

Islam and Inter-Faith Relations

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7. A Jewish View of Islam

ALON GOSHEN-GOTTSTEIN

The strength of a broadly sketched presentation is also its weakness. A wide view of such broad phenomena as Judaism and Islam perforce essentializes them, while overlooking many details and much nuance that are essential to a balanced picture of the two entities, their historical relations and the possibilities that may be held for their common future. Nevertheless, such a broad sketch also allows us to recognize the main currents of the past, challenges of the present and possibilities for the future. The following generalizations should therefore be taken as just that, along with the hope that these general reflections will withstand the test of finer scrutiny, while suggesting directions for future research and reflections. I would like to express the hope that whatever nuancing this paper invites, particularly regarding the refinement of statements concerning Islam as these emerge from the observations of a Jewish scholar whose knowledge of Muslim sources is perforce second hand, should be motivated by the spirit of unapologetic examination of self and other in which I myself have tried to write. The present overview seeks to point to complicated and menacing realities, without masking their complexities. I look forward to the overall notions being engaged with the spirit, both critical and constructive, with which these thoughts are offered.¹

1 The present essay sounds a very different note, though it ultimately remains complementary, to a paper co-authored by myself along with Paul Ballanfat and Paul Fenton, 'Judaism and Islam: Directions for Dialogue, Collaboration and Mutual Recognition', in preparation for the First Congress of Imams and Rabbis that I helped organize in January 2005, and which is available through the Elijah Interfaith Institute. That essay sought to create a historical and conceptual common ground between religious leaders of two traditions often considered as being at war with one another.

Elective Monotheisms – A Conceptual Overview

As a way of bringing together a series of distinct, though clearly interrelated, observations regarding Islam from a Jewish perspective, I would like to suggest a conceptual framework that allows us to grasp the commonality as well as the difference between the two traditions. These traditions are often referred to as Abrahamic, as though the figure of Abraham provided the conceptual, or genealogical, common ground between Muslims and Jews.² I prefer to adopt the usage of Martin Jaffee, who coined the term ‘elective monotheisms’ to describe the two traditions, as well as Christianity.³ As Jaffee rightly suggests, simply pointing to the belief in a common God, or even to other theological principles that Judaism and Islam share in common, is to mask the complexity of the issues and the real differences between the religions. On the vertical level the two religions do indeed point to a belief in a common God. However, this God enters the arena of history and engages humanity through his word. The act of revealing his word, choosing a community to whom his word is entrusted and which therefore becomes his community proper and the passage through history with the sense of unique revelation and relationship, until the eventual messianic vindication of the one chosen community – these are all constitutive components of elective monotheism. Consequently, an honest mutual assessment must take all these components into account. Accordingly, the present observations will be grouped according to the key elements that make both Judaism and Islam elective monotheisms, and that suggest where their major agreements and disagreements lie. These include God, revelation, the religious community (the community that God chooses and to which he reveals

The irenic note sounded by that paper is an example of the kind of constructive direction recommended by the present paper. However, the appeal to history and commonality, while useful for the occasion and while possessing educational and psychological merit, is also fraught with difficulties, as the present essay suggests.

2 For a critique of this designation, see A. Goshen-Gottstein, 2002, ‘Abraham and “Abrahamic Religions” in Contemporary Interreligious Discourse: Reflections of an Implicated Jewish Bystander’, *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 12, pp. 165–83.

3 See Martin Jaffee, 2001, ‘One God, One Revelation One People: On the Symbolic Structure of Elective Monotheism’, *JAAR* 69:4, pp. 753–75.

himself), history (the passage of the two communities along the axis of time and the interweaving of their relations) and the messianic end (the tension and the quest for the ultimate vindication of the truth and meaning of the commitment of the religious community).

God

It is important to acknowledge the theological common ground of Judaism and Islam, a common ground which may provide the ultimate foundation for Jewish-Muslim relations and whose significance must be reaffirmed despite all the complexities that make 'elective monotheism' more than simply monotheism. Judaism and Islam recognize and worship the same God. This has been the general tendency of Jewish authorities towards Islam throughout the ages.⁴ The ruling of Maimonides, according to which Muslims are not to be considered idolaters, because they believe in true monotheism, has become a default position in a Jewish assessment of the Muslim recognition of God.⁵ The recognition of the common God also opened the door to a great deal of theological and spiritual exchange between Jews and Muslims throughout the generations. Particularly noteworthy are the spiritual exchanges that characterize Maimonides' own descendants, as they forged a unique Jewish-Sufi spiritual synthesis, in which a particular spirituality and a variety of customs and forms of worship were integrated into Jewish praxis.⁶ None of this could have taken place without the fundamen-

4 The affirmation has not by any means been universal. Some of the exceptions to this general recognition will be noted below. See Marc Shapiro, 1993, 'Islam and the Halakha', *Judaism* 42, pp. 332–43. It is fair to suggest that underlying the lack of recognition of the identity of the God worshipped by Judaism and Islam, particularly as expressed by various authorities who considered Islam to be a form of *Avoda Zara*, a form of foreign, hence prohibited, worship of God, are identity politics, as these get played out in the historical relations of the two communities. For a particularly clear articulation of this relationship see the halachic discussion of Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, *Ziz Eliezer*, vol. 14, responsum 91.

5 See Maimonides, *Laws of Yein Nesech* 11,7.

6 See Paul Fenton, 1998, 'Abraham Maimonides (1187–1237): Founding a Mystical Dynasty', in M. Idel and M. Ostow (eds), *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership in the 13th Century*, Northvale: Jason Aronson, pp. 148ff.

tal acknowledgement of the identity of the God recognized by the two traditions. It is therefore a commonplace that Judaism considers itself closer to Islam than it does to Christianity. In other words, when a theological, rather than a cultural, perspective is chosen, Judaism and Islam share a fundamental understanding of the one God, which is free of the complexities that characterize Jewish-Christian relations.

