

Re-approaching Inter-religious Engagement in Israel/Palestine: Moving Beyond Questions of Religious Identity and Experience, by Peter Dziedzic

Abstract

While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a religious conflict, the presence and influence of religious communities cannot be ignored. Inter-religious engagement among various faith communities is necessary in the region, and various organizations have been committed to this work for years. Yet, has it been enough? In this paper, I argue that many inter-religious engagement initiatives have dangerously segmented questions of religious identity and experience from other modes of experience such as the political, the social, and the economic. While this segmenting is perceived as necessary to bring deeply-wounded and alienated communities to dialogue encounters, such encounters are not honoring the full experiences of participants. In order to more effectively engage religious communities in the process of peacebuilding and reconciliation in Israel/Palestine, inter-religious organizations must pursue more holistic conversations and encounters that re-integrate the religious, social, and political experiences of both Israelis and Palestinians.

Contextualizing Inter-religious Engagement in Israel/Palestine

While the consensus today is that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is essentially a secular conflict, none can doubt the widespread presence of religious communities in the region. Because the land plays a role in the narratives and histories of the three Abrahamic traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—inter-religious dialogue, encounters are often seen as one of the central ways to initiate conversation and engagement amongst Palestinians and Israelis. With apathy towards the peace process rising among both young Palestinians and Israelis, the efficacy of many peacebuilding initiatives is coming into question. What is the effectiveness of inter-religious peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine? There are dozens, if not hundreds of peacebuilding organizations in Israel/Palestine,¹ many of which seek to bring people together to discuss faith and religious identity. Exploring the limitations and possibilities for inter-religious engagement as an aspect of peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine is necessary at such a vital and dire time in the conflict. I hope that this paper, rather than naïvely offering definitive and authoritative solutions to these concerns, will instead invite readers to enter into this critical conversation and offer further insights into re-approaching traditional inter-religious efforts.

Recognizing the Need for Inter-religious Engagement

Despite the widespread divisiveness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the need to engage both Israelis and Palestinians in direct dialogue has been seen as crucial to the success of any reconciliation effort.

Dialogue...is a way of exploring the roots of the many crises that face humanity...It enables inquiry into, and understanding of...processes that fragment and interfere with real communication between individuals [and] nations...²

Dialogue, as a mode of engagement, is used as a way to reach levels of understanding among participants that might not be available in other forms of interaction or communication. When dialogue is used in peacebuilding and reconciliation processes, it offers a framework for the open and direct flow of information, necessary for gaining new insights into how groups and individuals perceive and approach the conflict.³ Among the many parties that are invited to dialogue initiatives and spaces, religious communities and leaders are viewed as central contributors not only in Israel/Palestine, but in many situations of intergroup and transnational conflict.

Religious communities made significant contributions to conflict transformation in the past century...the recent record but hints at the great potential inherent in a more systematic and coordinated mobilization of the spiritual and sociological resources of religion for conflict transformation and peacebuilding.⁴

Encouraging and fostering dialogue among religious communities and leaders is seen as vital in fostering responsible reconciliation efforts in Israel/Palestine, and this has been explicitly offered in the work of Mohammed Abu-Nimer⁵, a leading scholar in peacebuilding studies

“...[t]here has been a rising interest in how religion can be used in both conflict resolution and the peacebuilding process...The importance of inter-religious peacebuilding is obvious from the widespread, central role religion plays in the individual and collective identity of many.”⁶

Inter-religious engagement is a crucial aspect of reconciliation attempts in Israel/Palestine.

While the participation of these communities is recognized as essential, the need to engage the experience of religious identity and religious narratives among Israelis and Palestinians is also a factor that must be considered.

...religious identities clearly and crucially impact the perceptions and behaviors even of those Israelis and Palestinians who do not define themselves as religious or observant. ...religion in the Middle East...has never been separated from politics.⁷

Religious experience and expression is important, but it must be seen and approached in a context of larger social and political frameworks. This contextualization of experience within

larger frameworks that transcend any single mode of identity construction has wide implications in shaping the cultural and social narratives of Israeli and Palestinian society, and this must be taken into consideration when pursuing inter-religious dialogue initiatives. This raises the question, what else is informing the experience of religious identity of Israelis and Palestinians, and is this being considered in contemporary inter-religious engagement efforts?

