

Respect and Pursuing Loving, Affirmative Disagreements

Irving Greenberg

THIS IS the greatest century of dialogue in human history. The driving force has been the discovery of the image of God of the (hitherto) Other. Never have so many deep believers spoken to other equally committed practitioners of another faith on the basis of equality and dignity.

Theoretically, the Jewish-Muslim dialogue between believers should be in the vanguard. Both Judaism and Islam have a deep belief in pure monotheism, honoring a universal God who desires the final redemption of the world. Both faiths agree on the need to serve God not only ritually but through justice and *tzedakah* (righteousness/*zakaat*). *Shariah* and *halacha* are parallel attempts to organize all of life by religious precepts. They guide believers through an ever-changing reality by applying the word of God (Torah/Koran) and explanatory traditions (*Torah she B'al Peh/Sunna, Hadith*) through human, scholarly interpretation. Moreover, the burdens of memory are not as great between the two faiths. While Jews lived as second class citizens under Islam, they rarely suffered pogroms and expulsions as they did in medieval Europe.

The current weakness of dialogue bespeaks the contemporary tensions between Jews and Muslims. Much of the hostility is organized around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The situation is grimmer than that. There is an explosive spread of antisemitism throughout the Arab world — much of it government sponsored. The plague has invaded the mainstream of Islam, which is having difficulty containing this pathology.

To attain any permanent livable peace, religion must stop being a source to justify hatred or domination. Religionists must stop escalating conflicts from politically solvable problems to theologically irreconcilable clashes of world views. That Israel must live in the Middle East with hundreds of millions of Arabs should drive us even more urgently to explore every way of reversing polarization and finding mutual understanding.

The new conversation should draw hope from the extraordinary achievement of the Jewish-Christian dialogue in the West. In less than a century, contempt and mutual

rejection have been dismantled and replaced by repentance and partnership. The Jewish-Islamic conversation carries two handicaps. Modernity shook up Christian and Jewish absolutisms, challenging them historically, theologically, and morally; each became more modest in religious claims. The growth of democracy, separation of church and state, and secularism opened the door to religious equality. Islam has not yet experienced modernity. Therefore, most Islamic authorities think of Islam as the faith that supercedes Christianity and Judaism and the Koran as the final and perfect revelation of God and the divine message of Islam (the need for submission). Muslims mostly claim that the kernels of these Koranic teachings were found in the earlier religions, but have been distorted. Historical critical scholarship and self-critical theological development — as well as loving dialogue and deep human encounter — will be needed to validate pluralism on both sides.

The Shoah, with its retrospective revelation that Christianity had prepared the historical and cultural ground for the isolation and degradation of the Jews, has been the second powerful factor driving Christian repentance. However, Islam does not feel guilty for the Holocaust. Holocaust denial is most widely circulated in the Arab world. Many Muslims feel that the Holocaust was a Christian/European abuse that was visited on the heads of Arabs by a guilty West, which supported Israel to give the Jews asylum and reparation.

The Islamic-Judaic dialogue will, therefore, go much slower. But the moral demand of recognizing the image of God of the other and the historical urgency of preparing the ground for peace is all the greater. Only successful human rapprochement and growth in theological mutual respect can enable moderate Islamists and their Jewish counterparts to recover spiritual and moral hegemony in Muslim and Jewish religion.

The greatest promise for dialogue may be in the West, where Muslims are small but growing minorities. Muslim traditions in India (where they are a minority) and in Indonesia (where they started as a minority)

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Throughout this year, in honor of the 350th anniversary of Jewish life in America, Israeli Ruth Calderon is sharing her observations about living as an Israeli in America and her perceptions on the complexity of American Jewish identity. As she moves acrostically through the alphabet — America, Bank, Camp, eventually ending with “Zionism” — Calderon offers American Jews an opportunity to view their everyday experiences through an Israeli prism.

UNIFORM — America loves uniforms: for nurses, police, postal workers, bus-drivers, doormen, Wall Street investors, the military, and street construction workers. There are also non-standard-but-obvious uniforms: summer and weekend clothes, official work clothes, khaki and white, khaki and a golf shirt, comfort casual for a suburban housewife. People here are recognized by the clothes they wear more than anywhere else in the world. Perhaps because of the great size of the American scene, it is impossible to notice the details. Clothes send a clear indication of identity and purpose: white-collar or blue-collar, master or servant, are we having a business meeting or a casual visit? The dress code is mandatory, and a mistake in dress can create serious social discomfort. Our behavior in personal interactions is dictated by the uniforms we wear, which indicate the roles we are playing. Not everyone is original. Dress is a language; it sends specific messages about one’s identity based on the costume of choice.

VACATION — Americans take their vacations as seriously as their jobs. Twice a year, like clockwork, once in summer and once in winter, they make their plans and leave the city — to nature, to the sea, to Europe. There are special vacation clothes, vacation activities, sometimes even a vacation car and house. There is much forethought and planning that goes into a vacation, resulting in an organized yet predictable “break” from everyday life. But Americans seem to take a vacation from their everyday life with the caveat that they will find the elements of their everyday life in their vacation days. Unless, however, this is a vacation to Israel, in which case Americans hire a travel agent to help them pack their everyday lives into manageable luggage that they schlep on a five day jam-packed itinerary that highlights “every” great tourist attraction from north to south. Then on their next vacation to the sunny Bahamas or the Caribbean, one vacationer asks the other vacationer: “Did your kids get to shoot M-16s when you were in Israel? Mine were quite good shots.”

The full text of “The Balcony” is posted on www.shma.com.

Ruth Calderon is the founder of Alma College in Tel Aviv and Alma, NY. Her book, The Market, the Home, the Heart, is being translated into English. The Balcony is translated by Marc Glickman and Kerrith Solomon.

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have developed a more open spirit. Seeking their own dignified place in the sun, Islamists extended such pluralism to others. Jews and Christians can encourage such developments — especially if they stand on guard against abusive security measures and protect Muslims from any unfair backlash in the aftermath of 9/11. This is an opportunity to deepen the Judeo-Islamic dialogue in the United States and then feed the results back to the Middle Eastern homelands.

As one who has participated in both dialogues, I must warn that the older religions’ conversation is more theologically sophisticated and searching. Today, Judeo-Islamic conversation is closer in tone to the early days of the Jewish-Christian dialogue. As then, there is less knowledge of each other and a lot less trust and candor, so apologetics flourish; in many cases, there is hesitation to speak candidly lest the other be offended. Also, the Middle East conflict often polarizes the con-

versation. But in a world that needs healing, no Abrahamic faith can afford to withdraw or write off others. This generation needs the model of passionately committed believers learning to respect each other and pursuing loving, affirmative disagreements. Otherwise, the purveyors of hatred and violence will win with their argument that sincerity and religious depth is measured in the clash and degradation of the other.

The dialogue might well start — as did Jewish-Christian conversations — where there are less theological obstacles, i.e. a joint search for social justice. Out of common cause, friendships and appreciation are stimulated — from which flows deeper theological respect. As these two traditions regain their sense of family closeness, the world will recognize that the Abrahamic monotheistic traditions are role models of reconciliation. This would constitute a joint *kiddush haShem* (sanctification of God’s name) and healing (*tikkun*) for a bleeding world.