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THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION:
AN ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN STUDENT DIALOGUE

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Religion Assumed to Intensify Differences

It is commonly assumed that in a world increasingly riven by ethnic conflict and rivalries, cultural identities, and particularly those which are religiously-based, can only serve to fan the flames of political conflict. Indeed, in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there appeared to be a common assumption among many of the Israeli architects of the Oslo accord and process that religious leaders and adherents from both sides needed to be isolated from the process. It was apparently believed that the representatives of religious streams could only exacerbate the conflict, and that real peace efforts could only be advanced by secular political leaders and publics.

After the experience of an over four-year-long effort toward Israeli-Palestinian dialogue and cooperation, co-initiated by this researcher, it appears that religious culture can indeed provide a basis for Israeli-Palestinian relationship-building as part of the attempts to pro-

mote conflict resolution between the two peoples. While it is certainly true that religion which emphasizes absolute territorial claims from a purely theological point of view can indeed make conflict resolution more difficult, if not impossible, other aspects of religious culture, particularly in terms of commonalities between Islam and Judaism, can be utilized to achieve improved perceptions between Israelis and Palestinians.

Theoretical Perspectives

Let us first look at a number of theoretical works from a variety of disciplines which are relevant to the discussion of religion as a basis for conflict resolution.

The prominent political scientist Samuel Huntington has, in a variety of recent books and articles, emphasized the significance of an emerging clash of civilizations in the post-Cold War era international system. He and others have viewed this development with alarm, as culturally rooted civilizational

conflicts are generally assumed to hold the potential for generating more intense conflicts than those simply revolving around more limited conflicts over specific negotiable issues.

Interestingly, however, although Huntington generally offers a grim prognosis for the direction of international politics, he does, in fact, hold out the challenge of intercultural understanding between civilizational groupings as a basis for tension reduction, calling upon "peoples in all civilizations" to "search for and expand the values, institutions and practices they have in common with peoples of other civilizations."

Huntington, however, was not the first to address the cultural issue in international relations research. Israeli international relations expert Raymond Cohen long ago pioneered the study of intercultural communications in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In works such as *Culture and Conflict in Israeli-Egyptian Relations,* he has argued that failure on the part of both Arabs and Israelis to understand the cultural mindset and sensitivities of each other has at various times blocked a possible dialogue from emerging. Cohen has argued that the emergence of possible understandings between Israel and Egypt, long before the Sadat initiative, were inhibited by the intercultural communication factor and the inability of Israeli and Egyptian leaders to read each other better.

In *Theatre of Power,* Cohen cited the particular importance of religious symbolism with its potential for link-building between Israel and Egypt, recalling the late Anwar Sadat's proposal for the building of a mosque, synagogue, and church on Mount Sinai (Jabal Musa) as a means of "bridging the psychological gap between nations involved in a quest for reconciliation and friendship."

Focusing primarily on the interaction of leaders and elites, Cohen's path-breaking work suggests that the *intercultural* factor very much affects the quality of interpersonal political and *psychological* interactions between different peoples.

Of course, the ultimate measure of an intercultural dialogue is its contribution to conflict resolution and peace-building, which in large measure depends on the extent to which human contacts and inter-group activities are fostered between nations to make peace a living process. Indeed, the eminent social scientist Karl Deutsch pioneered the understanding of the process of community-building in which security communities (a frame-work in which peace is maintained through mutual consensus and internalized norms as opposed to balances of power) are created and maintained, citing the importance of intellectual support of peace-building efforts, including links of social communication, and mobility of persons.

The larger question which we are endeavoring to assess is how interaction between groups in conflict, and sometimes bitter conflict, can be improved. In this regard it is essential to cite the work of the Israeli social psychologist Yehuda Amir, who pioneered important efforts in intergroup understanding and sought to increase our understanding of the conditions under which contact between groups in conflict can be successful. Amir emphasized the importance of a number of important preconditions for such encounters including: "equal status contacts"; "intimate" as opposed to merely "casual" encounters; "cooperative" as opposed to "competitive" relationships; and "institutional" support for such efforts. Furthermore, and perhaps most significantly for the dialogue and cooperation effort which I would now like to describe, he cited the important contribution of commonalities between groups as a vital element in contributing to the emergence of improved and changed perceptions.

