

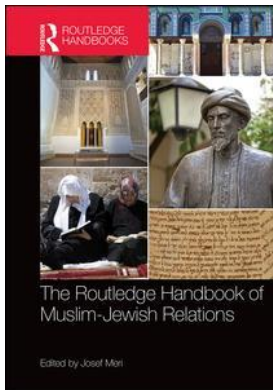
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## The Routledge Handbook of Muslim–Jewish Relations

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### Constructive dialogue

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## Constructive dialogue

### A Muslim and Jewish perspective on dialogue between Islam and Judaism

*Akbar Ahmed and Edward Kessler*

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In the first section, Akbar Ahmed discusses his involvement with Jewish-Muslim dialogue over a period of several decades in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Subjects discussed include the UK's seminal Runnymede report on anti-Semitism, which led to a second commission examining Islamophobia. He discusses the similarities and connections between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. The author then discusses interfaith dialogue in the United States and the ways in which members of both faiths came together in the aftermath of 9/11. Finally, the author discusses the current state of Jewish-Muslim dialogue in both the United States and the United Kingdom.

In the second section, Edward Kessler discusses similarities and differences between Jewish-Christian and Jewish-Muslim dialogue. He suggests that for the first time in a millennia, both Jews and Muslims in the West share the same challenges because they are minorities at the same time, in the same countries. He discusses a course on Muslim-Jewish encounters created with Prof. Ahmed and calls for Jewish and Muslim self-understanding in the face of the "other," before addressing more contentious areas, including Israel-Palestine. The article ends with a discussion of the world's first letter in modern times (2008) from Muslim leaders to the Jewish community calling for peace.

#### **Muslim-Jewish dialogue: a Muslim's perspective**

"Do not drink the water, it may be poisoned. The same goes for the food too."

"You can't trust the Jews; they are our enemies."

#### ***Synagogue***

This was the depressing advice I was being given as we drove down in a convoy of cars with the Muslim leaders of Cambridge to the synagogue in St. John's Wood, London. I had requested silence as I was trying to focus on my task that evening but was ignored as they seemed more intent on talking to themselves than to me. It was a cold January evening in

1999 and, as we arrived, I saw the police were out in full force. They were taking no chances. Extremists from both sides had threatened to disrupt the event.

In any case, Sheikh Umar Bakri had been attacking me as “an Uncle Tom” because I “admire[d] Western civilization more than Islamic civilization” and was keen to have dialogue with the Jews and Christians.<sup>1</sup> Bakri would go on to attain international notoriety when, after 9/11, his followers in London published a poster titled, “The Magnificent Nineteen.” I had been specifically warned – and in public – by his followers that a visit to the synagogue would make me liable to a fatwa as I would be crossing a religious line. With the fate of Salman Rushdie still hanging over the Muslim community in the United Kingdom, I was tense enough without the unwarranted and uncalled-for advice in the car.

I had never been to a synagogue before and neither had my Muslim companions. I was responding to an invitation received months earlier to deliver The Rabbi Dr. David Goldstein Memorial Lecture initiated by the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues of the U.K. My title was “Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism: The Need for Understanding.” It was my first major experience in Jewish-Muslim dialogue in a high-profile public event.

As we entered the large, impressive synagogue building, I was struck by how orderly, neat, and well-organized everything was. Once inside, the warmth of the reception committee and guests who were waiting to welcome us quickly enveloped us. I drank the water and ate the savouries, making sure my companions would notice. Not only was there a full house to hear my lecture but there were some prominent figures present, including senior rabbis, bishops and members of Parliament. Among them were my Muslim guests, who, along with the Cambridge group, numbered some thirty to forty. They included Lord (Nazir) Ahmad, who had just been appointed a member of the House of Lords, and Imam Abduljalil Sajid, who had begun to work closely with me on interfaith initiatives and would play a prominent role in promoting interfaith work after 9/11. The major Pakistani newspaper *The News* was also present.

I opened my talk by stating that when I was making the *Jinnah* film in Pakistan with Sir Christopher Lee playing the title role, the press attacked the project, some saying it was “a Zionist conspiracy.” “If the same people heard about my lecture today, their suspicions will be confirmed,” I said. “Such is the nature of the world,” I continued, “and the harm that anti-Semitism can inflict on both Jews and Muslims. I went on to present a brief historical overview of the theological relationship between Judaism and Islam and also Christianity. I then talked of the current relationship between Judaism and Islam and the importance of dialogue between them. I talked about the failure to solve the Jewish-Palestinian problem and its impact on the Muslim world. I pointed to the challenges they both faced in conducting this dialogue and its importance.

I concluded my talk on a personal note:

Only a few months ago I had a grandson. He was named Ibrahim after the great Muslim prophet, who is also the great Jewish and Christian patriarch. Ibrahim inherits a legacy of several millennia. He will not be denied his heritage. I would like him to see the Jews and Christians as kin, People of the Book. I would also like him to visit and pray in Jerusalem, with peace in his heart. For me, from Adam in the mists of time to Ibrahim, my grandson, there is a span of human history which both incorporates the great religions of the world and provides hope and optimism for the future.<sup>2</sup>

When I finished, I saw the entire audience rise and applaud enthusiastically. (*The News* [13 January 1999] ran a front-page story of the event with a picture and noted the standing

ovation and that I was “the first Muslim ever” to deliver such a talk at a synagogue.) It was a very moving moment for me. I felt physically exhausted and spiritually elated. What was remarkable was the change in attitude and mood of my Muslim companions as we drove back to Cambridge. The same people who had been warning me not to partake of Jewish hospitality as they were our sworn enemies now spoke with warmth of our hosts. It was clear the experience had affected them, too. “Ah, the wisdom of the Qur’an,” murmured the one who had been warning us about the food and water. “Truly they are our cousins and we must accept them.” “After all, the Qur’an describes the Jews as People of the Book,” said another.

