Bridging Traditions: Reflection on Nearly Half a Century of Jewish-Orthodox Christian Dialogue in Cambridge

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General Introduction to the Topic: the encounters of Orthodox Christianity and Judaism

Orthodox Christianity is often seen as the Christian tradition most closely aligned with Judaism, both theologically and ritually. This affnity is evident in shared scriptures, the continuity between Old and New Testament narratives, and overlapping liturgical elements such as the use of Psalms, incense, chant, and fasting. Orthodox practices like the Eucharist echo the symbolism of the Passover, while its spiritual emphasis on personal transformation through communal worship and ascetic discipline reflects longstanding Jewish ethical frameworks. As Andrew Louth notes, the early Church's communal identity was shaped significantly by Jewish models of covenantal life.

Nicholas de Lange's study, *Byzantium and the Judaic Tradition*,[1] further explores the deep historical and theological interactions between Byzantine Christianity and Judaism. His work highlights both convergence and tension – ranging from liturgical influences to theological debates and legal dynamics – shedding light on the complex relationship between the two traditions.

Yet, this theological and ritual proximity has not always fostered harmony. In certain historical contexts, particularly in Eastern Europe, closeness bred not solidarity but antagonism. The process of Christian identity formation often involved distinguishing itself from Judaism, at times transforming shared elements into symbols of difference. This led to the spread of harmful myths, such as the blood libel, which in turn justified pogroms and systemic violence against Jewish communities. Orthodox emphasis on doctrinal purity sometimes reinforced these divisions, marginalizing what was perceived as religious deviation.

From an anthropological perspective, reframing sin not as an endpoint but as a product of human freedom opens space for more compassionate pastoral care. Recognizing the human capacity for transformation and meaningful relationship with God encourages a shift from punitive frameworks toward healing and reconciliation. This is especially relevant when confronting legacies of religious prejudice.

Thus, the history of Jewish–Orthodox encounters is marked by both profound afinity and painful discord. Shared theological roots have at times intensified polemical differences, underscoring the urgent need for renewed understanding.

In this light, inter-religious dialogue becomes essential. It fosters empathy, reduces prejudice, and uncovers shared spiritual values. True engagement, however, requires participants to be deeply rooted in their own traditions – through both intellectual comprehension and lived experience. Such grounding nurtures openness and respect for the beliefs of others without fear or defensiveness.

Ultimately, dialogue offers a path to healing and unity. It builds trust, deepens faith, and encourages encounters that transcend religious boundaries. Against this backdrop, the study turns

to the experience of one particular group in the United Kingdom that actively promotes such dialogue, offering a practical model for fostering mutual understanding.

Practical Experience of Jewish-Orthodox Christian Dialogue

The inter-religious dialogue group currently based in Cambridge originated in the mid-1980s, initially centered in London. Its founding figures included prominent voices from both Orthodox Christianity and Judaism: Rabbi Louis Jacobs, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, Fr Sergey Hackel, Fr Yves Dubois, Rabbi Professor Nicholas de Lange, and Revd Professor Andrew Louth. Among its distinguished members over the years have been Professor Irina Levinskaya (recently deceased), Bishop Basil (Osborne), Rabbi Norman Solomon, Professor Rabbi Mark Saperstein, Rabbi Sybil Sheridan, Professor Revd Krastu Banev, Professor Stella Rock, Rabbi Mark Solomon, Revd Dr Ian Graham, Dr Elena Narinskaya, and many others.

The group now convenes biannually – typically in the autumn and spring – at the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge. Its structure has remained largely consistent: each meeting is organised around a selected theme with two main speakers, one from each tradition. Each presentation is followed by a formal response from a representative of the other faith. This reciprocal format has proven effective in fostering dynamic dialogue and thoughtful engagement, enabling participants to explore a wide range of theological, ethical, and historical issues in depth.

As mutual trust and understanding have developed, the group has increasingly tackled challenging subjects such as anti-Judaism and the blood libel with remarkable honesty. These conversations have enabled deep reflection and a more nuanced examination of the shared, and at times painful, history between the two traditions. Far from remaining a purely academic exercise, these gatherings have grown into genuine theological encounters – spaces where lived faith and scholarly inquiry meet.

