

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Jewish Revival and Respect for Islam in Nineteenth-Century Europe

On May 17, 2013, Joseph V. Montville, director of the Esalen Institute's "Toward the Abrahamic Family Reunion" project (<http://abrahamicfamilyreunion.org>), addressed a select audience at the IIIT headquarters on pre-Zionist Jewish scholarly interest in Islam.

He began by recalling how German and Austro-Hungarian Jewish scholars discovered remarkable similarities in the Torah, the Talmud, and the Qur'an. While hardly a surprise to Muslims, this was a "major revelation and surprise" to European Christian philologists and historians of religions. This new interest emerged as Europe was losing its fear of the Ottoman Empire, and of Muslims in general, because the now militarily inferior empire was in retreat and anti-Semitism was on the rise. Jewish intellectuals sought to blunt this latter trend by combating Christian disdain, if not hostility, of Jews and Judaism. They therefore played a major role in this scholarship, for, quoting from Bernard Lewis ["The State of Middle Eastern Studies," *American Scholar* 48, no. 3 (summer 1979: 369-70)]:

Jewish scholars brought up in the Jewish religion and trained in the Hebrew language found Islam and Arabic far easier to understand than did their Christian colleagues, and were, moreover, even less affected by the nostalgia for the Crusades, preoccupation with imperial [Christian] policy, or the desire to convert the "heathen" Jewish scholars ... played a key role in the development of an objective, non-polemical, and positive evaluation of Islamic civilization.

Montville then focused on the contributions of two major Jewish scholars in this field: Abraham Geiger (1810-74) and Ignac Goldziher (1850-1912).

Geiger's major concerns were to document Christianity's Jewish origins, win respect for Jews and Judaism in the post-Enlightenment era, and advance the cause of Jewish cultural and religious equality in the majority Christian world. He promoted the integration of Jewish studies in seminaries and uni-

versities, insisting that the study of rabbinic Judaism was essential to understanding the place of Jesus and the origins of Christianity.

A pioneer in this field, he spoke of an active, creative Jewish culture in Muslim Spain and the medieval Mediterranean. He concluded that Jews thrived in the high-level culture and learning in Muslim societies, which had no counterpart in Christian Europe. His work helped establish a new field of Jewish scholarship in Europe that documented persuasive similarities between rabbinic and Qur'anic literature. This, in turn, strengthened the theme of a positive symbiosis between Jewish and Muslim cultures.

Goldziher, unable to obtain a tenured academic appointment in his increasingly anti-Semitic Hungarian homeland – he refused to convert to Christianity, which was practically a requirement – decided to travel in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. He began studying Islam from its pre-Islamic context, trying to understand what was at the heart of a religion that had the values and prescriptions with which he was so deeply familiar from his in-depth studies of the Torah and Talmud. He wanted to introduce to Europe the moral and ethical revolution that the Prophet had brought to the traditional arena of tribal competition and warfare. He recognized the moral teachings he had learned while studying Jewish religious texts in the Arabic expressions of them in the Qur'an and traditions of the Prophet.

Using primary sources in Arabic, Goldziher discovered the open and democratic ideals that welcomed all races and ethnic groups into a global community of equality and the belief that every human being is precious in the eyes of God. As Muhammad proclaimed in his last sermon: "All mankind is from Adam and Eve, and an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black nor does a black have any superiority over a white, except by piety and good action..." But Goldziher also noted that such liberalism and humanism faced massive opposition in certain traditional, conservative patriarchal societies that had adopted Islam, especially as regards women's rights (e.g., choice of husband, divorce, inheritance, property ownership, and independent travel).

Jewish Europeans, not burdened with the historical fear of Islam and Muslims and the present contempt for both brought on by the Ottoman retreat, had positive recollections of life under Muslim rule in Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East. In European universities, Jewish scholars sought to present Islam to European readers as objectively as they could and to emphasize the Muslims' achievements during the Middle Ages, which laid the basis for the Renaissance via scholarly production, literature, exploration, and travel writing.