Challenges and Roadblocks – The Barriers to Dialogue

Both Israelis and Palestinians, when engaging in dialogue, bring narratives, experiences, and psychological barriers to the conversation that expands well beyond the confines of religious experience. Peace could potentially emerge out of a successful reconciliation process by overcoming psychological barriers in both parties involved.⁸ These barriers are potent and encompass diverse facets of life for both Israelis and Palestinians. Importantly, these barriers are not only present in individuals, but in the political and societal structures in Israel/Palestine.

...the Israeli political establishment has persistently failed to reconcile its sub-identity towards the Palestinians due to its inability to overcome psychological barriers...these problems are not particular to Israel. The Palestinian political establishment suffers from the same problems and also needs to overcome its own psychological barriers to reach a final agreement with Israel.⁹

There is a systemic issue that revolves around psychological barriers to peace. While dialogue is an oft-pursued method to overcome these barriers, it is important to recognize that these barriers arise from a variety of concrete situations and experiences.

Some central examples of psychological barriers in Israeli society include the historical events and narratives of the Holocaust, the attempted and continual construction of a Jewish-Israeli collective identity, the succession of Arab-Israeli wars in the later half of the twentieth century, the sense of physical isolation and insecurity in the Middle East, and inter-ethnic tensions in Israel.¹⁰ Central psychological barriers in Palestinian society include the historical events and narratives of the Naqba, the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the daily inconveniences and threats that arise from perpetual military occupation, economic limitations and inaccessibility, and sentiments of ethnic discrimination and racism against the Palestinian people.¹¹ Such broad examples only point to deep and poignant psychological barriers that influence the daily lives and perceptions of Israelis and Palestinians, and reveal that many facets of identity are intersecting in this conflict, including (and beyond the religious) social, political, ethnic, and economic.¹²

While the psychological barriers are recognized, their physical origins must be acknowledged. “Psychological factors...cannot be divorced from the objective conditions that underlie the conflict. There are real conflicts of interest that cannot simply be attributed to the effects of distrust and misperception.”¹³ These experiences are not only psychological, but point to real on-the-ground situations that limit the ability for sincere reconciliation processes. Such experiences, tendencies, and barriers must be carefully considered and respected in dialogue

encounters. Such barriers and experiences must inherently be taken up in inter-religious engagements, where the major objective is to change the participants' worldviews, particularly attitudes and behaviors towards the 'other'.¹⁴ How do inter-religious engagement efforts manage to speak to experiences that go beyond aspects of religious identity, and are they even capable of bringing these experiences of intersecting identity into the dialogue experience?

The Pitfalls of Inter-religious Dialogue in a Vacuum

The experience of religious identity formation for many Israelis and Palestinians is a process that touches upon other facets of life beyond the spiritual and is influenced by other experiences, such as the political, economic, and ethnic dimensions of identity. Issues of faith identity, especially in Israel/Palestine, cannot be brought up in a vacuum, but in conversation with other aspects of identity. In many situations, there is a resistance to integrating issues of religious identity with other aspects of identity that are influenced by the conflict. "Israel-Palestine is the supreme present instance of the problem that follows from the imposition of a sacred-secular dichotomy...The idea that politics and religion are different tapestries, hung on different walls, or even in different rooms, is a contemporary illusion."¹⁵ There is a tendency, in Israel/Palestine, to segment religious and political conversations and situations.

Because political agreements and processes have not included and integrated the religious dimensions, large segments of both Palestinian and Israeli societies have been alienated...segments of the Palestinians and Israeli religious communities clearly feel alienated from the secular peace process.¹⁶

There is a societal and individual alienation that arises from a false segmenting of religious identity and politico-social engagement in Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation efforts.

Israelis and Palestinians themselves recognize the need to integrate these conversations. According to Mitri Raheb, a Palestinian-Arab Lutheran pastor in the West Bank, "economics and politics present a challenge to my faith in my identity as a Palestinian Christian...Christians in Palestine are forced to ask themselves what God's justice means to a people whose members suffer under systematic political, social, and economic injustice."¹⁷ Dialoguing on religious experience cannot be naturally segmented from other social experiences.¹⁸ While such segmenting is unfortunately part of the societal reality in Israel/Palestine, and while segmenting is often required to bring participants to the dialogue encounter, it risks avoiding or missing the deep psychological barriers and concrete realities that must be addressed in the reconciliation process. It is important to look at the work of several key inter-religious organizations in Israel/Palestine in order to assess if the issue of segmenting conversations on religious identity from other conversations is also a structural problem of contemporary inter-religious encounters.

