

Ties with Moslems need work

THE RABBI'S TURN

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Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world today. In Africa, it has been ascendant over Christianity, which is often associated with the legacy of European colonialism. In our own country, too, the formerly small Moslem community is growing.

Recent estimates have it that Moslems will outnumber Jews in the United States by the turn of the century. Then they, rather than we, will be the largest non-Christian religious minority in this country.

The return of Elijah Mohammed's Black Muslims to the fold of orthodoxy allows them to join with the various Middle Eastern communities to create an important, essentially new and transethnic American religious minority.

Relations between Jews and Moslems have unfortunately been polluted for the last half-century because of our political

conflict with the Arab world, the heartland of Islam. But in longer historical perspective, we Jews have had a much closer and more amicable relationship with Moslem civilization than we have had with Christianity.

The second half of the 20th century has seen a marked improvement of our relationship with Christians (largely because of guilt-tinged reactions to the Holocaust), while at the same time the Jewish-Moslem relationship has reached a low point.

The time has come for us to turn our attention to improving relations with this very significant religious community.

Islam originated in the visions of Mohammed, a seventh-century Arabian prophet who believed he had direct communication from the one universal God. While the Arab tribes of his day still worshiped multiple deities and idols, Mohammed had learned of the One God through the influence of both Judaism and Christianity on Arabian culture.

Recognizing his debt to the prior monotheistic faiths, Mohammed and his followers legislated a special status for Jews and Christians in the developing Islamic empire. While

idolators were to be put to the sword if they did not accept the Moslem truth, members of the other monotheistic faiths were to be protected, though at a rank of some noticeable inferiority. The status of *dhimmi*, which the Moslems gave us, is that of a protected, though only barely tolerated, minority.

Despite this discrimination, Jews flourished in the Islamic lands. In the Middle Ages, there was a cultural exchange between Jews and Moslems that far surpassed the degree of openness that Jews felt in most Christian countries.

While Islam saw itself as superseding both Judaism and Christianity, there was not the anxiety of "sibling rivalry" that existed between Christianity and Judaism. Our religion did not have to be untrue for Islam to be vindicated, as was the case for Christianity until quite recently. Charges of deicide, ritual murder and the religiously justified pogrom were the legacy of New Testament characterizations of Jews and Pharisees. This did not take place in nearly the same measure in the Islamic world.

The fact is that Judaism and Islam have a good deal in common from a religious point of view. Both are radically monotheistic and insist that the oneness of God is the most basic truth they hold dear. Both are still motivated by the original anti-idol-

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atrous revolutions of their founders.

Because of this, the two traditions are iconoclastic in the original sense. They do not allow for graven images and certainly are wholly opposed to their use in a religious context. Moslems traditionally have been even more "orthodox" than Jews about this. For this reason, Islamic art developed primarily around abstract geometric and architectural forms.

Both traditions also have great respect for the rule of law and the importance of legal precedent within the tradition. Halacha for Jews has its parallel in the Moslem *shariya*, a venerable tradition of religious legislation. Such institutions as Al-azhar Islamic University in Cairo house teams of legal scholars who would be the match for any yeshiva in Jerusalem or Brooklyn.

A major difference between the two traditions emerges, however, in their respective confrontations with modernity. Because Judaism was a religion of Jews who lived in Western Europe as well as in the Slavic lands and the Near East, it went through a process of reform and gradual acceptance of modernity over the course of the past two centuries.

Due to historical and partly tragic circumstance, the largest single group of Jews now lives in North America, a place noted for interreligious dialogue and a multiplicity of approaches to tradition.

We learned from the surrounding Protestant culture that it is possible to maintain faith in God and love of tradition while still questioning certain fundamental claims of our inherited faith. The ability to combine the faithful heart and the questioning — or even challenging — mind is a central tenet of liberal Judaism.

The Moslem community, concentrated in the Near East, saw modernity as the creation of foreigners and colonialists. Its leaders wanted no part of the modern questioning and reforming spirit. As a result, literalism is still almost universal among Moslem believers. Most seem to insist that absolute belief in the verbal revelation from God to Mohammed is essential to any Moslem.

Because of this, Islam has tended to break rather than bend in its confrontation with the modern world. When young Syrians or Palestinians found they could no longer believe in the literal truth claim of their tradition, they became "post-Moslem" Arabs rather than reformed or "enlightened" Moslem believers.

If they continue to identify with Islam, they do so mostly for ethnic and Pan-Arabist reasons, rather than out of faith. In this, they are not entirely unlike secular Israelis, who

continue to identify with Judaism as the shared legacy of the Jewish people. This sort of cultural religion is found in both of these traditions perhaps more than it is in present-day Christianity.

The difficulties Islam has had in responding openly to the challenges of modern thought have led it to be identified in the minds of many with a fanatical or uncompromisingly fundamentalist attitude. We read of victories by Islamic parties or of the reinstatement of Islamic law in various lands. These moves are generally led by the clergy who see their first task as opposing the modern world, adopting only its technical gadgetry to proclaim a message that they proudly say is utterly unaffected by modernity.

Aside from a small segment within our community, most Jews believe that this situation is not a healthy one and that a deeper accommodation of religious faith with both the scientific and societal attitudes of the modern world will have to be developed.

For Jewish-Moslem dialogue to progress, it will first have to be rescued from captivity to Zionist and anti-Zionist politics.

As religious communities that know powerfully the love of God and the striving to understand and fulfill the Divine will, Jews and Moslems are able to be deeply respectful of one another. Over the centuries, we

have talked and learned from one another in ways that have profoundly shaped and changed both of our traditions.

I wish there were a way for us Jews to teach our Moslem neighbors to be a little less afraid of modernity and a little more open to allowing for change. In this way, Islam could provide alternatives from within itself to the fundamentalist spirit that is dangerous for us all. ■