

## CHANGING LANDSCAPES: JEWISH-CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS TODAY

Edward Kessler \*

*Abstract: This paper considers some of the similarities and differences in the contemporary encounter between Jews, Christians and Muslims. Despite the potential symbiosis, there are barriers to a triologue with the three monotheistic religions and the author reflects on the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the sometimes harmful influence of collective memories: for example, Jews think of Christianity in terms of suffering and persecution; while Muslims have not forgotten the Crusades, and see in Western aspirations an old crusader mentality in a new guise. Commemorations of past events help preserve a sense of historical continuity and identity but a preoccupation (some might call obsession) with the past may be damaging if it results in a negative identity and self-understanding, especially if it becomes the only or primary lens through which reality and the changing world is viewed. 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.*

In their contemporary encounter with Muslims, Jews and Christians have much to discuss. Theologically, it is commonly argued that Islam is more similar to Judaism than Christianity since both have problems with Christian Trinitarian theology, stress religious law and the centrality of monotheism, and have no priesthood. The 2008 Muslim Letter to the Jewish Community, *Call to Dialogue*,<sup>1</sup> initiated by Muslim scholars at the Centre for the Study of Muslim-Jewish Relations in Cambridge, is an example of a contemporary attempt to demonstrate the commonality between these two faiths. However, the rise of modern political Zionism, the creation of the state of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have become major sources of tension between Jews and Muslims, not just in the Middle East but throughout the world.

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*

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\* Founder and Director of the Woolf Institute, Cambridge. Email: Ed.Kessler@woolf.cam.ac.uk. This paper was first delivered as the CCJ Maurice Brunner Memorial Lecture on 19 October 2010 in Manchester.

<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>.

*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.

Similarities and dissimilarities could provide the substance for fruitful and respectful debates. There are problems with this scenario however, partly because 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.

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. While largely secluded from mainstream society, following a tightly regulated lifestyle, ultra-orthodox beliefs and moral understanding of the world have similarities to those of some evangelical communities. Christian allies of Jewish fundamentalists believe the creation of the Jewish state in 1948 and the yet-to-be-built

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<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).

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.

Both Jewish and Christian 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.

Zionism and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 has been a cause of controversy not only between Jews and Christians but also with Muslims. For Jews, the establishment of the state of Israel in the wake of *Shoah* was considered a miracle. However, for the Arab Palestinians, the vast majority of whom are Muslim, this marks the beginning of their *Naqba*, 'the catastrophe' in which approximately two-thirds of their population became refugees and lost control and ownership over the majority of the land they inhabited prior to the war of independence. In addition to the political conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, Israel occupies the third holiest Muslim site, the al-Aqsa Mosque, located on the Haram al-Sharif, known to Jews as the Temple Mount, in the Old City of Jerusalem. These holy places are at the centre of both religious ideology and rhetoric as well as the focus of much global attention (and contention). Their symbolic value to Christians, Muslims and Jews worldwide cannot be over-estimated. I will return to the subject of Israel later in this talk.

The positive developments in Jewish-Christian relations, in the last 50 years in particular, are viewed with distrust by some Muslims who view it as an attempt to marginalise and disempower them. The recent creation of inter-faith structures, which includes Muslims alongside Jews and Christians (such as the Three Faiths Forum and International Council of Christians and Jews) may help to change this negative point of view. At the same time, more positive contemporary Muslim relations with Jews

and Christians are also dependent upon intra-Islamic discussions that would admit more internal diversity, and articulate and apply more generous attitudes towards other religions than the noisiest ones that emanate from some parts of Islam.