Revelation

The profound differences between Judaism and Islam arise as we move from God understood philosophically to the relations God forges and the revelations he gives. In theory one could reconcile multiple revelations, assuming different intended audiences. While this position was not common, we have at least one precedent of a Jewish philosopher who was willing to acknowledge the validity of the Qur'ān's revelation, as long as its intended audience was not the Jewish people, for whom the Torah remains the final revelation. Thus, R. Nethanel Alfayumi, a twelfth-century Jewish philosopher, who has been described in this regard as a Jewish Isma'īlī, allows for the possibility of the Qur'ān's validity for a Muslim audience.⁷ Needless to say, the Qur'ān itself has a variety of references that recognize the fact of a previous revelation in the Torah. Thus, if other social, political and historical circumstances had prevailed, this position might have enjoyed greater currency. Circumstances were different, however, and they are best illustrated through the reasoning offered for why Islam should be considered *Avoda Zara*, an alien worship, even though it affirms belief in the same God. There are, as is well known, three prohibitions that must not be transgressed and for which the law prescribes choosing death over

⁷ See Steven Wasserstrom, 'Mutual Acknowledgements: Modes of Recognition Between Muslim and Jew', 1992, *Islam and Judaism, 1400 years of Shared Values*, ed. Steven Wasserstrom, Portland: Institute for Judaic Studies in the Pacific Northwest, p. 63 f. Al Fayumi's position was echoed recently, though without reference to him, by British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in the first edition of his *The Dignity of Difference* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 55. This formulation is one of the points of the work to have drawn the ire of his critics, leading to its reformulation in the second edition of the work.

committing those transgressions.⁸ One of those is idolatry, the worship of other gods, *Avoda Zara*. If the God of Islam is the same as the God of Judaism, how should one act under conditions of religious persecution? If God alone were considered, it would seem that conversion to Islam should be the recommended course of action. This conclusion was unacceptable to legal authorities who addressed the political realities of religious persecution. Rabbi David ben Zimra (sixteenth century) arguing in favour of martyrdom, shifts the basis of the discussion from the understanding of God to revelation.⁹ Were we only to consider God from the theological and philosophical perspectives, the entire Torah would be undermined. The Torah is a way of life, an entire religious system communicated by God to his people. One should prefer death to conversion to another religion, even if it recognizes the same God, because such conversion undermines the ability to live out the relationship mandated by God. Under historical circumstances of forced conversion and religious competition, the option that recognizes the validity of other forms of revelation finds no fertile ground to grow.¹⁰

Even though on a certain level Islam recognizes Jewish Scriptures, in many significant ways it fails to do so in a way that is satisfactory to Jewish religious, as well as historical, sensibilities. Unlike Christianity, Islam does not consider itself the next chapter of the same story. Rather, it is a variant telling of many components of Judaism's foundational story. Consequently, it does not own the Jewish Scriptures as such. This diminishes the kind of friction that developed from the scriptural takeover of the Jewish Bible by the Church. But it also introduces friction on another, possibly more profound, level. Christians have always recognized Jewish Scriptures, leading them to value Jewish learning and the tradition of interpretation entrusted to the Rabbis. This has led to millennia of study of Jewish sources by Christian students, always aware of the direct rela-

8 Maimonides, *Laws of Foundations of the Torah* 5,2.

9 Shut Radbaz 4,92, citing the earlier authority of the *Ritva*.

10 Steven Wasserstrom (cf. fn. 7) makes the point that symbiosis could take place because it served mutual needs. Theological positions are also couched within social realities. Neither cultural models nor theological positions grow in a historical vacuum. The climate of interreligious dialogue could in theory provide a soil upon which this hitherto marginal view could gain greater currency.

tionship between Judaism and Christianity. By contrast, Muslims do not consider themselves fundamentally indebted to Jewish tradition. They are in possession of the full revelation, making any need for the study of Jewish tradition and the related acknowledgement of a historical relationship superfluous. Whatever interest the modern historian may have in tracing the Jewish sources of Muslim teachings, to the Muslim believer such historical dependence is meaningless. God's revelation is not in need of historical precedent or formative materials. The discrepancies between the Jewish and the Muslim telling of related narratives is reconciled through what may be considered the earliest form of biblical criticism – the elaborate Muslim criticism of the contents of the biblical narrative as morally inferior and as spiritually impossible, leading to a recognition of a gap between the theory of revelation and the actual product that is said to contain it. The Jewish Scriptures are thus viewed as having been impaired and falsified by human hands. To all intents and purposes there is no need to learn from Jews and their concrete Scriptures are not appreciated as words of revelation.¹¹

Recognition can take many forms. Upon closer scrutiny one realizes that Jewish-Muslim relations are fraught with various degrees of lack of recognition of historical continuity.¹² The most contemporary expression of this tendency is the widespread attempt to deny any relationship between the historical Jerusalem Temple and the Haram al-Sharif. Erasure of memory and denial of continuity cast the two religions as increasingly distinct from one another, thereby undermining the historical basis of continuity that could in theory have served a constructive role in the relations between the two religions.

Issues of memory and continuity concern self-image and under-

11 There may be alternative ways of understanding these early charges of falsification, that may be more harmonious with the present desire to ameliorate inter-group relations. See the paper composed by Paul Ballanfat, Paul Fenton and myself, 'Judaism and Islam: Directions for Dialogue, Collaboration and Mutual Recognition' (The Elijah Interfaith Institute, 2004), pp. 14–15.

