

Jews, Christians and Muslims: The Quest for Human Solidarity

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According to William James, “whenever two people meet, there are really six people present. There is each man as he sees himself, each man as the other person sees him, and each man as he really is.” Human solidarity is best served when there is an earnest quest to know oneself and others in truth. Thus, when all our various selves congregate in a spirit of religious kinship, and as we engage in interfaith dialogue for the furtherance of human solidarity, it becomes important that such exchange not be seen as a dialogue between the faiths, but as a dialogue of believers in the faiths about issues of mutual human concern.

The objective of such dialogue is not to address the unassailable metaphysical beliefs that are particular to each faith, but to identify and share universal human values; for the human experience is what we all have in common, whereas the divine is diversely understood. Our common humanity must therefore be our starting point. Our common values cry out against the use of our fellow human beings as a mere means to an end.

Our faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – all affirm the non-ultimacy of economic and political considerations. They insist upon the ethical dimension and demand that humanitarian factors be placed at the forefront of all other considerations. They require a new kind of politics, capable of ending humanity’s ancient wars against itself and against nature. This would be as Baroness Shirley Williams has said, “politics for the people,” or *anthropolitics*, if you will.

When we speak of the ethics of human solidarity, it is impossible not to simultaneously talk of altruism, of interfaith as well as intra-faith outreach, of humane political and economic strategies (inclusive of poverty alleviation), of peace conditional on justice, of cultural security and identity, of universal codes of ethics to which all can subscribe, of conflict prevention and containment, of education, and of the all-important experiential component – the encounter with the ‘other.’ In other words, we have to be holistic in our quest to achieve greater levels of human solidarity, addressing a multitude of tracks and pursuing multi-pronged operational strategies.

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As a Muslim, I would like to share with you my personal understanding of Islam's relationship with other faiths. In the Qur'an, Islam recognises unequivocally Judaism and Christianity as revealed religions. For example, "Step by step, He has sent the scripture down to you [the Prophet] with the Truth, confirming what went before: He sent down the Torah and the Gospel earlier as a guide for people and He has sent down the distinction between right and wrong." (3:3) Furthermore, repeated throughout various *sura* (chapters) of the Qur'an, is the theme that God has created humankind to comprise many different communities, not as a monolith. The Qur'an states: "If your Lord had pleased, He would have made all people a single community, but they continue to have their differences." (11:118)

What place, then, does a variegated human experience of religion serve in the divine scheme of things? Why should God have ascribed to humankind religious diversity rather than religious unity? These are not simple questions, however, the Qur'an states "Each community has its own direction to which it turns: race to do good deeds and wherever you are, God will bring you together." (2:148). This is God's command to all human communities on earth and is not addressed to Muslims alone.

An examination of Islamic exegesis reveals an overwhelming, though not unanimous, agreement on this point among the exegetes across the ages, beginning with Al-Tabari.² Cultural diversity and religious pluralism inspire healthy competition between communities and nations, and God enjoins us to direct that competition towards the common good.

This outlook presents us with a powerful version of the Qur'anic view of solidarity among the faiths. Solidarity, of course, cannot presume the adherence of the followers of one faith to the prescriptions and ordinances of another. On this point, the Qur'an is clear: "There shall be no compulsion in religion" (2:256), and "You have your own religion, and I have mine" (109:6). Solidarity among the faiths means that competing human communities strive for the good, strive to understand and reach out to one another in pursuit of a common human ethic and vision.

So how do communities of different faiths in fact reach out to one another, how do they co-exist, and how do they strive towards a common good? Select moments in history can be highlighted when co-existence and relative harmony have been possible. This is a worthwhile endeavour, as history is replete with examples of unhappy encounters between members of the faiths. I draw on the findings of various academics to illustrate the possibilities for optimism.

Professor R. Marston Speight noted that even as the Fatimid Muslims and Byzantine Christians were locked in a struggle for supremacy in the

² Issa Boullata, "Fa-stabiqu'l – Khayrat: A Qur'anic Principle of Interfaith Relations", in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Wadi Z. Haddad eds. (University Press of Florida, 1995).

