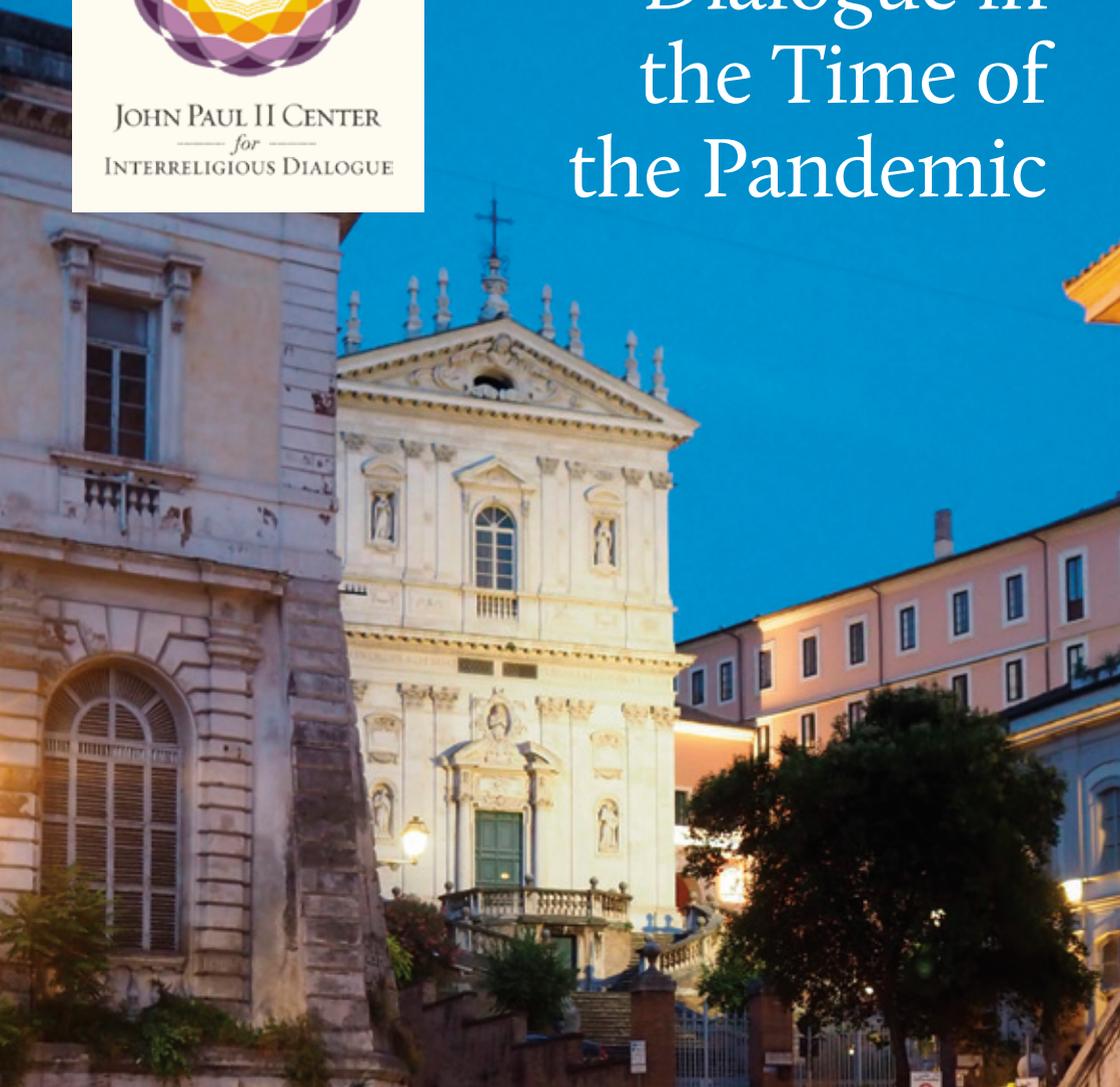




JOHN PAUL II CENTER
— for —
INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Interreligious Dialogue in the Time of the Pandemic



ARTICLES BY THE JPII LEADERS IN
INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE NETWORK



Interreligious Dialogue in the Time of the Pandemic

ARTICLES BY THE JPPII LEADERS IN
INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE NETWORK

Dialogue, any form of dialogue and interreligious dialogue, is based on close and intimate interactions. During the Covid-19 pandemic, traditional forms of dialogue were put on hold. It was no longer possible to meet in person, and the challenges were even more significant as communities worldwide were facing unprecedented psychic and spiritual difficulties and hardship. While interreligious dialogue is always a challenge, it seems that during the recent pandemic, it has become almost impossible.

Under these unprecedented conditions, how could one not only find the physical requirements to continue the dialogue but, even more so, the emotional and mental energies and resources needed to continue to dialogue outside of your immediate community? Is interreligious dialogue a fundamental necessity in such times?

Even with these challenging questions, there grew new methods and methodologies and, most importantly, a new commitment and understanding of the necessity of dialogue for our future. Many sense that the pandemic has reminded us of the fundamental truth of the unity of humanity and the great need for dialogue—interreligious dialogue—for the future of our faith traditions and communities.

JPII Leaders in Interreligious Dialogue Global Network

Upon completion of the Russell Berrie Fellowship year in Rome, Fellows are welcomed into a global Network of very active alumni — the JPII Leaders in Interreligious Dialogue — who are based in many countries across the world. The JPII Center offers them many opportunities for continuous training, workshops, and connections through partnerships with communities, centers, and organizations actively engaged in dialogue worldwide.

In the following pages, several JPII leaders in interreligious dialogue, reflect on the challenges and opportunities for interreligious dialogue during the time of the pandemic.

Lidiia Batig (Cohort VIII, 2015-2016) interviews Rabbi David Rosen, one of the most prominent Jewish leaders in the field of interreligious affairs. Rabbi Rosen offers many important insights on topics related to the challenges of the pandemic, including mental health issues, social isolation, and the impact of the pandemic on our religious lives, marriage, and human relationships in general. **Taras Dzyubansky** (Cohort III, 2010-2011) offers an insightful textual

“Upon completion of the Russell Berrie Fellowship year in Rome, Fellows are welcomed into a global Network of very active alumni — the JPII Leaders in Interreligious Dialogue.”



analysis of “The Man of Sorrows” in Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 and its implications for the Jewish-Christian Dialogue. **Andrew Boyd** (Cohort II, 2009-2010) writes about a new cooperation between the World Organization of the Scouting Movement (WOSM), representing more than 60 million Scouts and Guides around the world, and the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) to develop a youth training program promoting interreligious dialogue. And finally, **Elena Dini** (Cohort VII, 2014-2015) writes about online experiences of interreligious encounters and asks how the in-person dimension influences interreligious relations and how these new ways of interacting are helping us to see what remains at the core of dialogue.



Table of Contents

“Shalom Is a Real Response to Covid-19”:
An Interview with Rabbi David Rosen

Lidiia Batig (Cohort VIII, 2015-2016)

PAGE 8

The Man of Sorrows:
Textual Analysis of Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 and
Its Relevance for the Field of Interfaith Dialogue

Taras Dzyubanskyyy (Cohort III, 2010-2011)

PAGE 20

Dialogue for Peace:
Interreligious Dialogue and Scouting

Andrew Boyd (Cohort II, 2009-2010)

PAGE 28

Between Online and In-Person
in This Time of Pandemic

Elena Dini (Cohort VII, 2014-2015)

PAGE 34

“Shalom Is a Real Response to Covid-19”: An Interview with Rabbi David Rosen

by Lidiia Batig

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic did not simply change the world; it transformed all possible ways we work, learn, and interact, as social distancing guidelines have led to a more virtual existence, both professionally and personally. Unsurprisingly, the pandemic has triggered a wave of mental health issues: addiction, depression, anxiety, social isolation, loneliness, and general stress. Better health awareness became an issue and challenge for religious communities as well. I discuss mental health, depression, social isolation, and the consequences of the pandemic on Jewish religious life, as well as the use of religious practices to overcome anxiety,¹ in this interview with Rabbi David Rosen, one of the most prominent Jewish leaders in the field of interreligious affairs, the former Chief-Rabbi of Ireland, and the senior rabbi of the largest Orthodox Jewish Congregation in South Africa.

“Prayer as a way to overcome sadness and depression”

Rabbi David, in your opinion, how do the questions of COVID-19 and the effects of this pandemic affect the mental health of many people today? As we know, in classical Jewish texts there are no references to mental illness issues but there are references to the word “mad.” Could you talk more about this?

I am not sure if in the ancient world people really knew what depression was. And therefore, they encountered two kinds of the maladies: one was irrational behavior; the other was what they described as “sadness.”

Probably, “sadness” comes as close as we know to depression. With regards to this category, almost all the literature, such as Talmudic literature, addressed the legal state of somebody who

is seen as not in complete control of their faculties. With regards to sadness and thus happiness, there you have plenty of guidance that Jewish tradition offers. One of the things that people are encouraged to do if they feel depressed or they feel sad is to pray.

“Prayer helps you to see beyond yourself and your life conditions”

Why is prayer so important and crucial in both the spiritual and mental contexts?

Prayer is an amazing opportunity to transcend one’s own difficulties because when you pray you lift yourself above yourself, you are conscious of a higher reality, you are seeking to connect with that higher reality. One of the defining characteristics of depression is that we are so taken up with our own conditions at that

time we can't see outside, beyond ourselves. So, prayer enables you to be lifted up in some way, to see yourself out of your own clinical condition.

“You cannot lead a religious life in isolation. Prayer can lift people out of depression and isolation”

What is the specific dimension of Jewish prayer particularly?

Jewish tradition prayer is only considered to be its fullest expression when you pray together with a quorum, a public gathering of at least ten. Therefore, one of the functions of prayer—and I would say one of the functions of Judaism as a way of life—is to continuously reinforce your place in community. You cannot really lead a religious Jewish life in isolation.

One of the most dramatic examples is that most communities will usually not accept a rabbi who is not married. They want him to have a family. The idea of celibacy² is seen within Judaism as a kind of isolation. And that is not considered to be healthy. You need to be a part of a unit, a congregation, or a community.