12 The ambivalence toward the *Isra'iliyyat*, traditions that made it to Muslim sources from Jewish origins, is an additional instance of this ambivalence. Attempts to expunge these traditions are instances of conscious erasure of memory.

standing. What is at stake is not historical fact, but the construction of identity and the relationship to the other. These in turn draw upon different cultural modes of relating to the past. The different uses of history reveal significant cultural differences, on account of which Jews and Muslims often lack a common language. The Jewish appeal to history is, in principle, more open to a critical perspective, while many Muslim spokesmen would deny a meaningful role to historical enquiry and its critical methods as far as these can contribute a historical depth dimension to Jewish-Muslim relations. Consequently, resolving tensions over memory and image is dependent to a large extent on finding the conceptual and methodological common ground that would allow Jews and Muslims to share a discourse in light of which issues of history, continuity and identity could be explored.

There is one final point I would like to add in relation to Scripture and its implications for shaping the view of the other. Reuven Firestone has made a significant point regarding the long-term implications of the qur'ānic representations of Muḥammad's complex relations with the Jews and of some of the difficult statements made in that context.¹³ Appealing to the historical method, it is understandable that under the pressure of particular historical circumstances various statements of a derogatory nature were made. However, once these statements take on metaphysical significance, their destructive potential is brought to light. If the Qur'ān is God's word of truth from all eternity, it is harder to relativize negative statements concerning the Jews and to see them as merely products of a given historical moment. The text's metaphysical status can in theory lead to the negative essentialization of the other.¹⁴

¹³ Reuven Firestone, 2005, 'Jewish-Muslim Relations', in N. de Lange, M. Freud-Kandel (eds), *Modern Judaism, An Oxford Guide*, Oxford: OUP, pp. 438–49, p. 440.

¹⁴ In principle, the concern is mutual, and could be equally applied to Jewish descriptions of Ishmael or non-Jews in general. However, the dynamics of tradition are different. Negative views of Muslims are not found in Judaism's most fundamental text, but in later strata that are less authoritative. Nevertheless, it is clear that ultimately both communities must tackle traditional religious sources that portray the other in a negative light.

The People – Receiving Revelation and Moving through History

The next component in Jaffee's scheme to be considered relates to the choice of community that receives the divine revelation and traverses history with it. More is at stake here than the simple, though fundamental, difference regarding the identity of the chosen community – whether it is the people of Israel or the Muslim Umma. Under this rubric we would do well to consider the matrix of Muslim–Jewish relations throughout the long periods in which Jews were subjects of Muslims. Relations between the groups reveal fundamental theological understandings.

Islam understood its political victory as theological victory as well. It is this close juxtaposition of political history and theological triumph that provides the backdrop for much of the theological difficulty that Islam faces with the change of historical tides. As Jewish–Muslim relations are coloured by the historical changes in power relations, one must be aware of the significant role that the political dimension plays in defining inter-group relations.

From a completely theoretical perspective, one could develop a Jewish model of Islam that would legitimize Islam's mission in the world, as a religious community. Just as one could contemplate notions of multiple revelations, one could also contemplate complex relations between different communities, chosen to fulfil different parts of God's plan for humanity. To the extent that Judaism is bound up with its ethnic identity and to the degree that it is perceived as non-missionary and not seeking to convert the world to its form of belief, a convenient division of labour could be conceived in relation to Islam. Islam could be the outreach arm of the monotheistic and spiritual vision of Judaism.¹⁵ However, such a view would require a level of mutual recognition the two traditions lack; and the power relations between them, as well as their different approaches to their respective and intertwined histories, play an important role in frustrating such mutual recognition.

¹⁵ Of course, this is just as true of Christianity. Indeed, very often Christianity and Islam are considered together in attempting to provide a place for them within the overall Jewish economy of history and salvation. See Maimonides, *Laws of Kings* 11,4.

Judaism has lived in the shadow of Islam since the latter's birth. At certain historical moments as much as 95 per cent of the Jewish people lived in a Muslim context. The status of Jews in Muslim societies was governed by the rules of the *dhimmī*. These rules provide protection and security while at the same time also expressing subjugation and humiliation. The *jizya* tax imposed upon the *dhimmī* is a sign of subjugation that seeks to establish the clearly inferior status of the *dhimmī*, seeking to humiliate them, even as they are offered protection.

The status of Jews as *dhimmī* left them vulnerable to a series of injunctions that were applied in different degrees at different periods of history. These included the obligation to wear distinguishing clothes, the prohibition on building tall houses, the obligation to give right of way to Muslims, the prohibition against riding horses, against bearing testimony against a Muslim and more. The vicissitudes of history saw these rules enforced to different degrees, but they remained on the books, and hence always applicable in potential. It only took a change in the course of history and of how the Jews were perceived in a given society for what was purely theoretical to become operative.

Thus, Jewish life in the shadow of Islam is characterized by great complexities, if we will – ambivalences. One often speaks of the Golden Age of Jewry under Muslim rule in medieval Spain.¹⁶ For all its splendour, we must not over-idealize it, nor ignore the darker side of that splendour. The testimony of Maimonides, in many ways a symbol of the height of Jewish integration within prevailing Muslim culture and a sign of the Golden Age, is telling. Maimonides writes, following the persecutions of the Almohads:

on account of the vast number of our sins, God has hurled us in the midst of this people, the Arabs,¹⁷ who have persecuted

¹⁶ On the Golden Age as a historical construct and the role it played in the contemporary quest for Jewish emancipation, in the hands of Jewish historians, see Norman Stillman, 2000, 'The Judeo-Islamic Historical Encounter – Visions and Revisions', in Tudor Parfitt (ed.), *Israel and Ishmael*, Richmond: Curzon Press, pp. 1–12. See further Michel Abitbol, 'Jews and Arabs in Colonial North Africa', Parfitt (ed.), *Israel and Ishmael*, pp. 124ff.

