

The Eighth Doha Conference for Interfaith Dialogue
Raising the New Generation on a Foundation of Values and Traditions: Religious Perspectives Visions of Religious
Scholars on the Role of Educational, Social, and Media Institutions in Raising the New Generation

“Teach Your Children Well”ⁱ

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Abstract

The role of educational, social, and media institutions cannot be separated from the content of the values and traditions they transmit. The author considers five areas of common concern to Jews and Muslims in America for raising the new generation within the broader Christian and/or secular milieu: A) Where we came from: The Arc of Judaism and Islam in America. B) Assimilation and Authenticity: The Challenges Judaism and Islam face as part of America. C) Interpretation of Scripture. D) Interpretation of Law. E) Looking Forward: Training the next Generation. These will be considered, along with a session on Christian views of minority religions, at a workshop for Muslim and Jewish scholars jointly sponsored by the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Islamic Society of North America, October 25-26, 2010.

I. Introduction

“Raising the new generation on a foundation of values and traditions” has been a challenge since the time of Adam and Eve. “The role of educational, social, and media institutions” in doing so has been an engine of advancing religious civilization throughout recorded history. I prefer to not survey *all* of humanity and history on this noble topic, and instead will narrow my purview to Judaism in America for the 21st century. Even here, we must distinguish further between the role of institutions affecting transmission, and the content of religious values and traditions.

If you will allow an analogy from *Hadith*, there is a difference between the *isnad* and the *matn*. It is true that generations of Muslim scholars have struggled to determine the authenticity and validity of the transmission of Muslim traditions –there is a venerable science dedicated to the study of *isnad*.ⁱⁱ But once the vehicle of transmission (*isnad*) has been established, the quality

of its content (*matn*) becomes all important. So, too, while we may delineate the role of educational, social, and media institutions in raising the new generation; we are remiss if we do not examine the content of those values and traditions.

My assumptions are two-fold. First, that values and traditions are not static, but slowly evolve over time. Values change and are in tension with received traditions. Second, we cannot separate the institutions from the content they transmit any more than we would separate the *matn* from its *isnad*. The institutions by which we transmit those values and traditions have a role in shaping the content of our teachings. As Marshall McLuhan famously put it, “The Medium is the Message.”ⁱⁱⁱ

As a scholar of religion, serving as a professor of Midrash,^{iv} I stipulate that educational, social, and even media institutions each play a role alongside that of family, and synagogues, churches, and mosques in the transmission of our religious values and traditions. I wish to emphasize the distinction between values and traditions; for in modernity we often find an uncomfortable conflict arising between modern values, values of the surrounding culture, and the traditions of our ancestors. Each of the means of transmission (media, educational, and social institutions) can serve to potentially exacerbate the tension between values and traditions or, when thoughtfully studied and applied, serve to enhance the transmission and education of those religious values and traditions to the new generation.

In focusing on Judaism in 21st century America, I note that the Jewish community, alongside the Muslim community of America, is embedded within a largely Christian and/or secular culture. This means that Judaism in America differs in kind from Judaism in Israel, or even Judaism in Europe at the current time (which is, perforce, a decidedly more secular culture than that of America). In large measure, what is true of Judaism in America is also true of Islam in America. Both share common features as religions and cultures, and also share minority status. As such, Judaism and Islam have a great deal to learn from one another as they respond to the Christian hegemonic milieu.^v

I wish to take a brief to establish my *bona fides* on the “role of educational, social, and media institutions in raising the new generation.” I am a conservative Rabbi who was ordained

and earned my Ph.D. at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, where I currently teach.^{vi} My training includes expertise in the ancient literature of the rabbis, and comparative work in New Testament and Church Fathers. Recently I have been learning Arabic that I may augment my ability to work in Quran, Hadith, and other Muslim sources (إن شاء الله). I am trained in education, have served as an academic dean, write both academic and popular mass-audience books in Jewish studies, have blogged,^{vii} done television (including a ten hour series with Jews, Christians, and Muslims discussing the book of Genesis for public television),^{viii} and even consulted with DreamWorks on their animated feature “Prince of Egypt.”^{ix} I am not shy about using educational or media institutions to teach our values and traditions.