Mediterranean, the Fatimid literature of the time was not devoid of respectful depictions of Christians living in the Muslim milieu.³ It is noteworthy that Muslim chroniclers wrote objectively of Christians in their midst at a time of dire confrontation between members of the two faiths.

There are similar patterns of peaceful coexistence among the civilian populations, even as the Crusader armies faced their Muslim counterparts in combat in the 12th Century regions of Al-Sham – regions that include present-day Syria.⁴ Take for example, one account of the environment at the time when Salah al-Din (Saladin) commenced his attack on the fort of Karak in the mid-south of present-day Jordan:

Throughout the duration of the attack, the movement of caravans between Egypt and Syria continued unabated, as did that of the merchants between Damascus and Acre, and of Christian merchants through Muslim territory. The Muslims paid a tax to the Christians through whose lands they passed, while the Christian merchants paid a tax on their wares to the Muslims. Coexistence and moderation thus triumphed. While the armies clashed in battle, the civilians lived on in peace.⁵

There is as well the luminous example of Al-Andalus in the Middle Ages, where for close to eight centuries, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam co-existed and interacted, producing artistic, linguistic, philosophical and scientific advances so well known as to warrant little elaboration. The Andalusian experiment produced Maimonides and Judah ha-Levi among the many prominent Jewish thinkers, and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and Ibn Hazm among their Muslim counterparts. Christian officials at the Umayyad court would take Sunday as a day of rest and worship, and bishop and imam alike would be engaged in joint scholarly investigations.

Sufism also had a profound influence on Jewish spirituality.⁶ The Andalusian age culminated in the emergence, with Ibn Rushd, of what Pierre Philippe Rey terms a “universalist rationalist thinking” that crossed over into France and on into the rest of Europe.⁷ There were also sizeable and significant migrations of Jews from Christian Europe to Ottoman lands. Spanish and Portuguese Jews settled in the Ottoman Empire where they flourished in numerous fields such

³ R. Marston Speight, *Christian-Muslim Relations: An Introduction for Christians in the United States of America* (Hartford, CT: National Council of the Churches of Christ, 1983).

⁴ Hadia Dajani-Shakeel and Penny J. Cole, *Approaching Jerusalem: The Legacy of the Crusades in the 21st Century* (Regina: Champion College, 2000).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Haim Zafrani, *Two Thousand Years of Jewish Life in Morocco* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing, 2005).

⁷ Pierre Philippe Rey, “Al-Andalus: Scientific Heritage and European Thought”, in *The Routes of Al-Andalus: Spiritual Convergence and Intercultural Dialogue* (Paris: UNESCO, 1995).

as medicine, manufacture, commerce and banking, having brought with them the latest in European technology and methodology as they came in increasing numbers.

Islam is an extremely broad faith, with diverse institutions. It cannot possibly be understood in stereotypes. It is not unusual these days to read of Islam being described as a global threat, a menace to civilisation, a foreign phenomenon that should be shunned or confronted. Islam is no monolith now – it never has been. Muslim societies and expressions of faith have undergone centuries of change. To suggest distinct boundaries between civilisations is surely to ignore the ongoing debate about their very definition. There is a continuous process of interaction and dialogue between cultures. To presume that the identity of a civilisation never countenances change is to obscure centuries of synthesis and symbiosis. The long evolution and development of Muslim cultures contradicts the assumption that Islam labours under unbending theological rigidity. The four most fundamental values of the Holy Qur'an are justice (*'adl*), benevolence (*ihsan*), wisdom (*hikma*), and compassion (*rahma*).

For Muslims, the law of God represents absolute good. It is exercised in the service of God, and for the well-being of the community. It is eternal. The law of God pre-exists the community and its government. It is a perfect order which countenances no improvement. It is this idealised state that constituted the essence of the Prophet Muhammad's mission to the Arabs and to the rest of humankind.

The quest for this perfect order has, however, led Muslim rulers, theologians, thinkers and academics to seek its achievement in different ways. Given the inherent ambiguity of language, texts are bound to give rise to multiple interpretations. Any religious tradition which claims a substantial number of adherents is almost by definition a diverse institution. Of course it is possible to identify anti-pluralist tendencies within Islamic theory and history, running in tandem with pluralist ones. No doubt the same is true of any textually-based religion.