¹⁷ The distinction between Arabs and Muslims is, of course, completely

us severely, and passed baneful and discriminatory legislation against us . . . Never did a nation molest, degrade, debase and hate us as much as they.¹⁸

As historians have observed, the decline of the historical fate of the community as a whole leads to a deterioration of the status of the Jews within it.¹⁹ And yet, even during the finest of moments, Jewish living under Muslim rule, it seems fair to suggest that Jews never really felt at home. They were aware of being out of their natural place, out of their natural society, guests – often fairly treated, regularly abused – in a foreign society. Historians paint diverging pictures of Jewish life in the shadow of Islam. Some seek to portray Jewish–Muslim relations along the ‘Golden Age’ model; others highlight persecution as the governing narrative. Both portrayals seem to be ideologically invested. The truth seems to lie somewhere in between. One thing may be safely stated, nevertheless: Difficult as the relations may have been at various points in time, Jews still seem to have overall fared better under the shadow of Islam than they did under the shadow of Christianity. However, what allowed for the toleration, and at times integration, of Jews into Muslim society was the very recognition of Muslim superiority and supremacy. This has one significant implication: even in the finer moments of Jewish life in the shadow of Islam the relationship was not only unequal; it was non-reciprocal. Jews became part of surrounding Arab or Muslim culture. They learned the languages and arts and partook of other cultural expressions. Muslims did not make a similar effort to learn, appreciate or become conversant with Jewish culture. Thus, we have a precedent in history for successful toleration and cultural absorption, not for mutual respect, dignity and coexistence, in the sense mandated by contemporary reality.

It is precisely here that we can identify the secret of the success of the past. Jews took part in a surrounding culture; they did not join up or make compromises with a neighbouring religion. That the

irrelevant, if we seek an appreciation of the historical reality and, more importantly, of the subjective experiences of Jews living under Muslim rule.

18 Abraham Halkin, 1993, ‘The Epistle to Yemen’, in Abraham Halkin and David Hartman, *Epistles of Maimonides: Crisis and Leadership*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, p. 126.

19 See Firestone, 2005, ‘Jewish-Muslim Relations’, p. 442.

culture was thoroughly religious in character is a given. However, what made Jewish participation in broader society possible is the common cultural context. This culture no longer exists. One may evoke the memory of Al-Andalus or appreciate the heights of Ottoman culture and the place that Jews found within that culture. However, those cultures are no longer in existence and the contemporary cultural background that drives the quest for present day understanding between religious groups is very different.

In important ways, therefore, the past cannot serve as a guide to the future. The culture it provided as common background no longer exists, and the network of political and power relations that defined and governed Jewish-Muslim relations has since changed. The present day places before us the challenge of establishing Jewish-Muslim relations in a culturally and politically different context from the one under which the finest moments of Jewish-Muslim coexistence took place. To understand the complications of the present moment, we need to turn to the next element in Jaffee's scheme – the quest for the messianic future.

Looking to the Future

The model that reigned in Jewish-Muslim relations for centuries underwent radical changes as a consequence of political changes that have taken place since the nineteenth century. The growing influence of Europe in Arab societies and the move of Jews away from a Muslim social and cultural context are processes that had been under way well before the Zionist movement came along. However, it is clear that the single most dramatic force that reshaped Jewish-Muslim relations was the Zionist movement, and in time the founding of the state of Israel.

Zionism opened a new chapter in Jewish-Muslim relations, one that to a significant extent makes a return to earlier models impossible. On the one hand, the status of the *dhimmī* is no longer maintained, within a geographic region that at least some consider to be Muslim territory. Jews who came to Israel from Arab countries in fact exchanged their *dhimmī* status for a more powerful and autonomous status, provided by the state of Israel. On the other hand, the prevalent identification of Zionism with the West and with Western colonialism plays into a Muslim narrative that pits Muslim

culture and history against those forces. Israel is thus viewed within a matrix of power relations and conflicts that touches upon fundamental perceptions of Muslim identity and dignity.

Islam has a strong territorial dimension. Geographical territories are defined in ways that establish their Muslim affiliation. Concern with politics, government and territory plays into how the particular territory of Israel is viewed by many Muslims. Consequently, the changes brought about by the establishment of the state of Israel touch some very fundamental concerns of Muslim law and world-view. This is not to suggest that there is no way that a Muslim world-view can accept a Jewish state. However, it is certainly not the popular or default position, and a good deal of goodwill and constructive work would have to go into such acceptance. For the most part such goodwill has been lacking. From the political angle, the present (2006) Palestinian government, scores of Muslim radicals and governments such as the Iranian government all share a view of the state of Israel that is nurtured by the sense of violation of traditional Muslim norms, and that sees the only hope for the future in the return to those norms, in other words in undoing the Jewish state and replacing it with a Muslim regime.

I do not wish to be understood as claiming that the Israeli-Arab conflict is fundamentally a religious one. Nevertheless, even if at its historical roots it is a national conflict, the close association of religion and politics and the ways in which religion spills over into all facets of life make a neat division between the religious and the political impossible. Consequently, we witness the conflict being viewed increasingly in religious terms. Along with the Islamization of the conflict we can also observe a shift in its fundamental parameters. If several decades ago the conflict was with the Israelis, it is increasingly spilling over into a conflict with the Jews. This accounts for the apparently significant penetration of Christian anti-Semitic materials, including the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, into the Muslim world. Muslim anti-Semitism has become one of the most prominent forms of anti-Semitism in the world today.

