

**Forty Years of Interfaith Dialogue in Europe: The JCM Conference
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Jonathan Magonet**

The Context for Dialogue

Everyday, almost without fail, I receive two kinds of emails, usually from America or Israel.

The first kind is from an elderly Jewish woman whom I met briefly when lecturing in America and, perhaps inadvisably, gave my email address. Her emails are strongly anti-Muslim. They often include messages, articles or videos from websites that she approves of with names like 'Jihad Watch'. Basically she is deeply concerned about what she sees as the rise of Islam, its infiltration into American society and even government circles, and the failure of the American public and its institutions to recognize the danger this poses. Her anger is especially aimed at Jewish organisations and individual rabbis, whenever they associate themselves with the struggle against Islamophobia. She views them as foolish, and at worst as traitors to the Jewish people for being blind to what she considers to be a dangerous reality. For her and her colleagues, there appears to be no Muslim organisation or mosque in the USA that does not include, or has not included at some time in the past, someone who has had links with organisations she considers a threat, like the Muslim Brotherhood. Just one such individual who has made a public anti-Jewish or anti-Israeli statement in the past is enough to label the entire organisation as suspect. She has at her disposal books that give historical examples of how the dhimi status, the protected status of non-Muslims in Islamic societies and countries, has been misused to the detriment of Jews and Christians. In addition there are the Quran texts that can be used to show anti-Jewish sentiments or calls for actions against non-Muslims, and enough examples from contemporary Muslim sources to justify her claims.

Like all conspiracy theorists, any counter information or arguments are dismissed as mistaken, misguided or plain dishonest. In her view there are no moderate Muslims, or if there are, they are merely representatives of the acceptable face of Islam, whose purpose, whether knowingly or not, is to further the infiltration of Islam into American life. Their ultimate goal is to promote the imposition of Sharia law upon the entire American population. According to her view, Europe is already a lost cause, with large Muslim populations increasingly controlling public opinion and preventing any criticism of Islam, even when it is justified. Freedom of speech is the first human right that has been sacrificed, she claims. Finally her greatest anger is reserved for people like the writer and peace activist Karen Armstrong who, as far as she is concerned, is simply an apologist for Islam.

Like any such all-purpose crusade there are elements of her criticism that have to be acknowledged as true, amidst the vast number of generalisations and exaggerations that are not. That is one kind of daily email.

The other daily emails present a completely opposite perspective. They come from a charity foundation called the New Israel Fund or from organisations like Rabbis for Human Rights. The former supports progressive educational and social activities in Israel, and the latter civil rights issues in Israel and in America. From America I get informed about important examples of Jewish-Muslim dialogue and solidarity, sharing the public struggle against Islamophobia, and, of course, taking occasional stands against the more extreme views and activities of people like the lady who emails me. From Israel I get information about support for women's rights, legal aid for asylum seekers from Sudan and Eritrea, and engagement in local civil

rights issues. However a large part of the concerns involve struggles against the treatment by the Israeli government of its Arab minority, and currently a campaign to prevent the forced resettlement of Bedouin villages in the Negev. Above all, especially the Rabbis for Human Rights, fight to prevent the expropriation of Palestinian land, and individual Israeli activists join Palestinian farmers to defend their trees from incursions by Jewish settlers. These organisations take individual cases to Israel's Supreme Court, often successfully defeating government policy, and they are an important reminder that Israel is a place where democratic systems do operate.

I have mentioned these regular correspondents because they represent the parameters within which interfaith dialogue has to operate from a contemporary Jewish perspective. Every action by extremist Muslim groups or any political policy by a Muslim government that seems totally contrary to western norms of behaviour is seized upon by the media and undermines any attempt at encouraging dialogue. But similarly, every act of armed defence or aggression by the Israeli government affects Jews worldwide. Criticism of Israeli government policy is legitimate and acceptable, but more often Jews around the world, and especially in Europe, are confronted with physical violence against individual Jews, attacks on synagogues or even Jewish schools, sometimes with loss of life. These attacks are often carried out by people with a Muslim background, which reinforces anti-Muslim feelings and anxieties amongst Jews. Thus interfaith dialogue tends to be dismissed as a meaningless exchange between a few like-minded religious liberals, without either substance or significant consequence on a broader political level.

The JCM Conference: Dialogue in Practice

I wanted to sketch this ongoing problematic background, as it affects my experience of the situation in Europe, in order to preface my remarks about a dialogue initiative with which I have been involved for some forty years. What is important to state from the beginning is that there are no obvious statistics to show that this programme has dramatically changed the world, and indeed it is hard to measure its success. Nevertheless it has received an interfaith award for its work¹, has led to the creation of a similar organisation operating in Australia², and has even been the subject of a Doctoral Dissertation³! However I do know that it has changed the perceptions and even lives of many of the people who have participated over the years, and in some ways that is what was intended from the outset. But let me give you a brief history.

