



The Future of Interreligious Dialogue in Israel

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What does the future for interreligious dialogue look like in Israel? At a time when stabbings on the street have become almost a daily occurrence and tension is high, can Jews, Muslims and Christians -- all citizens of the state of Israel -- envision a better future for the followers of their religion in this country? How we bring the reality closer to the ideal? In which areas, and with which target groups, should we focus?

These were the questions that were discussed at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute before an overflowing audience of more than 150 people, on Thursday afternoon and evening, December 2nd 2015. My organization--the [Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel](#), a department of [Rabbis for Human Rights](#) (since January 2015) --co-hosted this conference with 3 other Jerusalem-based organizations -- the [Sisters of Sion](#), the [Tantur Ecumenical Institute](#), and the [Van Leer Jerusalem Institute](#)-- to explore these issues and to reflect upon them together in an atmosphere of mutual respect and genuine trust.

Our first speaker, The Very Reverend Hosam Elias Naoum, who serves as the Dean of the St. George's Anglican Cathedral in Jerusalem offered serious and sensitive reflections. The first Palestinian dean of this Anglican cathedral, he outlined two main challenges to our work: First, the ongoing political situation, and the difficulty to separate religion from politics in our region. The goal, he said is for religions to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. Second, the challenge of fundamentalism and extremism in all three monotheistic religions in our country--Judaism, Christianity and Islam -- is a challenge that we all face. There is an immediate need for moderate voices to be raised, heard and have more influence.

How can we improve the situation? Fr. Naoum delineated two areas in which religious leaders in our country can play a significant positive role. The first is in Education, especially through schools. There are many Christian schools in Israel, which teach the values of living together. Yet, this can be done better and more systematically in the future. The second area is through Worship and Study--through sermons from the pulpit and through Bible study groups. Much more can be done through these frameworks to promote peaceful coexistence. Fr. Naoum stressed that we need to work with religious leaders at all levels, from the top to the grass roots, since they have the power to make things happen, to effect change.

The second speaker, Rabbi Noa Sattath, Director of the [Israel Religious Action Center](#), the advocacy arm of the Reform Jewish movement in Israel, also addressed the problem of religious extremism, which is growing in Israel. She spoke passionately of the need for liberal religious groups to offer an alternative religious vision to the negative one that occupies so much attention in the media. "This is our moment," she said. "We need to reach out to the silent majority."

Rabbi Sattath even offered a practical creative idea to go along with her philosophy. She suggested that three thousand Jews and Christians could gather together in Jerusalem on Jerusalem Day next year, to hold hands around Jerusalem, to prevent the anti-Arab violence on the part of Jewish religious/nationalist extremists that has become the hallmark of Jerusalem Day in recent years.

Our third speaker, Issa Jabber -- the mayor of the Israeli Arab town of Abu Gosh, and a former

chairperson for many years of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel--said poignantly:

We all have a dream, a vision of what we would like....we need to change the conditions in our reality. We need a more peaceful life, based on harmony rather than killing each other. We need to end injustice, and the frustration that results from ongoing injustice. And we have a lot to do to achieve our visions. We need to be more courageous. We need to speak the truth. And we need to develop more trust, through dialogue, among us.

In addition, as an educator for most of his life, Mr. Jabber emphasized that we need to change many things in our education system, so that it can educate young people for coexistence in more significant ways. Also, we ought to reach out in more systematic ways to the mass media to get our message of moderation and peaceful living to be heard louder and more often.

Following the opening panel discussion, people at the conference were able to choose from one of three workshops to discuss the issues in greater depth. One was on "The Future of Jewish-Muslim Relations in Israel"; another was on "the Future of Jewish-Christian Relations in Israel"; and the third one was on "Engaging Young Adults and the Role of Social Media". I attended the first one.

At the workshop on Jewish-Muslim Relations in Israel, the Jewish presenter was Rabbi Michael Melchior, who has invested more time and energy on this issue than any rabbi in Israel, and continues to do so. He is the founder and Chairman of the Mosaica Center for Religious Conflict Transformation in the Middle East, and of several other organizations dedicated to such causes as religious peacebuilding, promoting dialogue among different sectors of Israeli society and building bridges for coexistence and justice between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs. In his own unique passionate and persuasive style, Rabbi Melchior talked about the need for religious peace, not just secular peace. The secularists who led the Oslo Peace Process left out religion and religious leaders. This was a major mistake. According to him, in order to have peaceful coexistence in the future, we will need to involve religious leaders and their followers much more than in the past, if we are going to succeed.

In my own work in interreligious dialogue over the past 25 years, I too have been engaged much more in Muslim-Jewish Relations than in Jewish-Christians Relations, especially lately and especially locally. The wars with Christianity ended a long time ago. The Crusades are over. We have been in active and successful dialogue with major Christian denominations, since the promulgation of "[Nostra Aetate](#)" by the Catholic Church a half a century ago.

Now we have to develop a systematic, sensitive and substantive dialogue with Muslim religious leaders, educators, cultural leaders, youth, young adults and women's groups in ways that we have not done in the past. The good news is that there is much interest in this among the moderate Muslim majority in Israel. Yet, new ways of bridging the gap between Israeli Jews and Muslims have not yet been developed significantly within Israel. In my view, this is the major challenge facing Jews engaged in interreligious relations in Israel (and in the Diaspora) in the years ahead. Taking up this challenge-- as well as resolving the political one --will be major tasks for the next generation. Both will be essential for the ongoing development of our common life in this country in the decades ahead.

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