For Christians, intra-faith conversation and relations (ecumenism) is also a recent movement, beginning in the early 20th century but which really gained momentum after 1948, the year the World Council of Churches (WCC) was founded. Originally the ecumenical Christian movement paid significant attention to Jews only as the objects of mission, but two factors caused a profound change of heart. First, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) insisted that Jews were *verus Israel*, the true Israel, and that it was appropriate to speak of 'the Church *and* Israel'.<sup>4</sup> Then in 1965 *Nostra Aetate* affirmed 'the sacred spiritual bond linking the people of the new covenant with Abraham's stock'.<sup>5</sup> The Faith and Order Commission of the WCC expressed its conviction in the same year that the Jewish people still have theological significance of their own for the Church and in 1982 *Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish-Christian Dialogue* was published. It argued that the Jewish people were full partners in dialogue: 'The spirit of dialogue is to be fully present to one another in full openness and human vulnerability.'<sup>6</sup> Yet mission to the Jewish people was not repudiated, which reflected the many different views held by WCC member churches.

For Jews, intra-Jewish conversations about Christianity have been much more limited and Claude Montefiore's call for a Jewish theology of Christianity in 1923 has yet to be fully realised. Even *Dabru Emet* ('Speak truth'), the cross-denominational Jewish statement on Christians and Christianity published in 2000, begins the process of reflecting on the place of Christianity in contemporary Jewish thought. *Dabru Emet* stresses that it is time for Jews to reflect on what Judaism may now say about Christianity and asserts eight points: Jews and Christians worship the same God; Jews

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<sup>4</sup> See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II. 2, ed. and trans. G. W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957).

<sup>5</sup> 'Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions', Second Vatican Council (28 October 1965), at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html).

<sup>6</sup> 'Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish-Christian Dialogue', World Council of Churches (February, 1982), at <http://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/interreligious-trust-and-respect/ecumenical-considerations-on-jewish-christian-dialogue.html>.

and Christians seek authority from the same book (the Bible); Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel; Jews and Christians accept the moral principles of Torah; Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon; the humanly irreconcilable differences between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the world; a new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice; and Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace.<sup>7</sup>

Contemporary Muslim communities are also grappling with the place of Judaism and Christianity in Islamic thought. In one sense, Islam's relationship 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.

More Muslims are playing an important role in the wider interfaith community, building on the pioneering work of leading figures such as Prince Hassan of Jordan and the American-based Pakistani academic, Akbar Ahmed, both of whom have devoted their lives to the inter-faith endeavour. There are signs that they are no longer alone, as demonstrated by the action of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, the Custodian of the Two Holy Places, who opened a World Conference on Dialogue in 2008 and called for dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims, in the face of criticism from some senior clerics in Saudi Arabia. Yet, it is too early to predict what results these events will have.

Despite the challenge to search for a common language and potential symbiosis, there are major doctrinal and psychological barriers to a dialogue with the three monotheistic religions and collective memories prevent uninhibited 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

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<sup>7</sup> 'Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity', National Jewish Scholars Project (10 September 2000), at <http://www.icjs.org/programs/ongoing/njsp/dabruemet.php>.

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>8</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.

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<sup>8</sup> Karl-Josef Kuschel, 'Children of Abraham: On the Necessity of an Abrahamic Ecumene between Jews, Christians, and Muslims', *Convergence* 10 (April, 1999), 34-40.

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.

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>9</sup>

The translator's interpretative gloss, 'which is Islam', shows how Abraham has become 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>10</sup>

Nevertheless, some Jews, Christians and Muslims seek reconciliation of these differences by appealing to the fact that each tradition hearkens back to the biblical Abraham. The resolution of their theological and communal differences will depend upon how carefully they negotiate the virtues of Abraham that belong to all three

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<sup>9</sup> 'Surah 3. The Family Of 'Imran, The House Of 'Imran', at <http://www.islamicity.com/Mosque/QURAN/3.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> M.A.S Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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 (or, conceivably, for members of one of them but not the other). 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.