### **Analysis**

I knew that after this event the Muslim community could not back down from reaching out in dialogue and friendship to the Jewish community. I was right. Over the next few days and weeks, a heated debate began in the Muslim media about the legitimacy of what I had done. While the extreme right-wing Muslim groups, including Bakri’s followers, attacked me, others such as Imam Sajid just as firmly supported my actions. The event itself was widely covered in the mainstream media, including the BBC and *The Guardian*.

I myself found the experience profoundly moving. I also realized how much work needed to be done in exploring and promoting dialogue between Jews and Muslims. There was so much prejudice, ignorance, and apathy to overcome. I had only recently become aware of the enormity of the problems faced by the Jewish community over the centuries and felt I had so much to learn. My education began in 1992 when I had the privilege of becoming the Muslim commissioner for the Runnymede Trust study of anti-Semitism, working with other distinguished figures such as Lord (Richard) Harries, then Bishop of Oxford, and Senior Rabbi Baroness (Julia) Neuberger. The experience was an eye-opener for me, yet few Muslims were aware of the terrible persecution, violence, and hatred the Jewish community has faced in history. We produced the Runnymede report, *A Very Light Sleeper: The Persistence and Dangers of Anti-Semitism* (1994).

As I learned about prejudice against the Jews, I realized how much this was familiar territory for a Muslim. Muslims too faced, for example, attacks on places of worship and stereotypes in the media. I believed strongly that such consistently negative images could encourage violence against a minority, especially one as vulnerable as the Muslims. As a member of the commission, and along with Rabbi Neuberger, I actively advocated another such commission, this time to examine prejudice and hatred against Muslims. When the commission was formed – the first of its kind – I was asked to join it as commissioner. Later its membership was expanded. The commission produced an influential report titled, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* (1997). The report popularized the term *Islamophobia* to mean hatred or fear of things Islamic. Islamophobia was broadly defined as seeing Muslims as monolithic, static, separate, inferior, and manipulative, with anti-Muslim discourse and discrimination seen as natural.<sup>3</sup> Since then, the term has been globally used to describe prejudice against Muslims, especially with regard to the increasing immigration to Europe from the Muslim world. The report itself gave the reasons that the commission had coined the term *Islamophobia* and related its origins to anti-Semitism while pointing out that mere identification would not diminish the real dangers facing the minority communities:

The word “Islamophobia” has been coined because there is a new reality which needs naming: anti-Muslim prejudice has grown so considerably and so rapidly in recent years that a new item in the vocabulary is needed so that it can be identified and acted against.

In a similar way there was a time in European history when a new word, “anti-Semitism,” was needed and coined to highlight the growing dangers of anti-Jewish hostility. The coining of a new word, and with it the identification of a growing danger, did not in that instance avert eventual tragedy. By the same token, the mere use of the new word “Islamophobia” will not in itself prevent tragic conflict and waste. But, we believe, it can play a valuable part in the long endeavour of correcting perceptions and improving relationships. That is why we use it continually throughout this report.<sup>4</sup>

In defining Islamophobia, the commission noted the legitimate concerns of the critics of the new word:

The term Islamophobia refers to unfounded hostility towards Islam. It refers also to the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs. The term is not, admittedly, ideal. Critics of it consider that its use panders to what they call political correctness, that it stifles legitimate criticism of Islam, and that it demonizes and stigmatizes anyone who wishes to engage in such criticism.<sup>5</sup>

One of the reasons there was so much misunderstanding among the three Abrahamic faiths was the lack of awareness of how complex the relationship was between them. While the Christians had the upper hand most of the time because of their numbers and strength, the Muslims and Jews had a changing relationship. In the early phase, when Muslims first arrived in Europe and ruled the Iberian Peninsula, there were long periods when Jewish life improved. It has led many scholars, Jewish (Brenner, 2012) and non-Jewish (Menocal, 2002), to call this the *Golden Age* of Jewish history. There has also been a rigorous attempt to reassess that period of history in a realistic frame (Nirenberg, 2002). When the history of the Jews and Muslims ended on the Iberian Peninsula, with both being expelled from the late fifteenth century onward, another chapter opened in eastern Europe with the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans welcomed the Jewish exiles, and hundreds of thousands settled in Ottoman lands. Many thrived. Another Jewish Golden Age is recorded for the community in, for example, Thessaloniki, in present-day Greece. We are now in the midst of the third phase of the relationship between Jews and Muslims, which is coloured by the situation in the Middle East. It is clear that what appears to be a bleak period of mutual recriminations and breakdown of communications is not a permanent condition. Periods from the past thus provide us hope for the future.

Every dialogue with people of a different faith is similar and yet different. The dialogue between Jews and Muslims is especially interesting for several reasons. Judaism, like Christianity, is present at the birth of Islam, and an agreement called the *Treaty of Medina* was signed between the two in which Muslims guaranteed the Jews the right to practice their faith freely, to own property, and so forth. The Prophet of Islam even married a Jewish woman who was allowed to practice her faith freely.

The relationship between Judaism and Islam for more than 1,000 years was, by and large, one between two neighbours who were sometimes friendly and sometimes indifferent to each other. There was so much familiar in Judaism for a Muslim that it was easy to see Jews as fellow People of the Book. Indeed the Qur'an describes them as such. They, too, believed in one omnipotent God, received divine messages through messengers who were common to both, and shared many laws, including the Ten Commandments. Like the Jews, Muslims traced

their spiritual descent from the sons of the prophet Abraham. While the Jews are descended from Isaac, Muslims claim to be descended from Ismail. Though commentators often spoke of the rivalry between Jews and Muslims as that between two male cousins, they often overlooked the fact that, at the end, Abraham on his deathbed was able to bring about the reconciliation of his two sons. Isaac remains a popular name among Muslims who see both sons as the offspring of the beloved prophet Abraham. Both religions share in such social norms as circumcision for men and even some of the dietary restrictions, such as the prohibition on eating pig flesh.