Conversations began in the late 1960's that were to develop into the creation of what came to be called the Standing Conference of Jews, Christians and Muslims in Europe (JCM). At that time dialogue activity in Europe was largely confined to programmes between Jews and Christians. Such programmes and organisations originated during World War Two, partly in response to the rise in Nazism, and

¹ The conference was awarded the Hermann Maas Medalion in 2003. The related papers were published in *European Judaism* Vol 37 No 1 Spring 2004, including an evaluation of the pioneering work of the JCM Conference by Karl Josef Kuschel.

² JCMA (the Jewish Christian Muslim Association of Australia) began in 2003 with a residential conference modelled on JCM and has broadened to include a wide variety of related programmes.

³ Daniela Koeppler *Zelte der Begegnung: Geschichte und Theologische Bedeutung der 'Ständigen Konferenz von Juden, Christen und Muslimen in Europa' (JCM) und der 'Internationalen Juedisch-Christlichen Bibelwoche* 1. Auflage, Frankfurt am Main 2010 (Übernahme vom Verlag Otto Lembeck) zugleich Diss. Universität Köln, 2010 XIV, 385 Seiten ISBN 978-3-87476-626-5 Preis: 28,00 Euro (Deutschland)

gained additional impetus as the impact of the Holocaust was increasingly felt. In 1965 the Second Vatican Council made historic changes to the policy of the Catholic Church with the publication of *Nostra Aetate* that, alongside other remarkable aspects, revolutionised its approach to Jews and Judaism. A great deal of immediate post-war activity stemmed from the German Protestant Church because of the awareness of the failure of the Church to combat the effects of National Socialism. This led to a profound re-evaluation of Christian teachings and doctrines, especially the demonization of Jews as Christ-killers. These teachings were acknowledged as having helped to provide fertile soil for the anti-Jewish feelings that the Nazis could exploit. In post-war Germany a few rabbis and Jewish teachers who were willing and able to engage with Christians despite the Holocaust, provided Jewish input into the dialogue process. In a sense it was less a dialogue and more an exchange of information, and was often coloured by a profound sense of guilt on the part of the Christian participants.

Against this background a London-based rabbi, Lionel Blue, and a German Pastor, Winfried Maechler, came together. They met in London where Maechler was pastor of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Church and their collaboration continued when Maechler moved to the Evangelische Akademie in Berlin. What they brought to the dialogue was a desire to move beyond the repeated re-examination of German guilt about the past treatment of the Jews and to ask instead the question: was there anything the Church could do today for the Jewish people? Against the background of the Middle East conflict, Rabbi Blue suggested that beyond the immediate political entities Israel and the Arab States there were the three great monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Surely they had the spiritual resources to offer an alternative to the violence that seemed to be the only option, and perhaps Christians could mediate a dialogue between Jews and Muslims. From this possibility emerged a number of small conferences in Berlin and ultimately the idea of a programme that would involve the future religious leaders of the three faiths during their student days. This resulted in establishing an annual international student conference (generally known as the JCM conference) that took place from its beginning at a small Catholic conference centre, the Hedwig Dransfeld Haus in the town of Bendorf, Germany, thanks to the inspired leadership of the Haus's director Anneliese Debray. When the Haus was forced to close for financial reasons, the conference moved to Wuppertal with the support of the UEM (Vereinte Evangelische Mission)

Perhaps it is important to point out that at the time the JCM was developing Islam as a real and growing part of the European religious scene was hardly noticed. Most European Muslim communities were made up of immigrants, with additionally a few local European converts. In each country the situation was different. For example in Germany they were mostly Turkish 'Gastarbeiter' whose religious life was directed from Turkey. In France there had been a large influx from former French colonies. In Britain they came from Southern Asia. As to the possible participants in the conference, it was relatively easy to find Christian theology students from Germany and the United Kingdom. Rabbinic students from the Leo Baeck College, of which Lionel Blue was one of the first graduates, could be encouraged to participate, and attendance at least one conference during the five years of their training became a requirement of their studies. But almost none of the Muslim communities were sufficiently developed to have their own local training facilities. Moreover, the role of the Imam was not on the same level of professional training and paid employment as a pastor or rabbi. It was only when the conference

was expanded to include social and community workers and teachers that a greater Muslim participation became possible.