Unfortunately, many commentators – whether scholars, politicians or media analysts – maintain that Islam is entirely hostile to the West and its matrix of cultures. Islam is often associated in contemporary media accounts with extremism, violence, and intolerance. When Muslims appear in the press, it is usually as the perpetrators of violence. At a time when Muslims comprise nearly three-quarters of the world's refugees, the innocent victims of conflict, this is a deeply disturbing trend.

Terrorism is not peculiar to any particular people; it is generally a manifestation of despair. Some Muslims are engaged in terror, as are some Christians, Jews, Hindus, secularists, and so on. But it is a grossly insulting act of reductionism to characterise the religious and spiritual aspirations of 1.2 billion human beings in this way. For while images of Muslim extremism

may rule the media – especially photojournalism, which thrives on dramatic and gritty sensationalism – they are by no means universally accepted in the Muslim world as models of piety.

One of the immense challenges facing us all – indeed, one of the greatest hindrances to further solidarity – relates to the interpretation of difficult texts and negative references in our revealed scriptures. How do we handle them? How do we contextualise them historically as well as circumstantially, so that they are not taken to smear and indict entire peoples and serve the goals of those who wish to use them to justify eternal and monolithic characterisations of others? For years, voices – however remote – have risen from among the Jewish, Christian and Muslim clerical communities, calling for a bolder look at such texts.

A key issue to examine is the scope and nature of the work that can realistically and pragmatically be carried out to ensure that the exegesists and religious authorities of Jews, Christians and Muslims are kept in check and held to account by their adherents regarding what they disseminate from their respective pulpits and what interpretations they offer with regard to such difficult texts.

The power of such authorities and individual clerics wield in either promoting conciliatory attitudes or fomenting negative ones should not be underestimated, especially in certain cultures that are particularly prone to virtually revering their religious leaders and following their directives.

Consider as well the role of education in fostering greater human solidarity, dismantling psychological barriers and creating empathy among former antagonists. While formal education is essential in any quest aimed at fostering better Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations by replacing inaccurate with accurate information, as well as the minimisation of ignorance, due weight must be given to the psychological component of education, which is all too often caught up in acrimonious cycles of mutual blame and finger pointing. These cycles must be identified, intercepted, and addressed.

The identification of such pathways necessarily involves a thorough – if not occasionally tedious – examination of one's inherited as well as acquired 'perceptual sensory receptors' that predispose us to construct particular paradigms of attitudes towards individuals of other faiths and cultural backgrounds, or indeed attitudes towards an entire faith, both positive and negative.

In cases where such perceptions are constricted, monolithically dismissive and harsh – and by means of both education and the human encounter – it is hoped that people caught up in such cycles will then start realising the extent to which they had harboured largely unnecessary and redundant feelings and energies of exclusion, hate and fear.

In attaining the confidence and grace required to release some of those

negative energies, they will invariably be less burdened by such morbidly powerful and depletive forces. Spiritual as well as behavioural equilibria then stand some chance of restoration as an outcome of perceptual revisionism. Essential in any prospect for such revisionism is the consolidation of one's own identity in an inclusivist manner free of fear, or the fear of threat that outreach might usher in.

This is why the study must be holistic in nature, for there is no denying that pre-set and acquired perceptions are shaped by a diverse and complex matrix of input-factors, such as a) socio-economic status (i.e. poverty, employment prospects, social dignity, etc.); b) where and how we grew up; c) cultural influences; d) patterns of interaction during early childhood and teen years; e) socio-educational experiences; and f) the prevalence of peace/stability or war/tension in places we lived in, among many other possibilities.

For education to stand a realistic chance of achieving its desired goals of ultimately fostering better relations and enlightened outreach among the three faith groups, it must be married off to the far more abstract concept of goodwill. Merely knowing about the other is by no means guaranteed to create better feelings and to dismantle generationally-ingrained negative attitudes. The best chance for this requisite goodwill to be generated is via the experiential component.