So, communal prayer is definitely a very important aspect of lifting people out of depression, out of isolation.

But now, during COVID-19 times, how can we keep social distancing and pray in groups?

Fortunately, as indicated, the requirement for public prayer is of a minimum of ten. And almost all COVID-19 legislations that different countries have laid down allow people to congregate in numbers of ten, sometimes up to twenty.

“Online-prayers also connect people”

Do you mean online or in physical presence?

What has been happening, in Israel especially

— you walk around in the morning; or after we finish this conversation, it will be the afternoon prayers, and there's a little park just outside our house, and there are people praying together in the park. And it is really nice for communing with nature as well.

Another thing you will see in Israel in some places, where there are more parking lots, is people gathering there or coming out on their balconies and praying together in an area where they are not physically connected—but they are praying together from their balconies. It also creates a form, if you like, of connectivity, of communal connection. And even though you're physically distanced, you still have a connection. And then, of course, there is this “Zoom,” we are all “Zoomers” now. So, there are a lot of activities that take place as well now online. But of course, online prayer is not the same as coming together.

“During the times of COVID-19 we have a special obligation to care about all vulnerable people”

Many people are suffering because of the distance and loneliness that this pandemic created. How does Judaism with its deep wisdom advise to support these people, to take care of them? Are these actions the duty we should all perform?

A most important mitzvah (religious imperative) for us is caring for the vulnerable, as is mentioned in the Bible: the widow, the stranger, the orphan, etc. And Judaism extends that to all vulnerable people; in other words, we have an obligation to care for the vulnerable. And this is not only important for the healthy; it also has an important function for those who are suffering from social distancing. And if you get some people to do an act of kindness, nothing is more therapeutic than performing an act of kindness for people who are in a state of deep depression.

“The true dimension of mitzvah is to show us that the more our world is beyond us the fuller we are as human beings”

Can you explain about the modern, religious, and social context of the Jewish mitzvah?

“מִצְוָה” (mitzvah) means a good deed or duty, a positive duty. Also “mitzvah,” when we talk about it in social context, means “gemilutkhasadim” (charity, kindness), and “khesed” is an act of loving kindness—“gemilutkhasadim” are acts of loving kindness. The more you perform acts of loving kindness, especially to the needy, to the poor, to the isolated, and the more the poor and the isolated themselves perform the acts of loving kindness, the more you are raised up out of your own self-indulgence. And that’s one of the most dangerous things in our world: self-indulgence. When your world is only you, you are a deformed human being. The more your world is beyond you, the fuller you are as a human being.

“Social isolation was already known in the Talmudic times”

Rabbi David, this act of mercifulness, of loving-kindness, especially in COVID-19 times, can sometimes contradict your own safety. In Judaism, as I know, the first, the most important mitzvah is to protect your own life, because it’s a huge gift from G-d. So, don’t you think that nowadays, in the contemporary context, this kind of loving-kindness, mitzvah, can contradict not our selfishness but rather a question of life and death? How can we perform this mitzvah in such dangerous times?

That’s a very important question, but one must not contradict the other. We can do acts of loving-kindness without endangering ourselves.

This is not new, and the Torah³ and Talmud⁴ already deal with the question of plagues and infections, and already teach us that we have to be able to both quarantine and facilitate socialization. Social isolation was already known in the Talmudic times. The importance of hygiene was already known in the Talmudic times. And all of these are legislated for.

Today we know: by wearing a mask you are substantially—maybe even as much as ninety percent—protected from the dangers. So, there’s no reason you can’t visit a sick person, or a poor person, or somebody who is alone, and still maintain social distancing.

And if you’re still nervous about that, then we have, thank G-d, got telephones. We have computers, and we can contact people in different ways. That’s why we can always find a way to do it. Maybe the mitzvah cannot be done as fully, as it would be under normal conditions, but there are still ways in which you can exercise it substantially.

And this act will still be considered as a full mitzvah?

Fully. Absolutely. You can go even further on that: if you’re asking about the merits of the value of the action. The Talmud says in tractate that if someone wanted to perform a mitzvah and is prevented from doing so by factors out of his or her control, like the plague or COVID-19, it is considered as if we have performed the act.

“Technologies can teach us also a discipline in controlling ourselves during the prayer times”

It is interesting how the performance of different religious practices have changed now due to COVID-19. Of course, we have a lot of events online, but maybe you can underline what has been the most important change

that happened in the religious services, in practicing, traditions, prayers, etc.

I have previously addressed the matter of modern technology and prayer, and the introduction of modern technologies to prayer, so that we have online services and religious celebrations. This is not without its problematic character. From an Orthodox point of view, you are not meant to operate technology on Shabbat.⁵ Now, what many people have done is that they have had pre-Shabbat services, to enable praying together. These online services are not exactly the same but at least provide some form, if you like, of compensation. Then they found other ways, and that is, like, setting up the technological operation in advance, so that you are not actually operating it yourself, but nonetheless, the screen is on, and you can come. So, you can do that.

Automatically?

Yes. It might not be considered fully acceptable by all; but the real question is whether it is truly in the spirit of Shabbat. And there is a bigger problem: if you allow technologies to invade religious practices, then how purely can you maintain these religious practices?

I must confess that we already have a problem. So, for example, when I go to my daily prayers, I use my Smartphone because I have it around with all the services downloaded. And I can access whatever text I want—whether it's biblical, whether it's liturgical. Now, obviously, when I have a Smartphone for that, and some emails are coming in, I'm tempted to look at the emails, I'm tempted to look at the messages. I succeeded in using these technologies in the right way during the essential prayers. But there might be a break between prayers in different times when it's alright to do that, and I might do that.

Is it possible to keep the Spirit of the day during Shabbat through social isolation and technological revolution?

Now, if you allow people to have technological access on Shabbat, how much will that disrupt the nature of the day? I think it will disrupt it greatly. I know some people, for example, who put their television on a time switch, so that they don't operate the television on a Shabbat, but then they could watch it.

That, in my opinion, is an example of keeping the letter of the law and desecrating its spirit. Because the intention is to not to find a legal way around; the idea is that certain things are not in keeping the Spirit of the day. So, you can technically find your way around, and you have not desecrated the letter of the law, but you have desecrated the spirit.

So, this is a good example of the challenge of technology, which is a great blessing. The Fourth Commandment in the Decalogue⁶ says: "Six days shall you work, and on the seventh that you shall rest," and Judaism understands that, that we are meant to enjoy the blessings of our technology, but there is a day that must be free from the same controls of technology, that we enjoy the rest of the week. And once we allow the technology to seep in in different ways, it's going to be very difficult to be able to keep it down. So that, I think, is a very big challenge.

"I don't feel that I suffer from that. And the answer is, because I had a very secure upbringing as a child, and that's far more important, than the collective experience"

Rabbi David, once I read an article that was called "Jewish anxiety." It claimed that due to all the historical events that Jewish people and the Jewish nation have been through—even

before destruction of Temple—that Jewish people feel more anxiety in their everyday life than people from the other nations. I don't know how much this is true, but anxiety, I think, is the one of the most popular words that we use now. How would you comment this issue?

I think you know, these kinds of generalizations may have an element of truth in them, but largely, they're false. And also, the idea of Jewish guilt. I've had people talk about Jewish guilt, and I've had people talk about Catholic guilt. I know plenty of Catholics who do not feel continuously guilty on a daily basis. And I know plenty of Jews who do not feel guilty at all. And there are plenty of Jews, plenty of Catholics, who are happy to sin without a slightest bit of guilt in them. It's true that we have, of course, experienced persecution. And for those who've grown up experiencing anti-Semitism⁷ within a non-Jewish environment, this can cause them to feel vulnerable, and their feelings can increase anxiety.

But I, for example, had grown up in England. I didn't even know what anti-Semitism was at the time—I'd never experienced it. My first experience of it was already when I was a Rabbi in South Africa, when people wanted to attack me because of my political opinions against the apartheid regime, so they would use anti-Semitism as a vehicle. But, the result of the fact is that I don't feel I am a person of anxiety. I don't feel that I suffer from that. And probably the reason is because I had a very secure upbringing as a child, and that's even more important than the collective experience.

I would like to mention the famous Jewish joke about the slogan of the Jewish festivals. All Jewish festivals are, according to this slogan: "They tried to kill us, they didn't succeed, let's eat."

"The Talmud says: 'The pain of the many halves the pain'"

And it's interesting, because actually during COVID times, many people, religious and non-religious, suffer from this anxiety. And it's a question: is anxiety, in the religious context, a sign of a highly intelligent person, because you can proceed, you can analyze the events? Or do we consider it as a lack of spirituality?

I think with this question it will be very dangerous for us to generalize. The answer is "yes" to all possibilities. But at the bottom line, this, as I said, has a lot to do with your upbringing, and your experience as a child. I think Shimon Peres said: "Pessimists and optimists die the same way, but they live a totally different way of life." And whether you are an optimist or a pessimist, it's not a simple thing to be able to make a smooth cognitive decision. It's got so much more than anything else to do with your disposition.

Some people are lucky; I consider myself to be lucky, that I'm an actual optimist. I always want to see the positive side of people. That's the way I want to be. It doesn't matter whether it's an objective reality or not. It's a much better way to live, and I like living like that. But if I was pessimistic by inclination, then no matter how much I would cognitively know that it might not help, because I might not be able to see these things or thoughts in that way.

Sometimes it has to do with the fact that so much depression or anxiety can be resolved in a pharmacological or chemical situation for which people often get medical treatment. But also—again getting to what we spoke about at the beginning—if you are a part of a community, then it's much easier to deal with difficulties. You're not alone.

And as the Talmud says: "The pain of the

many halves the pain.” In other words, if you feel that others share your pain, you feel your suffering less, because others are also in the same situation.

Just communication alone will help. I think there’s enough documentation that shows that religious people, believing people, are generally happier. And it’s logical, because if you believe that what you’re experiencing is not the whole story, there’s not only more sense of a greater reality, but there’s a sense of the transcendent reality, which you are connected to.

