in interreligious relations, whether locally or internationally, derives from an awareness of the need to counteract the negative image of Islam as it is disproportionately portrayed to others, in the West in particular. However, there is also growing recognition that people of faith face common challenges both from without and from within. All of the religious traditions are manipulated from within the

selves to a degree, by vested-interest groups frequently reacting to a sense of marginalization—economic, political, and/or psychological. Often this manipulation of religion acquires fanatical and violent dimensions. Such manifestations not only threaten civil order, but also the fabric of the particular religious tradition itself.

There appears to be increased recognition within the Islamic world (which seems to be disproportionately beset by such challenges) that these can be addressed better with the support of international and interreligious cooperation than in isolation from them. Moreover, such cooperation can also serve as an important educational tool for tolerance and peace, testifying to the religious alternative to extremism and hostility.

Furthermore, precisely in our rapidly changing world of amazing technological advances there is a widespread desire even among those who are not members of any particular religious denomination to receive moral and spiritual guidance. Not only do the Abrahamic traditions share major religious-ethical values and approaches toward many of these challenges, but they can obviously address them all the more effectively through working together, rather than in isolation from one another. This recognition has substantially stimulated interreligious cooperation. In addition, there is a growing discovery of the fact that the dividing lines are increasingly not between religions, but rather within them all. The division tends to be more and more between those of a more isolationist, exclusivist, and extreme outlook on the one hand and those of a more expansive, tolerant, and universal approach on the other—both of which are to be found within all the religious traditions.

Interfaith cooperation thus becomes an imperative for persons of religious conviction who seek to live tolerantly with respect for diversity, both outside as well as within their own communities. Moreover, the need for religious guidance, within the modern world in particular, requires an inclusive and pluralistic language that interfaith cooperation can provide, especially when the teachings of the religions concerned have so much in common, drawn from shared roots and origins. In this regard, the words of Jordan's Prince Hassan spoken on October 24, 1996 at the Leo Baeck College in London are most apposite:

"Inter-faith dialogue," he declared, "should not be seen as a dialogue between the Faiths, but as a dialogue of believers in the Faiths, about issues of common human concern. Its objective is not to address the metaphysical beliefs that are particular to each faith, but to identify and share universal human values . . . a recognition of diversity does not compromise anyone's integrity, for only by exploring diversity can we hope to live together. [However,] only by celebrating what we have in common and understanding and tolerating our differences can we offer hope for a better future."

This self-same perception runs like a golden thread through the pronouncements of the Vatican concerning interreligious dialogue in general, as well as Christian-Jewish relations in particular. One of the most profound



In a demonstration of unity for peace, leaders of the four major Abrahamic religions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Orthodox Christian, Muslim, Roman Catholic, and Jewish, signed a Statement of Shared Moral Commitment in Sarajevo, with the support of the WCRP, on June 9, 1997.

statements in this regard was that made by Pope John Paul II in Mainz in 1980, terming such cooperation as the "third dimension" of the dialogue and the "sacred duty of Jews and Christians." "... As children of Abraham," said the pope, "[we] are called to be a blessing to the world (Gen. 12:2) by committing [ourselves] to work together for peace and justice among all peoples."

This then is the religious imperative of the Abrahamic dialogue: to work together as a family, together with the other families of the world, to promote the ethical values that we share in a world that seeks both understanding and tolerance, as well as guidance and direction; to promote universal truths amidst respect for diversity; to promote peace and harmony for the benefit of all humankind. □