All these developments can be explained in terms of political developments as these impact upon the psyche and the traditions of the players in the seemingly endless drama in the Middle East. However, we may also consider a more principled dimension of the events of the past century. Jaffee points to the eschatological moment

as the point in time towards which competing elective monotheisms march, at which point they expect their vision and world-view will be vindicated, proving who is the ultimate chosen community of God. If so, messianism is not simply a detail of a religious world-view. It is a climax of an entire religious structure, what gives it meaning and direction, its ultimate point of fulfilment along the axis of time. Now, Zionism is at one and the same time a political movement and a messianic movement. It draws upon ancient messianic dreams and for many of its followers it is part of the realization of a messianic vision. This, of course, raises the stakes regarding acceptance and rejection of Zionism, within the broader matrix of a competing religious system. Furthermore, the messianic element is not exclusive to Judaism. It plays an important role in some forms of Islam, including those currently making their mark in the contemporary political arena. Messianic dimensions seem to loom particularly large in the world-view informing the decisions and actions of the present Iranian regime.

All this may point us to the source of the irrational element that plagues the Israel–Arab conflict. I believe there is no other conflict upon earth that has lasted for so long, that captures the imagination of the entire human family in such a powerful way and that still seems as far as ever from adequate resolution. All these elements open us to a consideration of something beyond the purely historical conflict of competing national groups. The messianic dimension of the conflict could perhaps account for the particular charge and the great complexity of the Jewish–Arab conflict. Thus, underlying the conflict, even if not always fully consciously, is a battle about the story and the legitimacy of the competing religious world-views. If history is the ultimate testing ground of elective monotheisms, then the state of Israel may be considered the conclusive test for these religions.

Regardless of how important the following tradition may or may not be in the broader economy of Muslim sources, it may point to an important dimension that fuels present day conflict. There is a Muslim eschatological tradition that affirms that on the Day of Judgement, a battle will take place with the Jews, who will then be destroyed.²⁰ As Moshe Sharon points out, the Jews were never so

²⁰ See Moshe Sharon, 1989, *Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Interaction and Conflict*, Johannesburg: Sacks, p. 103.

powerful politically as to justify the creation of such a tradition. It would therefore seem that only a deep theological rivalry, whose resolution awaits the eschaton, can lead to such a radical formulation.

The upshot of the radical changes in political perspective, coupled with messianic overtones, is that the present chapter in Jewish-Muslim relations redefines the relations between the two religions. It is fair to say that almost everything positive that was created in the centuries of Jewish living in the shadow of Islam has been erased.

It is interesting to conclude this section by revisiting, yet again, the issue of the definition of Islam as *Avoda Zara*. When considered from the eschatological perspective, viewed through the particular political context of the state of Israel, a surprising position is encountered. One of the great halachic authorities, writing shortly after the Six Day War, considers Islam's role on the political ground and points to continuing Arab hatred of Israel. It is not conceivable that Islam possesses true knowledge of God, argues Rabbi Halberstam of Kloisenburg. Its political position and the alliances it makes with Israel-hating Christians (who for him are obvious idolaters) prove that Islam is *Avoda Zara*.²¹ Islam's spiritual value is thus tested not by its theological affirmations but by the actions that it exhibits, particularly as these concern God's people Israel.

Assessing the Present Moment – Our Challenge

We seem to be at a moment of climax as far as the historical process is concerned. If our elective monotheisms traverse history awaiting their final vindication, the present moment in time brings unprecedented pressure to bear upon the realities common to Jews and Muslims, as well as Christians. Even if the present moment in time is not viewed as the final messianic showdown, it must be acknowledged as unique in the intensity of feelings, the enormity of challenge and the profound potential for destruction for all involved, not only in the Middle East but throughout the world. It seems there is no going back. We cannot return to the lost Golden Age, whether it ever existed or not. We seem to be pushed deeper and deeper into the inevitable conflict, and the ensuing conflagration. The move-

21 Rabbi Yekutiel Halberstan, *Yisrael Sava*, vol. 4, no. 48.

ment toward the future thus brings to light all the uncontrollable forces and conflicts that are contained within the religions. We may, then, be headed towards the inevitable conflagration.

There may be, nevertheless, an alternative to the passive waiting for the unleashing of the deep forces contained within our religions in a grand showdown. Much depends on who it is we are talking to and how much power those who are willing to talk with each other actually have within their respective religions. We must at least do our best to cultivate those understandings of religion that will provide an alternative to the vision of the clash of religions coming to a head. It is worth noting, in this context, that as for the basic paradigm of competing claims made by different elective monotheisms, the situation between Judaism and Christianity is no different from that of Judaism and Islam. In relation to most forms of Christianity we have found the way of living in the present time without messianic expectations spilling over in destructive ways into contemporary reality. The deep tensions inherent in the existence of parallel elective monotheisms thus need not be translated into concrete conflict. Other factors exacerbate these profound tensions. These factors could in theory be addressed. This is our task.

We can identify several dimensions to the growing tensions between Judaism and Islam. The conflict, to the degree that one may speak of a conflict between the religions, has *national*, *cultural* and *religious* dimensions. It is fed by the conflicting territorial claims of two nationalities. It is sustained by different cultural attitudes. The differences in cultural attitudes relate not only to the world-view at large but also to how tradition(s) are to be understood in light of historical thinking and critical thinking in general. Attitudinal differences stemming from different degrees of adaptation of critical self-awareness often frustrate attempts at dialogue and understanding between Jews and Muslims. Finally, the conflict is religious, inasmuch as an appeal to religion underlies the attitudes that inform treatment of the various aspects of Jewish-Muslim relations. The challenge is how to construct, or lift up, those aspects of Judaism and Islam, those Judaisms and Islams, if we will, that can play a positive and constructive role in alleviating the conflict that the deep structures of religion could lead to, if not appropriately diffused.