All these things give enormous sense of comfort and assurance and are very valuable. So, I would say that probably even for the more depressive personalities, if she or he is religious, they’re probably less depressed.

“In the Orthodox world, mental health is connected with the issue of marriageability”

How are mental issues treated by Jewish religion in general? I know in some societies, like in Eastern European, people with mental issues are criticized, even bullied.⁸ Does Judaism accept these kinds of people, or reject them?

I suppose again, the answer is yes and yes. And sociologically, there’s definitely a problem. Especially in the more Orthodox world, where marriage and family are so important, that when you bring up your children, the moment these children reach maturity, you immediately think of their marriageability. One reason for less tolerance is that if a child is not so marriageable, that reflects on all the other members of the family and makes their marriageability a problem as well because the family becomes known as an unstable family. This is sad and wrong.

“The Jewish Law requires us to treat those who have any form of mental disability or dysfunction with very special compassion and love”

So mental health problems can be considered a shame for the family?

Yes, that can lead to stigmatization. And there is often sociological intolerance towards mental disability of any kind. On the other hand, those communities are enormously self-supporting and helpful, and therefore for someone in need, they will be there to help them at the same time. So, we have now, of course, in Israel you have state bodies, but historically speaking, we’ve always had self-care organizations that will care for the needy. And they will care for those who are challenged in some way.

One of the most interesting examples in this regard, in terms of Jewish Law, is the attitude towards suicide. Suicide is a great sin; it is considered, from the religious point of view, to be the murder of oneself. And somebody who is a murderer, who is a great sinner, is not normally buried together with the other righteous. People who have done terrible and heinous acts are normally buried in the cemetery close to the wall at the outside of the cemetery in order not to be close to the others. It was a form, if you like, of deterrence: trying to deter people from bad actions. And logically, according to Jewish Law, a suicider, because a suicide is a murderer, should also be buried by the wall, aside from the others. But in practice, Jewish Law did not do that, because Jewish Law taught that anybody who is suicidal must be considered to be mentally unstable. And if you’re mentally unstable, then you are sick, you are not a criminal. And if you are sick, then you must be treated with special compassion and understanding. Jewish Law requires us to treat those who have any form of

mental disability or dysfunction with very special compassion and love. But in practice, we do also have to contend with sociological prejudices.

“Shalom is a real response to COVID-19”

As I understand, we can claim that religion and law say one thing, but of course, as we are human beings, it also depends not on the community or religion, how we treat mentally sick people. And, as well in Judaism, what does it mean to be a healthy person? Who can be considered a healthy person, according to Judaism?

You know, the Hebrew word for peace is “shalom.” And shalom comes from the root with the word shalem, which means “complete.” The idea of shalom is not simply a matter of no violence or no harm; shalom means integral health, physical health, spiritual health, mental health, personal health, congregational health, communal health, ultimately global health. And therefore, shalom is a real response to COVID-19; because what it calls for is to be in a healthy personal condition, both physically and spiritually, which means to have a healthy relationship with our society. It also means to have a healthy relationship with our environment. This is very important, because pandemics today result from us having invaded the space of the animal world and having therefore broken down the boundaries between human and animal, and the destruction of rainforests, and industrial factory farming. All of these spread diseases in various ways. And one of the most important things that COVID-19 is saying to us—that not everybody is hearing—is that we have to take these factors into much more serious consideration and change our lifestyle both personal and general. And to be healthy means to have a healthy lifestyle personally, communally, and ultimately globally. And I

would say in today’s world, we should all be seeking to have as much of a plant-based diet as possible and move away from eating animals, from killing animals, from caging animals, and from abusing animals because that’s not just good for the animals, but it’s really good for us. So, the true aim must be an integration of the physical, the mental, and spiritual.

“The crisis brought the best and the worst in a context of families”

Thank you so much. Now about family: during COVID-19 times, one of the most negative issues is domestic violence in families. And I know in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the concept of family is a keen concept of every religious person. So, what do you think? How is it possible, to overcome this issue of domestic violence? What religious beliefs, practices, and other tools can we use to cope with this issue of domestic violence, according to Judaism?

Do you know that little poem? “There was a little girl, who had a little curl, right in the middle of her forehead. And when she was good, she was very, very good, and when she was bad, she was horrid.” So, crises are like this little girl: they bring out the best in us, and they bring out the worst in us.

And COVID-19 has brought out the good in humanity and has brought out the worst in it. But when a family is a healthy family, and when there is a truly loving and respectful relationship between husband and wife, then being shut up at home together is only a blessing.

But when there are tensions, and when people are not loving and respectful, then it being shut up together can be very dangerous. And that’s what we have at the moment. And again, one of the reasons that modern technologies are so very important to use in a constructive way is

to ensure that people are in communication.

And if someone's in trouble—and it's usually in this case a woman—that she has an opportunity to be able to contact people for help. And sometimes it's too difficult for her to ask for help, but at least to be able to talk to someone. So, we've got to be able to provide this kind of counseling. But at the root of it all is to ensure that relationships are loving relationships. Here, of course, you have a big difference between Catholicism and Judaism in regard to marriage. While marriage is a holy institution, Judaism does not have a concept of sacrament that cannot be broken. And therefore, the Jewish approach would be: if they're in a bad relationship and this cannot be counseled adequately and fixed, then it's better for everybody that they separate and get divorced and not stay together in an unhappy relationship.

And in Judaism, is divorce considered to be something from the social perspective that can be a shame on the community?

Again, similarly to the issue of getting help, there are social stigmas. But that is not what Judaism teaches as a religion, and it's not what Jewish Law teaches. The Bible teaches that if two people are not interested in living together, it is better that they separate. Obviously, divorce is always a sign of some failure. But in the situation of failure, it's better for us to handle it constructively, rather than to compound it, by allowing that failure to continue as a source of ongoing suffering, pain, and wounds.

“Gratitude, appreciation is what makes you celebrate everything you have in your life”

As I know, mitzvah and gratitude are considered as key concepts of Judaism. How can

these concepts get more of modern experience, modern look in times of COVID-19? Can we say that if we use gratitude now, it can change the condition that we are living in?

That's a very important point, and it's really part of the answer that I should've given to almost all your questions at the very beginning. Because prayer in Judaism contains three aspects. One is praise; we praise G-d in most of the psalms. The other is petition: when we ask for things. And the truth is that when we ask for things, we should be thinking whether we deserve these things, or is it the right thing to ask for. And the third category of prayer is gratitude. And gratitude also highlights the importance of people performing the acts of loving kindness which I mentioned before. Gratitude and appreciation are central to prayer and key to changing our mental condition.

Now, the essence, the essential aspect here, even though it's part of prayer, is summed up in the Hebrew word for blessing, “berakhah.” And berakhah, in fact, is an expression of gratitude. According to Jewish law, before you eat anything, before you drink anything, even before you smell a lovely smell, you are meant to make berakhah, a blessing. There is a formula for this, but what you are doing when you recite this formula is expressing gratitude. You are not taking things for granted.

The biggest danger for depression, for mental health, for bad relationships—all these things—is when you take things for granted. The more you appreciate what you have, and the more you appreciate those in your life, the more you appreciate the neighbor, the happier you will be. So, gratitude is crucial.

Interestingly enough, the word for “Jew” (“יהודי”; “yehudi”) comes from the name of Judah (“יהודה”; “Yehuda”), the son of Jacob. And

that name comes from the word for “thanks” because Leah, Jacob’s wife, gave special thanks for being reunited with her husband through Judah’s birth. As a matter of fact, gratitude really could be described as the defining quality of an authentic Jew. And our prayers, as I say, preach gratitude. Gratitude—appreciation—is what makes you celebrate everything you have in your life, and we do that in our prayers every day and not forget sight, sound, speech, touch, scent—all these things which we often take for granted. Every day we should say: “How lucky I am, that I can see, how lucky I am, that I can speak, I can hear, breathe.” And the more we appreciate how lucky we are, the happier we will be.

“No prayers have any magic value. Their value could be described as “spiritual physiological”

Sometimes when people feel danger for their health or their life, they immediately search: “I need some kind prayer. Where will I read the most powerful prayer?”—in Christianity, in Judaism, or in other religions—“that will really heal me and give me enthusiasm, inner power, and energy?” Are these prayers in Judaism, the ones that are connected with health, considered the most sacred, holy, or powerful prayers?

Some traditions that have more to do with Kabbalah⁹ have more of a sense, if you like, of the prayers having a mythical, a magical power. Personally, I don’t like that, and don’t find that authentic. I think it actually contradicts the basic ethical teachings of Judaism. And that we are not subject to totally haphazard immortal forces but ultimately, each one of us is the captain of their own soul. Of course, we don’t control everything in this world—most factors we don’t control—but our inner condition, our inner

spirituality and morality is up to us.

And therefore, while you will find those who disagree with me, I believe that no prayers have any magic value. Their value could be described as “spiritual/physiological.” That is, the way they influence you, your outcome, your approach. And in that regard, there is nothing greater than the Books of Psalms. The Psalms have within them passages of the loftiest spirit that express the deepest anguish and fears as well as the greatest joy and jubilation. Reciting them can give the most enormous inspiration to be able to overcome difficulties, to connect with God, and to draw God’s divine inspiration.

Rabbi David, I would like to share with you an example from my personal experience. In fact, during the time I was waiting for my test results for COVID-19, I was feeling very depressed and down. My brother and I are Christians, but he told me that when he reads the Psalms, he feels some positive energy. I had never considered it, to be honest, but when I also started to read the Psalms, I found helpful words somehow connected with my life. It’s strange because it’s written in a simple manner and from thousands of years ago. Do you think the teachings of Kabbalah are giving more attention to the recycling of words not from our individual dialogue with God (opposite to what Psalms do), as it’s possible to say?

It is a very difficult to talk about generalizations because Kabbalah has lots of aspects within it. Theoretical, Kabbalah is more of an esoteric philosophical system. But there’s something called practical Kabbalah, and I would describe it as something of lower order. Practical Kabbalah involves the use of charms, etc. That I consider being superstitious. And superstition is often found in religion, but in my opinion, it is like parasites found living off the trunk of a healthy tree.