### **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. They hold, for example, that the search for simple certainties is mistaken and unethical and that theological and ideological questions, such as seeking truth, serve to (at best) confuse and (at worst) abuse memory and identity. 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>11</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 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 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. Akbar Ahmed's recent studies of the views of Muslims in the twenty-first century<sup>12</sup> lists numerous examples of Muslims feeling 'under attack by the West and modernity', which are viewed as a 'Judeo-Christian' creation. Whilst carrying out research, Ahmed asked Muslims across the Muslim world: 'What do you think is the number one problem in the world today?' He expected the answer: 'Israel, Iraq and Afghanistan.' However, to Muslims in Damascus, in Karachi, and London the number one problem was the perception that Islam was deliberately being distorted in the West; that Islam was under attack.

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>13</sup>

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<sup>11</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.

<sup>12</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>13</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking Penguin, 1988).

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.

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, since, as George Santayana coined, 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.'<sup>14</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 for Jews and Christians 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.

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<sup>14</sup> George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), 284.

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 their 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.

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 Israeli origins. With the increased communication and ease of travel today, many American citizens of Israeli origin can participate in the cultural and religious world of Israel 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-Israeli. Pushed further, one might find out even deeper layers of identity such as American-Israeli-Sefardi.

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.'

One example of the changing historical situation can be seen in changes in immigrant areas. 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.

Another change effecting relations can be seen in the growth of secularism, a challenge which can bring Jews, Christians and Muslims together. The secular challenge has led some to call for a 'common mission' and for religious leaders to see each other as allies opposing religious indifference, which is understood as a greater threat than religious differences. This 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 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, 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 inter-religious conversation as observant Jews. Indeed, proponents of dialogue may be convinced of its ability to bring together and reconcile members of antagonistic religious faiths, but lack any great degree of personal faith themselves. 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**

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 difference.

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.

Martin Buber explained the Jewish historical attachment to the Land of Israel in a letter to Mahatma Gandhi, written in response to Gandhi's November 1938 declaration, which was critical of Zionist aspirations. Gandhi had recommended that Jews remain in Germany and pursue *satyagraha* ('holding onto truth' which was the basis for his non-violent resistance to British rule) even unto death. Buber forcefully rejected this argument and explained the connection between the Jewish people and the land as follows:

You say, Mahatma Gandhi, that a sanction is 'sought in the Bible' to support the cry for a national home, which 'does not make much appeal to you'. No, this is not so. We do not open the Bible and seek sanction there. The opposite is true: the promises of return, of reestablishment, which have nourished the yearning hope of hundreds of generations, give those of today an elementary stimulus, recognised by few in its full meaning but effective also in the lives of many who do not believe in the message of the Bible.<sup>15</sup>

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. Yet 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, failing to recognize 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. Because Jewish-Muslim dialogue lies so far behind Jewish-Christian dialogue, 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.

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<sup>15</sup> N.N. Glatzer and P. Mendes-Flohr, eds., *The Letters of Martin Buber* (New York: Schocken, 1991), 479-480.



How ironic that both Muslims and Jews feel vulnerable and under attack. They share the experience of being minority communities in Europe and the USA and we have parallel experiences and needs. Xenophobia and prejudice know no boundaries.

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 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 Islamic-Jewish relations with the same positive results. Jews and Muslims today carry far different memories and issues than the historical baggage brought to encounters with Christians.

For Christians, perhaps because land is not central to Christian theology, although they have generally acknowledged that Jews feel tied to a particular territory, they have found it harder to accommodate the consequences. One eminent American theologian, Walter Brueggemann argues that the subject of land should move to the centre of Christian theology, and suggests that Christians cannot engage in serious dialogue with Jews unless they acknowledge land to be the central agenda.<sup>16</sup>

Roman Catholicism's attitude towards Zionism changed greatly in the course of the 20th century. In 1904, Pope Pius X (1903-14) rejected Herzl's plea for support unequivocally stating that 'The Jews have not recognised our Lord, therefore we cannot recognise the Jewish people.'<sup>17</sup> However, Vatican II and the 1965 document *Nostra Aetate*, while not explicitly mentioning Israel, began the process which eventually led to the Vatican's signing of the Fundamental Agreement with the State of Israel on 30 December 1993 and then exchanging ambassadors in May 1994. Increasing awareness among Roman Catholics of the place of Israel became much more noticeable during the papacy of John Paul II, demonstrated by the Pontiff's pilgrimage to Israel in 2000, and the everlasting image of his visit to the Western Wall.

