

Jewish-Muslim Relations, Past and Present

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Few religions have as much in common as Islam and Judaism. In contrast with Christianity - which is very much the product of an interaction between Greek and Hebrew culture - Judaism has historically remained overwhelmingly rooted in its Semitic world view and is extremely similar to Islam in its fundamental religious outlook, structure, jurisprudence and practice. At the heart of the two Faiths is an ethical-monotheistic vision which determinedly resists any compromise on the idea of the transcendence and unity of God who is envisaged as just and merciful and who has revealed a way of life in accordance with these values for the benefit of human society.

Accordingly Islam and Judaism share the idea of revealed Scripture and even though they differ over the precise text of such, the Hebrew Pentateuch (the Torah) and the Koran share much religious narrative as well as injunctions.

They thus also share many other fundamental religious concepts, such as reward and punishment relating to a Day of Divine Judgment as well as the belief in the afterlife, Heaven and Hell and future resurrection. Moreover the structure and modus operandi of their religious jurisprudential codes of conduct – Shaaria and Halachah – bear striking similarity.

Both Islam and Judaism are essentially theocratic democracies or better, meritocracies, in as much as they do not have clergy who by virtue of sacrament are separate from the rest of the community. Religious authority is essentially a function of individual mastery of the religious sources to be able to guide the community in accordance with their teachings. While there are of course many differences in their specific forms, the two Faiths also share the central practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, as well as dietary laws and aspects of ritual purity. These similarities are most evident in Orthodox Judaism as the encounter with modernity led to new forms of Jewish religious identity, most evident in the Reform, Progressive or Liberal streams of Judaism which removed or reinterpreted some of these more traditional characteristics.

While Islam puts Christians and Jews in one category as “people of the book” with a protected (albeit secondary) status under Islamic authority; Judaism traditionally saw Islam as a purer form of ethical monotheism than Christianity – uncompromised by concepts of the incarnation; the Trinity; the adoration of saints and the use of effigies.

There are different opinions among scholars regarding the character and origin of the Jewish communities that the Prophet Mohammed encountered in Arabia. The Koranic sources would suggest that they were a somewhat non-orthodox if not schismatic Jewish community. However they shared enough of the message of the Prophet Mohammed for the latter to assume that the Jews of Medina would eagerly rally around him. Their failure to do so led to the ensuing discord, arguments and hostility between them.

The Jews were certainly better off under the Muslim rule than under the Byzantine Christians, and it is likely that they also fared better than under the Zoroastrian Persians. However, while Jews were free to practice their religion without interference, as indicated a number of restrictive conditions applied ensuring their subordinate status, that were codified in the Pact of 'Umar.

Medieval Islamic civilization developed into its most productive period between the years 900 and 1200, and Jewish civilization in the Islamic world followed suit. During this period, some of the greatest works of Jewish philosophy, grammar, law, philology, and lexicography were written, in parallel with great advances in these fields in the Islamic world. Nowhere was this more pronounced than in Spain, where Jewish civilization flourished along with the flowering of the Islamic and secular sciences and culture throughout the region, known in Arabic as al-Andalus. The relatively open society of al-Andalus was reversed and then ended by the coming of North African armies to help defend against the Spanish Christians, who were pushing the Muslims southward from their strongholds in the north. Jews were highly restricted under the Islamist Berber regimes and eventually began moving northward to newly conquered Christian areas where, for the time being, they were treated better.

The reversal of Jewish good fortune in Spain was mirrored in other parts of the Islamic world, where by the thirteenth century the open and humanistic qualities of Islamic society began to give way to a more feudalistic mentality of rigidity and control, as Islam went on the defensive. Many Jewish communities were forced into ghettos and in places Jewish and Christian communities were destroyed. As the Islamic world declined, so too did the Jewish communities within it; and Jewish intellectual, cultural, and religious creativity generally tended to shift toward the Jewish communities of Europe. (R. Firestone, "Children of Abraham", Ktav, 2001)

Nevertheless as a rule the Jewish communities that remained in the Muslim world were generally protected in keeping with the Pact of 'Umar and as long as they accepted their second class status, lived peacefully and cooperatively with their Muslim neighbors.

The collapse of imperial rule and the rise of modern nationalism led to the clash between the Jewish nationalist aspiration for self determination in the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people and the struggle for national self-determination on the part of the regional and local Arab populations. This territorial conflict has degenerated in recent times to increasingly assume the character of a religious conflict.

While not seeking to go into the causes and effects, rights and wrongs of the political conflict in the Middle East, the increasing religious characterization of a territorial struggle has come from various quarters, presenting the conflict within the context of a "clash of civilizations" between the Muslim world and Western/Christian, with Israel and the Jews portrayed as a hostile "bridgehead" into the Arab world in particular and the Muslim world in general.

However the truth of the matter is that what we are witnessing is not a clash of civilizations as much as a clash within civilizations. It is a clash between those

elements of a religious culture whose sense of historic injury and humiliation leads to alienation and conflict within their own societies as well as to those outside their religious culture; and those who seek to constructively engage other societies as part of world culture and a positive interaction with modernity.

This “clash within civilizations” means that while religious extremists of various traditions and cultures are (almost always unwittingly) part and parcel of a “conspiracy of conflict”, the enlightened voices of religion within these traditions have a responsibility to work together not only to be greater than the sum of their different parts, but also to provide the essential alternative testimony – i.e. that of interreligious cooperation and mutual respect. In particular, Muslim and Jewish leaders have a duty to their communities and Faith traditions to counteract the destructive exploitation of their religious civilizations and to draw their inspiration from those past examples of the glory of cooperation and collaboration among the children of Abraham – Muslims, Christians and Jews – for the benefit of all.