“The challenge is not the pain or pleasure—it’s how you handle it”

And Rabbi David, how do you think that COVID-19 could influence Judaism? Or is it impossible to happen? Maybe it will bring more believers. Maybe some families or younger generations who were non-believing are now, during COVID-19, coming back to their roots, to their religious origins. Do you think that COVID-19 can be a threat to Judaism and Jewish people or a positive historical moment?

The challenge is not pain or pleasure, it’s how you handle them, and what do you do with them. What are the conclusions you draw from your experienced? Some people will draw good COVID-19 conclusions, and some will draw bad ones. I think, in general, because it is something that we all are aware of, that the general lessons learnt are actually positive. However, it is not just a viral infection that has attacked us. Other afflictions have happened to us, which are bad, that we are not aware of. Spiritual fatigue, material overindulgence, insensitivity towards others—all these are themselves plagues and, if you like, pandemics, but we are unconscious of them because they corrupt us easily. The Corona pandemic we know is there, and we are aware of it. This has led people to take actions, which certainly create more consciousness. And the more consciousness there is, ultimately, I think, the better.

“Not G-d, but we are responsible for the consequences of our actions”

Are we able to say that COVID, in general, can be considered as a punishment for us? Humans have really disturbed the animal world, abused nature, other people, and technologies. Or is it wrong to claim this idea from a religious perspective?

We have to use simple human language to describe G-d because we have no other way to do that. The truth is, we all believe that G-d is loving, merciful, and compassionate. That G-d doesn’t want anybody to suffer, He doesn’t want people to be bad. And therefore, it’s not so much that G-d punishes us, as much as G-d has given us guidance and the values that should be our allies. When we don’t do what He asks of us to do, there are consequences. There are the consequences to our actions.

For example, if somebody jumps off a building and breaks their legs, you could say that G-d has punished him or her for jumping off a building. But a much more nuanced and better way of looking at it would be to say that these are the negative consequences of disregarding G-d’s natural law, which is gravity. There are physical laws; and there are moral laws, as well. The Bible teaches that we are commanded to take care of ourselves and not do any harm. These persons, disregarding the divine natural law and moral law, face the consequences as a result—which in more simplistic terms may be described as Divine Punishment. And in that sense, you could say that pandemics or any kind of disease is a kind of punishment. But not the punishment in a vindictive sense.

The consequence could indeed be the result of disobedience, but it could also be the result of ignorance. So, it’s a way by which a person is taught a lesson; in other words, pain can be a positive pain that is seeking to instruct you how not to be and how you should be.

I would say that COVID-19 is a wake-up call for us to turn away from the things that we have been doing that are bad and to adopt the way of life that is better and good.

RABBI DAVID ROSEN BIOGRAPHY

International Director of Interreligious Affairs, American Jewish Committee Rabbi David Rosen was the Chief Rabbi of Ireland and the senior rabbi of the largest Orthodox Jewish Congregation in South Africa. Today he is one of the most prominent Jewish leaders in the field of interreligious affairs.

CAREER SUMMARY

- 1) AJC's International Director of Interreligious Affairs and its Heilbrunn Institute for International Interreligious Understanding
- 2) Past Chairman of IJJCIC, the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations
- 3) Honorary Advisor on Interfaith Relations to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel
- 4) International President, Religions for Peace (RFP)
- 5) Honorary President of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ)
- 6) Knighted by the Vatican in 2005 as Commander of the Order of Gregory the Great Decorated CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) in 2010 by H.M. Queen Elizabeth II

MAIN PUBLICATIONS

- 1) <https://www.rabbidavidrosen.net/multifaith-relations>
- 2) <https://www.rabbidavidrosen.net/muslim-jewish-relations>
- 3) <https://www.rabbidavidrosen.net/christian-jewish-relations>
- 4) "Beginning to Talk: An Interview with Rabbi David Rosen." *The Christian Century* 131, no. 12 (June 11, 2014): 31-32. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost. Accessed June 7, 2017.
- 5) *The Christian and the Pharisee*. Warner, 2006.
- 6) *Un Solo Dio, Tre Verita*. Mondadori, 2001.

LIDIIA BATIG

Lidiia Batig is an alumna of the Russell Berrie Fellowship in Interreligious Studies and worked as a Media Intern for the John Paul II Center for Interreligious Dialogue, responsible for the Center’s social media and communications. Lidiia also studied at the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies (Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, Italy). Now she is a student of the of the John Paul II Pontifical Theological Institute for Marriage and Family Sciences (Pontifical Lateran University), working on her thesis project “Esther’s sexuality through the prism of the moral law: Judeo-Christian aspect (Esther 2:17).” She holds an MA in Religious Journalism from the Ukrainian Catholic University and an MA in Journalism from the Ivan Franko Lviv National University. Her own religion, family history, and the current situation in Ukraine have, in part, made religious journalism her calling.

ENDNOTES

¹ Anxiety is an emotion characterized by an unpleasant state of inner turmoil, often accompanied by nervous behavior such as pacing back and forth, somatic complaints, and rumination.

² Celibacy, the state of being unmarried and therefore sexually abstinent—usually in association with the role of a religious official or devotee.

³ In Judaism, Torah is, in the broadest sense, the substance of divine revelation to Israel, the Jewish people: God’s revealed teaching or guidance for humankind.

⁴ Talmud is the generic term for the documents that comment and expand upon the Mishnah (“repeating”), the first work of rabbinic law, published around the year 200 CE by Rabbi Judah the Patriarch in the land of Israel.

⁵ Shabbat (שַׁבָּת; related to Hebrew verb “cease, rest”) is the seventh day of the Jewish week and is the day of rest and abstention from work as commanded by God.

⁶ Decalogue or The Ten Commandments: the statements of God quoted by Moses in Deuteronomy 5:6–18 is entitled “the ten words, or utterances” (Heb. עֲשֶׂר־דְּבָרִים aseret ha-devarim; LXX δέκα ῥήματα [Deut. 4:13], δέκα λόγοι [10:4]).

⁷ Anti-Semitism - the belief or behavior hostile toward Jews just because they are Jewish.

⁸ Bullying is the use of force, coercion, hurtful teasing or threats, to abuse, aggressively dominate or intimidate; the behavior is often repeated and habitual.

⁹ Kabbalah (also spelled Kabbalah, Cabala, Qabala)—sometimes translated as “mysticism” or “occult knowledge”—is a part of Jewish tradition that deals with the essence of God.

The Man of Sorrows: Textual Analysis of Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 and Its Relevance for the Field of Interfaith Dialogue

by *Taras Dzyubanskyy*

ABSTRACT

The Isaianic passage about the Man of Sorrows or the Suffering Servant is one of the most influential biblical passages for Christian theology, particularly Christology and interpretations of the significance of Jesus' death. It is also a passage of particular significance for Jewish-Christian relations. When dealing with this passage, one must take into account how this text was read/received both in the synagogue and in the church—that is by Jews and Christians. In this essay I will attempt to present a short textual analysis while looking at the following themes: the structure of the text, the historical context in which the piece was composed, and possible meanings at the time of its composition—especially meanings of the identity of the Servant, his suffering, what kind of suffering, etc. I will also tackle the significance of interpreting the figure of the Suffering Servant from an interfaith dialogue perspective, bringing Christian and some Muslim views about the themes connected with the text.

The Isaianic passage about the Man of Sorrows or the Suffering Servant is one of the most influential biblical passages for Christian theology, particularly Christology and interpretations of the significance of Jesus' death. It is also a passage of particular significance for Jewish-Christian relations. When dealing with this passage, one must take into account how this text was read/received both in the synagogue and in the church, that is by Jews and Christians. In this essay, I will attempt to present a short

textual analysis while looking at the following themes: structure of the text, the historical context in which the piece was composed, possible meaning/s at the time when it was composed—especially the meaning of such concepts as the identity of the servant, his suffering, what kind of suffering, etc. I will also tackle the significance of interpreting the figure of the suffering servant from the perspective of interfaith dialogue, bringing forth Christian and some Muslim views on the themes as connected with the text.

This text is overflowing with meaning and is rich in commentary and interpretation from both the Jewish and Christian sides. To do justice to the text is to also try and determine the meaning of this passage at the time—exilic or early exilic—when it was composed.

In the prevailing Christian exegesis of the text, the suffering servant is seen as prefiguring Jesus, the suffering and exalted Messiah. In the context of interfaith dialogue, such understanding should not overshadow the understanding of this text that was held and intended when the text was first composed. A great step in the improvement of Catholic-Jewish relations was achieved by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, the body that is responsible for interpreting the sacred texts on behalf of the Catholic Church. Its document from 2002, “The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible,” is one of the most important attempts at dealing with scriptural exegesis. In one of its revolutionary statements it says the following:

The original task of the prophet was to help his contemporaries understand the events and the times they lived in from God's viewpoint. [...] Christians can and ought to admit that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Sacred Scriptures from the Second Temple period. (21, 22)

Terminological Observations and Textual Structure

Some authors have asked whether the term “suffering servant”—a modern construct introduced in 1892 by Bernhard L. Duhm—is an adequate description of the subject of the passage who indeed, although having suffered and undergone humiliation, is “exalted” and “lifted up” (Isa. 52:13).

Looking at the structure of the text, one of the features that draws our attention as readers is its continuous repetition of words and terms. This, undoubtedly, has an effect on the reader and her/his understanding of the text. One of the striking things that is noticeable right away is a contrast between such concepts as suffering and humiliation on the one hand, and triumph and exaltation on the other hand. Two tenses are employed: past and present. In the past time, we read about what happened and how it was perceived by those who are in the story (Isa. 53:3-9). And in the present, we read about the effect of those past events (Isa. 52: 13-15). The narrative is still dominated by a contrast between humiliation and exaltation and of the confession of the collective “us” and the recognition of these effects on them.