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<sup>16</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Land*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Marvin Lowenthal, ed., *The Diaries of Theodor Herzl* (New York: Dial Press, 1956), 429-430.

Following Jewish tradition, the Pope placed a written prayer in a crevice of the Western Wall. The short typed prayer with an official seal read:

God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your Name to the Nations. We are deeply saddened by the behaviour of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking Your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, even though there have been great changes in Christian teaching on Judaism, a resurgence of anti-Israeli attitudes, particularly in Europe, has taken place in the last few years and the feeling remains that whilst the Church has for many years been grappling with issues related to Christian antisemitism, attitudes towards the Land and State of Israel continue, from the theological perspective, to be more difficult to tackle. Simply put, it has been easier for Christians to condemn antisemitism as a misunderstanding of Christian teaching than to come to terms with the re-establishment of the Jewish State. As a result, the subject of Israel has probably caused as much disagreement and division within the Church as any other topic in Jewish-Christian dialogue. Alice Eckardt is one of a number of scholars who points out the contrast between Christian willingness to tackle antisemitism and the Shoah with Christian reticence on the subject of Israel.<sup>19</sup>

There are also dangers when those who, in the name of dialogue, move from a position of commitment for the well-being of Israel to one of almost Israel can do no wrong. This is not conducive to dialogue for it is not an honest and sober conversation firmly related to present realities. For example, although Evangelical Christian Zionists strongly support Israel and especially the Settler Movement, their agenda is dominated by an eschatological timetable. Their hope, as they freely admit, is that the Jewish return to Zion will be followed by a second-coming and the acceptance of Jesus by the entire Jewish people. David Flusser, the eminent Israeli

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<sup>18</sup> 'Prayer of the Holy Father at the Western Wall', John Paul II's Pilgrimage to the Holy Land (26 March 2000), at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/travels/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20000326\\_jerusalem-prayer\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/travels/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20000326_jerusalem-prayer_en.html).

<sup>19</sup> Alice L. Eckardt, 'The Place of the Jewish State in Christian-Jewish Relations', *European Judaism* 25:1 (Spring, 1992), 4.

scholar of first century Judaism, once told the following story, based on his encounter with a group of evangelical Christians visiting Israel:

‘Why should we quarrel?’ I asked, ‘You believe in the coming of the Messiah - so do we. So let us both work for it and pray for it. Only, when he arrives, allow me to ask him one question first, “Excuse me sir, but is this your first visit to Jerusalem?”’<sup>20</sup>

There is another danger to mention: What happened a hundred years ago to the Jews outside of Israel is considered by some as historically remote compared to biblical events, which are viewed as almost contemporary. The present becomes transformed into biblical language and geography, which leads to the danger of giving metaphysical meaning to geographical places. The fundamentalist Jew in Israel interprets the ownership of the Land of Israel in terms of a divine gift. This creates a great danger of bestowing divine importance to Israel and the vocation of the Jew becomes a dedication to the existence and the restoration of the cosmic state. Thus, the return to the Land is a fulfilment of the divine promise and reflects a return to the original fullness. However, the biblical promises do not define the same borders and by choosing the widest ones the fundamentalist abuses the idea of the promise, which is related to the Land.

So where do we go from here? Much of Israel’s history has been about winning wars in the face of great hostility. Israeli Jews are aware, however, that a successful future may depend on an even harder task: winning the peace.