The central problem between Jews and Muslims in contemporary times was their overwhelming ignorance of each other. Add to this some well-established stereotypes each had of the other and the problem of building bridges seemed insurmountable. There was just not enough of a critical mass to change the problem. Attempts such as mine were few and far between and appeared doomed to be dismissed as those of a Don Quixote chasing windmills. Then something terrible happened that would change the world and plunge it into a genuine global crisis, one that would have a direct impact on the subject of Jewish-Muslim relations.

### ***The impact of 9/11 on Jewish-Muslim relations***

Having relocated across the Atlantic, I was teaching one of my first classes on 11 September 2001 in Washington, D.C., when one of the most significant events in the history of Jewish-Muslim relations occurred. Before the class was over, the news of what was happening in New York and Washington came through. I knew that my life would change dramatically as a Muslim scholar in the United States. I promised that I would do everything I could to help close the huge gap that had opened between Muslims and non-Muslims, building on the previous initiatives of which I had been a part in the United Kingdom.

Two distinct and diametrically opposed streams now formed around the subject of Jewish-Muslim relations. In one, it was believed that dialogue was not only possible but essential. In the other stream, it was argued that Muslims were inherently anti-Semitic, anti-Western, and indeed anti-modernist. This stream also promoted the idea of labelling Muslim violent action as the work of “Islamic radicals,” with many commentators blurring the distinctions between this categorization and Islam itself. Owing to the primeval force of the second stream, Islamophobia grew rapidly and spread into the media and then into society itself. There were constant reports of mosques and women in *hijabs* being attacked. Non-Muslims too, such as Hindus and Sikhs, were made targets, as people assumed anyone with brown skin or wearing a turban was a Muslim.

Muslims were responding in kind. There were terrible things happening in the Muslim world both to Muslims and non-Muslims, but there were also Muslim attacks in the United States and Europe. Synagogues, Jewish museums, and kosher shops were targeted. There was cause and effect here for those observing events and connecting the dots.

Nonetheless, while there were challenges around the relationship between the Abrahamic faiths, there were also many opportunities opening up that would encourage people of different faiths to participate in interfaith activity. Let me give some examples: After 9/11, I was invited by Senior Rabbi Bruce Lustig, who heads the largest congregation in Washington, D.C., at the Washington Hebrew Congregation, and Bishop John Chane, the Bishop of Washington, who oversaw the National Cathedral, to join them in a groundbreaking initiative called the *first Abrahamic Summit*. Many initiatives followed from our friendship, including the ongoing Abrahamic roundtable, the Spiritual Unity Walk on 9/11 every year, and lectures at the National Press Club and the National Defense University. Other rabbis were soon



equally active and contributing richly. Rabbi Marc Schneier of New York, whose Foundation for Ethnic Understanding launched a significant Jewish-Muslim relations project in 2007, is one prominent example. I had the honour of being the first Muslim to be invited to give a public talk at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, an event that was broadcast live and is still available on the museum's website.

Professor Judea Pearl, the father of journalist Daniel Pearl who was so tragically killed in Karachi, came to Washington, D.C., to meet me and we formed a partnership for Jewish-Muslim dialogue that took us to several countries and many campuses.<sup>6</sup> We were honoured to speak at the Moses Room in the House of Lords along with three lords representing the Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We were included in the BBC documentary in which the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks delivered his annual address to the nation. Rabbi Sacks's excellent book *The Dignity of Difference* had created a stir in the Jewish community, and he faced threats of being charged with heresy before a religious court. The offending passage represents the first stream of interfaith dialogue:

God has spoken to mankind in many languages, through Judaism to the Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims ... no one creed has a monopoly of spiritual truth. In heaven there is truth, on earth there are truths. God is greater than religion. He is only partially comprehended by any faith.<sup>7</sup>

The chief rabbi invited Judea and me for breakfast at his home and then, when he came to Washington, D.C., gave Zeenat, my wife, and me the privilege of hosting his wife and him. Zeenat, who was heavily involved in interfaith work with me, worked with Amy, the wife of Rabbi Lustig, to prepare a special kosher breakfast. My daughter-in-law Melody Fox, who was present, captured the spirit of the event:

The guests enjoyed a delicious and all kosher breakfast of bagels, lox, cheese, and fruits. They ate together in the sitting room, seated randomly in a casual "interfaith roundtable": Dr. Handa next to Rabbi Sacks, Rabbi Lustig next to Bishop Chane, Imam Magid to his right. The conversation flowed – a highlight was the positive and successful discussion between Dr. Handa, a senior Shinto priest, and Rabbi Sacks about the common bonds that exist between the Abrahamic and Shinto religious traditions ... Although this is a time when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict worsens daily and passions and hate run high between Muslims and Jews, the sight of Akbar Ahmed and Rabbi Sacks praying together for peace provides a strong symbol of hope for the future. Rabbi Sacks presented his latest book, *To Heal a Fractured World*, to the Ahmed family, inscribing it: "To Akbar and family – a true leader of compassion and courage, in cherished friendship and great admiration, with blessings, Jonathan Sacks."<sup>8</sup>

These events and initiatives were widely reported and discussed and helped act as a catalyst for interfaith dialogue. It took time, but interfaith dialogue began to find a foothold in the United Kingdom and in the United States, and today the attendants of many mosques are comfortable talking to the congregants of synagogues and churches, and religious leaders are meeting, working together, and becoming friends. Such mainstream Muslim organizations as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) are heavily involved in interfaith work. While there is still a long way to go, we have come a long way from the reservations my Cambridge companions expressed on our journey to the St. John's Wood synagogue.

### ***Bridging the Great Divide: the course***

Perhaps one of the most significant outcomes of Jewish-Muslim dialogues since 9/11 was the creation of the Centre for the Study of Muslim-Jewish Relations at Cambridge, U.K., in 2006 and the academic courses on interfaith dialogue produced there. The first of its kind, the Centre was pioneered by the renowned scholar Dr. Edward Kessler of Cambridge University with its co-founder and founding director, my daughter, Dr. Amineh Hoti. Edward Kessler also pioneered a popular online course titled “Bridging the Great Divide” to teach Judaism and Islam as parallel subjects. I am his partner in this course and we run it jointly from our respective universities across the Atlantic. Our students range from undergraduates to senior rabbis and imams. They are situated in countries across the world, from the United States to Pakistan. There are few thrills as exciting as seeing total strangers from different faiths starting a course online and, over the course of a few weeks, beginning to engage and then soften their initial position regarding one another. Speaking for myself, I have always learned something new during the teaching of these courses.