As on many pages of the Bible—both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament writings—the idea of evil and suffering can be found in Isaiah 53. On the whole, the Hebrew Scriptures do deal with the question of suffering and with the mystery of evil, and in this particular book, we have some interesting insights into the theme of suffering. According to Herman Spiekermann, the novelty of this particular text is in proposing the idea of “vicarious suffering.” This suffering has an atoning effect, and it is not to be repeated: it is once and for all. Here are five criteria that, according to this author, make the suffering described in Isaiah 53 unique and novel at the same time: it is one person who intercedes for the sins of others (vv.11-12); that person is sinless (v.11); the suffering is once and for all (v.11); the person who undergoes suffering does this of his own will; God's role is intentional/providential (v.10). He concludes:

Isaiah 53 remains a singular text in the Old Testament. It had no “posthistory,” and its prehistory left behind nothing “prefabricated.”

The prehistory simply produced those problems that the new idea of vicarious suffering was supposed to help solve. We don't know to what extent this conception had any success in the Old Testament period. In any case, literary attestation of the development of its theological options is first found outside the Old Testament.

Returning to the issue of suffering as one of the main themes of this passage, we might ask the following questions: What is the cause of this suffering—is it a human or divine agency that inflicts it in the Servant? Why does the Servant have to suffer? In this essay we will not deal with the question of whether the suffering leads to the death of the Servant.

The well-known practice of symbolic animal sacrifice might be the root of the atonement suffering of the Servant in Isaiah. However, in light of the close link between the vicarious atonement doctrine and the metaphor of sin as burden, many nuances in this text seem to point to a more developed understanding of the idea of vicarious suffering. Writing about the role of metaphor in theology in this particular text, Leslie Brisman would also support the hypothesis that the Isaianic Servant presents a more developed understanding of suffering:

Though assuming the burden of guilt for one's own misdeeds is not the same thing as sacrificing oneself to atone for the sins of others, there is a sense in which this first biblical assumption of the burden plants the seed for the later flowering of atonement ritual in the form of the suffering servant.

It is clear from reading the text that the cause of suffering in this particular poem is not any human agency. Rather, and somewhat surprisingly, it is God who inflicts the suffering onto the Servant. In fact, the suffering of the main character is described with the aid of passive participles: the Servant was stricken, afflicted,

smitten by God (Isa.53:4) and by the "Lord's will" (Isa.53:10).

The discussion on suffering also opens up a question of the meaning of sin and its effects as well as the responsibility for sin. The following questions are legitimate in the context of the passage in question: Does bearing or carrying the sin of others mean wiping it out? Returning to the famous scapegoat ritual, there were in fact two animals (goats) that were involved in the ritual: one was immediately killed, and the other one was let free to carry out the burden. Does that signify the unclear status of sin? Is the sin wiped out totally or does some of it—or the guilt for sin—remain to be lost in the wilderness like the goat?

So, what about the identity of the Suffering Servant or the Man of Sorrows? Who is he and who does he represent? For many Jewish and Christian biblical scholars, this is a fundamental question about the passage, for the answer can shed light on the meaning of the text itself and the purpose for which it was written.

One of the striking characteristics of the Servant is that he never speaks for himself. He is silent as "a lamb" (Isa. 53:7). This also makes it difficult to understand his role and his purpose, which are affirmed strongly by the author: "His [suffering servant's] presence is powerful, but it is others who bear witness to him, not himself. And the first witness is none other than the Lord God." From reading the passage, the Servant can be viewed as a priest who offers sacrifices and as a sacrifice in itself, a channel of God's grace. This fourth servant song has strong connections to the previous songs found in Isa. 41:1-4, 49:1-6, and 50:4-9, respectively. This context introduces the Servant as a sort of mediator between God and the nations/the people. The "universality" of this figure is made explicit already in the very first song. In the

text, the Servant does not speak. It is God who speaks using the Servant (Isa. 53:12). By inflicting suffering on this figure, God has a mysterious plan, a purpose in his mind. This is the way that Yahweh teaches a lesson and makes the whole figure of the Suffering Servant an incarnate spokesman for his plan. No other speakers are identified in the text; it is the pronouns like “I” or “we” that are mostly employed by the author of Isaiah that also makes it difficult to interpret the text.

The Servant is also presented as a God-sent individual. It is a “he” who is weak, humiliated, and suffering. This suffering, however, is not in vain—it has a purpose: to liberate others from their sins. This is vicarious or sacrificial suffering. This language recalls the sacrificial language that is used in Leviticus 16, but the difference between this text and any previous texts is the object that is being sacrificed. Whereas in Leviticus or in any other texts, it is animals like sheep or goat that are being sacrificed, here we have a human being, a man, that is to be sacrificed. That is a huge difference between any non-Isaianic sacrificial texts and the Isaianic text itself.

As to interpreting the Servant as representing the people of Israel, i.e., having a collective or corporate identity, one of the problems that arise is the following: Why would Israel be the beneficiary of the vicarious suffering of the Servant? In other words, if it is Israel that suffers, then this kind of suffering is like a catharsis, a self-purifying act. Moreover, the image that is depicted in the text is highly individual.

According to Israel Knoll, a prominent Jewish biblical scholar, what we have in Isaiah 53 is the beginning of the development of a theological idea that will be further elaborated and embellished in the writing of the

prophet Daniel and in the Dead Sea Scrolls: a figure that undergoes suffering, humiliation, and death and is yet rewarded to a heavenly, quasi-divine status at the end. Knoll does not go as far as to include the Christian understanding of the Suffering Servant as prefiguring Jesus, for that would indeed point Judaism in the direction of accepting Jesus as the prophesized figure in Isaiah. For Knoll, the suffering servant represents the people of Israel who were, at that particular moment in history, in an early exile state.

Starting with Chapter 40, the prophet Isaiah offers words of comfort and hope to the Israelites. Having been judged and punished by exile for their sins, they are now being promised to be able to leave the exile and return to Jerusalem. Liberation and redemption from this oppression will involve a mysterious figure—the Man of Sorrows or the Suffering Servant—who will make an appearance in Chapter 52. This Servant is depicted as a mediator between God and the Israelite nation, as someone who has the power to liberate them from exile and set them free through his humiliation, suffering, and death.

Most probably, the fourth servant song was written to comfort the exilic community, to give it hope and promise of a better future. In the broader context, placing Isa. 52:13-53:12 within Isa. 40-55, one could probably interpret the suffering servant as having a collective identity and pointing to or representing the nation of Israel.

An Interfaith Reading of the Text

With the recognized importance of new hermeneutical tools by the scholarly community, interpreting Isaiah's Suffering Servant through this prism brings new possibilities and “new

horizons” for understanding the text. One of the important characteristics of the new hermeneutics is the claim that language itself becomes an event: language has its own doing and acting.

In Christian theology, the idea of the transmission of guilt and the doctrine of the free have an important place. The whole doctrine of the theology of original sin, eloquently developed by St. Augustine of Hippo, is about guilt and the consequences of sin that are transmitted from the first man, Adam, onto the whole human race.

The transmission of guilt, the possibility of atonement for sin, the question of suffering, the problem of innocent suffering—all of these are central themes in the Man of Sorrows poem, and they will be essential in the development of the theology in Christianity. Some problematic questions for Christian theology are: Why does God need to suffer? To whom is the debt paid? Does this imply a higher being than God?

The Servant in Islam

The idea of a servant and of a prophet to be persecuted but rescued resonates with the Islamic theology. In an interfaith context, the idea of a person who is subordinated to God has its most vivid representation in the Muslim understanding of a religious follower: in fact, a Muslim is someone who submits, subordinates her/himself to God.

In the beginning and at the very end, the verses contain the term “abdi,” which denotes some sort of subordination or servitude. Many prophets, including Moses (Ex. 4:10), Joshua (Josh 5:14), David (1Sam. 23:10), and Job (Job 1:8) were referred to as servants of God. In the book of Isaiah, the nation of Israel is referred

to many times as “servant” (Isa. 41:8; 42:1; 44:1, etc.). The New Testament has references to Jesus’ mother, Mary (Luke 1:48), Paul (Rom. 1:1), and Jesus himself (Phil. 2:7) as servants.

The idea of interpreting the suffering servant through the notion of disability and various interfaith social initiatives that help fight disability. In a recent study that focuses on linking the notion of disability to the figure of the Suffering Servant, Jeremy Schipper rightly notes that in the Isaianic presentation of the servant, the focus is more on the suffering rather than the identity of the servant—be it a theological, historical, metaphorical or legal identity. For Schipper, the suffering servant is a case of severe disability:

All description, including the poetry of Isaiah 53, is metaphorical on some level. The presence of metaphor in the disability imagery of our passage does not signal the absence of disability in the servant’s description. [In the text] there is not a convincing reason to interpret the imagery in Isaiah 53 as primarily describing something other than an experience of disability.

So, what would be implications of disability if applied to the suffering servant? They would definitely impact our theological understanding of the servant. Defining disability as a social and political experience of impairment, Schipper argues, would affect a person’s social, political, theological, and legal status in any society, and the Suffering Servant would be no exception to the rule. It seems that in most of the interpretations of the Suffering Servant, he has come out as an able-bodied personage, whereas in the text itself he is presented with a severe physical disability.

Taking Isaiah 53:3 at its face value, in which

the servant is described as someone who “was despised and withdrew from humanity; a man of sufferings and acquainted with diseases and like someone who hides his face from us,” Schipper concludes that most probably the servant’s disability also included some kind of skin anomaly (like leprosy) that actually led him to be excluded from the community. This would probably be more connected to the fact of purity rather than sinfulness that caused the disease itself. All of this also raises the questions of how exclusion is depicted in the Hebrew Scriptures and what implications it has on the theology itself:

The so-called “suffering” that the servant endures at the hands of other humans focuses on an oppressive social experience of living with disabilities as depicted in the later part of the passage. In this sense, our passage portrays disability as a social and political reality and not simply a medical condition. The servant’s suffering arises from an unjust interaction of a figure with impairments with his social environment.

