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Interfaith Relations: Islam and Judaism

Islam and Judaism are often considered to be conflicting religions, whose followers have no chance of developing mutual understanding, of collaborating with each other, or of living peacefully alongside each other. However, this idea is one which is largely untrue, and is based on the very recent creation of the state of Israel, while historically, it has actually been the case that Jewish and Muslim people have happily and peacefully lived among each other for centuries, particularly in Maghreb countries like Morocco. Therefore, in spite of outside perceptions of stark contrast and discordance, Judaism and Islam are actually very compatible religions with many commonalities, and the interfaith collaboration of Jewish and Muslim Berber communities should serve as a model for interfaith relations around the world.

The Jewish and Muslim populations of Morocco have gotten along for centuries, and to this day, there is minimal anti-Semitic sentiment and a strong memory of the now-departed Jews. The town of Tinghir in Morocco, in the Atlas Mountains, a location featured in the ‘*Tinghir-Jerusalem’* documentary about Jewish and Muslim Berber communities and interfaith relations, is an example which confirms this point[[1]](#footnote-1). The Jews and Muslims of Tinghir lived together in peace and harmony for generations before the creation of the Israeli state, which led to many Jews choosing to leave for Israel, but did not create significant anti-Semitic sentiment. This should serve as a role model for religious communities around the world, particularly the Jewish minorities in European nations, Muslims in America, and Muslim-Christian tensions throughout Europe and North America.

The Jewish and Muslim Berbers of Tinghir, Morocco had similar rituals and lifestyles. The Jews and Muslims wore similar robes. They performed similar music. These groups also had many cultural features in common, such as the same Berber language. Even though the two other prominent languages in the region spoken by the Jews and Muslims, Hebrew and Arabic respectively, are different languages, someone who speaks one can understand some when another person speaks the other. In fact, Morocco had been home to over 300,000 Jews, the largest such population in the Arab world.

As noted in the documentary film *Tinghir-Jerusalem,* the Jewish and Muslim Berbers of the Atlas Mountains were only different in their religion, nothing else. This comment shows the deep level of collaboration and understanding between these two communities in Tinghir, Morocco, and that type of bond and integration should serve as a model for the rest of the world, particularly calling into question the troubled relationships between Muslims and Jews, or Muslims and Christians, elsewhere in the world. Tinghir should serve as a particularly important role model for Western Europe and North America.

In Western Europe there are large populations of Muslims, most of whom are immigrants, and these groups are often discriminated against and marginalized. Similar issues have been occurring in North America. Now, in these times troubled by terrorism and violence motivated by warped interpretations of religious scripture, is the right moment for nations to come together, maintaining their liberties, holding on to their values, and accepting the diversity in their communities. It is not the time to be divided and discriminate against certain groups in national populations. There are three nations from Western Europe and North America which face particular challenges regarding the acceptance and understanding of their Muslim and Jewish minorities – France, Great Britain, and the United States.

The relationship between the majority in France, which today is mostly secular, but historically has been mostly Catholic, and its mostly immigrant Muslim minority is particularly vexed, standing out as an example of a situation which could benefit greatly from the lessons of Tinghir’s Jewish and Muslim Berbers. The French have created laws, referred to generally as the *laïcité,* which theoretically promote the separation of church and state, but in practice have at times been used to discriminate against the Muslim minority. It was the *laïcité* which paved the way for measures, supported by President Sarkozy, making it illegal to wear burqas and niqabs in public.[[2]](#footnote-2) The staunch support of secularism in French society has ironically led to the oppression of a religious minority and infringements on their right to free expression of their faith. This has bred resentment among the Muslim immigrant communities from the Middle East and North Africa of the French government and the mainstream Catholic population of France. That resentment only accentuates the struggles regarding assimilation and integration of immigrants into mainstream French society, which led to the regrettable ghetto-like banlieues, xenophobia, populism, and Islamophobia.

A related concern is the strained relationship between the Protestant majority and the mostly-immigrant Muslim minority in the United Kingdom. It is particularly hard to decide where to draw the line between the powers of the Muslim community, and the powers of the British government. An example of such a conflict between the British government and the Muslim community is the conflict over religious marriages[[3]](#footnote-3). If a marriage was intended to follow the Islamic religion, can it be performed by community religious authorities, and should it have legal status with the government? After marriage, if a Muslim couple wants a divorce, but wishes to ensure the divorce is executed in a religiously appropriate fashion, gaining the consent of the community religious officials, then is the state obliged to respect this divorce and legally recognize it? The debate over which powers belong to religious counseling groups and which powers belong solely to government is heated and ongoing. However, the British government should remember to respect the rights of its Muslim communities, and to avoid marginalizing them or making them second-class citizens by restricting their rights more than those of other segments of Britain’s population, because nothing good would come of that.

