

Interfaith dialogue nothing new for Jews

Local scholar traces long hidden Jewish links to ‘the other’

LARRY YUDELSON

The story of how the Dalai Lama encountered the Jewish community in 1990 is well known.

Less known is how the Ashkenazi Jewish community first encountered the Dalai Lama — in a Hebrew-language book published in Europe in 1804, compiled from travelers accounts in English and French.

“Jews then were not as sheltered as we think of them,” says Alan Brill, who quotes from the book, “Meorot Zvi,” in his own book, “Judaism and World Religions: Encountering Christianity, Islam, and Eastern Traditions,” just published by Palgrave Macmillan.

‘Judaism does not have the same problems with Islam that it has with Christianity.’

The understanding of Buddhism shown by the author of “Meorot Zvi” is less positive than that of the Jewish religious leaders who traveled to Dharamsala, to meet the current Dalai Lama as recounted in “The Jew and the Lotus” nearly two centuries later. The Meorot Zvi called the senior Tibetan leader of his day the “father of impurity from which all the monks derive their way of crookedness from one of the spirits of impurity.”



Alan Brill: A Jewish perspective on other faiths.

This negative Jewish view of Buddhism, however, is only one perspective, and “Judaism and World Religions” aims to catalogue all of them, from a 13th century Jewish physician who accumulated enormous power in the Mongol court and wrote a biography of the Buddha through the differing views of contemporary authors and thinkers.

Buddhism is the subject of only one chapter of this book, which looks at Jewish understandings of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and the whole concept of religion itself. “Judaism and World Religions” is a sequel to Brill’s

previous book, “Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding.” In the earlier book, Brill, a Teaneck resident who holds Seton Hall University’s Cooperman/Ross Endowed Chair for Jewish-Christian Studies in honor of Sister Rose Thering, examined different approaches to religions at a more abstract level. Is Judaism the only true religion and all other religions false? Or is Judaism the root of all true religions? Or are all religions true paths to approach God? As could be expected, each of these positions had some support from Jewish thinkers over the ages.

“The first book deals with the fact that we’ve forgotten that we have many universal and inclusive positions, that we share monotheism, and other elements. It’s not a zero sum game. The second book deals with the specifics,” says Brill.

Brill has been an active participant in interfaith dialogue. A Yeshiva University-trained rabbi with a doctorate in religion from Fordham, a Catholic university, Brill has been part of the Jewish delegation in meetings with the Catholic Church — the most formalized and regular interfaith dialogue — but also with meetings with Orthodox Christians, at the Madrid interfaith conference convened by Saudi King Abdullah in 2008, and with ongoing meetings with Hindu religious leaders since 2006.

“The Jews — including the Israeli chief rabbinate — have recognized that Hindus worship a supreme being and are not idolatry,” says Brill.

In his book, Brill shows that this is not a revolutionary



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departure for Jewish observers of Hinduism.

"A lot of the texts in earlier times conceptualized Hinduism and Buddhism using an Islamic lens. The Muslim world had the trade routes and the borders. Jews were the merchants and doctors and translators.

"The Eastern religions got translated from Arabic into Hebrew, so the 30 thousand million gods of Hinduism get translated as 'malachim,' angels, to preserve a monotheistic understanding. They understood almost all Asian theological categories through Judaeo-Islamic philosophy.

"The statues stood in Afghanistan for 800 years peacefully under Islam, because the Buddhists were seen as worshipping one principle, and it's only the recent Taliban that saw them as a problem."

Brill was surprised by how much Jewish contact with Buddhists and Hindus his research uncovered.

He was also surprised to discover that the relationship between Judaism and Islam had even more connections than was commonly known.

"We've crossed over many more times than we usually conceive of," he says. "Jews don't begin to understand the incredible overlaps of law and texts and mysticism between Judaism and Islam."

On Islam, Brill quotes from what he calls the earliest Jewish responses to the rise of Islam, midrashic works such as "Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer." He shows how medieval Jewish thinkers such as Maimonides viewed Islam as a theological phenomenon.

"Judaism does not have the same problems with Islam that it has with Christianity, that is, trinity, incarnation, and resurrection," Brill concludes. "But to envision a Jewish theology of Islam, there are many questions that would need a fresh analysis to move the discussion forward, especially finding a way to read the negative statements about Jews, either conceptually or contextually, in a way that would minimize their effect."

Toward an encounter with Islam

Teaching the importance of Islamic sources in the works of great Jewish thinkers can create an awareness of the possibilities of encounter. This educational process would be an internal Jewish endeavor and could carry important implications. First and foremost, if Jews are taught about the prior integration of the two faiths then there would be greater clarity that the political war between Arabs and Jews is not a faith war. It could promote an understanding that Islam and Judaism can coexist.

The Catholic Church moved from teaching contempt to recognizing Judaism as a living faith. We cannot preclude giving any group in Islam that wants dialogue the chance to change and slowly learn tolerance and respect, especially since it serves their own needs for entering a global economy. We recognize that certain Islamic countries currently have a lack of religious freedom, fund hateful literature, have negative views of Judaism, and fail to recognize the State of Israel.

But we cannot compare their worst comments to our best. Both sides have saints and both sides have

advocates of hatred. We must, however, remember heroic figures, such as Sister Rose Thering, who confronted her own church with the anti-Semitism that was being taught in its textbooks and helped bring about an inter-faith revolution.