By appointing Amineh Hoti as director of the Centre, Edward Kessler brought on board not only a Muslim scholar with a Ph.D. from Cambridge University but one who, because of her gender, added another dimension to the dialogue. In addition to producing scholarly works, Amineh Hoti organized groups of Jewish women whom she took to mosques and groups of Muslim women whom she took to synagogues. In my keynote address to a seminar organized by the Centre on 28 June 2007, I was able to pay tribute to both:

Let me put on record the groundbreaking nature of the work that is being done at this great Centre: The syllabus for teaching the first-ever course on Muslim-Jewish relations; offering a similar course, supported by Prince Hassan of Jordan, for the first time ever through e-learning with its global scope; and a learning resource called *Valuing Diversity* for 470 schools in the UK which will support the national curriculum. This is solid academic work and will also be widely appreciated in the community.

As a father, my pride in Amineh’s work is enhanced by the excitement of witnessing the growth of a young scholar in the same field. Even at this young age Amineh has excelled her father. She is learning Hebrew and is therefore better able to create substantive bridges between the Abrahamic faiths. I know how many difficulties she has had to overcome to reach the position she has reached and this would not have been possible without the support of her husband, Arsallah Khan Hoti, and here in the Centre, Dr. Edward Kessler.

Amineh’s most daring act was yet to come. She chose to return to Pakistan with Arsallah in 2010 and there set up the first centre for teaching interfaith dialogue at Forman Christian College university in Lahore. She also began to have the relevant literature (e.g., *Valuing Diversity*) translated into Urdu so that many more Pakistanis than just the English-speaking elite would encounter the ideas of dialogue.

While the challenges she faces in Pakistan are truly frightening, the rewards for a teacher are immense. Threats against anything remotely connected with interfaith, which is defined by many as a subtle way of weakening Islam, are in the air. A school in Lahore that had experimented with the subject had to immediately withdraw it after processions threatened to attack the school and staff. Schools in Islamabad where Amineh’s children study have received a white “coffin sheet.” It is an ominous message the Taliban uses to announce their coming attack and is meant to instil fear in their victims. To ensure delivery, it was sent by



registered mail. The staff did not take the threat lightly. The Taliban had used the same method in one of the most brutal acts of savagery when they attacked the school in Peshawar in late 2014, in which some 150 schoolchildren were killed.

While at Cambridge, Amineh had faced attacks with equanimity by those who oppose interfaith dialogue, and she was worried, but her sense of hope and optimism overrode her fears. She told me of her student from the rural areas of Punjab who informed her that though his uncle had taught him that the killing of non-Muslims was sanctioned by Islam, he now knew better.<sup>9</sup> That, in itself, was a victory worth celebrating.

## Muslim-Jewish dialogue: a Jewish perspective

### *Bridging the Great Divide: Muslim-Jewish relations*

Jewish-Christian dialogue has been taking place for nearly a century, symbolized by the establishment of the London Society of Christians and Jews and the U.S. National Conference of Christians and Jews in 1927, both of which are still functioning today, albeit in different forms. The Muslim-Jewish dialogue, on the other hand, is a much more recent and fragile phenomenon. Indeed, it might be said that no two religions are closer together than Judaism and Islam, yet today, ironically, no two religions are further apart.

For many years, Christians have reflected on the significance of the Jewish origins of Christianity (especially that Jesus and the first Christians were Jews) and notable also are the messages of repentance for a history of anti-Semitism and an attempt to purge a tradition of latent anti-Judaism. Some Christian theologians have begun to reflect on how Christianity can differentiate itself from Judaism without asserting itself as either opposed to Judaism or simply as a replacement for it.

To a lesser extent, but also noticeable since the early twentieth century, Jews have pondered the purpose behind the creation of Christianity, reflected on the significance for Jews of the Jewish Jesus, and even begun to consider the implications of two billion followers of the Jew from *Eretz Yisrael* who read the *Tanakh*.

However, similar questions about Muslim-Jewish relations have been and remain all too rarely considered, so we enter relatively uncharted territory. Some Muslim scholars, such as Akbar Ahmed and Amineh Hoti, who seek a clearer understanding of and a meaningful relationship with Jews and Judaism, are leading the way. Their engagement reflects a desire to contribute to the formation of Islam in the West. It is not by chance that these two Muslim scholars initiated the 2008 publication *A Call to Dialogue: A Letter to the Jewish People*.<sup>10</sup>

An increasing number are now reflecting on how Muslims might understand the significance to Jews of the State of Israel. Prince Hassan of Jordan, a leader of interfaith conversation over many decades, has stressed there is a need for Muslims, particularly in the Middle East, to internalize the meaning of the Holocaust so as to better understand relations with the wider Jewish world.

As well as Muslim scholars, there are also Jewish scholars, such as Reuven Firestone, Norman Stillman, and Yehezkel Landau (from the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, in Los Angeles, the University of Oklahoma, and the Hartford Seminary, respectively) and Sarah Stroumsa (Hebrew University, Jerusalem), for whom engaging with Muslim thinkers and studying Islam are vital to their academic study and are of deep personal interest. Their work contributes to non-academic interfaith activity such as that of the U.K.'s Council of Imams and Rabbis or the Three Faiths Forum.