II. Values and Traditions

The *raison d'être* of the Jewish Theological Seminary, where I teach, is precisely the transmission of Jewish values and traditions to the next generation of American Jews. Indeed, we see the problem as urgent for both Jews and Muslims within the predominantly secular and Christian American culture.^x For more than a year we have been addressing these issues together with our Muslim colleagues from the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). These deliberations have resulted in the convening of a “Workshop on Judaism and Islam in America,” which will take place on Monday and Tuesday, October 25-26, 2010. As we write in our statement of the issue we seek to jointly address:

American Jews and American Muslims face an array of pressing and often troubling issues, none more significant perhaps than maintaining their heritage and identity in a predominantly secular and Christian culture. ...[the joint workshop offers opportunities] ...for Jewish and Muslim scholars to gather and share their learning and insight as these bear on the problems and unique experiences of the two groups as they seek to live and teach their traditions faithfully and authentically in the unprecedented conditions of 21st-century America.

To facilitate discussion of the questions that face us scholars and educators in transmitting the values and traditions of our separate religions in a common Christian/secular culture, we are gathering Jewish and Muslim educators, media experts, and social scientists to join in conversation. This workshop is closed to outsiders in the hopes of encouraging frank

discussions and relationships which allow for mutual trust, understanding, and synergy. Only when we explore the common problems we face, can we work toward common solutions for raising the new generation of Jews and Muslims, *mutatis mutandis*.

In order to focus the workshop, we are considering five content-areas: A) Where we came from: The Arc of Judaism and Islam in America. B) Assimilation and Authenticity: The Challenges Judaism and Islam face as part of America. C) Interpretation of Scripture. D) Interpretation of Law. E) Training the next Generation. Each of these areas seeks to establish the common ground among Jews and Muslims: our shared attitudes, similar practices and beliefs, and mutual challenges within the broader American culture. We will also have a sixth session on “Christian perspectives.” In this session we invite the heads of three major American Christian Seminaries to share their views on the challenges which Jews and Muslims face in America and the role of Christian religious leaders in shaping inter-faith tolerance, acceptance, and respect for one another.

In tracing “Where we came from” the scholars will focus on the social history of Judaism and Islam in America. We explore the development of Judaism over the past two centuries in America and the emergence of Islam in America. We seek to determine how Judaism and Islam in America each differ from their antecedents: how Judaism in America differs from its European origins and how Islam in America is developing a separate identity from its Middle-Eastern and Asian roots. The different waves of immigration that brought separate and diffuse populations of Jews and Muslims to America are a topic for consideration. We will also attend to changing attitudes within America toward immigration and minority cultures. We will observe how within each religious population sub-communities and denominations have developed. We assume that the study of history leads us to understand how we became what we are. This allows us to imagine an arc of progress into the new generation.^{xi}

Our session on “Assimilation and Authenticity” seeks to address how our young people assimilate to the broader American culture, how both religions face xenophobia in the forms of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, and how the new generation navigates these pressures while forming an independent religious identity through education in Muslim and/or Jewish values and

traditions. The Jewish community in America has experienced these issues a generation and more ahead of the Muslim community, which is currently confronting these challenges. Yet we have much to learn from one another's successes and failures in confronting and engaging these essential tests to maintaining identity in America.^{xii}

In our discussion of the interpretation of Scripture, we consider how contemporary interpreters draw on traditional methods to find new relevance in *Tanakh* and Quran. The impact of modern critical scholarship upon traditional interpretation, to say the least of its impact upon finding religious significance in our sacred texts, is an essential topic. Scriptural interpretation is a flashpoint in the debate between the traditional and the scientific historical-critical approach. While both Judaism and Islam each have a long history of Scriptural interpretation, the modern university presents challenges to religious approaches on two fronts. On one hand, traditional readings are dismissed as quaint, or worse, as false. Secondly, the non-denominational attitudes inherent in American universities often give rise to a class of interpreters who study Scriptures from outside their own religious traditions. While this provides a patina of objectivity, it runs the risk of unsympathetic interpretation of our classical texts. We seek to find a middle ground that allows for critical yet sympathetic scholarship which accounts for modern research methods while respecting the integrity of traditional readings^{xiii}

Similarly, we find interpretation of law to be contested territory. Judaism and Islam confront aspects of modernity which have bearing upon our legal traditions. Scholars of *halachah* and *fikh* are called upon to adjudicate religious law for changing conditions brought by technological innovation; but also by changing social mores and values in the broader American society. A simple example would be the shifts in attitudes over centuries of American experience toward slavery. A much more complex and contested example would be the role of women in religious leadership.^{xiv}

Finally, we look forward to the future of Islam and Judaism in America. Specifically, we focus on the training of Rabbis and Imams for American constituencies. This requires discussion of educational, social, and media institutions. But it also recognizes the unique demands upon clergy for Islam and Judaism in America going forward. We expect to discuss

professionalization of clergy, gender roles (i.e. the role of women in religious leadership), and the increasingly complex relationships between religious institutions and communal organizations.

