



**NONE SHALL
BE AFRAID**
FIGHTING ANTI-SEMITISM

Faith-Based Anti-Semitism

Over the course of thousands of years, those promoting irrational hatred of Jews have constructed ways to do so on multiple grounds: religious, socioeconomic, racial and political. Among the very oldest strains of the bigotry called “the oldest hatred” is that of the faith-based variety. Jews comprise both a people and a faith community, but while Jews have come to be characterized by some diversity in ethnic backgrounds and substantial diversity in religious beliefs and practice, they are most fundamentally defined by their association with Judaism, the religion rooted in the Hebrew Bible.

The adherents of Judaism – which traditionally accepts committed converts but does not actively proselytize – comprise a very small proportion of the world’s population: significantly under one percent. However, as a forerunner of other major faiths, as well as through the impact of its teachings and its followers across time, Judaism has had outside influence on human history.

Jews have loomed large particularly in the consciousness of many Christians and Muslims, whose religions are the two most widely followed in the world and, like Judaism, were born in the Middle East.

Christianity, which came to be dominant in the West (with presence and power well beyond), sprung from a small group of Jewish followers of Jesus, a fellow Jew in the Jewish ancestral homeland, Israel, some two millennia ago. Christians continue to view Jewish scriptures as fully part of their own scriptural canon.

Islam, too, maintains significant connections to and commonalities with Judaism, as a monotheistic faith that is also sometimes referred to as “Abrahamic.” (Of the biblical patriarch Abraham’s sons, Jews look to Isaac as their forefather, while Arabs, now predominantly Muslim, look to Ishmael.) Forged in Arabia, Islam classically respected Jews and Christians as “people of the book,” and considered their prophets among its own.

However, interspersed with contexts of mutual respect and coexistence, various manifestations of tension and conflict have repeatedly been spurred by theological differences, by rivalry in drawing adherents and by battles for political and territorial conquest among the religions – none of which are monolithic.

Although Jesus was executed by Roman authorities, after the Roman Empire eventually adopted Christianity and following the exile of most Jews from Israel (renamed Palestine) with Rome’s destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem – the spiritual and national heart of the Jewish people – Jews were long subjected to humiliations, segregation, discrimination and persecution in predominantly Christian European lands. An “adversus Judaeos” (or “against-the-Jews”) tradition progressively took shape, characterized by a supersessionist belief that Christians have replaced Jews as the “new Israel” or “people of the covenant,” and that Jews deserved punishment for failing to accept the divinity of Jesus or bearing supposed responsibility for his death.



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While, during extended periods, Muslim rule proved far friendlier to Jews than that of Christians – whose armies, during the Crusades, massacred both Muslims and Jews while fighting to retake the Holy Land from Islamic rule – in Islam, like its fellow religions, could also be found less tolerant, more triumphalist elements, relegating Jews and Christians to inferior “dhimmi” status and asserting Muslim control over expansive terrain labeled “dar al-Islam” (the “abode of Islam”).

Christian anti-Semitism culminated in the Holocaust, the genocide perpetrated by Nazi Germany and its collaborators, which by 1945 eradicated some six million Jews – one-third of the world’s Jewish population – utilizing the varied anti-Jewish myths and imagery that had circulated in Europe for centuries.

However, particularly after 1948, when Jewish statehood was restored in Israel – a development furiously rejected by Arabs, who considered Palestine to be Arab and Islamic land – the source of the most overt and lethal hostility to Jews, often not limited to the half of Jewry that came to reside in Israel and often appropriating the old anti-Semitic motifs of Christian Europe, shifted to the Muslim world.

Some 850,000 Jews fled or were expelled from Middle Eastern states; most of these states long officially discriminated against Israelis, those visiting or doing business with Israel or Jews generally; and surveys have found extremely high rates of animosity not merely to “Zionists” but to Jews in many Muslim-majority countries, with anti-Jewish harassment and violence perpetrated by some of those migrating from them to Europe and elsewhere.

Above all, the demonizing, delegitimizing and scapegoating of Israel in political discourse, religious sermons, educational curricula and media content across so many Muslim countries – with pledges to “drive Israel into the sea” and glorification of “holy war” and “martyrdom” against Israel – has led to decades of conflict and terrorism responsible for taking the lives of nearly 25,000 Israelis and some Jews abroad. While historically Muslims did not see Jews as foreign to the region, including Israel, a denial of Jewish roots in the land and connection to foremost holy sites there has become common not only among diverse jihadist extremists – both Sunni and Shi’ite – but in the mainstream of the Arab world. With a plethora of social and other challenges in Arab countries, the “cause” of Palestine – which for decades expressly meant the total replacement of Israel with a Palestinian Arab state – has served as a rare rallying cry in otherwise often fragmented societies.

Beyond the borders of Muslim countries, attacks against individual Jews and Jewish communities have unfortunately become all too common. These attacks are often perpetrated by Muslim radicals in Europe, radicalized by online sources or fiercely anti-Semitic imams.

However, there are bright spots in the fight against faith-based anti-Semitism. Fortunately, beyond the moderate and pluralistic Muslim communities to be found in different parts of the world, growing recognition within Arab countries themselves of Israel’s permanence, fatigue over endless warfare and heightened awareness of shared interests – not least, containing the broadly threatening policies of Iran, but also fostering



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regional development – have been quietly remaking Arab-Israel relations. It is hoped that years after Israel finally secured peace and diplomatic ties with its two primary Arab neighbors, Egypt and Jordan, other states in the region will come to normalize ties with the Jewish state.

Moreover, elsewhere – particularly in Europe – Muslim, Jewish and other communities can find much common cause in fighting bigotry and resisting infringements upon religious freedom. In some European countries, regulations have been adopted or proposed to curtail the religiously mandated preparation of meat or the performance of male circumcision – restrictions, often prompted by thinly veiled xenophobia, that threaten to make communal existence difficult or impossible for minorities like Muslims and Jews.

Meanwhile, the Christian-Jewish relationship provides unique hope in the potential for reconciliation despite a painful past. Although some retrogressive elements certainly remain among clergy members and laypeople alike, over the course of the 20th century, especially after the Holocaust, many church denominations reflected on the incitement that made such horrors possible and sought to forge a better future by repudiating anti-Semitism as a “sin against God and man.” The Roman Catholic Church recognized that Jews’ covenant is unbroken – and eschewed targeted efforts to missionize Jews.

However, challenges do persist, with some churches (particularly among those mainline Protestants who have singled out Israel for censure and sanctions) accepting Jews’ religious legitimacy but not fully their national rights, while others (primarily evangelical) uphold the legitimacy of Zionism and Israel’s self-defense while continuing to maintain that Jews must adopt Christian religious beliefs.

Through ongoing interreligious dialogue and new avenues of practical cooperation, there remains cause for optimism that, notwithstanding their differences, faith groups can help to build bridges even across cultural and geographic divides.



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