Work can be done in all three areas. I do believe that there is a good chance that if the appropriate work is done by the right people,

it can stem the tide of violence that we seem to be headed towards. It is, of course, only a chance, inasmuch as what is at stake is not only a conflict between the religions, but a battle within each of the religions regarding the form it takes and the self understanding of its practitioners in relation to contemporary reality. The chances may not be high. Yet, we cannot assume the responsibility of not trying. The consequences are too grave.

Meeting the Challenge of the Moment – Ways not Taken

Alleviating conflicts between Jews and Muslims is an important contemporary concern and one can point to any number of initiatives that seek to address this important challenge. In light of the above analysis, I would like to suggest that some of the ways that are most commonly taken in this context are, in fact, ill suited to the task. Perhaps the most common strategy is the appeal to the past. Jews often point to the Jewish roots of Muslim faith; Muslims often point to the positive statements found in the Qur'an in relation to Jews, usually ignoring the other side of the complex picture that emerges from the Qur'an. An appeal to the Golden Age of Jewish life under the shadow of Islam is often made, in an attempt to remind us that the two religions can indeed coexist in fruitful and mutually sustaining ways.

All these strategies seek to provide an alternative to present and potential conflict. That which is considered to have been historically positive is thus called upon to address the difficulties of the moment. The implied understanding is that that which is positive, and which is being highlighted, is the essential and fundamental reality. Therefore it ought to govern relations between the religions. The various negative phenomena that one seeks to combat are in some way secondary aberrations, whose influence can be checked if only we recollect the fundamentally harmonious relationship that characterizes the two religions.

I find these moves to be very problematic. Any irenic presentation of history is by definition one-sided. It fails to address the problematic dimension of Jewish-Muslim relations, leaving the untreated area as a festering wound that will continue to impact relations if untreated. Jewish-Muslim relations have been complex from the earliest historical foundations of Muḥammad's relations with the

Jews. There will therefore always remain alternative voices, ghosts in our religious closets, that will continue to haunt us. The complexity of the Jewish experience in the shadow of Islam can similarly not be ignored, if we seek to take stock of the good as well as the problematic sides of our history as part of addressing the future.

A related strategy is the attempt to highlight the commonalities both religions have. In this context one can construct entire catalogues of similarities and commonalities the two traditions share. However, listing similarities ignores the deeper issue: can these similarities be extricated from the structures within which they are contained?²² If the similarities are fully enshrined within the broader context of the two religions, then the irenic potential of the similarities becomes insignificant, in view of the more powerful forces of competition and of potential conflict that drive both traditions. In fact, similarities may be found between any two religious systems, regardless of the particulars of time, space and their relationship to one another. Identifying similarities may not be enough to stem the tides of conflict.

Highlighting commonalities, just like highlighting positive precedents, is only meaningful in the framework of a broader effort to construct religions in a particular way. Such an effort involves making self-conscious decisions regarding how one understands one's own religion as well as that of the other. It is an educational-constructive process, rather than a naive appeal to one element in the broader descriptive canvas. If we are to succeed, a prior commitment to such a constructive process must be made. History can only be appealed to as part of a self-conscious reconstruction of identity, in light of which relations may be restructured. It is my contention that until such reconstruction has taken place, we are better off leaving history aside. Appealing to history implicates us in the very matrix of conflict and complexity that has characterized Jewish-Muslim relations since their inception. If history is part of the inevitable collision course, as competing monotheisms await their ultimate vindication, we may fare better by putting aside history altogether and seeking

22 Put more theoretically, one must consider to what extent pointing to similarities grows out of the study of religions in a neutral, scientific manner, or to what extent it is an ideologically motivated statement, and as such an oversimplification of more complex realities.

other ways in which the two religious communities can best coexist. In my estimation, in the overall scheme of things, the negative heritage of history far outweighs the model moments to which we can appeal. One is therefore better off attempting to construct Jewish–Muslim relations as one would construct Jewish–Hindu relations. That is, the two religious communities ought to come together on the platform of mutual concerns for coexistence, peace and contribution to the world. Initially our respective and interdependent stories ought to be left behind, as we seek to contribute to peaceful coexistence. Let us come to know one another as parallel religious communities, leaving aside the baggage we carry through history. The baggage will wait for us. We can pick that load up again when we have successfully constructed the kind of Judaism and the kind of Islam that we would like to bring to each other and to the world.

Meeting the Challenge of the Moment – Areas of Focus

This chapter issues a call to self-conscious construction of identity within a relationship: constructing Jewish and Muslim identities in ways that support the Jewish–Muslim relationship, and by so doing contributing to the peace of the world at large. Such self-conscious construction grows out of an assessment of the needs of a particular moment in time. This point in time calls for an attitude that circumvents much of history, and seeks to construct an alternative vision to that of an inevitable collision. I would like to suggest several areas that deserve future work, as part of such self-conscious construction. Each of these areas can make an important contribution to a new construction of Jewish–Muslim relations. The four areas are culture, knowledge, values and theology.²³

Culture

We have already noted that one component of the conflict is a cultural divide, through which Jews and Muslims (that is, stereotypical Jews and Muslims) relate to the world, to their history, to Scripture and to society at large in very different ways. The present challenge

²³ One might almost present these four areas as alternatives to the four areas that feed conflict – sovereignty, territory, self-image and memory.

grows out of what in UNESCO terminology is dubbed 'creating a culture of peace'. What, then, are the prerequisites for the creation of such a culture, common to Jews and Muslims? Can a medieval construction of these religions contribute to such a culture of peace, or can it only grow on a modernist, or postmodern, platform? Jewish-Muslim relations in the Middle Ages were characterized as a symbiosis. This symbiosis fell apart because the culture that sustained it ceased to exist. In today's world a different kind of symbiosis is emerging, one in which all religions seek to partake in a culture that can sustain the global village. This broader context provides an opportunity for Judaism and Islam to construct their identities in ways that support the broader needs of the contemporary culture of peace.