These scholars recognize that there exists an odd quality about relations between Muslims and Jews, something that requires reflection by students early on in their studies, particularly in the West. First, Jews (and Christians) need to be reminded that Islam is a religion, not an ethnicity: For example, not all Arabs are Muslim, and the majority of Muslims are not Arab. Indeed, there are not only Christian Arabs but also Jewish Arabs (as articulated by Rachel Shabi in her book, *Not the Enemy: Israel's Jews from Arab Lands*, 2010). The most populous Muslim country in the world is Indonesia, followed by India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, thousands of miles away from the Middle East; next is the first Arab nation, Egypt, with 82 million Muslims, which is listed as the distant fifth most populous Muslim state, followed by Nigeria.

For their part, Muslims (and Christians) face the challenge in their encounters with Jews of not viewing Judaism as though it were a religion only. This is a basic error, because Judaism is a culture, a civilization, *and* a religion. Judaism has always been a peoplehood. A man who converted to the Jewish religion became “Abraham the son of Abraham” (or, for a woman, “Sarah daughter of Sarah”); in other words, he (or she) inherited the history of a people whom he (or she) now joined as part of a religious conversion.

Finally, it is important to remind students that neither Judaism nor Islam are – or ever were (even in antiquity) – a united force. They were and are a collection of communities, and one outstanding shared characteristic is that they develop not despite, but because of unending and sometimes quite violent internal conflicts caused by diverging interpretations of the same heritage.

### ***Similar challenges faced by Muslims and Jews***

It should not be surprising that Jews and Muslims in the West face similar challenges and concerns, articulated most clearly by my friend and pioneer in Jewish-Muslim dialogue, Akbar Ahmed, in *Journey into Islam* (2007) and *Journey into America* (2010). A social anthropologist by training, Ahmed undertook fieldwork to explore Muslim self-understanding, asking the simple question, “What do you think is the number-one problem for Muslims in the world today?” He expected the answer to be Israel-Palestine, Iraq, or Afghanistan. However, to Muslims in Damascus, in Karachi, and in Indonesia, in London, New York, and Los Angeles, the number-one problem was the perception that Islam was deliberately being distorted in the West, that Islam was under attack.

This siege mentality resonates with the Jewish community; facing hostility, perceived or real, is a characteristic common to both groups. When a minority feels it is on trial and feels threatened, it will be less willing to engage in the pursuit of mutual understanding or empathy.

Allow me to share two practical examples of how I encourage my students of Muslim-Jewish relations to gain an insight into this jointly shared characteristic. First, I encourage the Muslim students to read the *Jewish Chronicle* and the Jewish students to read *Muslim News*. I am not sure who finds this a more challenging task, but it is a salutary experience for both.

A second practical example, for my Cambridge-based students, arises from a regular visit to the local mosque, where they meet Muslim leaders such as Tim Winter, also known as Adbal Hakim Murad. During a visit in 2014, he made these observations about the current situation of Muslims in Britain:

- The community has a sense of corporate identity in materialistic and often hostile surroundings.
- The *madrasas* (religious schools) teach to various degrees outdated curriculum from the mother countries.

- A major problem for the community is a generational gap and concern about transmission of values and culture to Muslim children.
- Schisms and tensions within the community are generally related to ethnic identities.

These Muslim concerns sounded extraordinarily familiar to a Jewish ear. Jews also have faced discrimination in British society (and still face prejudice) and have experienced difficulties in integrating. Jews, too, are concerned about their children's education and the challenge of generational transition. And Jews also face tensions within their own communities, adding to a sense of vulnerability.

Whereas Jews have a long and varied history in Britain, returning from the 1290 expulsion in 1656, Muslim migration to Britain is relatively recent. Muslims began immigrating in the second half of the eighteenth century as workers of the East India Company, but large-scale migration to Britain from India and Pakistan began in the 1950s, involving mainly men who came to work in industry and were welcomed by the British, whose economy and post-war construction depended on these workers who would take jobs British employees would not accept. Their children are the parents of today's youth.

Is it reasonable to suggest that, perhaps for the first time in the history of the world, both Jews and Muslims in the West share the same challenges because they are minorities at the same time, in the same countries? In the West, both communities live a Diaspora existence, and both carry multiple identities as citizens of the countries in which they live.

### ***Citizenship and multiple identities***

Citizenship can be defined as membership in a political community that exists over a sovereign territory. The key word in this definition is *territory*, because the association of citizenship or "belonging" with a specific geographical territory is a recent development in history. Traditionally, Muslims and Jews (and Hindus and Christians, for that matter) defined themselves in terms of their shared laws, values, and beliefs. If and when they had to move, they would take their laws, values, and beliefs with them. It was not so much territory that defined their identity but values and a way of life, a role often played by religion.

However, the modern nation-state is defined by a distinct geographical territory. To live within this territory is to be within the jurisdiction of the nation-state and thus to be a member of the community of people who equally live within its borders. Yet historically, our identities easily cut across various geographical and linguistic boundaries, and it was common to move freely between one territory and another, alternating between languages without significantly losing any sense of belonging to the same community. Jews in Central Europe in the early twentieth century are an example of this process. However, our modern nation-state is unique in history for its privileging of territorial identity and (normally) a single language.

Citizenship is also unique in defining itself as an association of separate individuals. In the past, one belonged to a tribe, a clan, a caste, an ethnic group, a religious community, and so forth. To possess rights solely as an individual irrespective of any other affiliation is a modern invention. Citizens are, in theory, treated equally by the state, but other forms of collective identity, such as ethnic, cultural, or religious, that associates the individual with anything other than the state can be viewed as problematic. This is perhaps why the modern nation-state feels threatened by demands made by cultural, ethnic, or religious groups for separate rights or recognition. (In the West, consider the demands made by Scottish Nationalists in the United Kingdom or the Catalan people in Spain.)

Yet a common national identity need not contradict multiple sources of identity. There is no reason why a person cannot be Québécois and Canadian at the same time or Scottish and British, or Muslim and French, or Jewish and English. This is not to say that tensions between these identities do not arise; to be sure, they do, but they are more likely to lead to conflict when identity is defined so tightly as to exclude the other. For example, if being British means being Anglican, then Catholics, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, and the like will be excluded.