An Israeli-Palestinian Student Dialogue

Let us turn now to a description and evaluation of an Israeli-Palestinian student dialogue which serves as a case study of the role of religion in conflict resolution. The dialogue has involved Israelis and Jewish students from abroad studying at Bar-Ilan University, and Palestinian students, mostly from the area between Jerusalem and Hebron. This effort at dialogue and cooperation began in November 1994 and is unique in that it has primarily involved religiously committed members of both communities. It is these very sectors that over time have lacked the most opportunities for constructive interaction with each other, and indeed are considered to be the greatest obstacles to a peaceful settlement.

Since the dialogue began on an ad hoc basis under difficult circumstances, the records which exist are primarily based on this author's written summaries of the meetings. Let us first review a number of the accomplishments of the dialogue.

Durability over time: I was invited to a meeting with seven Palestinian students in November 1994, and subsequent to that first encounter I invited

members of my one-year exchange program course for overseas students at Bar-Ilan University to attend a meeting with the Palestinian students. Despite the vicissitudes of the peace process including suicide bombings and subsequent closures, contacts, meetings, and joint efforts of various sorts have continued to this very day.

Emergence of a core working group and partnership: Despite the barriers of hostility and suspicion between the two peoples, approximately 90 students on *each side* have participated in meetings and interactions of some type at one time or another. Equally important is the fact that a core group has emerged to guide, organize, and maintain the activities and contacts. Dr. Musa Barhoum, professor of educational psychology and educational technology at the Al-Quds Open University, has been my faculty colleague in these efforts for much of this period. We have co-authored an article entitled "Building Cultural/Religious Bridges between Israeli and Palestinian Students," which has appeared on two respected Internet sites—MERIA and ARIGA. In addition, Ayman Ismail, a graduate of the University of Hebron in English literature, emerged over time as a key leader on the Palestinian student side with whom I developed a very close working relationship.

A number of students from Bar-Ilan University who have participated in these activities continue to serve as my assistants, and students in my classes are extremely enthusiastic about such encounters. This project is currently under the auspices of the Program for Conflict Resolution of the Department of Political Studies and my colleagues in the Interdisciplinary Department of the Social Sciences are supportive of these efforts.

Spin-off results; development of informal ties: Probably the most significant concrete spin-off result of our meetings and efforts has been the participation of a Palestinian student from the village of Beit Omar (midway between Gush Etzion and Hebron) in the International Program in Business Administration at Bar-Ilan University. Muhammed Awad's application was made possible by his acquaintance with Ayman Ismail, who was able to recommend him when the School of Business Administration sought a Palestinian candidate for its international program. Awad has just completed the program and will receive an MBA degree at the Bar-Ilan University graduation ceremonies in June 1999. He has been interviewed on Israeli Arabic TV and in the Israeli press, and has

served as another link in the chain of mutual understanding that we have been constructing.

Another Palestinian participant in the dialogue was accepted, with my support, to the peace studies program at Notre Dame University, and has remained in close contact.

Religion as a Bridging Factor

The main factors contributing to the success of our meetings appear to be related to both the content and format of the meetings.

As noted earlier, religious culture became a central focal point of the discussions. The decision to concentrate on this element occurred almost by accident. At the first meeting which my students attended with the Palestinian students, which was held at a Christian educational institute in Bethlehem, a Jewish woman student asked an Arab female student if the head covering she was wearing was for the same reason that observant Jewish married women cover their hair. She indicated that it was not, as the custom of Arab women is to cover their hair from the time of puberty.

Yet this brief exchange sparked other questions. One of the Palestinian students mentioned the fast of Ramadan, which they were then observing. This motivated one of the Jewish students to ask if the strictures of Ramadan were similar or different from those of Yom Kippur.

At that first student-to-student meeting, digressions occurred into controversial political issues. In the course of one of these exchanges, the Jewish students were astounded to hear of the Arab interpretation of the symbolism of the Israeli flag —according to them, the two blue stripes flanking the Star of David were meant to represent the Nile and Euphrates Rivers. The Jewish students responded that the configuration of the two blue stripes is based on the color design of the Jewish prayer shawl. It was clear from that first encounter that the gulf of misunderstanding between the two sides was immense. However, the beginnings of mutual interest which both sides displayed toward the others' religion offered the first glimmer of a possibility that religious culture might provide a potential bridge of understanding.

