

# Rabbi David Rosen: Bringing the world's religions together

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**R**abbi David Rosen is arguably the Jewish world's foremost proponent and practitioner of interfaith dialogue. Born and educated in Great Britain, he served as a pulpit rabbi in South Africa and was the chief rabbi of Ireland, before moving to Jerusalem. He's the international director of inter-religious affairs of the American Jewish Committee, serves on the Chief Rabbinate of Israel's commission for inter-religious dialogue, is a co-president of Religions for Peace International and is honorary president of the International Council of Christians and Jews.

Rabbi Rosen was a member of the Bilateral Commission of the State of Israel and the Holy See, which normalized relations between the Jewish state and the Vatican in 1994.

*The CJN* interviewed him in Toronto, where he attended the Parliament of the World's Religions.



Rabbi David Rosen

**Let's start with the big question, which is the state of Jewish relations with other faiths today. Is it possible to encapsulate this in a paragraph?**

It's possible to encapsulate it in a phrase. But, of course, the phrase that I'm going to use will be surprising for some, and requires a commentary. The phrase is, "things have never, ever been as good as they are for the Jewish people in their relations with other faiths as they are today. Even with Islam." And I'll tell you one particular thing now: in the wake of this terrible tragedy in Pittsburgh, it's difficult to talk of a silver lining. But if there's one real source of comfort for me, it's to see not only the way religious leadership, religious communities and religious individuals in different religions have responded to express their solidarity with the Jewish people and offer their condolences, but especially from within the Muslim world. It's amazing.

At the World Muslim League, which is the Saudi-based organ for propagating Wahhabist ideology, the secretary general issued the most amazing statement of solidarity with the Jewish people and condemned anti-Semitism. We've never, ever had a situation like that. The truth is, there's more respect and more interest in good relations with the Jewish people today than ever in history.

**Does it take a tragedy like the Pittsburgh shooting for interfaith dialogue to come to the surface? Is there talk among faiths when times are good and quiet?**

Yes, of course there is. But there is a human tendency to be shocked into positive actions in the wake of terrible ones. And that's not just to do with religious conversation. It's to do with the human condition. But nevertheless, we can see today – whether it's over issues like climate change, or combating poverty, or areas that deal with immigration and countering radicalism and extremist language – there's an incredible amount of co-operation across religious communities.

**But do you get the feeling that interfaith dialogue is a rather low priority for rank-and-file Jews and their leaders?**

I think it's a low priority for all people in the world because, by definition, it means going out of the context of your immediate preoccupations. So whether you are a Hindu or a Christian or a Buddhist or a Jew, your immediate preoccupations are within your own community. But the proportion of people involved in interfaith relations today, within all communities, is greater than ever before. And the world of interfaith relations is an exponentially growing industry.

I spend half my life traveling and I'm turning down seven or eight times as much as I take on. We do not have the resources in the Jewish community to meet the demand globally. And I would say that within the Jewish community, there is more and more interest every day in this work.

**Can you bring us up to date on Jewish-Islamic relations? And do you**

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**think that Muslim anti-Semitism is the greatest obstacle to improved ties?**

We can't really talk about any relationship properly in generalizations. To be fair, we need to break it down into geographic and even denominational contexts. I'm on the board of the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, which was established by Saudi Arabia, Spain, Austria and the Vatican. Its policies are determined by a board of directors: three Christians, three Muslims, one Hindu, one Buddhist and I'm the Jew. For an Israeli rabbi to be on the board of a centre established by Saudi Arabia is not a small thing.

In November, I will be in Abu Dhabi for a conference where there will probably be about a dozen rabbis. And I just came back from Indonesia, where I was the only rabbi at a national conference under the auspices of the prime minister and the country's Muslim leadership. I could go on reciting my travel itinerary to you, but what I want to illustrate is that never before has there been as much interest in having a Jewish presence in interfaith initiatives and gatherings from within the Muslim world as there is today.

The King Abdullah Centre has helped facilitate the establishment of the first-ever Muslim-Jewish religious leadership council in Europe. This council was established for Muslims and Jews to work together on issues of religious freedom: *shechitah*, halal, circumcision, combating incitements. The American Jewish Committee has established Muslim-Jewish advisory councils in the last two years across the United

States. There is more institutional, structural collaboration now between Muslims and Jews than ever before.

You're right that a lot of hostility, xenophobia, extremism and threats of violence comes disproportionately from within the Muslim world. But that, above all, threatens the Muslim world first and foremost. The vast majority of the Muslim world simply wants to live a decent life and wants to be able to work with those who share their desire.

I'm not sure, when we talk about Muslim anti-Semitism, exactly what we mean. Within Islam, there was never the kind of endemic anti-Semitism that there was within Christianity. It is, of course, a paradox that while Christianity has, to a large degree, purified itself of much of the anti-Semitism or anti-Semitic rhetoric and myths that prevailed throughout most of history, many of them have now been Islamicized for political purposes. And therefore, you get the prejudices and the conspiracy theories and all the other ridiculous ideas within the Arab world. And they're very much nurtured by political factors. It's not just a question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It's the way in which that conflict is used as kind of a lightning rod for all kinds of complexes and hang-ups that exist within the Muslim world generally, and the Arab-Muslim world in particular. And this is an enormous challenge.

**What obstacles do you still see outstanding between Christians and Jews?**

I suppose one challenge is bringing the good news from the Olympian heights down to the grassroots and sustaining it. The whole area of inter-religious relations is an educational challenge. All relationships have to be sustained. All prejudice has to be combated continuously. Where there is lack of familiarity, there's always going to be a regression to certain prejudices. So long as human beings are human beings, we're going to be dealing with anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, prejudice and bigotry.

We can divide the Christian world into four groups: Orthodox, Catholic, mainline Protestants and evangelicals. With evangelicals, of course, very often the problem is that they love us to death. And there, the challenge is to maintain Jewish integrity and not allow the desire and need to support Israel to blur any lines to suggest that we are in some way partners in any kind of eschatological end-of-days vision. So that's a different kind of challenge. ■

*This interview has been edited and condensed for style and clarity.*