One aspect of life in the West that is proving transformative for Muslims and Jews is the notion of hybrid identity, when one's identity is constituted by a multiplicity of distinct identities – cultural, religious, ethnic, linguistic, national. This is a relatively new development in Europe but has a longer history and is more common in the United States.

Consider the example of the American Irish: With the increased communication and ease of travel today, many American citizens of Irish origin participate in the cultural world of Ireland while simultaneously participating in the cultural world of the United States. If asked about their identity, such persons would reply with a compound response such as “American Irish”.

I regularly find that American students enrolled in the Bridging the Great Divide course inform (and sometimes are informed by) fellow students about the consequences of hybrid identities, such as crossing boundaries that divide insider from outsider, thus blurring identity markers that were previously more clearly defined. Boundaries are being remade, redefined, and re-imagined, thus creating new identities.

In times of change, of course, people have to readjust and redefine who they are. It is no easy task to redefine one's identity, the fragility of which can lead to insularity as a defensive mechanism. The reaction against rapidly shifting boundaries of identity, especially when one's 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 constructively in society, especially a society of many cultures and faiths. This is an increasing challenge for both Muslims and Jews.

Jews, however, have had to adapt to Diaspora life since biblical times. For Muslims, particularly in the West, this is one of the biggest challenges, as there is an urgent need to adapt to living as a minority after being in a Muslim majority environment. Islamic jurisprudence did not envisage Muslim communities being formed by voluntary migration from Muslim to non-Muslim lands. Muslim theologians are therefore grappling with systematic formulations of being a minority, a quite different experience than that faced by Jews, who have nearly always been a minority.

### ***Bridging the Great Divide***

When Akbar Ahmed and I were inspired to create Bridging the Great Divide, we sought to provide an e-learning course that would enable students from around the world not only to learn about Muslim-Jewish relations but also to develop strategies for building bridges between the two communities. It has become more than a university course, with Pakistani Muslims and American Jews studying together alongside students from Australia, Canada, Israel, Morocco, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. In previous years, we have had a student from Gaza, another from Jerusalem, and still another from Amman studying together (virtually).

Since this is an academic programme committed to scholarly integrity, providing a (virtual) forum in which to reflect on and discuss a broad range of issues in the Muslim-

Jewish encounter, it does not preclude the more controversial topics. The most difficult to discuss is, of course, Israel and Palestine; it would be a mistake to avoid discussing this topic since, for both communities, it is a core issue in the Muslim-Jewish encounter.

However, it is not the place to start a dialogue or to start the study of Muslim-Jewish relations. The first half of *Bridging the Great Divide* deals with Jewish and Muslim self-understanding in the face of the other, before moving onto more contentious areas. Our experience shows that once students have built up a level of understanding of their own faith, as well as that of the other, the course picks up momentum and trust is established. What follows, in general, is the fostering of better understanding of the other, which is one of the central aims of interfaith dialogue.

One topic that students, especially Muslim students, have found helpful in the early stages is studying the *convivencia*, the relatively easy coexistence (lit. *living together*) of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in medieval Spain and Portugal. Students learn that Jews were present at court as royal physicians and, in the eleventh century, when the Córdoba state had fallen apart, served as viziers to the Berber kings of Granada. It is important not to idealize this relationship: Non-Muslims were *dhimmīs*, subject to restrictions such as heavier taxation; on the other hand, there was no attempt to insist on the full rigour of these restrictions. With the coming in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries of the uncompromising Almoravid and Almohad rulers – Moroccan Berbers who had little experience of religious minorities – the outlook for Jews became darker, and many migrated to Christian Spain, where similar openness was visible at the courts of Aragon, Castile, Portugal, and Navarre. The age of *convivencia* was dealt its death blow not by the expulsion of Jews and Muslims in 1492 but by the pogroms of 1391, which resulted in mass conversions and marginalization of those Jews and Muslims who remained – later known as *marranos* and *moriscos*.

Al-Andalus is important because it shows that the two communities had successfully created together literature, art, philosophy, and other cultural endeavours. Our students are assigned the task of reflecting on how Jews and Muslims should practically move the dialogue forward today. Their suggestions vary, but the common denominator is that a foundation of mutual trust and respect is best built step by step (e.g., by organizing reciprocal visits to synagogues and mosques, developing joint strategies on issues such as discrimination, and supporting each other's attempt to maintain a distinctive religious identity in a society that promotes conformity to the majority culture).

*Bridging the Great Divide* works on the basis that fostering real understanding and creating a constructive relationship begin with building bridges and establishing what is held in common. Modern Christian-Jewish dialogue began, for example, not with an exploration of Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism but with a rediscovery of the Jewishness of Jesus and the Jewish origins of Christianity. By beginning with commonality, our students achieve minimum levels of knowledge (faith literacy), which result in increasing trust, respect, and sensitivity. They are then better equipped to move on to the trickier issues.

Jews and Muslims share many of the same reasons (both positive and negative) for engaging with one another. Some may start for defensive reasons – to respond to the external ignorant and negative stereotypes – because the spectre of anti-Semitism continues to haunt Jewish communities in Europe, as does Islamophobia for Muslim communities, feeding on fears in general. In such circumstances, *Bridging the Great Divide* has, for some students, taken on the added dimension of mutual support and solidarity. At the same time, our students learn that a lack of knowledge within both Jewish and Muslim communities provides a seedbed for prejudice.

As well as important academic programmes in the West, such as in Cambridge, at the American University (AU) in Washington, D.C., and at the Center for the Study of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations, Merrimack College, North Andover, MA, the work of educational institutions beyond – such as the Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID) in Doha, Qatar, the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) in Vienna, the Centre for Dialogue and Action in Pakistan, and the Centre for Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations at the Open University in Israel – are vital for the pursuit of knowledge and furthering understanding. It is one of the reasons that the Woolf Institute has developed joint programmes for academic collaboration with the AU and DICID.