A larger complement of participants on both sides attended the next meeting in Bethlehem. It was agreed beforehand that one student from each side would present the content of either a Muslim or a Jewish prayer as an expression of that

religion's core values and faith. A Jewish student presented an explanation of the first paragraph of the "Shema Yisrael" prayer ("Hear O Israel, the Lord is Our God, the Lord is One"). His explanation led to an animated discussion in which both *halakhah* (Jewish religious law) and *shari'a* (Moslem religious law) were briefly explored and compared. The participants found it satisfying to identify the great similarity in the structure of the two religious legal systems.

In considering the presentation which one of the Muslim students offered of a prayer from Islam, Allah's name as "Rachum" (merciful) was identified as identical to one of the Jewish names of God. In general, both presentations generated an awareness among both groups of students of the similarity of many Arabic and Hebraic religious terms.

This meeting was further enriched by the participation of an Israeli lecturer at Ben-Gurion University in the emerging field of bioethics who offered an introduction into the area of medical ethics. In response to a student question, he briefly presented an explanation of the Jewish position on abortion, which, it was discovered, was essentially the same in both Judaism and Islam.

With enthusiasm growing for this effort, a third student meeting was arranged. This time it was agreed that the respective versions of creation in both Islam and Judaism would be discussed. At that meeting, several of the Arab students gave a short presentation on the Koranic version of creation. This led to an interchange concerning the structure and narrative of the Koran in contrast to the Torah. It became apparent to the participants that while the Torah, in the book of Genesis, offers a clear chronological presentation of the creation sequence, the Koran is structured very differently, with the creation process described or derived implicitly, in the context of Koranic exhortations on various moral and religious themes.

One Jewish participant, so moved by the thoughtfulness and seriousness of the encounter, offered a vision of an expanded dialogue in many Arab and Jewish homes, "first in the living rooms, then in the gardens, and finally on the sidewalks." He declared that Jews and Arabs passing by should overhear discussions concerning the Koran and Torah and see a new interaction being created.

Of course, our discussions could not be divorced from pressing political realities. In addition to the formal part of the program, the principal

organizers agreed that the coffee break should be utilized by the participants to discuss any issue or question on the students' minds, including the most urgent and controversial political questions at issue in the peace process or Middle East politics. We did not skirt the potency of pressing political questions, but believed that once commonalities between the two cultures were uncovered, a new atmosphere could develop in which the more divisive issues could be discussed in a different and more positive atmosphere.

In the course of time, other religious issues were discussed such as the structure and practice of prayer in both religious cultures, including the place of Jerusalem in the prayer experience of both peoples. Dietary laws were also identified as common elements between the religious cultures.

Our discussions were further enhanced by the participation on several occasions of a faculty-student delegation from Japan and India, in the field of bioethics. Bioethics is an emerging field focusing on the array of moral, scientific, and social ecological questions affecting the quality of human life at the end of the twentieth century. This group has remained in contact with us, and on their visits exposed us to a wider perception of religious approaches from East Asia connected to human survival issues. Discussions sparked by our visitors on issues such as ecology and poverty helped us, the Arab and Jewish participants, to see our own situation in a larger context.

The preceding capsule description of a portion of the content discussed by the participants in this Arab-Jewish student dialogue illustrates the potential of religious culture for serving as a basis for bridge-building and perception modification. Indeed, the opportunity for Arabs and Jews to discover similarities in their respective heritages, as a basis for perception change, seems to parallel findings in the literature of social psychology and conflict resolution. As noted earlier, the theoretical literature in the field suggests that individuals will change their negative attitudes towards another group when they discover that others hold attitudes or beliefs similar to their own.

This process of identifying similarities between groups seems to confirm something of my own personal odyssey in these encounters. On several occasions I shared my own evolving impression of Arab culture and Islam, which came as a result of the meetings, with my Arab partners and colleagues. Referring to my own background as a Jew

from the United States, I related my impression that most American Christians had a great deal of difficulty in understanding the structure of traditional Judaism with its complex framework of written and oral law and ongoing legal interpretation. In contrast, it was a source of satisfaction to see how Arab students and faculty immediately understood this multi-faceted framework that appeared very similar to their own Muslim religion. As a result of this discovery, my impressions of Arabs in general began to change. Instead of perceiving Arabs as a faceless group of people locked in mortal conflict with the Jews, I began to perceive the Arabs as a group of people with great similarities to my own people.