Israel has won great military victories, none greater than the Six Day War in 1967, when the state appeared to be in a hopeless situation. The Israeli army heroically defended their country against apparently overwhelming odds. However, the qualities that win wars are not necessarily the same qualities that win the peace. For one thing, winning wars often results in a tendency to glorify military prowess, leading to an unhealthy self-reliance and self-belief, bordering on arrogance. For another, war inevitably engenders enmity and hatred, neither of which provides a foundation upon

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<sup>20</sup> E. Kessler, *Jewish-Christian Relations: The Next Generation* (Cambridge: CJC Press, 1999), 5.

which peace can be built. Palestinians living in the West Bank since 1967 have, for the most part, only experienced Israeli occupation and power. It is surely of little wonder that the attitudes of many are so negative towards Israel.

Israelis are surely right to recognise that their country must remain armed whilst there is the danger of renewed aggression from neighbours or regional superpowers. Iran's threat to 'remove Israel from the map of the world' serves to reinforce this outlook. Israelis are possibly right to hold onto territorial gains until wide-ranging peace is agreed; but in the end there will be no security for Israel until mutual grievance is replaced by mutual trust. To win the peace, Israel needs not only to make territorial concessions, as it did by returning Sinai to Egypt (1979) and by leaving Gaza (2005). It must also strive to build bridges of understanding and friendship, between ordinary Israelis and Palestinians in particular and Arabs in general.

For over half a century Israel has passed one military test after another. Until fairly recently, Arab states did not want peace with Israel. They rejected the partition plan of 1947 and for many years denied the right of a Jewish state to exist at all. Some still do, and the rhetoric and actions of Hamas are sober reminders of those days. However, the historic visit of Sadat to Israel in 1977 and the warm welcome he received from the Israeli public made it clear that peace is a realistic possibility. Since then, there have been sporadic outbursts of peace evidenced by the signing of peace treaties with Jordan and the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

There is no doubt that there are Arabs, whatever may have been their past record, who genuinely desire peace. There are others, of course, who still seek the destruction of the Jewish state. Yet in the face of this ongoing hostility, Israelis need to remember the courage of leaders like Anwar Sadat, who, like Yitzhak Rabin, lost his life at the hands of a fellow countryman because of his desire for peace.

If there is a desire for peace on both sides, the first condition of its attainment has been achieved. There is, however, a second condition, which has been severely tested in recent decades. Winning the peace requires compromise and concessions on all sides. This is not a call for pacifism. As William Ralph Inge said, 'It is useless for

the sheep to pass resolutions in favour of vegetarianism while the wolf remains of a different opinion.'<sup>21</sup>

At the root of the problem is a clash between two peoples laying claim to the same land. This is neatly illustrated by the following apocryphal story told to me in the Arab market in Jerusalem some years ago:

There were two brothers. Each owned half a field, but each wanted the half he did not have and neither would give up his half. They called in a rabbi known for his wisdom. He lay down with his ear to the ground under a tree in the field and appeared to fall asleep. After a time the brothers grew impatient, complaining that the rabbi was wasting their time. But he told them that he had been listening to the ground. It had told him that neither of them owned the ground. It owned them. And one day, he said, they would be inside it.

The conflict will not be resolved in the long term by military means, but only by political compromise and territorial concession. To an outsider it seems obvious what ought to happen – limited autonomy must evolve into independence and eventually into a federation of states, initially consisting of Israel, Palestine and Jordan, leading perhaps to an economic community of Middle Eastern States.

At some points in the future, morality and expediency will coincide and Israelis and Palestinians will have the opportunity to bring peace to the region. It is in Israel's self-interest to make peace as the vast majority of Jews recognise. The state of Israel survived and flourished because it was able to withstand decades of attacks. It won the military battles. Its future survival now also depends on winning the peace.

The debate about the place of Israel will continue in the future for God-knows how long. Unless we intend to carry on talking at each other during and beyond our lifetimes as in the story I told earlier, we need to change our course - listening to each other's views with generosity would be a good place to start.

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<sup>21</sup> William Ralph Inge, *Outspoken Essays*, First Series (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1919).

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