There seem to be some distinct components to the present cultural moment. Globalization, the quest for common values and for peace are central. Knowledge, communication and new ways of expressing the age-old quest for truth are additional components of a present-day cultural outlook. Historical knowledge and critical thinking, in particular self-critical, are additional important components of contemporary culture. They are also much needed tools in combating the potential for violence inherent in our religions. The implications of interiorizing a more complex and self-aware perspective on our religions is the adoption of a particular religious identity that is at one and the same time also a broader human identity. They also point to adopting a religious identity that can patiently await the end time, while postponing some questions of ultimate significance in favour of peaceful living in the here and now. It seems the common living of Jews and Muslims in the west is facilitating the construction of the kind of complex identities called for by the present situation.

Knowledge

Prominent characteristics of contemporary society are the availability of knowledge, its easy dissemination and the breadth of interest in knowledge, facilitated by technology and communication. Knowledge must be the basis of any cultural development, including advances in inter-religious relations and in the self-understanding of religious groups. Knowledge has always played an important role in

inter-religious relations. The successes of the Golden Age of Jewish–Muslim relations have much to do with a shared knowledge base, in the fields of language, philosophy and more. However, there has been great asymmetry in knowledge within Jewish–Muslim relations. We have already remarked that while Jews knew Arab culture, Arabs did not show parallel interest in Jewish culture. That the Qur’ān as text, rather than as revelation, is not considered a sequel to the Bible meant that the quest for learning the original revelation that characterized Jewish–Christian relations was absent from Jewish–Muslim relations. Even in contemporary times we find asymmetry in knowledge. Jews have been at the forefront of the modern academic study of Islam. The reverse cannot be said.

The present-day situation cannot tolerate partial or exclusive knowledge. Forms of knowledge that have been hitherto guarded and secret are becoming increasingly open and available.²⁴ The global situation challenges us all in similar ways. If part of the challenge concerns forging new relations between members of faith communities, this must also be translated to interest in and exchanges of knowledge. It is important that Jews and Muslims learn about each other at all levels. On the popular level this means ensuring proper knowledge replace stereotypes. On the academic level this means ensuring a high quality academic study of the other religion in major academic centres worldwide. Once again, the academic setting in the West provides a welcome context for establishing new paradigms of mutual learning between Jews and Muslims. The very few individuals in Arab-speaking universities who have gained proficiency in Judaism also testify to the potential that academia holds for balanced spreading of knowledge between Jews and Muslims. Intellectuals have an important responsibility. The lack of reciprocity that has traditionally characterized interest in knowledge and its sharing within Jewish–Muslim relations must give way to a broader and more reciprocal perspective. This task will probably be best achieved with the help of the academy.

24 An interesting instance of this from a different religious tradition concerns the effects of the internet on the dissemination of teaching that had hitherto been guarded and protected in one form of Hinduism, the Madhva tradition. See Deepak Sarma, 2005, *Epistemologies and the Limitations of Philosophical Inquiry: Doctrine in Madhva Vedanta*, London: Routledge Curzon, pp. 66–7.

Values

Religions have different dimensions and these can be variously highlighted and presented in different cultural contexts. Highlighting the truth value of religions can easily lead to awareness of the conflicts inherent in competing truth claims. One notes, partly in an attempt to avoid such conflicts and partly in an attempt to harness religions to meet the common challenges of contemporary society, the increasing emphasis upon religions as sources of values, and more particularly of common values. If, as suggested above, earlier expressions of Jewish-Muslim symbiosis grew out of a situation of common needs, one may ask what are the contemporary needs and what response can they draw forth from our religions.²⁵ Turning to religions as sources of values indicates a value crisis in today's world and the recognition that religions are repositories of key values of living. If Jews and Muslims partake, to some degree or other, of the crisis of modern living,²⁶ this provides a context for a new and broader kind of symbiosis, in which Jews and Muslims, along with others, reach to their traditions to provide guidance for the contemporary needs of society. The appeal to values allows us to put aside the range of history-related issues that weigh down upon Jewish-Muslim relations. A search for common values and their contemporary relevance can be conducted between religious traditions that have no common past. Approaching our religions in this light allows us to look to their spiritual depth and present contribution, rather than to their complicated historical past and conflicting future visions.

Nevertheless, the quest for values, or common values, may not be as straightforward as one initially imagines. Our traditions possess many common values, and they make repeated appeals to those values. Truth, love, peace and justice are but some of the most cur-

25 I shall leave out of the discussion the more political dimension of joining forces in combating hate and xenophobia, as these are expressed through anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. While this may provide potential meeting ground and space for collaboration, often Jews and Muslims are caught on opposing sides of these issues, thereby fuelling these very attitudes towards the other.

26 See on this issue the collection of articles published by the Elijah Interfaith Institute, *The Crisis of the Holy*, 2005.

rent values to which we find repeated appeal in the public discourses of our religions, educational as well as political. But what do these values actually mean? Often, it seems that we use the same words with very different understandings. Justice is a particular case in point. The regular appeal on the Muslim side to justice as a self-evident value in light of which various political moves should be made contrasts with the Jewish understanding of what is implied in justice, in light of a particular history of Israeli–Arab relations. Core values can easily degenerate into slogans.