A Possible Judeo-Christian Reading of the Suffering Servant

The diversity of interpretations and readings of the Suffering Servant passage in Isaiah has prompted a lively theological discussion and debate over the centuries. Christians are often charged for “privatizing” the Hebrew Bible and disregarding the Jewish reading of their scriptures. For the Jews, the idea that the Jesus represents (and was prefigured in the person of) the suffering servant is not acceptable. An interesting interfaith invitation to Jews and Christians to read and interpret the Suffering Servant figure came from the context of liberation theology in El Salvador.

Ignacio Ellacuria in 1978 argued that if we want the word of God to speak to us today, we should be open to see our reality through the prism of Isaiah’s message: the harsh reality of many of the oppressed people today reflects the dramatic reality of the suffering servant. Today, the figure of the Suffering Servant would be embodied by “anyone who discharges the mission described in the songs—anyone unjustly crucified for the sins of human beings,” whose suffering produces a kind of “expiation” through its demand for a “public” and “historical” return to “righteousness and justice.”

Perhaps, if we take on an interfaith reading of Isaiah’s suffering servant and focus more on how the suffering servant is portrayed in the text rather than who is presented, we will get more satisfying answers for our interfaith community that deal with issues of inclusion and exclusion, suffering, disability, and hopes for a better future.

In conclusion, a quote from one of the commentators on Isaiah is truly gratifying for someone trying to make sense of the figure of the suffering servant and its relevance for our days and for interfaith dialogue in particular:

In a religious culture such as our own, where commitment is measured almost quantitatively by speech and action, the servant of the Lord of Isaiah 53 is ill at ease, for his commitment to the “purposes of Yahweh” (53:10) lies entirely in his silent and unresisting suffering. No one wants to claim that there are no other servants of the Lord except this one of Isaiah 53, that this poem-parable is the only glimpse we have of the reality of the servanthood. But this servant still walks among us, wordlessly calling in question our images of servanthood and with his suffering reproaching our easy activism.

TARAS DZYUBANSKY

A graduate of the Russell Berrie Fellowship program at the Angelicum, Taras Dzyubansky holds a Doctorate in Theology from the Angelicum and studied at various papal institutes in the Vatican. Taras teaches at the Ukrainian Catholic University. He is Founder and Director of 'Libertas' Interfaith Center in Ukraine. Taras advises the JPPII Center team and coordinates the global network of John Paul II Center Leaders in Interreligious Dialogue.

ENDNOTES

¹ This document was the first one of its kind in the history of the Catholic Church to speak in a positive way about other religions, and it opened the door for the Catholic Church to be officially engaged in interfaith relations.

² "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible," accessed April 22, 2022, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html.

³ See Kristen Joachimsen, *Identities in Transition: The Pursuit of Isa.* 52:13–53:12 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 15–26.

⁴ Hermann Spieckermann, "The Idea of Vicarious Suffering in the Old Testament," in *The Suffering Servant. Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, eds. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 1.

⁵ Spieckermann, "The Idea of Vicarious Suffering in the Old Testament," 15.

⁶ Leslie Brisman, "From Metaphor to Theology: The Suffering Servant," in *Religion and the Arts* 19 (2015), 295–319.

⁷ Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011), 209.

⁸ For a further discussion of this, see Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher (editors), *The Suffering Servant. Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 54–56.

⁹ Spieckermann, "The Idea of Vicarious Suffering in the Old Testament," p.15.

⁹ David Clines, *I, He, We and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 52* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1976).

¹⁰ Israel Knohl, "The Suffering Servant: from Isaiah to the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Scriptural Exegesis: The Shapes of Culture and the Religious Imagination: Essays in Honour of Michael Fishbane*, eds. Deborah A. Green and Laura S. Lieber (Oxford Scholarship Online, May 2009), doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199206575.001.0001.

¹¹ Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah's Suffering Servant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, New York, 2011).

¹² Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah's Suffering Servant*, 53.

¹³ Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah's Suffering Servant*, 32–41.

¹⁴ Marc Brettler, "Isaiah's Suffering Servant: Before and After Christianity," in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 73 (2019): 172–173, doi: 10.1177/0020964318820594.

¹⁵ Robert Lasselle-Klein, "Voice of the Suffering Servant, Cry of the Crucified People," last modified December 16, 2015, <https://www.scu.edu/ic/media--publications/explore-journal/spring-2015-stories/voice-of-the-suffering-servant-cry-of-the-crucified-people.html>.

¹⁶ Scriptural exegesis could be a very helpful tool for those involved in interfaith dialogue, as it helps to treat the text from a variety of disciplines and look at its many dimensions, leaning towards a more balanced understanding as opposed to a literal and fundamental meaning.

¹⁷ Clines, *I, He, We and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 52*, 65.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brettler, Marc. "Isaiah's Suffering Servant: Before and After Christianity." In *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* Vol. 73 (2019): 158–173. doi: 10.1177/0020964318820594.

Brisman, Leslie. "From Metaphor to Theology: The Suffering Servant." *Religion and the Arts* 19 (2015): 295–319.

Clines, David. *I, He, We and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 52* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1976).

Janowski, Bernd and Peter Stuhlmacher, eds. *The Suffering Servant. Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004).

"The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible," accessed April 22, 2022, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html.

Knohl, Israel. "The Suffering Servant: from Isaiah to the Dead Sea Scrolls." In *Scriptural Exegesis: The Shapes of Culture and the Religious Imagination: Essays in Honour of Michael Fishbane*, edited by Deborah A. Green and Laura S. Lieber. Oxford Scholarship Online, May 2009. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199206575.001.0001.

Kristen, Joachimsen. *Identities in Transition: The Pursuit of Isa. 52:13–53:12* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

Lasselle-Klein, Robert. "Voice of the Suffering Servant, Cry of the Crucified People," last modified December 16, 2015, <https://www.scu.edu/ic/media-publications/explore-journal/spring-2015-stories/voice-of-the-suffering-servant-cry-of-the-crucified-people.html>.

Schipper, Jeremy. *Disability and Isaiah's Suffering Servant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, New York, 2011).

Webb, Barry, *The Message of Isaiah* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011).

Dialogue for Peace: Interreligious Dialogue and Scouting

by A. J. Boyd

ABSTRACT

The World Organization of the Scouting Movement (WOSM), representing more than 60 million Scouts and Guides around the world, teamed up with the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) to develop a program promoting interreligious dialogue training called “Dialogue for Peace,” officially launched in 2017. Since 2018, it has worked to align itself with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The purpose of this short article is to present to a broader audience the success and strengths of this program as part of the world’s largest network of informal/extracurricular youth education programs with a long tradition of commitment to religious diversity and mutual understanding.

The Scouting Movement

When then-Colonel Robert Baden Powell, a British commander during the Boer War and very soon to be hero of the Siege of Mafeking, published his 138-page book, *Aids to Scouting for NCOs and Men*, his clear intention was to help soldiers become better military scouts. He sought to impart skills based on his own experience, such as finding your way in strange country, using your senses to observe everything around you, concealing yourself from the enemy, following tracks and reading their meaning, sketching maps, and making reports to superiors.

It was a surprise for him when he returned

home after the Boer War, in 1902, to discover that his text was being used by youth groups around the country as a guide to outdoor fun. His knack for telling stories and imparting lessons simply and without jargon along with his illustrations and appendix filled with games for testing the skills he sought to develop had appealed as much to schoolchildren as he had hoped it would to young men entering military service.

Simultaneously promoted to lieutenant general and placed on inactive duty in 1907, he found he had time to experiment with the youth appeal of his program of scouting skills and arranged a summer camping experience

with more than twenty youth on Brownsea Island. The success of the experience encouraged him to publish an adapted version of his text as *Scouting for Boys* in 1908. The next year, girls were admitted in parallel to the movement with the designation of Guides. The rest, as they say, is history. Today, 60 million youth from nearly every country on the planet are engaged in the Scouting Movement.

Where Does “God” Come In?

When asked where God and religion come into Scouting and Guiding, Baden-Powell replied, “It does not come in at all. It is already there. It is a fundamental factor underlying Scouting and Guiding”; he further stated that “it is all important that this should be fully understood [by leaders] so that they can explain it to our Scouters and Guiders as well as to outsiders who may want to know about it.”¹

From the beginning, it has been clear that “Duty to God” is a core principle of Scouting and Guiding alongside, and even preceding, “Duty to others,” including duty to country and “Duty to self.”² It was seen as a part of character development, by “the realization of God the Creator through His works; the appreciation of beauty in Nature; and through the love of plants or animals with which outdoor life has made one familiar.”³

It is equally clear that this reverence to God and for neighbor is understood as a non-sectarian, non-denominational commitment that allowed for, and even encouraged, both ecumenical and interreligious encounters and sharing, and that “each form of religion is respected and its active practice encouraged.”⁴

Today, the global Scouting movement describes the “Duty to God” as “the relationship to the spiritual life and spiritual

reality” considered a “key aspect in human growth and flourishing.”⁵ It has deliberately shifted from the non-sectarian but still monotheistic language that dominated its founding to be intentionally inclusive of the non-monotheistic traditions as well. Making explicit the implicitly interfaith nature of the movement, with its perennial commitment especially to peace-building and global identity, recent decades have emphasized in new ways the commitment to forming youth in and through interreligious dialogue as a tool for promoting peace and social cohesion.⁶

Interreligious Dialogue in Scouting

Over the decades, networks of religiously affiliated Scouts and Scouting interests emerged at the local, national, and international levels—in the latter case, with consultative status to the World Scout Committee. These include the International Catholic Conference of Scouting (1948), Council of Protestants in Guiding and Scouting (1965), International Union of Muslim Scouts (1989), International Link of Orthodox Scouts (1996), World Buddhist Scout Council (2004), and the International Forum of Jewish Scouts (2006).

It may be noted, and solemnly remembered, that an international European gathering of Jewish Scouts, meeting at Colleville-sur-Mer, Normandy in 1931, had proposed a “World Union of Jewish Scouting,” but this never developed owing to the tragic events that unfolded in Europe during that decade and culminated in the Shoah.