A Snapshot of Three Inter-religious Organizations

Three central inter-religious organizations in Israel/Palestine—*Jerusalem Peacemakers*, the *Interfaith Encounter Association*, and *Rabbis for Human Rights*—point to both limitations and possibilities in Israel/Palestine. The first organization, *Jerusalem Peacemakers*, identifies itself as a network of independent peacemakers formed in the Holy Land. Formed by Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bukhari and Eliyahu McLean in 2004, the organization proposes to enable the “coming-together of people to support each other in difficult times,” and promotes enduring, daily, interfaith cooperation, creating cultures of peace, justice, and healing for the Holy Land and all living beings.¹⁹ Recent initiatives and activities of *Jerusalem Peacemakers* include an interfaith delegation to the Dul Nouran mosque in Qusra, where the delegation met with people from the village, the Jerusalem Earth Walk, in which Israelis and Palestinians participated in an interfaith prayer, dialogue session, and peace circle in the city of Jerusalem, and a presentation at the Boombamela Festival in Eliat, where religious leaders offered a message of religious unity to Israeli youth.²⁰ While these initiatives seem to bring people together around issues of religious identity and religious unity, discussions about the political, social, ethnic, and economic factors are not promoted as a central aspect of the dialogue encounters. While these conversations might take place among dialogue participants, they are not a part of the systemic focus of *Jerusalem Peacemakers*, seeking to promote a strict message of interfaith harmony and peace. Such interfaith engagement speaks to the segmenting of identity that has taken place in dialogue encounters in Israel/Palestine.

The second organization mentioned, the *Interfaith Encounter Association*, was founded in 2001 and is based in Jerusalem. IEA’s goal is to promote peace through “interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural study. We believe that...religion can and should be a source of the solution for conflicts that exist in the region and beyond.”²¹ In bringing together ordinary people from contending political, religious, and ideological perspectives, the organization’s goal is to develop in these “encounter groups” understanding and respect across the differences that divide them, beginning with religious differences.²² While religious differences are indeed the focus of the conversations and dialogue groups, the conversations do reach a point beyond issues of religious commonality and difference: “Interfaith Encounter Association is not apolitical as such; rather, it is political in a particular manner. It does not avoid conflict or power inequalities. It addresses these in specific ways.”²³ According to participants in the encounter groups, conversations of interesting identity and issues beyond religious identity are presented and discussed, and they are personally transformed by their participation. While this is the case, the social impact of IEA’s work and individual participation is not clear.²⁴ This type of interfaith engagement points to possibilities for further integrating conversations of religious identity with conversations of economic, social, political, and ethnic identity, and reveals that such conversations, while powerful for those individual participants, are not yet taking effect at a systemic and societal level.

The third and final organization to be considered, *Rabbis for Human Rights*, is a grassroots organization founded in 1988 in response to “serious abuses of human rights by the Israeli military authorities in the suppression of the Intifada.”²⁵ Identified as one of the most

politically active peace groups in Israel, they are involved in ecumenical dialogue and educational activities, in addition to dealing with violations of human rights of Israeli Arabs and West Bank Palestinians. Its uniqueness, in comparison to other interfaith or faith-based peace groups, is that its agenda includes solidarity actions with underrepresented groups against injustice, including protesting home demolitions, supporting uprooted Bedouins, and lobbying for the rights of foreign workers.²⁶ *Rabbis for Human Rights* represents an organization that not only goes beyond discussions of religious identity and integrating this conversation with other areas of experience, but they work in the realm of putting dialogue into political and social action, inherently bringing to the dialogue experience the intersectionality of religious identity with other spheres of life—political, social, economic, or otherwise.

Conclusions

These three organizations, while representing only a small portion of the inter-religious activity in Israel/Palestine, offer a critical insight into the large range of focuses that are present in inter-religious engagement efforts in Israel/Palestine. In light of stagnating reconciliation efforts, what is the way forward for inter-religious engagement in Israel/Palestine? The necessary focus of inter-religious engagement is evident in the need for more integrated conversations on how religious identity intersects with the political and other experiences of Israelis and Palestinians and into more action-based initiatives for reconciliation and justice.