In the interim, we need to give those that seek encounter our support. We must not look to the past and use that to dissuade us from working with our counterparts now and in the future. One must first transcend the past and look to the future, then one must transcend polemical arguments on both sides, and then give precedence to common points. But we can look to the past to see how long it took most Western countries to achieve the liberties of the modern world, and know that it will also take many Muslim countries time to achieve this openness.

Such starting points will allow for a positive future Jewish theology of Islam.

Excerpted by permission from "Judaism and World Religions"

And he raises some of the questions that he wants Jewish theology to answer regarding Islam, among them, "Can Judaism find a place for Muhammad in Judaism as not a madman" as he was portrayed by Maimonides? "Can we find a place not in the realm of an Islamic polity (dar islam) or in an anti-Islamic polity (dar harb), but walking alongside? Can we have a sense that we worship one God, have common laws, common revelation, and common resurrection?"

Much of the classical Jewish theology on Christianity appeared in Brill's prior volume. Here, he details con-

temporary Jewish thinking on Christianity, such as Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, who Brill writes "can serve as a barometer of the inroads of ecumenical thinking about Christianity in many traditional Jewish circles. Riskin's speeches show that segments of his community are begging to sincerely acknowledge the tremendous strides in Jewish-Christian relation along with post-Holocaust sensitivity to Judaism and the State of Israel."

For Brill, even after 50 years of formal Catholic-Jewish dialogue, plenty remains on the theological agenda.

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“The next question is how do we go forward? We have to break discussions down into much smaller units, starting from the questions of where we overlap, to the other way, where do we diverge?”

Brill says that in thinking about other religions, Jews have to be fair and consistent. “You can’t compare a Christianity from the 14th century to a modern Judaism and then say, behold, they’re opposites.”

Models of Jewish understanding of Islam

Jews were comfortable enough with Islam that many aspects of medieval Jewish culture were articulated, defined, and systematized under Islam. Knowledge of Arabic linguistics allowed Jews to refine Hebrew as a sister language. Jews followed Arabic and Persian models of poetry, and Jewish law was influenced by Islamic courts and Islamic jurisprudence.

A remarkable indication of the depth of this penetration of Arabic language and culture is the adoption of Islamic terminology to designate even the most sacred notions of the Jewish faith, a fact which has practically no parallel among Ashkenazi Jewry prior to the modern era. For example, the Hebrew Bible would be referred to as the Koran, the halakhah as the shari’a, and Moses as rasul Allah “the Apostle of Allah.”

Siman Tov Melammed (before 1793— 1823 or 1828, nom de plume Tuvyah) was an Iranian Jewish rabbi, poet, and polemicist. Melammed praises the Sufis for transcending their physical bodies and the habits of ordinary life to become servants of God. They are radiant and contented from their devotion to God and they lead others back to a straight path to God.

Ignatz Goldziher (1850 — 1921), Hungarian orientalist and Orthodox Jew, is certainly the strongest and most unusual advocate for Jewish—Muslim understanding in the scholarly history; he regarded Judaism and Islam as kindred religions. Despite his status as a Jew, he was allowed to study with Muslim clerics in Al Azhar in Cairo. Goldziher had the utmost admiration for Islam and thought that Islam had evolved into “the only religion which, even in its doctrinal and official formulation, can satisfy philosophical minds.”

“My ideal,” he said, “was to elevate Judaism to a similar rational level.”

For Goldziher, Islam is not simply a sibling religion of Judaism; he urges the Jewish minority in Christian Europe to view Islam as a model for its own development.

Trude Weiss-Rosmarin (1908-1989) was an Orthodox Jewish-German-American writer, scholar, and feminist activist. She co-founded, with her husband, the School of the Jewish Woman in New York in 1933, and in 1939 founded the Jewish Spectator, a quarterly magazine, which she edited for fifty years. She advocated already in 1967, a strong Jewish-Muslim dialogue as the only source of Middle East peace.

“If henceforth Jews will assign to Jewish-Muslim dialogue the importance that is its due, the Arabs, in whose nationalism religion is as important as it is in Jewish nationalism, will eventually — and perhaps sooner than cold-headed realists will dare expect — rediscover that the Jews are their cousins, descendants of Abraham’s eldest son, Ishmael, who was Isaac’s brother.

“If the young State of Israel is to survive and prosper it must become integrated into the Arab world and be accepted by its neighbors. We believe that with a complete reorientation, especially a muting of the insistent harping on the theme of ‘Israel is an outpost of Western civilization’ the Arab nations would accept Israel on the basis of the kinship which unites Jews and Arabs.”

Excerpted by permission from “Judaism and World Religions”

What is needed, he said, is the time and commitment.

The Kaplen JCC choir contains singers of “every possible denomination and nondenomination,” he added. But more important, it “crosses transpolitical lines. It’s beyond politics. These kinds of choirs are one of the few places where you can get that. We’re singing a text...of the Jewish people, agreeing on the history of the text.”

Lazar said that while the upcoming concert celebrates the group’s 18th year, “We’re looking to the future. One

reason for our success is the leadership of the members of the choir,” he said. “We’re incredibly lucky to have truly dedicated and devoted managers and very active committees. People step up and galvanize the choir.”

For further information about Shirah or the June 10 program — made possible through the Bernie and Ruth Weinflash Shirah Fund, The Ethel and Irving Plutzer Fund, and The Rhoda Toonkel Fund — call Michael Reingold, (201) 569-7900, ext. 1461.

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