In 1996, following an organizational meeting between some of these networks in Geneva in March of that year, the 34th World Scout Conference in Oslo passed a resolution:

in consideration of the fundamental and universal importance of the spiritual and religious dimensions within the educational method of Scouting and considering the Scout Movement as providing a privileged place and opportunity for knowledge, understanding and fellowship among Scouts of different religions which are present in the world, the Conference:

- *Recommends to the World Scout Committee and to the religious families to convene forums of representatives of the religions that are present in the Movement*
- *Encourages the World Scout Bureau to promote the spiritual dimension and to improve mutual understanding between different religious faiths*
- *Calls on the World Committee and National Scout Associations to make full use of the ecumenical and inter-religious potential of Scouting.*⁷

In response to this resolution, during preparation for the World Scout Jamboree in Chile, representatives of these networks, as well as representatives from the Bahá'í Faith, Hinduism, and Sikhism, began collaborating in what came to be called the Interreligious Forum of World Scouting in 1997. Meeting annually, the Forum's responsibilities now include organizing interreligious activities during World Scout Jamborees and Moots, organizing the World Scout Interreligious Symposium, and generally championing spiritual and religious development in Scouting at the world level.

The World Scout Interreligious Symposium has been held five times: in Valencia, Spain (2003), Kaoshiung, Taiwan (2006), Kampala, Uganda (2009), Iskan, South Korea (2012), and Huntington, NY, USA (2017). A sixth

was scheduled to meet in Jambville, France in March 2020, but was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2001, Crown Prince (now King) Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud addressed participants at the 23rd Arab Scout Conference in Riyadh:

*Scouts are messengers of goodwill, love, and peace for all the world. I beseech Allah to help scouts make a significant contribution to serving humanity and uniting the peoples of the world. Humanity will persist as long as man continues to care for his fellow man. I believe you have made such great impact on the minds of 28 million youths. I wish you good luck and further success in your noble mission, which aims at goodwill for all mankind.*⁸

King of Sweden Carl XVI Gustaf, honorary Chairman of the World Scout Foundation, was present for the event and, in collaboration with King Abdullah, developed a program for Scouts worldwide inspired by this theme, which has emphasized in a variety of forms education and service to promote peace. First known as Peace Gifts, the program was reformulated as “Messengers of Peace” in 2011. The purpose of the program, as described by the Scouting Movement, is broadly for the bettering of community, promoting dialogue, providing emergency relief, and education for peace values and service.⁹

With the Forum and the Symposia designed mostly for global and national scout leaders, there remained a need for interreligious activity and education at the local level by the Scouts themselves. Though widely successful in promoting service and relief as well as a general message of peace and global fraternity, the Messengers for Peace initiative lacked a specific element in learning about religions and interreligious dialogue

specifically. Addressing this lacuna, in 2013, at the recommendation of the Forum, the World Organization of the Scout Movement signed a memorandum of understanding with the new King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), in Vienna, for the development of a formation and training program for Scouts in interreligious dialogue, to be named Dialogue for Peace.

Dialogue for Peace

A few months after the memorandum was signed, an inaugural joint event was held in Vienna in February 2014, bringing together 37 representatives of National Scout Organizations (NSOs) from around the world.¹⁰ This three-day conversation allowed scout leaders at the international level to begin strategizing for adopting and implementing the new program. In June of that year, the first training of Dialogue Trainers took place, kicking off a series of trainings across regions and at world scouting events, such as the 23rd World Scout Jamboree in Japan in 2015. The official launch, however, came during the 41st World Scout Conference in August 2017.¹¹ At the same time, a series of “dialogue badges” were introduced to indicate three levels of engagement: Scouts who had participated in an event, Scouts and Rovers who were trained as facilitators, and Scouts and leaders who were trained as trainers.¹²

In 2018, *Building Bridges: Guide for Dialogue Ambassadors* was published to help NSOs adopt and implement the Dialogue for Peace program and more generally to “provide guidance on how to instill dialogue in our hearts and minds as a value rather than just a skill.”¹³ In the same year, WOSM committed its

programs to align more closely with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and Dialogue for Peace began focusing on the development of key competencies in young people and for several of the goals: SDG4 Quality of Education, SDG5 Gender Equality, SDG10 Reduced Inequalities, SDG11 Sustainable Cities and Communities, and SDG16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

While some NSOs have yet to adopt the program officially, including the Boy Scouts of America, many have done so enthusiastically and with great success. All focus on spending time in the outdoors, character development, leadership skills, and non-formal education programs. Globally, nearly 10,000 Scouts have participated in training sessions or workshops, and there are nearly seventy accredited dialogue trainers globally. While there is no official mechanism to adopt the program, unless your NSO is formally promoting the program, access to the facilitation and training accreditation is barred, and information on how to promote it is limited. Training and accreditation are offered through each of the six global regions of the World Organization of the Scout Movement.¹⁴

The method and approach of the Dialogue for Peace program mirrors that developed by KAICIID for its Fellows Programme, simplified and adapted for use with youth and youth leaders.¹⁵ The overall objectives are:

*to promote dialogue (interreligious, inter-cultural, et al.) as an essential value toward creating a better world and global peace; to engender respect for everyone regardless of faith, race, ethnic background, gender or age; apply principles of dialogue as part of one’s value system; and to value the need for peace and dialogue in today’s world.*¹⁶

Dialogue, in this case, is understood as “a form of interaction between two or more persons of different identities that emphasizes self-expression and reciprocal listening without passing judgment, in an intellectual and compassionate spirit of openness to mutual learning with deep transformative potential.”¹⁷ It is necessarily distinguished from other forms of bilateral communication, such as advocacy, conference, consultation, debate, discussion, or negotiation, each method with different purpose, skillset, and anticipated outcome.

KAIICIID’s ten principles of interreligious dialogue are set out through both its Fellows Programme and Scouting Dialogue for Peace:

1. *Establishing the safe space*
2. *To agree that the main purpose of the dialogue is learning*
3. *Use of appropriate communication skills*
4. *Set the proper ground rules*
5. *Take risk, express feelings and confront perceptions (honesty)*
6. *The relationship comes first*
7. *Gradually address the hard questions and gradually depart from them*
8. *Do not quit or avoid the difficult issues*
9. *Expect to be changed: once participating in the dialogue, expect to be changed*
10. *Bring the change to others*¹⁸

During the Covid-19 pandemic, these efforts continued through the use of Zoom and other virtual spaces, particularly at the annual “Jamboree on the Internet” (successor to and extension of the “Jamboree on the Air” that engaged Scouts as international

amateur radio operators), where nineteen workshops and “dialogue cafes” were held during the October 2020 iteration. Scouting programs in Australia, Tunisia, Argentina, and Romania have been featured in global webinars sharing the success of the program. In a number of developing countries, local scouts have been in emergency relief mode in the midst of the pandemic. Turkish Scouts aided in the production of masks. In Niger, Scouts launched a public awareness campaign to combat the spread of the virus. In Kuwait, Scouts engaged in the promotion of public health information and gathering emergency packages for families. When Scouts Afghanistan recently joined the World Organization of the Scout Movement, American Scouts lost no time in setting up an opportunity for dialogue and welcome via Zoom. But the cycle of international in-person training and promoting events has halted, like so much else.

During this caesura of the regular pattern of life, efforts are underway to make the process more clearly accessible and understood. A revision of the *Guidebook for Dialogue Ambassadors* is underway, as is the practical information on adaption and implementation. A compilation of statistics is involved. Yet the anecdotes continue to accrue from around the world of the success of a global youth dialogue formation program potentially available to sixty million Scouts in 171 countries.

Prof. Andrew “A.J.” Boyd was a Russell Berrie Fellow 2009-11, Assistant Director of the John Paul II Center for Interreligious Dialogue 2011-14, and has been teaching theology, focusing on ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, in Rome since 2013. He was a KAICIID International Fellow in 2019. He is originally from the Seattle, WA area (USA), where he served for several years as a pastoral associate and ministry formator before coming to Rome.

ENDNOTES

¹ This document was the first one of its kind in the history of the Catholic Church to speak in a positive way about other religions, and it opened the door for the Catholic Church to be officially engaged in interfaith relations.

² “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible,” accessed April 22, 2022, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html.

³ See Kristen Joachimsen, *Identities in Transition: The Pursuit of Isaiah 52:13–53:12* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 15–26.

⁴ Hermann Spieckermann, “The Idea of Vicarious Suffering in the Old Testament,” in *The Suffering Servant. Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, eds. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 1.

⁵ Spieckermann, “The Idea of Vicarious Suffering in the Old Testament,” 15.

⁶ Leslie Brisman, “From Metaphor to Theology: The Suffering Servant,” in *Religion and the Arts* 19 (2015), 295–319.

⁷ Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011), 209.

⁸ For a further discussion of this, see Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher (editors), *The Suffering Servant. Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 54–56.

⁹ Spieckermann, “The Idea of Vicarious Suffering in the Old Testament,” p.15.

⁹ David Clines, *I, He, We and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 52* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1976).

¹⁰ Israel Knohl, “The Suffering Servant: from Isaiah to the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Scriptural Exegesis: The Shapes of Culture and the Religious Imagination: Essays in Honour of Michael Fishbane*, eds. Deborah A. Green and Laura S. Lieber (Oxford Scholarship Online, May 2009), doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199206575.001.0001.

¹¹ Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah’s Suffering Servant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, New York, 2011).

¹² Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah’s Suffering Servant*, 53.

¹³ Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah’s Suffering Servant*, 32–41.

¹⁴ Marc Brettler, “Isaiah’s Suffering Servant: Before and After Christianity,” in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 73 (2019): 172–173, doi: 10.1177/0020964318820594.

¹⁵ Robert Lasselle-Klein, “Voice of the Suffering Servant, Cry of the Crucified People,” last modified December 16, 2015, <https://www.scu.edu/ic/media--publications/explore-journal/spring-2015-stories/voice-of-the-suffering-servant-cry-of-the-crucified-people.html>.

¹⁶ Scriptural exegesis could be a very helpful tool for those involved in interfaith dialogue, as it helps to treat the text from a variety of disciplines and look at its many dimensions, leaning towards a more balanced understanding as opposed to a literal and fundamental meaning.

¹⁷ Clines, *I, He, We and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 52*, 65.