Religion Allows Equal Status Contact

The manner in which the meetings were planned and conducted also seemed to parallel Yehuda Amir's emphasis on *equal status* contacts as a precondition for successful contact between ethnic groups in conflict. Our meetings were planned and run jointly and began with a round-robin introduction in a formal circle. Indeed, our focus on religion seemed to offer a framework in which equal status contacts could take place, given the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians around issues such as final status arrangements involving questions of territory and statehood. Thus, Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs could meet as equals in the context of each representing their respective religious and cultural traditions.

Other aspects of the meeting format also followed important elements of Amir's formula for effective intergroup contacts. Our informal coffee breaks, following the more formal circle discussion centering on a religious/cultural topic, offered the opportunity for participants to meet each other as equals in an entirely different setting, when in the past Palestinians or Israelis might have perceived each other only as perpetrators of violence or threatening behavior.

These informal opportunities for interaction, often held in either Arab or Jewish homes, also created a sense of what Amir termed "intimate" as opposed to merely "casual" contact among different ethnic group members. The atmosphere of these encounters led to family visitations and expressions of concern or celebration during illness and festive occasions. Amir determined from his research and analysis that encounters which engendered this "intimate" contact had the greatest

chance of influencing attitudes of each group towards the other.

The Problem of Institutional Support

However, our dialogue has not yet benefited from all the ingredients of success which Amir and others maintain are necessary for effective intergroup contacts. Two Irish researchers, Knox and Hughes, writing in the *Journal of Peace Research*, reported recently on the effectiveness of community relations programs in Northern Ireland. Citing and expanding upon Amir's research, they asserted that institutional support for these types of people-to-people efforts is a highly necessary factor for their success. The researchers did, however, report on the favorable impact on Protestant and Catholic participants of intercultural activities and dialogue connected to religion.

One of the biggest impediments that we have experienced so far is the reluctance of the Palestinian Authority to fully endorse this activity, which is necessary for it to develop to its full potential. We hope that this will change. We also would have preferred that the process of gaining entry passes into Israel for the Palestinian participants from the Israeli authorities would have been easier.

The Core Issue

Returning to the core issue posed at the outset, can a religious/cultural dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians be expanded as a basis for more successful peace-building?

From a theoretical international relations standpoint, Hans Morgenthau, the foremost exponent of realist international relations thought and author of the classic *Politics Among Nations*, actually expressed deep skepticism concerning the efficacy of what he termed the "UNESCO approach" to solving international disputes. He maintained that conflicts among nations do not occur because peoples are unaware of one another's culture, even if similar, or because they are unaware of a different actor's policy objectives.

However, the case against believing that furthering cultural and religious understanding can contribute to conflict resolution in the Israeli-Palestinian case is not so certain, even according to Morgenthau's own understanding of the dynamics of international relations. Morgenthau asserted the importance of creating a viable balance of power between states and encouraged the practice

of responsible diplomacy as the best basis for promoting international stability.

In the course of the dialogue, I think it became clear to the two sides of the depth of the commitment which both peoples have to living in the same land, which is based in large part on what they experience, know, and cherish from their religious heritages. Thus, in a sense, an "ideological balance of power" emerged out of the clash of viewpoints, with the possibility of a balancing of religious and culturally-based convictions.

Faced with a situation in which both sides recognize that both are here and neither expect to leave, rational and responsible human beings ought to seek the creation of a viable structure of peace and stability. While perhaps neither Islamic nor Judaic justice can be realized in each one's fullest and most abstract sense if the other side is present, based on our experience, we can, however, seek the creation of new relationships that would benefit each other to a greater extent than could be achieved if the other party were not present.

This description of a case study in which religion has served as a bridge for positive inter-cultural understanding between Israelis and Palestinians cannot yet be the basis of conclusive evidence that religion can serve as a basis for Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution. However, its results and achievements can offer the possibility that religion can serve the function of uniting rather than dividing the two peoples.

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