This does not invalidate the search for common values. But it does suggest that the process is complex and must be founded upon serious and open discussion. It involves study, mutual listening, discernment and a scrutiny of the past, even if this is focused on ideals and their realization, rather than on historical relations between groups. Not only individual values must be considered but also the dynamic of clustering values together and the process of making choices between conflicting values. These complexities are as relevant to the possible joint contribution of Jews and Muslims to contemporary society's concerns at large as they are to helping advance their own wounded relationship. It therefore stands to reason that identifying values and suggesting commonalities is to a large extent itself a constructive, rather than descriptive, enterprise, and is therefore an important component of how we seek to construct our religious self-understanding in the broader contemporary context.²⁷ In some way or another all appeals to values and to the past are attempts at constructing a common base of values, through appeal to our past. However, the unexamined appeal is clumsy, inasmuch as it is one-sided and therefore lacks credibility. We must thus avoid a naive appeal to values, just as we must avoid a naive appeal to history.

²⁷ It may bear stating that such a construction is a religious project, and belongs properly to the field of theology. It should not be confused with attempts to shift the basis of encounter from religion to secular or other contemporary values. The recognition that religions must construct or readdress their theologies in light of the changes and needs of contemporary realities informs the projects that I have initiated through the Elijah Interfaith Institute. We have gathered both Jewish and Muslim scholars to engage in work on the construction of contemporary theologies of other religions. This ongoing enterprise is part of the Institute's broader vision that seeks to stimulate fresh theological reflection among all religions.

Both involve conscious constructions in light of our traditions and their resources.

The quest for values and the move away from history lead us to a consideration of the appropriate context for carrying out such conversations. It is often assumed that 'Abrahamic' religions have a particular conversation that is unique to them and should therefore also be exclusive to them. While this position can be defended, and while there is room for work to be carried out in any bilateral inter-religious relationship, I would argue in favour of the work on values being carried out in a multilateral inter-religious context. I note with approval that the present volume does in fact seek to address Islam through a broader multilateral context, as it is broken down into its individual bilateral relationships. If we seek to contribute to the human family as a whole, living in the global village, this may be best done by sidestepping the historical charge that any individual relationship is fraught with and by lifting up the message of meaning and value that can speak to all, and that should be articulated in the presence of all. The new global situation is the cultural context that issues a call to religions to restate their message. This call is issued in a context that already transcends the relations between individual religions.²⁸ It therefore also holds the promise of helping specific relationships transcend the limitations of their historical relationships.

Theology

It is time to return to our starting point – God. So much has divided us, when we consider the broader structures of competing elective monotheisms. Yet, what unites us is the recognition of the common God. At the end of the day we must ask what is most important in our religious lives. I think we strive towards making God the

²⁸ One might add that, as Reuven Firestone (cf. fn. 13) has pointed out, present-day tensions between Jews and Muslims are fuelled by a broader global perspective. Relations of the Muslim world and the West, economic considerations, trends of emigration and globalization all come to a head in the context of Jewish–Muslim relations, particularly as these focus upon Israeli–Palestinian relations. As Karen Armstrong has recently claimed, the Israeli–Palestinian issue has become a symbol for all sides, far surpassing its objective importance. Hence the charge associated with it.

most important thing, more than religion itself. Making religion with its particularities and choices, even those God-given choices, more important than the recognition of the one God, source of all, allows our egos and identities to take over. It is, in some sense, idolatrous.²⁹ Return to God is a return to the source that could allow us to rediscover each other. This is very different from making a statement concerning the common faith of Jews and Muslims. Return to God involves reaching the spiritual insight that truly makes God the centre of our religions, rather than anything we have made of them.³⁰ To construct our religions is not simply a theological or intellectual exercise. It is a call for spiritual regeneration that would allow us to grow to the fullness of vision promised by our traditions. It is my faith that in that fullness we can also find the resources for living together.

Conclusion

I have argued that if we are to get past the present historical difficulties in Jewish–Muslim relations we must step for a moment outside history and outside our historical memories. Living our relationship under the scrutiny of history, viewed differently by the two groups, places us on a collision course. The present moment calls for a self-conscious construction of our religious identities in light of contemporary challenges. This is a theological project, through which values, relations and self-understanding must be constructed anew. It ultimately involves spiritual regeneration and reaching out to the heights of our religions' spiritual visions. We must first step outside

29 See the powerful conclusion to Vincent Cornell's essay, 'Islam: Theological Hostility and the Problem of Difference', in *Religion, Society and the Other: Hostility, Hospitality and the Hope of Human Flourishing*, The Elijah Interfaith Institute, 2003, p. 92 (forthcoming also with Fordham University Press).

30 On the turning of Islam into a programme of social reform, and the loss of theology and mysticism in much of contemporary Islam, see Vincent Cornell, 2005, 'The Crisis of the Holy: Islam', in: *The Crisis of the Holy*, The Elijah Interfaith Institute, pp. 120 ff. These issues arise in different ways in a Jewish context, given that Jewish self-understanding is both national and religious. See my 'Judaism: The Battle for Survival', *The Struggle for Compassion*, Chapter 2 in *Religion, Society and the Other* (cf. fn. 29).

historical memory and of the parameters of our bilateral relations in order to gain new perspective. From that perspective we can then revisit our histories, choosing to integrate their testimony in a self-conscious way in how we construct our memory and identity. This is a complex task. It suggests that important work lies ahead for academics, educators, and men of spiritual vision. It may prove to be beyond our abilities. But if the alternative is heading towards further violence and conflict, do we have the right not to try?