Certain policy decisions were made at this early stage that were to affect the subsequent development. The first was to restrict the conference to considering the three religious communities in Europe alone and not to address the Middle East conflict directly but only insofar as it impacted on the local communities.

A second major decision was to obtain participants by personal invitation only rather than advertising widely, and to ensure that whatever took place within the conference was to be treated with the strictest confidence. It was our feeling that dialogue at this level was a matter of personal engagement and people should be able to trust whatever it was that they gained from the experience and not feel that they had been used for some kind of secondary purpose. For this reason there were to be no public declarations at the end of the conference, and at times we had to resist pressures to send out petitions about some current issue in the name of the JCM. Along the same lines we insisted that participants should speak personally as individuals and not as 'representatives' of their particular faith or organisation.

Whereas in the early years the programme consisted largely of academic lectures in the usual manner of the time, within a short period we made the decision to restrict the number of formal lectures to three only, one from each of the three faiths. Instead we focused on building the programme around discussion groups. These were carefully crafted to include a balance of members of each of the three faiths, gender equality and, wherever possible, a cultural mix. A key feature of all aspects of the programme was to insist that everything had to be translated into the two languages of the conference, German and English. In practice, a translation into the other language was handed out at the beginning of the public lectures. More important for the actual dialogue process itself was the practice of translating everything that was said in the discussion groups. This put a considerable strain on those charged with the task, and obviously slowed down the discussion, but the long term advantages were significant. Waiting for the translation meant that people had time to consider carefully their response rather than reacting immediately. Moreover, dialogue is as much about learning to listen as it is to presenting your own views, and this translation exercise furthered the acquisition of this important skill.

A later development was to offer more opportunities for informal engagement through workshops that one could choose to attend. These included initially exercises in non-verbal communication, such as meditative dance or art. These expanded later to include shared study of our sacred texts. One afternoon during the week is set aside for an outing to some local place of interest to the three faith communities, which also provides a break from the intensity of the programme. A cabaret by the participants on the final evening reveals any number of unexpected talents.

In the case of the lectures, we invited each of the lecturers to focus on the same issue from the perspective of their religion. The idea was that unique features and differences would emerge naturally from the particular perspectives of the speakers rather than having them attempt to present their views about the 'other' religions. In fact speakers were encouraged to speak personally and we have tried to restrict lecturers to people who had attended at least one JCM conference before and had experienced and understood the particular approach.

The topics that we covered over the years included:

Between two worlds: Living with the difficulties presented by different languages, cultures and social expectations.

Are we prisoners of our history?

Tradition and change.
Education within our faith community.
Interfaith Dialogue in situations of conflict.
Power and Authority in the Religious Traditions
Use and Abuse of Religious Language.

In recent years we have responded more directly to current concerns and aimed at a younger range of participants with topics like:

Still of Use? Do religious communities have something to offer to the wider society?

Young, gifted and religious. What do we expect from our tradition and our society?

From the very beginning we made sure that the organising team was made up of equal numbers of people from each of the three faiths, so that the planning and running of the conference could already model the principles we wanted to promote in the programme itself. Though this may seem self-evident, at the time most such programmes were organised by one of the faiths, who invited the others to participate in the programme they designed. The team are all volunteers, though usually with some authority or responsibility in their home community, which enables them also to find and encourage new participants. When the initial team began to feel the strain of the regular annual commitment it was expanded by inviting individuals to join it as 'observers' for a year and then become part of a pool of potential team members to be called upon as needed in future years.

Early discussions addressed the question of how we were to offer the religious services of the three faiths, and whether we should attempt to produce some kind of shared interfaith service. We decided against attempting to do so, and instead each community runs its own services, but with an open invitation for the others to attend and participate to the extent that they felt comfortable. Particularly at the weekend, after a week's intensive programme, the Friday afternoon Muslim service, followed by the evening and morning Jewish Sabbath services and the Christian Sunday morning service became memorable shared experiences. The one area where we felt we could find common spiritual ground was in silence, and each morning begins with a reading of a text from one of the three communities followed by a silent meditation.

Early experience led to an awareness of the practical difficulties to be encountered when the three religions live together, in particular when it came to issues around food and drink. In the end we settled for vegetarian food for the entire conference but have to explain why each time to pre-empt complaints from meat eaters! To accommodate Muslim sensibilities alcohol was prohibited, and the customary wine for the Jewish Friday evening home service was replaced by grape juice. When people became concerned about making such 'concessions' to the needs of more 'conservative' participants, it was helpful to point out that those who attend have had to travel very different spiritual distances in order to be able to participate. What was a relatively simple journey for those who belonged to liberal religious communities was considerably more difficult for those with a more traditional religious background, so it was important to accommodate as far as possible such different kinds of personal religious commitments. Everyone had effectively to make a personal sacrifice to be able to attend, and this awareness was accepted as part of the desire to create a 'safe space' where all could meet comfortably.