There are, of course, positive reasons for engaging in the study of Muslim-Jewish relations as well. European Muslims and Jews have something very much in common with one another and with some other minority groups: their relationship with Europe. The role they will play as a distinct community (in whichever countries they live) is by no means settled. The European dimension may offer a very productive framework in which Jews and Muslims can find ways of becoming at ease with themselves and their desire for distinctiveness. Tariq Ramadan, for example, sees the forging of a “European Islam” – which sounds like a “European Judaism” that some European Jews such as Jonathan Magonet look toward as a key to the integration of Muslims in European societies in a form that does not involve abandoning fundamental aspects of Islamic identity.

One initiative worth highlighting is publication of the world’s first letter in modern times (2008) from Muslim leaders to the Jewish community – *An Open Letter: A Call to Dialogue and Understanding between Muslims and Jews* – calling for peace and understanding. This letter, which should be viewed as an attempt to build bridges, appeared a year after the publication of *A Common Word*, an open letter written by Muslim leaders to the Christian world. One of its signatories was Akbar Ahmed. The initiative behind the letter to the Jewish community came from Muslim scholars – Akbar Ahmed, Aminah Ahmed Hoti, and Sheikh Michael Mumisa – who collaborated with leading Muslims from the United Kingdom and overseas. Tariq Ramadan spoke of its significance: “I really think that this Letter is a signal that we are ready to call for dialogue... We need to get beyond ‘tolerance’ which is saying that ‘I put up with you but I would rather you were not here’ to a mutual knowledge and a mutual respect.” He described dialogue with Jews as “a risk but a necessity.”<sup>11</sup>

The letter acknowledges the striking commonalities of Islam and Judaism and those historic periods and places of remarkable cooperation and cross-fertilization between the two faith communities, much of which has been overshadowed and even hijacked by modern politics. The letter demonstrates a willingness on the part of Muslim leaders to call on their own community to reach out constructively to Jews.

By now, I hope I have shown that beginning with what is shared in common provides the foundation for the study of Muslim-Jewish relations. However, we also need to take into account that relations today are overshadowed by the failure of both communities to address the impact of the Middle East conflict. For most Jews, 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. Yet for many Muslims, Arabs and non-Arabs, the permanent existence of a Jewish state in the Middle East is a religious and political anomaly.

Our students (and others) need to recognize that 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. Jews 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, Arab and non-Arab, term the same events *Al-Naqba*, “the disaster,” a time when an Arab-Islamic society was uprooted and became a minority in a land that was once *Dār al-Islām*. Most Jews do not separate Zionism from its deep religious roots within Judaism. However, some Muslims (and Christians) make a distinction between Zionism and Judaism.

There are, of course, also many Jews and Muslims (and Christians) who are deeply concerned about the other, making this a complicated picture to understand. There are numerous examples of dialogue groups collapsing, being damaged or overshadowed by a failure to successfully meet and converse around the topic. In our experience, however, it is essential that before discussing Israel and Palestine, students have learned that present confrontations and tensions need not be set in stone and that reading history and acknowledging different narratives help them see Muslim-Jewish relations in a more understanding light.

Thus, Bridging the Great Divide students are more prepared for conflicting views and, indeed, they grow and change during the course.

### *Minority transformations*

If the challenges faced in Muslim-Jewish relations 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 Muslim-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.

Yet there are features of Jewish-Christian relations that may be helpful for the Muslim-Jewish encounter, such as the publication of official documents and the promulgations of the churches that demonstrate that Christians and Jews have come to understand their relationship in positive terms. The landmark change came about with the publication on 28 October 1965 of the Vatican II declaration on non-Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate*, which effectively reversed the classical “teaching of contempt” against Jews and Judaism.<sup>12</sup> Such far-reaching re-evaluations of basic Christian teachings are gradually filtering down to local levels. There have also been a small number of Jewish statements about Christianity, such as *Dabru Emet* (2000).<sup>13</sup> We now urgently need statements and documents on Muslim-Jewish relations, such as the Muslim letter mentioned earlier.

In addition, we need serious studies and textbooks on the subject of Muslim-Jewish relations. To understand the historical dimensions of mutual perceptions in modern times, the roots of Muslim-Jewish relations need to be recovered and accurately mapped. Furthermore, the full history of Judaism and Islam can only be written when the controversialist tradition they share is taken into account. A genuine interfaith encounter must allow for acknowledging sharp differences. The task of making these sources known and accessible to the wider scholarly community should be undertaken without delay.

At the same time, Jews and Muslims share a rich vocabulary because of the similarities between Hebrew and Arabic and the fact that the entire medieval Jewish philosophy was developed within an Islamic milieu, which also contributed both to concepts and to the Hebrew language itself. Jews provided the translations of Arabic texts that made their way

into Latin via Hebrew. Medieval Hebrew religious and secular poetry is a direct consequence of exposure to Arabic models. Jewish culture responded to contact with Islam by adopting similar styles and by engaging in the close study of grammar, following Arabic methods of study.

Even more significant is the fact that Judaism in its classical form, like Islam, is based on law, a law that comprehended every aspect of private and public life. Thus religion and politics belonged together as inseparable parts of a total worldview or, as it is commonly expressed, Judaism (and in this sense Islam) is not a “religion” but a “way of life.” Thus the approach to day-to-day issues and concerns, from food laws to marriage and divorce, is similar in both traditions, as are the legal methodologies used to address such matters.

Today, it is no longer sufficient simply to translate one another’s writings, although that would be an important start. The Middle East conflict makes the task more difficult but more urgent. As Rev. Martin Luther King said, we live in the “fierce urgency of Now.” In the past we have defined ourselves in contradistinction, but today we have to define ourselves in relationship to one another, for whatever affects one directly will affect all indirectly.

## Conclusion

Both of us authors of this chapter have been involved for more than two decades in interfaith dialogue. In concluding this piece, therefore, let us distil the basic lessons we have learned. We would suggest the following steps to those interested in joining interfaith discussions.