Focusing on dialogue and inter-religious understanding is necessary for creating a culture of peace in both societies. However, ending the occupation and addressing gross injustices require different mechanisms of inter-religious peacebuilding...The interfaith work in Israel-Palestine is in need of a joint nonviolent religious resistance movement.²⁷

There is a way forward for inter-religious cooperation in Israel/Palestine, but it will require not only more honest conversations about religious identity in the context of a conflict that affects the social, political, economic, and ethnic identities of Israelis and Palestinians, but a commitment to concrete efforts of reconciliation and against injustice. While these initiatives and encounters are present in Israel/Palestine, they need to become a norm rather than an exception if religious identity and interfaith engagement are to play a constructive role in changing the stagnating Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation efforts. Inter-religious engagement is, as has been offered, central to changing the narratives in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but it will require a more nuanced, intersecting, and action-based form of encounter if it is to reinvigorate new pathways to peace.

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Notes

¹ Frida Furman, "Religion and Peacebuilding: Grassroots Efforts by Israelis and Palestinians," *Journal of Religion, Conflict, and Peace* 4:2 (2011), under "Religion and Peacebuilding: Grassroots Efforts by Israelis and Palestinians."

² David Bohm, Donald Factor, and Peter Garrett, *Dialogue – A Proposal*, accessed via http://www.david-bohm.net/dialogue/dialogue_proposal.html.

³ Julia Chaitin, *Peace-building in Israel and Palestine: Social Psychology and Grassroots Initiatives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 57.

⁴ William Zartman, *Peacemaking in International Conflict: Methods and Techniques* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2007), 273.

⁵ I have used a large portion of Dr. Abu-Nimer's scholarship in this work due to his heavy contribution to this specific area of inquiry. While other scholars have written on this topic, and while I employ some of their work, I must thank Dr. Abu-Nimer for providing a sound scholarly basis from which I have built my argument in this paper.

⁶ Mohammed Abu-Nimer, "Conflict Resolution, Culture, and Religion: Toward a Training Model of Interreligious Peacebuilding," *Journal of Peace Research* 38.6 (2001): 685.

⁷ Mohammed Abu-Nimer, "Religion, Dialogue, and Non-Violent Actions in the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 17.3 (2004): 492.

⁸ Yuksel Sezgin, "The Shift from War to Peace – Reconciliation of Sub-Identities and Overcoming Psychological Barriers in Israel," *The Review of International Affairs*, 1.2 (2001): 50.

⁹ *Ibid*, 49.

¹⁰ Julia Chaitin, *Peace-building in Israel and Palestine: Social Psychology and Grassroots Initiatives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 26, 35-40.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 28-35.

¹² While I would like to further explain and nuance the examples of psychological barriers I offered, and while these examples do not encompass the full experience of Israelis and Palestinians, the confines of this paper do not allow for such extrapolation. While I agree that some of these terms require clarification, I believe the body of literature available on these topics can expand on places where I have only touched the surface.

¹³ *Ibid*, 24.

¹⁴ Mohammed Abu-Nimer, "Conflict Resolution, Culture, and Religion: Toward a Training Model of Interreligious Peacebuilding," *Journal of Peace Research* 38.6 (2001): 688.

¹⁵ James Carroll, *Jerusalem, Jerusalem: How the Ancient City Ignited Our Modern World* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 296-297.

¹⁶ Mohammed Abu-Nimer, "Religion, Dialogue, and Non-Violent Actions in the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 17.3 (2004): 492-494.

¹⁷ Mitri Raheb, *I Am a Palestinian Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 14.

¹⁸ While I offer Raheb's account as a Palestinian Christian to touch upon an example of intersecting identity, similar experiences are echoed by both Jewish and Muslim leaders in Israel/Palestine.

¹⁹ Jerusalem Peacemakers, <http://jerusalempeacemakers.org/about/about-jerusalem-peacemakers/>.

²⁰ Jerusalem Peacemakers, <http://jerusalempeacemakers.org/category/action-areas/>.

²¹ Interfaith Encounter Association, <http://interfaithencounter.wordpress.com/>.

²² Frida Furman, "Religion and Peacebuilding: Grassroots Efforts by Israelis and Palestinians," *Journal of Religion, Conflict, and Peace* 4:2 (2011), under "The Encounter Group."

²³ *Ibid*, under "The Encounter Group."

²⁴ Ibid, 26-27, under “Conclusion.”

²⁵ Rabbis for Human Rights, <http://www.rhr.israel.net/profile/index.shtml>.

²⁶ Mohammed Abu-Nimer, “Religion, Dialogue, and Non-Violent Actions in the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 17.3 (2004): 507.

²⁷ Ibid, 508-509.