The practical experience of the conference itself also led to additions and changes. Early on a room was provided for the daily Muslim prayers. When it was realised that many of the people who came had some kind of information that they

wanted to share outside the immediate official programme, we introduced a ‘speakers’ corner’, modelled on London’s Hyde Park, where a number of such talks were presented at the same time, and people could choose whether or not to attend. From time to time introductory Hebrew and Arabic classes have been held. Occasional graduate seminar sessions allow those working on academic projects to give brief presentations. When it became clear that the intimacy of the programme sometimes led to misunderstandings between men and women about what was permitted behaviour, we identified the issue within the introductory explanations and provided a women’s room for their sole use. Acknowledging and addressing such issues at the beginning of the conference have added to the sense of security and encouraged an ethos of appropriate behaviour.

One of the special features of the conference is the participation of families and the provision of a children’s programme. This means that the conference itself becomes effectively a normal community with the children often easing the personal contacts across religious and cultural boundaries.

Some concluding observations

Over time, the structure of the week-long conference became more firmly established and awareness of its unique nature became well known, particularly amongst people engaged in interfaith dialogue. It is now hard to remember how cautious we felt we had to be at the beginning about advertising the conference and the confidentiality, bordering on secrecy, that we felt it was important to maintain. Our concern was that participants would not receive adverse criticism from their own communities at meeting with ‘the other’, who might even be perceived of as the ‘enemy’, especially given the Middle East issues. In some ways the greater openness over time about the conference itself, and the broader recognition of interfaith dialogue in general, reflect analogous changes in Jewish and Muslim societies in Europe. Both of them, in different ways, perceive themselves as ‘Diaspora’ minority communities whose heartland or spiritual home is elsewhere. However, a growing security in their own identity and a developing sense of uniqueness and independence as local, fully authentic communities in their own right, have contributed to a greater degree of self-confidence in participating in such dialogue activities. Indeed these developments over the past thirty years coincide with the growth of interfaith organisations and programmes, university courses in the subject, and government interest in promoting interfaith and intercultural activities as part of concerns about combating the threat of terrorism while also developing positive aspects of civil society. Whereas what happens within the conference itself remains confidential and unreported, with the agreement of the speakers, the three public lectures have long been made available for publication in the journal *European Judaism*, and provide a partial record of developing topics and areas of concern.⁴

Looking back over the forty years it is obvious that the Conference has acquired a self-confidence and openness that were unimaginable at the beginning. Though each year there are likely to be public concerns (Nine/Eleven, the Gulf Wars, the London bombings, escalations in the Israel-Palestine conflict), they manage to be contained within the structure, which even offers contexts for serious evaluations and responses amongst those present.

⁴ Recent issues on the subject are *European Judaism* Vol 37 No 1 Spring 2004; Vol 38 No 1 Spring 2005; Vol 41 No 1 Spring 2008; Vol 46 No 1 Spring 2013.

Despite the growing number of conferences and programmes addressing the relationship between the three faiths, the JCM remains unique in the quality and intensity of the encounter that it provides. To have a week together to explore both personal and community issues in a 'safe space' is a luxury few can afford. What it highlights is that at some level dialogue should be seen as an end in itself and not simply a means to achieving some external goal. It may well be that such external issues provide the motive for many to participate, but if the programme is conducted with integrity, and with confidence in its long-term value rather than in immediate results, the effect may be deep and lasting. Generations of leaders of the three faith communities have taken their experience into their respective communities and have created a network of personal friends and available resources that can be called upon when needed, and the likelihood is great that such needs will arise in our fractured world.

Europe is one of the few places where all three faiths meet on equal footing and share similar challenges from an advanced and largely secular society. So a great deal can be achieved in Europe in terms of mutual understanding and common reflection on the attitudes of our respective traditions to one another. That implies also a great responsibility to increase such programmes. If the conference itself is consciously apolitical and self-contained, those who have participated leave with a level of experience of a deep encounter with the 'other' that will affect their attitude in many other contexts. The price, however, is often a degree of alienation from the superficial judgments still to be found when one returns to one's home community. In some ways it is during the 're-entry' that the hardest personal work of dialogue begins.

Many years ago Rabbi Lionel Blue posed the question: 'We have schools in which we learn how to wage war. Where are the schools in which we learn how to wage peace?' In its unique way the JCM conference has made a small contribution to answering what is really a question and challenge to us all.