First, encourage more and consistent dialogue between the Jews and Muslims. (We are strong advocates of interfaith dialogue including with non-Abrahamic peoples, but here we are focusing on Jews and Muslims.) Conferences and seminars need to be promoted, and communication and dialogue must extend beyond religious leaders to reach ordinary members of the community. The more people see Jews and Muslims, of course, as well as Christians, talking to each other in public, the more they are encouraged to believe that dialogue is possible.

These exchanges must be conducted with courtesy and even humility. They are not to show the superiority of your faith or an attempt to convert the other. They are an exercise in learning and even bridge building. From such initiatives come lasting friendships. When, as an example, Prof. Ahmed was asked by *The Times Higher Educational Supplement* for their “Past Masters” series to name the person who had the most impact on his academic life, his choice was his friend Ernest Gellner, whom he called “my guru” (Ahmed 1995, March 17). Gellner was a giant of a man in spirit and intellect – and happened to be of Jewish background.

Second, pursue the history, culture, and religion of the other in a scholarly and sympathetic manner. Books and articles need to be read and scholars consulted (see, for examples, Ahmed 2007, 2010; Armstrong 2000; Sacks 2002, 2005).

Third, regular visits to each other’s places of worship should be part of this understanding. A visit to a house of worship and a chat with the religious head of the institution invariably enlightens and often adds an important dimension to the dialogue. Too often we hear people say they have not visited any house of worship outside their own. Every school term, invariably, bright and enthusiastic students from a variety of religious backgrounds eager to compensate for their lack of experience in this field will confirm this fact.

Fourth, it is vital to write and publish about this subject. Too often the literature is written with a view to projecting a point of view rather than sharing genuine research. There is enough controversy and vitriol around the subject. Scholarship will help put things in a context and allow us to continue talking.

Fifth, joint courses on the Abrahamic faiths, such as the courses organized by Edward Kessler and Aminah Hoti at Cambridge or the course run jointly by Akbar Ahmed and Edward Kessler, need to be introduced in teaching institutions. Learning together has a profound effect on people.

Finally, we must develop an understanding of the relationship between Jews and Muslims. We acknowledge that, to most people, the relationship between Jews and Muslims is a mystery; to many Jews and Muslims themselves, it is a frustrating riddle. To attempt to understand that relationship requires both commitment and courage. It is not an easy journey and not for the faint-hearted. In our case, Akbar Ahmed had to face nasty attacks by both Muslims such as Sheikh Bakri and Islamophobes, and Edward Kessler has had to tackle prejudice within the Jewish community as well as anti-Semitism. Yet we believe that developing an understanding of the relationship between Jews and Muslims is a vital exercise not only for the Abrahamic faiths but for world peace.

It is in this spirit that we applaud the champions who have emerged on both sides to promote dialogue – including Rabbi Lord (Jonathan) Sacks and Rabbis Bruce Lustig and Marc Schneier on one side and Prince Hassan of Jordan and Aminah Hoti on the other. As both streams are now in full flow, many more peacemakers are emerging, especially in the young generation – many of them our students. Our blessings and prayers go with these trailblazers.

Let us give the last word to our friend Lord Sacks by referring to his message of *tikkun olam*, to heal a fractured world: it must now become the motto for our time.

## Notes

- 1 Adam Lebor, *A Heart Turned East: Among the Muslims of Europe and America* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), pp. 142–145.
- 2 Akbar Ahmed, “My grandson, child of the People of the Book,” *The Guardian*, 16 January 1999: <http://www.theguardian.com/news/1999/jan/16/guardianobituaries> Accessed: 1 March 2016.
- 3 Runnymede Report, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* (London: The Runnymede Trust, 1997). p. 4. <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/islamophobia.pdf> Accessed: 30 April 2016.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 See Paula Span, “Across the great divide,” *Washington Post, Post Magazine*, August 2 (2004). <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A19541-2004Jul27.html> Access date: 1 March 2016.
- 7 Stephen Bates, “Fresh attacks on chief rabbi’s book: Sacks fails in moves to mollify orthodox leaders,” *The Guardian*, 17 October 2002. <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2002/oct/18/religion.politicsphilosophyandsociety> Accessed: 30 April 2016.
- 8 Melody Fox, “‘Unprecedented’ visit of Chief Rabbi UK to home of Muslim scholar,” *Pakistan Link*, 5 December 2005. <http://pakistanlink.org/Opinion/2005/Dec05/16/04.HTM> Accessed: 30 April 2016.
- 9 Mentioned in Aminah Hoti, “Spring - a symbol of hope,” *The Friday Times*, 20 February 2015, <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/spring-a-symbol-of-hope/> Accessed: 30 April 2016.
- 10 “An Open Letter: A Call to Dialogue and Understanding between Muslims and Jews,” (Cambridge: Woolf Institute, 2008): <http://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/resources/reports.asp?ItemID=512> Accessed: 30 April 2016.
- 11 Remarks at the launch of “An Open Letter,” Cambridge, U.K., 25 February 2008.
- 12 *Nostra Aetate*: [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) Accessed: 30 April 2016.

- 13 “Dabru Emet,” Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies: <http://www.icjs.org/resources/dabruemet> Accessed: 30 April 2016.

## Further reading

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- Ahmed, Akbar, *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam* (Washington, DC: Brookings Press, 2010). Studies the Muslim community of the United States and U.S. perceptions of Islam after 9/11 based on a year’s worth of fieldwork across the United States, for which Ahmed and his team visited 75 cities and 100 mosques.
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- Eilberg, Amy, “Children of Abraham in Dialogue,” in *Muslims and Jews in America: Commonalities, Contentions, and Complexities*, eds. Reza Aslan and Aaron J. Hahn Tapper. (New York: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 33–44. A useful overview to dialogue among the Abrahamic faiths in the United States, offering insight into discussion of scripture.
- Lebor, Adam, *A Heart Turned East: Among the Muslims of Europe and America* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1997). Examines the life of Muslims in both Europe and America during the 1990s.
- Magonet, Jonathan, *Talking to the Other: A Jewish Interfaith Dialogue with Christians and Muslims* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2003). Insightful overview of Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue by a leading British scholar and theologian.
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