Between Online and In-Person in This Time of Pandemic

by Elena Dini

ABSTRACT

During this challenging time, dialogue has needed to readapt to the new social rules. There are many activities that we are running online, from conferences and group gatherings, but the need to meet in person is deep and still there. How can we make the most of this online space? How are interreligious relations influenced by the in-person dimension? The new ways of interacting are helping us to see what remains at the core of dialogue. At the same time, the fact that we strongly miss physical interaction is telling us something about dialogue too. In my short article I will draw examples from some online experiences of interreligious encounters.

Over the past two years, we have all had to adapt our daily life to new conditions. At the beginning we thought that it was going to be for a short time. Then we slowly realized that this was going to be a radical change for a longer period. Certainly, many aspects of our life have been heavily impacted, from our family relationships and our social dimensions at large to our working attitudes and the use of our free time. Interreligious interactions also needed to be rethought in light of the pandemic, and after more than one year, a few thoughts about this might be shared.

I will first reflect upon the pre-pandemic use of online tools for interreligious dialogue and then focus on how the pandemic confirmed or added other dimensions to

these online tools and spaces. This will be based on practical first-hand examples.

Before March 2020, when going online for interreligious meetings was simply one option among many and not the only way of encountering people, an important topic of discussion was if the web was offering real opportunities for such encounters. In a recently published article, Ruth Tsuria rightly tackles this issue starting from the characteristics of interreligious dialogue and then moving on to see if these are found in the different contexts offered by the World Wide Web. Tsuria affirms that “[i]n order for an online interaction to be considered online interreligious dialogue it needs to have the characteristics of such dialogue—openness,

honesty, etc. Otherwise, users might conceive of these spaces an open agora [...] in which they are defending their religion or defining themselves.”¹

Many exchanges can and do happen online between people of different faith traditions, and sometimes, these interactions might focus on faith issues. This is definitely not enough, however, to consider these exchanges “interreligious,” just as “interreligious” might not be an accurate label for in-person events that do not favor mutual knowledge, interest in encountering and discovering the other person’s truth and approach, and/or the willingness to build something new together. A study in 2017 about the consumption of digital media by Catalan millennials, for which 1800 young people between 12 and 18 years-old were interviewed, reports that “very few young people (20%) asserted that they use digital tools with the intention to learn about other religions. Online religious spaces are a platform for self-affirming one’s own identity and values; that is why they have not served as spaces for interreligious dialogue in a wide-reaching environment that would lend itself to just such a use.”²

If the use of online spaces and, in particular, social media did not seem to be the most favorable context to offer interreligious exchanges before the pandemic, it is sure that most things needed to be reexamined because of the sanitary restrictions in many countries that impeded people from meeting in presence for so many months.

Over these months all those who wanted to keep people of different faith traditions experiencing encounters and exchanges had to revert to online methods. How did the medium influence the result? Here I would simply share some considerations which

might be helpful to take into consideration while we look ahead to this next phase of “normalization”—if not of post-pandemic—on the basis of personal experience.

First of all, I realized that people were thirsty for opportunities not only to listen to experts or religious leaders (there have been, and still are, so many online conferences, webinars, liturgical celebrations, spiritual retreats, etc. that each person could find something suitable) but, even more, to engage in exchanges in a sort of community space. People wanted to share with someone else what they were going through and feel that—even from a distance—they were part of a group with other people. This makes the context of online interreligious dialogue very different from the pre-pandemic scenario, and this should be taken into consideration.

The kind of online interreligious gatherings I organized or attended were almost all moments favoring the building of intimate exchanges where all people could have the chance to ask questions and share their own reactions and thoughts.

The need people had for being part of a community required the diligent and careful preparation of the organizers, above all in one-on-one contacts. I realized that most people who joined did so after a personal invitation. Actually, what has proved to be important in this time of forced online gatherings is to remember that the same rules of in-person exchanges apply: personal contacts, deep listening, creating a safe space (this was even more important online when people cannot have the same immediate feeling about who is in the room), to name a few. Therefore, substantial time in each meeting was devoted to personal short introductions so that people could hear about

the other participants and discover why they decided to attend the event.

In 2020 during the months of the first strict lockdown, I connected with a longtime Muslim friend and a Jewish friend whom I met in different circumstances to run online sessions of Scriptural Reasoning. Since the very beginning, this was a touching and intense experience. We gathered people from four continents—who otherwise would have probably never had the chance of coming across each other—for some sessions. The possibility of running Scriptural Reasoning online has always been available. However, it is clear and reasonable that people who were interested in such an experience preferred to find a local circle to do it in. The impossibility of doing that in person for over a year opened up a larger exchange; having such a diverse group of people who were sharing about the scriptural passages in front of them as well as the concrete experience they were going through in their own countries (the very few minutes at the beginning of each session were always an update on the sanitary situations of the participants' countries—from Egypt to Israel, from UK to the U.S.) added a very interesting international exchange.

Most people did not know each other, and they came because of an invitation from one of the organizers. Some of them were already familiar with Scriptural Reasoning; others were not. However, I can honestly say that this was a heartwarming experience where people got so much deeper into conversations and sharing. A big sign of success was the fact that we started receiving emails from people asking when we could plan the next session, and some of them volunteered to be the person from their faith tradition picking up the text to be used for discussion and

presenting it, thus taking the ownership of the process and the group.

There have certainly been challenges: the main one was and still is getting used to giving online gatherings the same importance and attention that we give to those in person. All of us have been occupied by so many meetings during these months, which has created a sense of fatigue of sitting in front of a screen and listening to other people without having many opportunities for dynamic exchanges and “surprises.” I think we are all familiar with the experience of replying to an email during an online meeting or switching off the video and doing something else. This high multitasking ability is unfortunately the big obstacle to deal with when one tries to have intimate and deep conversations or create a sense of community.

Another challenge is the lack of free/informal time. During in-person gatherings, one takes coffee breaks or the time before or after the meeting to establish more direct and personal relationships. The lack of this space is so evident when you can only send a message in the chat to someone else, and often you would not do this with someone you don't really know.

It has definitely been interesting to witness how many groups or institutions have tried to find good alternatives to keep exchanges about interfaith active and meaningful. With the John Paul II Center for Interreligious Dialogue, we tried to offer different formats to support Fellows and JPPII Leaders, alumni of our program, in making the most of their time. Apart from arranging online lectures on a broad range of topics, which had more time for Q&A than regular classes, we worked on webinar formats that allowed participants to hear different experiences of interreligious

dialogue, ask questions, and share their own experiences.³ Additionally, we organized sessions called “Meet the IRD Leaders,” where leaders working in interreligious organizations came and shared about specific projects they were running, taking the time to tell about best practices, challenges they met, and tips for successful interfaith meetings in their experience.⁴ Another key moment during the month of Ramadan for our Fellows was the online Iftar they attended with a group of Muslim friends from Istituto Tevere; this was a chance to hear about young Muslim people’s Ramadan experience and share thoughts about fasting and meaningful celebrations in their own faith tradition.⁵

The online interfaith experience has limits that we must acknowledge, but it also offers interesting opportunities that we do not want to lose in the future. The possibility of gathering at a distance while investing in one-to-one knowledge prior to and after the event or session brings a wide richness to our interfaith encounters. Now that in-person meetings are slowly coming back to be part of our life, I hope we will be able to make the most of both opportunities in order to advance the interreligious sphere.

ELENA DINI

Elena Dini is Senior Program Manager of the John Paul II Center for Interreligious Dialogue. She holds degrees in Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Communications, Catholic Theology, and Interfaith Dialogue. She is working on her PhD at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome in the field of interreligious dialogue. Locally in Rome she is responsible for interreligious meetings at the Sacred Heart Basilica between young Italians and young refugees, and she serves as the liaison contact person with the Muslim community for relationships with Islam for the region around Rome (Lazio) at the Italian Bishops' Conference. Internationally, she is a member of the Steering Committee of the International Abrahamic Forum and a member of the Network 4 Dialogue.

ENDNOTES

¹ Ruth Tsuria, "The space between us: considering online media for interreligious dialogue," *Religion* 50, no. 3 (2020): 450.

² Míriam Díez Bosch, Josep Lluís Micó Sanz, and Alba Sabaté Gauchachs, "Typing my Religion. Digital use of religious webs and apps by adolescents and youth for religious and interreligious dialogue," *Church, Communication and Culture* 2, no. 2 (2017): 132.

³ On April 19, 2021, the John Paul II Center for Interreligious Dialogue organized with the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI) a webinar featuring four alumni of both institutions: "From Academia to Practice: Interreligious Dialogue Experiences in Africa." You can learn more about it here: www.jp2center.org/activity/news/2021/04/21/interreligious-dialogue-africa.

⁴ Here you can watch the "Meet the IRD Leader" session with Imam Yahya Pallavicini on March 15, 2021: <https://vimeo.com/527183036>.

⁵ You can read more about this initiative here: www.jp2center.org/activity/news/2021/04/23/iftar-istituto-tevere.



S: P: DOMINI ORD: P: R: A: D: F: V: D: A: T: ET: M: O: N: I: A: L: I: V: M: P: A: R: E: N: T: I: A: M

THE JOHN PAUL II CENTER FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The John Paul II Center for Interreligious Dialogue has a special place in preparing religious leaders for interfaith work and peacebuilding. The Center was born out of a partnership between a Jewish philanthropic foundation—the Russell Berrie Foundation—and the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (the Angelicum) in Rome and is administered by the Institute of International Education. The Center aims to build bridges between Christian, Jewish, and other religious traditions by providing the next generation of leaders with a comprehensive understanding of and dedication to interfaith issues and action. Since its establishment in 2008, over 130 Fellows from about 40 countries have been welcomed for a unique academic program at the Angelicum.

The Center has supported students studying for a diploma, licentiate, doctorate, and post-doctorate in Ecumenical studies and Interreligious dialogue. The academic program offers at its core courses in Christian and Jewish theology, Catholic-Jewish dialogue, history of dialogue, and related subjects, plus a dense program of extra-curricular activities, including a visit to Israel, practical workshops offering tools for implementing dialogue projects, and various engagements with leaders in the field.

