“Desecrating the symbols of other religions: A Jewish Perspective”
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A basic premise of this paper is that desecrating the symbols of other religions degrades all of us. It is both insulting to religion as a whole and it paves the way to justifying violence against people of other religions. While I believe that people have the right to criticize the practices of members of other religions, especially when they violate universal moral standards, the mark of a civilized society is to treat human beings and their religions with dignity and honor. It is here that religious leaders can play an important role and model the behavior of speaking respectfully about symbols that others regard as holy. The challenge for all of us is that we are consistent in our behavior — that we speak out against our own communities when they insult the symbols of other religions as much as we are quick to criticize the way others treat our own religions.

Turning to the way that the Jewish tradition deals with this subject, I examine the issue of “desecrating the symbols of other religions” from two larger perspectives: (1) attitudes towards that religion as a whole; and (2) expressing a desire to do violence to the people of that religion. On the second issue, Jewish tradition makes it very clear that, with the exception of “idolaters who lack a moral code of behavior,” people of all other religions must be treated with compassion and with concern for their welfare, based on the belief that all human beings were created in the divine image and based on the understanding that people should live in peace (“mipnei darkei shalom”).

On the first issue of attitudes towards other religions, we must distinguish between the theological value that Judaism accords to Islam and, in most cases, Christianity, as monotheistic traditions with moral systems, and the historical experience of Jewish-non-Jewish relations.

The clearest indication of the value that Judaism accords for people of other religions is the principle that the righteous of other nations have their share in Heaven. Because Judaism is a universal religion but does not demand that all people should be Jewish, most Jewish scholars recognize that there are other valid paths to God. Regarding Jewish attitudes towards Islam and Christianity, I bring the most famous classical writings on the subject — that of Rabbi Musa b. Maimon (Maimonides) and Rabbi Menachem ha-Meiri, who argue that Islam and Christianity, respectively, are religions that should be recognized as monotheistic and that their practitioners engage in religious behavior for the sake of heaven.

Regarding the historical experience of Jews and non-Jews, we must distinguish between the periods in which Jews have lived freely or as the majority religion and when Jews have lived as a minority under other religions. When Jews lived as a minority under Islam or Christianity, Jewish writings must be seen in the context of how Jews were treated (sometimes tolerated, sometimes persecuted) and in the context of Jewish responses to anti-Jewish sentiments expressed in the Qur’an and in the New Testament. It is here that we find Jewish criticisms against texts and figures in both Islam and Christianity. In the
contemporary period, in which most Jews live either as citizens of democracies or as the majority in a sovereign state, Jewish writings on Jewish-non-Jewish relations stress our responsibility to protect and defend the rights of other religions communities to live and worship with dignity.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to the conference for giving us an opportunity to share our concerns on this subject and for allowing members of each religious community to raise issues that concern and trouble them. I am outraged at recent actions in the West that insult the Prophet Muhammad and desecrate the Qur’an. They demonstrate a lack of understanding and respect for Islam and they do violence to the global Muslim community. I also want to raise issues of Jewish concern in this arena regarding the desecration in the Arabic media of rabbis, Jewish symbols and Judaism more generally. I ask that we – Jews, Muslims and Christians – establish the same standards of challenging these insults wherever they are, whether in our own communities or in the communities of others.