An important observation from these dialogues is that constructive conversation often emerges more readily between open-hearted interlocutors from different religious backgrounds than with fundamentalist voices within one’s own tradition. This underscores the importance of openness and humility as prerequisites for meaningful engagement.

One of the group’s defining strengths is its commitment to maintaining a dialogue that is both academically rigorous and spiritually sincere. This dual focus has made it a model of inter-religious engagement, particularly relevant given the profound theological and ritual afinities between Judaism and Orthodox Christianity. At the same time, the shared heritage that underpins these conversations can also be a source of historical tension – manifesting in patterns of anti-Judaism and antisemitism that have shaped Christian–Jewish relations over centuries.

Participation in such dialogue not only deepens understanding of the other tradition but often strengthens one’s own faith. Exposure to another tradition’s spiritual and theological richness encourages a more grounded and reflective religious identity. This, in turn, offers a powerful antidote to religious intolerance and hostility. The promotion of sincere inter-religious dialogue across faith traditions emerges, therefore, as one of the most constructive responses to historical prejudice and contemporary challenges.

The following section of this study will explore this further through the example of the Cambridge-based dialogue group, offering insight into how such sustained engagement can shape theology, pastoral practice, and interfaith understanding today.

The Significance of Inter-Religious Dialogue for Religious Representatives

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As trust deepened within the group, participants developed personal relationships that allowed for sustained, honest, and intellectually rigorous inter-religious and interpersonal dialogue. What sets this group apart is its commitment not only to theological discourse but also to fostering genuine relationships grounded in intellectual curiosity and spiritual appreciation. This ensures that the discussions reflect living traditions as personally experienced and interpreted by their practitioners, rather than remaining in the realm of abstract or academic debate.

Engagement in such dialogue broadens participants understanding of other faiths and often deepens their appreciation of their own. For Orthodox Christianity – historically and theologically close to Judaism – this exchange has proved especially fruitful. Yet, the very closeness between the two traditions has historically been double-edged: while it allows for meaningful engagement, it has also given rise to tensions, including instances of anti-Judaism and antisemitism – tragic legacies that such dialogue now seeks to address.

From 2003 to 2019, the group explored a wide range of topics, including Genesis 3 and the Fall, Tradition and Worship, the role of Law, and more difficult subjects such as anti-Judaism and blood libel. These were approached with honesty and scholarly rigor, yielding deep reflection and interfaith insight. Esteemed scholars and religious leaders contributed to these discussions, enriching the group’s collective understanding of theology, history, and inter-religious engagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the group’s regular meetings in 2020. Notably, the members rejected virtual alternatives, believing that in-person dialogue is essential for fostering trust and genuine exchange. Meetings resumed as soon as circumstances permitted, reafirming the group’s commitment to face-to-face engagement. Occasionally, visitors have been welcomed, offering fresh perspectives and insight.

Beyond meetings, the group has published two volumes. The first addresses theological themes, while the second tackles contemporary issues such as COVID-19, gender, purity laws, sexuality, euthanasia, and interfaith tensions. Rather than offering prescriptive answers, both volumes encourage critical engagement and deep reflection, providing accessible insights for those interested in interfaith dialogue and modern religious thought.

A distinguishing feature of the group is the integration of formal discussion with informal, personal encounters. Shared meals and informal conversations often become as meaningful as the presentations themselves, allowing for the embodiment of inter-religious dialogue in daily practice. Participants learn from one another not only through theology but through shared religious experience and personal testimony.

Participation in such dialogue requires deep grounding in one’s own faith – through study, practice, and lived experience. This grounding fosters openness, enabling individuals to engage with the beliefs of others without insecurity or defensiveness. It also allows for critical reflection on one’s own tradition, without losing appreciation for its beauty and significance.

Such dialogue is not only about understanding the other but also about transforming the self. As representatives from Judaism and Orthodox Christianity engage in mutual exploration, they discover shared ethical values, spiritual depth, and historical interconnection. The process fosters trust, counters prejudice, and models a form of religious engagement that is both critical and compassionate.

This group stands as a testament to the transformative power of inter- religious dialogue. While its influence may be modest on a global scale, the profound impact on its participants – and now its readers – is undeniable. The following section will explore in greater detail the themes addressed by the group over the past two decades.

