



## FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

### **Axel M. Oaks Takacs**

When I received a proposal from Geoffrey Claussen, Barış Kesgin, and David Marshall to guest edit a special issue on Teaching Israel/Palestine (emerging from a conference they hosted at Elon University), we were nearly 18 months into the Israeli military’s war in Gaza in response to Hamas’s attacks in Southern Israel. On this side of the Atlantic, tensions in public spaces and university campuses were fraught. Protests and sit-ins were common. Government and university responses varied; some opened dialogue, while others shut them down. It was difficult to make claims about one side of the conflict or the other without being accused of anti-Palestinian or -Muslim bias or suspected of antisemitism. When one attempted to offer claims that were empathetic to suffering—real or perceived, emotional or physical—on both sides, the charge of “false equivalencies” or “lack of historical context” were quickly cast. It was nearly impossible to discuss the accuracies or inaccuracies of using labels such as genocide, collective punishment, and/or disproportionate response. Educators, scholars, government officials, elected politicians, and religious figures, such as rabbis, priests, and imams, were hesitant to speak openly on the topic, lest their students, colleagues, bosses, constituencies, or co-religionists take umbrage (at best) or seek their ousting (at worst). Of course, there was also no lack of courageous voices taking a stand on these issues; they often suffered the consequences.

Given that context, I decided to pursue this special issue and work for its publication. I did so because it was evident that discourse in public spaces, especially social media, had devolved into vitriolic condemnations, reductive one-liners, and ideological echo chambers. As one of my Jewish colleagues put it in a conversation (I paraphrase), “There is already so much trash out there on the internet. You might as well offer something academic, even if some may disagree with the conclusions.” A year since receiving this proposal, nothing much has changed. While I am disheartened that tensions remain fraught and free speech threatened, I am glad that the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* (JIRS) can serve as a venue offering critical, constructive, and generative conversation on how to teach and organize campus events about Palestine/Israel.

I will leave it to our Guest Editors to present the details of this special issue, its contents, and its genesis vis-à-vis the conference they hosted; all this, and more, will be found in their co-authored introduction to follow. Generally, the issue comprises both Invited Scholarly Reflections and peer-reviewed articles. The former category underwent guest editorial and general editorial peer review followed by revisions and re-review before formal acceptance. They were accepted as Invited Scholarly Reflections because their content and arguments offered an academic, peer-reviewable contribution in a reflective mode. Accordingly, they are critical, constructive, generative, and scholarly reflections on teaching and campus organizing around the topic of Israel/Palestine. The peer-reviewed articles underwent guest editorial and general editorial review, followed by revision requests. After initial revisions were received, the articles were then sent to double-blind peer review, with some of them undergoing triple-blind peer review in the event of tiebreakers. As the editor, I was responsible for the peer-review process and therefore made certain that the pair or set of reviewers was marked by viewpoint, religious, and ethnic diversity.

Notwithstanding, I do not doubt that some readers may disagree with the premises or conclusions of some of these articles. However, this is not unique to pieces written on the topic of Palestine/Israel. Any academic article is open to scholarly critique regarding its premises, methods, theories, data analysis, evidence, arguments, interpretations, conclusions, and more. Some may offer more facile objections, such as the lack of explicitly pro-Zionist positions or the articles' relative agreement on definitions regarding genocide and antisemitism. This may be true. But the articles express a scholarly responsibility that is unmistakable in their arguments, evidence, and citational practices. Readers with disagreements are invited to craft their own articles proposing alternative approaches to Israel/Palestine and submit them to the journal for review. This is the nature of scholarly dialogue and debate. Concepts such as antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Muslim or -Palestinian bias, anti-Judaism, Zionism, and genocide are contested and, as academics, it would be unwise to leave their definitions to untrained non-experts. Future articles, if submitted, peer-reviewed, and accepted, could certainly present alternative conceptualizations.

I am pleased that the JIRS can do its part in elevating the conversation around the topic of teaching Palestine/Israel. The articles and reflections are stimulating. They all arise from concrete teaching and event-organizing experiences. Furthermore, they register real tensions (e.g., the role of affect in teaching and the value, or lack thereof, in pursuing narrative approaches to the topic). The pieces discuss imaginative genres in teaching (music and graphic narratives), point out pervasive problems in current practice (e.g.,

single events rather than series, the myth of balance), and represent the institutional diversity of higher education. I am certain this issue will serve as a crucial resource for educators.

Let me also add that this issue closes with two unrelated book reviews:

- *Ibn 'Arabī's Religious Pluralism: Levels of Inclusivity*, by Faris Abdel-hadi; reviewed by Yusri Mohamad Ramli
- *From Outlaw to In-Law: How Multicultural Interfaith Couples Can Become Agents for Social Change*, by Tanya Sadagopan; reviewed by Matthew Maruggi

This issue and its distribution would have not come together without the proficient and superb work of Lydia Bremer-McCollum (Assistant Editor), Sze-Long A. Wong (Design and Production Editor), Mark Spinnenweber (Graduate Research Fellow), and Aubrey Chavez (Social Media and Website Manager). My sincere gratitude is extended to all of them.

Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Th.D.  
Editor-in-Chief  
*Journal of Interreligious Studies*



The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS) are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of Interreligious Studies Media (ISM).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).