III. Conclusions

While the workshop of Judaism and Islam in America is intentionally a closed group (to enhance connections, openness, and progress), we intend to use our educational institutions, social organizations, and media following the workshop to publish our shared vision and conclusions. To that end, I have spoken at the Doha forum and the annotated, longer version of my address will be published for the international inter-religious community in the conference proceedings. At our workshop itself, we will hold one public session, reprising the discussion on “Assimilation and Authenticity” for a large public audience. Publicity for the public session is being coordinated with the New York Public Library’s exhibition of manuscripts of the three Abrahamic religions.

Following the workshop we intend to use a variety of media to circulate our findings. *The Journal of Interreligious Dialogue* will serve as a means of disseminating our work to the broadest possible audience. Our conference coordinator will write a summary article of the workshop findings. Further, the Journal’s *InterViews* will post short videos of the workshop participants on-line through both the Journal website^{xv} as well as on YouTube.^{xvi}

In summary, we have considered the broad content areas of Jewish values and traditions and their means of transmission in educational, social, and media institutions of America. We also recognize that raising the new generation must happen in conjunction with our Muslim and Christian neighbors.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 6:7, as interpreted by Crosby, Stills, and Nash, *Déjà Vu* (1970), lyrics by Graham Nash.

ⁱⁱ *An Introduction to the Science of Hadith*, translated by Eerik Dickinson, (Reading, U.K.), 2006; and see the classic by Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien* (Halle), 2 vols., 1889–1890.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, 1964), et passim.

^{iv} See Burton L. Visotzky, *Reading the Book: Making the Bible a Timeless Text* (New York, 1991); and idem., “The Literature of the Rabbis,” in B. Visotzky and D. Fishman, *From Mesopotamia to Modernity: Ten Introductions to Jewish History and Literature* (Boulder, 1999) 71-102.

^v See e.g. the classic works by Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (NY, 1994) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (London, 1988).

^{vi} See http://www.jtsa.edu/Academics/Faculty_Profiles/Burton_Visotzky_Bio.xml?ID_NUM=100589

^{vii} Primarily on *Reuters: Faithworld: Religion, Faith and Ethics*. See <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/>

^{viii} <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/genesis/>

^{ix} See Charles Solomon, *The Prince of Egypt: A New Vision in Animation* (New York, 1998), p. 191 where current author is listed under Research: Religious Consultants.

^x Much of what follows comes from planning documents for the “Workshop on Judaism and Islam in America,” described here. The steering committee for the two-day workshop consists of Prof. Arnold Eisen, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Prof. Ingrid Mattson, ISNA President and Professor of Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary, Prof. Burton L. Visotzky, who serves as the workshop’s program officer, and Ms. Jessica Marglin, of Princeton University, who graciously brought to fruition our plans and coordinated the conference. Visotzky is responsible for the language and content of this essay, its errors and omissions.

^{xi} See for example: Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, 2004); Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States: 1654-2000* (California, 2004); Barbara Bilg , “Islam in the Americas,” in M. Eliade, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York, 1987), 7:425-31; Sulayman Nyang, “The History of Muslim Immigration in the U.S.,” paper presented to *Symposium on Muslims in North America*, 1983; Ilyas Ba-Yunus, “Muslims Living Next Door,” in N. Hosansky and M. Jalil, eds., *Muslims and Jews* (Columbus, 2003) 83-90.

^{xii} See Chaim Waxman, *American Jews in Transition* (Philadelphia, 1983); Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (Bloomington, Indiana, 2000); Akbar Ahmed, *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam* (Brookings, 2010), Paul Barrett, *American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion* (New York, 2006).

^{xiii} Two excellent examples of sympathetic attempts to synthesize modern scholarship with traditionalist views are Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (New York, 2001); and Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Quran: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* (Malden, Mass., 2008).

^{xiv} See Elliot Dorff, “The Historical Development of Jewish Law,” in idem, *Conservative Judaism: Our Ancestors to our Descendants* (New York, 1996) 53-68. For Islam, see the writings of Muzammil Siddiqi, president of the Fikh Council of North America, on www.IslamOnLine.net and www.islamopediaonline.org.

^{xv} <http://irdialogue.org/>

^{xvi} <http://www.youtube.com/user/religiousdialogue>

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