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Jewish–Orthodox Christian Dialogue: Reflections on Two Decades of Interfaith Engagement (2003–2024)

Over nearly two decades, from 2003 to 2019 – with further sessions extending into 2022 and 2024 – a Jewish–Orthodox Christian discussion group has served as a vibrant forum for interfaith dialogue. Gathering scholars, clergy, and researchers, the group has explored a wide range of themes, addressing both historical legacies and pressing contemporary challenges in religious thought. This text offers a thematic synthesis of the discussions held over these years.

Biblical Foundations and Theological Anthropology

The early meetings established a theological foundation, focusing on biblical narratives that shape understandings of sin and human nature. A notable session on 19 May 2003 explored *The Fall in Genesis 3*, setting the tone for subsequent discussions of sin and moral failure as central to theological anthropology. The dialogue often revolved around the contrast between sin and virtue, with both traditions examining human fallibility in light of divine expectation.

Liturgical Practices and Interfaith Dialogue

From the outset, comparative liturgical reflection was a prominent theme. Sessions such as those on 19 May and 18 November 2003 explored “Jewish– Orthodox Dialogue” and “Tradition and Worship,” facilitating comparative analysis of ritual, prayer, and communal religious life. Later discussions delved into theological concepts such as the Rabbinic doctrine of the two inclinations and the Christian idea of “two spirits” or “ways,” both traditions reflecting deeply on the nature of human motivation and ethical decision-making.

Addressing Historical Tensions

The group did not shy away from painful historical episodes. The session on 10 June 2004, for instance, examined the *Blood Libel* in Russia, illuminating how anti-Jewish myths have left enduring scars. These discussions were marked by honesty, fostering critical reflection on the legacy of religious conflict and the importance of confronting prejudice in theological contexts.

Legal Thought and Moral Responsibility

In May 2007, the group explored *Law in Judaism and Christianity*, investigating how each tradition conceives of divine justice, legal obligation, and moral responsibility. Discussions revealed tensions between formal legalism and more personal, conscience-driven interpretations of moral law. The dialogue revealed both shared ethical concerns and divergent theological frameworks.

Confession, Sacrifice, and Sacred Space

Confession, sacrifice, and sacred space emerged as recurring themes. Several sessions addressed the sacramental and penitential practices of each tradition, including the theology of confession as both spiritual renewal and moral accountability. Topics such as *Divine Images, Angels*, and *Sacred Space* highlighted the experiential dimensions of religious life and the role of material and symbolic elements in the encounter with the divine.

Ethics, Environment, and Society

From 2014 onwards, contemporary ethical and social concerns became increasingly central. Environmental ethics, for example, were discussed with reference to Orthodox liturgical responses

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and evolving Jewish ecological discourse. Other sessions explored the ethical implications of power, authority, and religious leadership, as well as the role of pilgrimage and love in religious identity formation.

Tradition and Modernity

A consistent theme across the years has been the challenge of integrating ancient religious traditions with modern psychological, philosophical, and existential insights. Discussions sought to reinterpret classical doctrines – such as sin, guilt, and sacredness – through the lens of contemporary understanding. Titles such as *The God Who Can Be Said and the God Who Cannot Be Said* reflected this theological grappling, encouraging more nuanced and inclusive approaches to divine mystery and human experience.

Expanding Horizons: 2022–2024

Recent sessions continued this evolution, engaging with pressing contemporary issues. Topics included the role of Ukraine in both Jewish historical memory and Orthodox Christian imagination, and explorations of sacrifice in religious and geopolitical contexts. The group also tackled the intersection of faith and mental health, and the moral weight of war and suffering, reflecting an ongoing commitment to relevance and moral engagement.

Reflections on the Group's Impact

The group's sustained interfaith engagement – now extending over twenty years – has yielded significant theological and spiritual insights. Themes such as sin, confession, liturgy, and moral law have been enriched through reciprocal reflection and respectful challenge. These dialogues have not only deepened mutual understanding between Judaism and Orthodox Christianity but have also allowed participants to revisit their own traditions through fresh, critical perspectives.