The relationship between the Christian majority and the Muslim minority in the United States of America is another unsettled and tense situation. After the traumatic terrorist attacks of 9/11, the United States government, as well as certain segments of the general population, has become very wary of its Muslim minority. The United States government, instead of surveilling suspect individuals, has often chosen to set up surveillance for entire Muslim mosques and community centers. This has created even more friction between the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities in America. Therefore, the trust and kinship displayed by the Jews and Muslims of Tinghir is especially relevant to the United States; it can teach Americans a lesson about the value of cooperation, collaboration, and mutual understanding. Problems with terrorism will not get better if parts of the population are isolated, alienated, stigmatized, and removed from the mainstream.

Relationships between followers of different religions must improve, not only for the promise of greater peace and harmony around the world, but also because religion is an important aspect of one’s world perspective, lifestyle, and culture. The array of innovative, artistic, progressive, and insightful contributions to global societies and cultures brought forth by religious communities is immense, and it must be preserved and enhanced for the future. These contributions are only possible in an environment of peace, harmony, and tolerance, and they are necessary for unlocking the full potential of a society and nation.

There are many examples of positive, important, and impactful cultural contributions to society from Muslim communities. One example is the mosque run by Hamza Perez, a Muslim convert in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, who uses his own life story and spiritual awakening to teach inmates at an Allegheny County prison lessons about morals, religion, and leading a positive lifestyle which contributes to society[[4]](#footnote-4). Another example is the Muslim youth culture, particularly in America, where young people have produced their own creative Islamic spins on fashion and popular music[[5]](#footnote-5). This is the output which is possible for Muslims when they are marginalized and discriminated against, so one can only imagine what the cultural output of these Muslims communities would be when they are accepted and understood by society at large.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all major world religions, and they are the three main global monotheistic faiths, so they have many more commonalities than differences. However, all three have histories of oppression, marginalization, and minority status, so they should be able to understand each other better than they currently do, and they should come together for their mutual benefit, rather than fighting among each other over petty differences. If they were to come together, they would no longer face persecution, marginalization, and oppression; they would create a religious and cultural rebirth instead. Such cooperation would promote acceptance, successful assimilation, and more complete and positive integration. This would be immensely beneficial for Syrian refugees and other Muslim immigrants to Europe. It would enrich the cultures and economies of the United States, France, and Great Britain, among other nations with large Muslim and Jewish minorities, and it would work to prevent and reduce violence and distrust between faith groups around the world.

Improved stability, understanding, cooperation, and collaboration between various spiritual communities would not only lead to increased questioning of traditional gender roles, inequality, and conservative social policies holding back younger generations; it would also lead to more interfaith collaborations and proposals for solutions to remove these obstacles from their paths and open society up to taking full advantage of the revolutionary ideas and capabilities of these groups, particularly their younger members. The youth culture of Muslims in America, once again, is excellent proof of what positive additions to society these communities can offer, from new genres of music to new styles in fashion. Hamza Perez, his mosque and Islamic community center, and his teachings at his local prison, all have substantial and noticeable positive impacts on his community as well.

However, there are also political benefits to fostering cooperation between faith groups. Better interfaith relations in the free, democratic, capitalist nations of Western Europe and North America would truly make them ‘leaders of the free world’ and international role models. This would also inspire more pro-American and pro-European sentiment abroad, showing the international community that it is possible to overcome deep-seated hostility and distrust between faiths, and would encourage nations struggling with democratic transitions and fights against extremism, like Tunisia, to stay strong and pull through for a brighter, more prosperous future. These countries need to see that there are nations which can successfully reconcile the differences between various segments of their population with disparate beliefs, and which can peacefully promote the identities of these groups, encourage cooperation amongst these groups, and take advantage of the unique skills and perspectives offered by these communities to strengthen the whole.

Christians, Jews, and Muslims share much, and they should learn to work together, because only positives can come of such enhanced cooperation and understanding. The time has come for nations around the world to integrate and learn from their Muslim and Jewish communities. It is past time for France to overcome its current anti-immigrant drama, with misguided measures like the ‘*laïcité*’ and the creation of the segregating ‘banlieue’ ghettos for Muslim and ethnically non-French minorities, and choose instead to promote and implement its core values of universal French culture and education through travel and diverse cultural experiences. The United States needs to return to its roots as a nation built on immigration, and use those values as motivation to work harder to accept, understand, and encourage its Muslim minority to achieve its full potential. The American and European Christians can learn something from the Muslims and Jews of the Maghreb, particularly those of Berber origins from Tinghir, Morocco. The positive, prosperous relationship between Muslim and Jewish Berbers in Tinghir should serve as a model for an achievable ideal of interfaith collaboration around the world.

(1956 words)

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