In more ideal circumstances, education would be poised to be most effective when it is grounded in positive personal relations and friendships. The goodwill generated therefrom will then function as the incentive and drive to sustainably use one's newly acquired education about the 'other' in the most innovative and constructive ways. This may well work among individuals and small groupings of people who have reached out across the religio-ethnic and cultural divides to embrace each other in friendship and trust, but can it work for entire communities, or indeed, nations?

The theory espoused and promulgated by numerous well-intentioned inter-faith and inter-cultural dialoguers and peace activists revolves around – in spirit, at least – the familiar notion that 'to know is to love'. That mutual awareness and knowledge – the often heralded fruits of education – help to humanise the other, creating a better understanding of one's fears and concerns, and eventually leads to empathy among former adversaries.

Of course, while this may be true as far as it goes, we must bear in mind that some of the bloodiest and most brutal conflicts have occurred between people who know each other only too well and have little mutual empathy as a result, including – alarmingly – co-religionists. For example, confrontation among co-religionists and co-nationalists: in the Caucasus, Christian Russia backed Muslim Abkhazia against Christian Georgia, while Muslim Iran played off Christian Armenia against Muslim Azerbaijan. The list continues – Ossetians against Georgians (both Christian), and Circassians against Karachai (both

Muslim). Elsewhere, in Lebanon, savage battles raged between Muslims, Christians, and Druze, all of whom knew each other sufficiently well already, but the most savage of all battles often took place within each sect. In the Balkans too, where for each conflict pitting Muslims against Christians, there was another conflict involving co-religionists; for instance Moldovans versus Russians, Hungarians versus Romanians, Macedonians versus Greeks, Serbs versus Croats.

Familiarity, therefore, does not always eradicate enmity. It is perfectly possible for people to both know and hate each other. However, there is obvious validity to the point that ignorance leaves the door wide open to all species of misconceptions which would rule out harmonious co-existence.

Most conflicts end up taking on a religious colouring if only because the dividing lines between antagonists coincide with the religious divisions. These dividing lines are often *realpolitik* matters, such as feuding over territorial rights, natural resources, disparities in wealth, etc.

But what about the conflicts just mentioned, where the lines of antagonism do not always correspond to religious divisions? Does that not highlight the twin-poles of the problem? For example, we need to examine on the one hand how religion is caught up in conflicts grounded in actual or perceived socio-economic or territorial injustices, and on the other, the imperative of conducting not only inter-faith, but also intra-faith discourse. The role of 'perceptual revisionism' as an essential component of education, therefore, must examine reciprocal perceptions among Jews, Christians and Muslims.

In practical terms, what about education and mediums for education in a global context? One of the keys to successful education lies in the immense potential of the information revolution and global communication. Members of the Abrahamic family of faiths can and must tap that great technological potential for the furtherance of the human solidarity we seek – circumventing the limitations of physical mobility and geographical constraints, while avoiding the pitfall of ignoring the neighbour next door. Furthermore, we must take the plunge, headfirst, and devise educational materials and methods – utilising all new technologies available – that are both informative, attractive and relevant.

Here is another challenge, as if extant ones are not enough. We must ensure that whatever is available, curricula-wise – in terms of the subject-areas relevant to the furtherance of human solidarity – not only remains intact and survives the gauntlet of budget cuts in times of financial crisis, but operational strategies must be diligently pursued in order to obtain a bigger slice of the curricula cake, using the most effective and engaging educational methods and technologies.

This is vital if shared ethics of human solidarity are to be successfully disseminated. The interactive nature of those technology-rich educational

tools will ensure that what is disseminated may escape coming across as prescriptive, and therefore unappealing, but rather as mutually-engaging, and thus hopefully more palatable.

History is replete with examples of both positive and negative encounters between members of our respective faiths. What are we to make of this diverse historical record?

The possibility of a positive encounter is a matter of choice; the result of a concerted effort to bring out the very best of what religion has to say, maximising the chances of successful interaction. The choice is ours. We can reach out to each other, combat the scourges of ignorance and hate-mongery together towards a profitable co-existence, and compete in a fraternal spirit with one another in pursuit of the common human good that is also sensitive to the natural world we occupy. Such is my vision of solidarity among our great faiths.