Since the publication of two volumes[2] – one exploring theological foundations and the other addressing contemporary challenges – the group has increasingly sought to share its insights with a broader audience. These publications address complex issues such as religious purity, sexuality, euthanasia, and interfaith tensions, encouraging nuanced engagement rather than offering reductive answers.

As the group looks to the future, its accumulated intellectual and spiritual capital holds promise for further publications and public engagement. With nearly half a century of collective interfaith experience, the group stands as a testament to the transformative potential of sustained dialogue. It offers a compelling alternative to contemporary religious and ideological isolationism, fostering trust, empathy, and mutual enrichment.

While it would be ambitious to suggest that a single group in Cambridge could reshape global religious dynamics, its impact on participants has been profound. Moreover, through its ongoing efforts to publish and disseminate its work, the group has begun to extend its reach, modelling a respectful, intellectually rigorous, and spiritually grounded form of interfaith engagement.

In a world increasingly marked by division, such initiatives serve as an antidote to religious prejudice, social hostility, and theological chauvinism. By providing a space where faith can be explored not only through doctrine but through shared human experience, the group reminds us of the enduring relevance – and urgent need – for authentic inter-religious dialogue.

Conclusion

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The long-standing and continuously evolving experience of one particular Jewish–Orthodox Christian dialogue group offers a compelling example of how interreligious encounters can, over time, shape and deepen the religious identity of their participants. This lived experience directly contributes to the broader themes of this paper – namely, the bridging of religious traditions and the reflection on interfaith dialogue as a meaningful and transformative practice. Beyond the intrinsic value of participation for those involved and the publication of two volumes capturing the group's rich theological discussions, the group itself stands as a unique and concrete manifestation of the fruits of dialogue. It represents an alternative paradigm of encounter in a world increasingly marked by hostility, polarization, and entrenched divisions.

In contemporary discourse – both religious and secular – aggression, disrespect, and narrow-mindedness often dominate. Conflicts, whether global or local, continue to reflect humanity's deep-seated fear of the other, of what is unfamiliar. This instinctual reaction, perhaps once rooted in evolutionary self-preservation, still governs much of human behaviour. However, in an age shaped by millennia of shared history and cultural development, there is an urgent need to embrace alternative models of relationship-building – models grounded in mutual understanding, empathy, and the willingness to listen.

Interreligious dialogue does not emerge spontaneously. It requires prior formation, education, and a readiness to venture beyond the familiar boundaries of one's cultural or religious norms. It is not easy to encounter differences without defensiveness, and yet the potential benefits of such encounters are immense. At the heart of dialogue lies a profound and often unsettling realization: there may be more than one truthful perspective, more than one valid insight into the nature of God, the human person, or the relationship between them. Dialogue teaches us that contrasting views can, in fact, illuminate different facets of a larger and more complex reality.

This capacity to appreciate the beliefs, practices, and traditions of others does not negate the significance or integrity of one's own faith. On the contrary, it encourages a more nuanced and enriched understanding of one's own religious heritage, while simultaneously creating space for others to contribute meaningfully to the shared human pursuit of the divine. In an ideal world, such an approach would foster fewer conflicts and greater mutual respect, allowing differences to be seen not as threats but as valuable resources in the quest for peace and reconciliation.

Admittedly, this may seem a distant ideal, especially in a modern world characterized by rapid change, existential anxiety, and political instability. Yet, reflecting seriously on the significance of dialogue – as a mode of engagement and a moral imperative – offers a constructive starting point. It encourages individuals and communities alike to reevaluate the role of difference, not as a hindrance, but as a source of enrichment and collaborative growth. In this way, interreligious dialogue has the potential to foster more lasting and peaceful bonds between peoples, traditions, and nations.

The purpose of this report, therefore, is to underscore the value of interfaith dialogue not only as a tool for fostering outward openness toward others, but also as a pathway to deeper engagement with one's own tradition. Dialogue invites a recognition that no single religious expression holds a monopoly on truth. Instead, it affirms that each tradition – while retaining its uniqueness – can offer indispensable insights into the human experience of the divine. Such a perspective does not diminish the value of one's own heritage but rather situates it within a broader, more inclusive vision of humanity's shared spiritual quest.

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