

Oxford Islamic Studies Online

Citation for Muslim-Jewish Dialogue

Citation styles are based on the *Chicago Manual of Style, 15th Ed.*, and the *MLA Style Manual, 2nd Ed.*

MLA

Freidenreich, David M. "Muslim-Jewish Dialogue". *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. Ed. John L. Esposito. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*. Nov 5, 2007. <<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article>>.

Chicago

Freidenreich, David M. "Muslim-Jewish Dialogue". *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. , edited by John L. Esposito. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article> (accessed Nov 5, 2007).

Download to Citation Management Software

EndNote

ProCite

ReferenceManager

RefWorks

Muslim-Jewish Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue, in the modern sense of the term, refers to an intentionally constructed framework for the mutual exchange of ideas among members of different religious communities. Norms for such frameworks first developed within Christian ecumenical encounters during the early to mid-twentieth century and, especially in the final third of that century, in the context of Christian-Jewish dialogue. Muslim-Jewish dialogue in this modern sense is an even more recent phenomenon, but communication of ideas between adherents of these religions has a history as old as Islam itself.

Historians regularly characterize medieval Muslim-Jewish intellectual relations as "symbiotic." Problems have been raised with this metaphor of mutually beneficial interaction between distinct entities, popularized by S. D. Goitein (*Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts Through the Ages*, New York, 1955), but it retains scholarly currency. Two drawbacks of this image are that it presumes the existence of a religious divide within society and obscures the ways Muslims and Jews perceived their multifaceted relationships.

Conceptual affinities between Islam and Judaism were recognized by early Muslims themselves, who saw both religions as the products of divine revelation and who consciously appealed to traditions of reportedly Jewish origins about pre-Islamic religious history (*isrāʾīliyyāt*). Academic scholars once commonly explained parallels between Islam and Judaism in terms of "borrowing" by the former from the latter, epitomized most famously in the title of Abraham Geiger's 1833 study (in German), "What did Mohammed take from Judaism?" Scholars today are more likely to emphasize the shared cultural and intellectual milieu in which both Judaism and Islam evolved and to examine the ways intellectuals from each community employed and reshaped common ideas.

By the tenth century, Jews living in the Islamic world—the vast majority of world Jewry during the Middle Ages—regularly used Arabic in their daily lives and in their scholarly writings. Ideas espoused by Muslims influenced

all spheres of Jewish intellectual activity. Medieval Jews themselves, however, often did not acknowledge such influence and in many cases would not have considered the ideas of their cultural milieu particularly “Islamic.”

Intellectual ties between Muslims and Jews in no way impeded interreligious polemics, although the significance of such activity should not be overemphasized. Polemical statements appear in a variety of Jewish sources, but tracts dedicated to polemic are rare in Jewish literature from Islamic lands. Muslims, meanwhile, were less interested in anti-Jewish than in anti-Christian polemic. Critiques of foreign religions often took place in the salon-like context of a formal disputation (*majlis*) between representatives of different traditions, theoretically conducted in an environment that preserved freedom of speech and freedom from recrimination.

Classical Islamic polemic against Judaism focused primarily on the Bible. Muslims asserted that Jews falsified their scripture in order, for example, to remove references to the coming of Muḥammad; they further argued that God abrogated the Torah with the Gospels and, finally, with the Qur’ān. Jewish polemic, in contrast, contested the prophethood of Muḥammad and the validity of his revelation, contending that God’s will is unchanging and thus that claims of the abrogation of the Torah are invalid.

Contemporary polemics between Muslims and Jews often relate to the modern State of Israel. Many Jews regard its establishment, in 1948, as the fulfillment of what Israel’s national anthem calls “the 2000-year-old hope of becoming a free people in our land.” Especially since 1967, many have imbued the state’s existence with religious significance. Opposition among Muslims to Israel’s existence, at first focused primarily on solidarity with Palestinians and their right to national self-determination, has taken on an increasingly religious tone in recent decades. This tone is epitomized in the assertion by Hamas that “the land of Palestine is unalienably dedicated as Islamic (*arḍ waqf islāmī*) throughout Islam’s generations until Resurrection Day” (Hamas Charter, 1988). Animosity between Muslims and Jews is fueled by Israeli military activity and by terrorism in the name of Islam by Hamas and other organizations.

The Arab-Israeli/Israeli-Palestinian conflict has exercised considerable influence on the historiography of Muslim-Jewish relations (Cohen, 1994) and on contemporary Muslim-Jewish dialogue. Many organized dialogue programs involving Muslims and Jews relate to the conflict whose developments have both inspired the creation of dialogue events and contributed to the dissolution of established groups. The September 11 attacks and local incidences of conflict have also significantly affected Muslim-Jewish dialogue.

Dialogue between religious leaders and scholars has been promoted by a variety of Jewish and Islamic organizations and individuals. The governments of Jordan and Qatar have been particularly active in fostering dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims, including Jews, through conferences and institutes. Dialogue among North American leaders has been hampered by the different organizational structures, cultural backgrounds, and communal needs of participants, and especially by disparities in power dynamics. Especially since 9/11, however, leaders from both communities have perceived altruistic and self-interested motivations for fostering interreligious communication.

Numerous grassroots and university-affiliated organizations sponsor Muslim-Jewish dialogue in communities across North America, Europe, and Israel. When not the primary focus of dialogue, Middle Eastern politics are often consciously excluded from discussion. While some groups limit their activity to conversation, text study, or shared holiday celebrations, others make a point of fostering collaboration on shared goals, such as the alleviation of Palestinian suffering, defense of ritual slaughter practices against European opposition, and civic improvement projects. Many organizations focus their efforts on youth dialogue, seeking to promote mutual understanding and train future leaders in conflict resolution through activities such as camping and Internet-based programs.

Carolyn Shaffer (“Arab/Muslim-Jewish Dialogue in Montreal,” thesis, Concordia University, 2006) reports that organized dialogue in Montreal began in 1982 and that the three active organizations are less than ten years old. Shaffer’s observational study, among the few of its kind, supports the contention of theorists that grassroots

Muslim-Jewish dialogue effects change in participants and fosters improved interaction among individuals and communities but generates frustration when efforts to “do something” seem to fall short.

Bibliography

- Cohen, Mark R. *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Lazarus-Yafeh, Hava. *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Loskota, Brie, and Reuven Firestone. Challenges in Jewish-Muslim Dialogue: The American Context In *A Comparative Study of Jews and Muslims*, edited by Humayun Ansari and David Caesarani. Royal Holloway Research Online, forthcoming. [http:](http://)
- Stroumsa, Sarah, Jewish Polemics Against Islam and Christianity in the Light of Judaeo-Arabic Texts. In *Judaeo-Arabic Studies*, edited by Norman Golb, pp. 241–250. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997.
- Wasserstrom, Steven M. *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis Under Early Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.