According to Montville, there seems to be a consensus among historians writing about the advances in this Jewish promotion of Islam that a major motivation was to encourage Christians to respect Islam and Muslims in a way that would also cause them to respect Jews and Judaism. In Europe and later in the United States, Goldziher was recognized as having established Islamic studies as a new, distinct discipline.

Montville then mentioned the contributions of other German-speaking Jews who became fascinated with Islam. Friedrich Wolf (1888-1953), a productive playwright who admired Islam's non-materialistic and humanistic values in a European world of growing consumer capitalism and war, published a play entitled *Mohammed*. In it, he portrayed the Prophet as a champion of social justice in Makkah and an opponent of violence as a matter of principle. Muhammad Asad (born Leopold Weiss [1900-92]), a professionally trained journalist who lived for long periods of time in various Muslim lands, wrote *The Road to Mecca*, *The Message of the Qur'an* (a Qur'anic commentary), and many other books. During his long and productive life, he served as an advisor to Ibn Saud (with whom he later broke) and Pakistan's ambassador to the United Nations.

Josef Horowitz (1874-1931), the first director of the School of Oriental Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (opened in 1925), was fascinated by the comparative study of Judaism and Islam. Among his scholarly interests were Arabic poetry, *adab* literature, and studying the Qur'an. Shlomo Dov Goitein, who assumed the post in 1949, authored the six-volume *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*. In this opus, he leaves little doubt as to the ease with which the Jewish and Christian inhabitants of these Muslim-ruled lands were able to interact functionally with Muslims as equals based on their skills and knowledge.

Basing himself upon a meeting with Uri Rubin of Tel Aviv's University's Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies who had translated the Qur'an into Hebrew (2005), he concluded on an optimistic note: "Thus Jewish respect for Islam is alive and well in the twenty-first century."

The two discussants, Marc Gopin (director, Center for World Religions, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution, <http://crdc.gmu.edu>) and Rabbi Gerald Serotta (chair, Rabbis for Human Rights-North America [www.truah.org]; executive director of Clergy Beyond Borders [www.clergybeyondborders.org]), made the following remarks.

Gopin, who has trained thousands of people worldwide in peacebuilding strategies, researches values dilemmas as they apply to international problems associated with the clash of cultures, globalization and development, and so-

cial justice. The direction of his new research and teaching investigates the relationship between global trends in nonviolence and new approaches to global conflict resolution. Praising Montville's "good, deep work" on an "unknown period" in contemporary studies on Islam, he proceeded to give some more context. By the nineteenth century, the European Jewish community had lost touch with Islamic philosophical roots due to history and its members' new emancipation. They wanted to be accepted by the Christian West. This was also the starting point of Europe's "romantic racism," which eventually disappointed the scholarly Jewish community and caused it to turn to Islam. Both German Protestant and Jewish scholars began to conduct serious scholarship on different religions. There were differences, but there was also sincere mutual respect. They concentrated on the parallels between Judaism and Islam in areas of text, law, wisdom literature, and other fields. Such an undertaking, according to him, remains in its infancy. Gopin called for more dispassionate research to find these existing correlations. Despite the "now too much focus on differences," he is optimistic that the younger generation of scholars is moving forward with this earlier approach.

Serotta, who works on issues of globalization and economic justice from a Jewish perspective, said that historically, Judaism had a universal mission but gradually became a religion only for the Jewish people. In medieval times, Islam and Christianity accomplished what Judaism could not: they became truly universal religions. He sees the three religions of Sarah, Hajar, and Abraham as "sister" religions and considers the view of Islam and Christianity as "daughter" religions of Judaism as insulting and not entirely accurate. Viewing these three religions as members of a family, as opposed to being in a "parent/child" relationship, supports the idea of unity and serves as a base for pluralism. In closing, he asserted that each sister religion has a common view: to bring justice to the world.

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