

## Handout 4.1

### Session Four: Interfaith Relations

#### The “interfaith deal” and Anti-Semitism

Jewish theologian Marc Ellis describes the “ecumenical” or “interfaith deal” as follows:

“The deal began with the ecumenical dialogue between Jews and Christians after the Holocaust, when many Christians woke up and found there was blood on their theology...Israel became the vehicle for repentance for the Holocaust. Thus, for many Jews, any critical discussion of Israeli policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians is to abandon that vehicle of repentance and return to anti-Semitism. This is the ecumenical deal...”

Read aloud:

“The relationship between Christians and Jews reaches back to the very beginnings of the Church. The earliest history of this relationship was marked by the struggle to resolve the conflicts between the Jewish followers of Jesus, Gentiles and the larger Jewish community (Acts 15:6–11, Romans 9:1–5). The apostle Paul promoted a vision of one community of humankind, free of the hostility and conflict generated by ethnic, class and gender divisions (Ephesians 2:14, Galatians 3:28). Tragically, however, until recent times Christian-Jewish relations have been marked by conflict, enmity and mistrust. When Christianity was established as the dominant religion in the late Roman Empire, thus becoming linked to imperial power, the Jewish community was forced into a position of isolation and defensiveness. Over the centuries, simmering mistrust and enmity between Christians and Jews was relieved by periods of relative openness, exchange and cooperation. Yet undeniably, the relationship has been characterized by systematic oppression of Jews throughout the history of the Christian West, punctuated by outbreaks of savage violence against Jews by Christians. This culminated in the attempted extermination of the Jewish people in the heart of Europe in the mid-20th century.

Shocked and traumatized by the confrontation with the consequences of their anti-Jewish history, after World War II Christians began a determined process to atone for anti-Semitism and to reconcile with the Jewish people. The period from the mid-20th century to the present has been a

time of steadily increasing interfaith exchange and trust-building between the two communities. Powerful impulses to honor the rights of the Jewish people for safety and security, as well as strong theological trends to support the standing of God's covenant with the Jews, continue to this day. Many Christians see the return of Jewish sovereignty in historic Palestine as a corrective for 1,600 years of persecution of Jews by Christian empires and states. This has led to widespread support for the State of Israel among Christian clergy, academics, lay leaders and church establishments."

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Have you observed this dynamic of Christian support for Israel as a corrective for the Holocaust and 1,600 years of Jewish persecution? Where?
2. For many Christians, this is a compelling argument. Is it for you? What feelings and thoughts do you have reading these selections? What have you heard from others about this?
3. How do these feelings and thoughts impact how we think and talk about Palestine and Israel?
4. How do our feelings and thoughts about this issue impact how we relate to Jewish friends, colleagues, family members, etc.?

#### Read the next section:

"We believe strongly in the value of interfaith dialogue and reconciliation. But we acknowledge with sadness and distress that because of the powerful impulse on the part of Christians to atone for their sins against the Jewish people, vigilance against anti-Semitism today has come to trump working for justice in Palestine and Israel. The Christian need to rectify centuries of anti-Jewish doctrine and actions and to avoid even the perception of anti-Jewish feeling has served to silence criticism of Israel's policies and any questioning of the consequences of U.S. government support for Israel. Differences between anti-Semitism and legitimate opposition to Israeli actions are avoided or explained away. Responsible discourse about Zionism is often denounced as hostility toward Israel and its citizens or branded as anti-Semitism. We believe that in our dialogue with our Jewish friends, family members and colleagues and in our relationships with the Jewish community on institutional levels, we must confront this pattern of avoiding, denying or suppressing discussion of issues that may cause conflict or discomfort. The fact that anti-Semitism still exists makes it all the more important to differentiate between actual anti-Jewish feelings and criticism of the actions of a nation state. Uncomfortable though it may be, we cannot be afraid to address the

urgent issue of justice and human rights in Israel and Palestine with our Jewish sisters and brothers here in the United States. And, increasingly, these conversations must include Muslims.”

Discussion Questions:

1. In this passage, the document is making claims about the problem with the “interfaith deal.” What are those problems?
2. Which problems are ones that you have experienced or observed yourself? In personal contexts? Within our local community? Within the national conversation? Within our church structures?
3. Is there anything in this statement that makes you uncomfortable, or that you disagree with? What? Why?
4. How do you imagine this passage may be met by some in the Christian community who may have conflicted, mixed or fearful feelings about these clear and admittedly bold statements, statements that challenge the status quo and threaten to disrupt or disturb relationships, both personal and institutional? How do we deal with the objections that may arise?

5.

Making the link to Islamophobia

Read the following paragraph:

“Prejudice against Muslims and misconceptions about Islam are pervasive in U.S. society. Our government’s activities around the world reinforce fear-based discrimination against Muslims. In addition to the role that it plays in our foreign policy and its impact on American Muslims, Islamophobia influences our attitudes about Israel and Palestine. Islamophobia is pervasive not only in U.S. society but also in the Church. Some voices in America, many of them Christian, foment panic about rising levels of anti-Semitism in the Arab world and an impending holocaust against the Jews. They draw parallels between Nazi Germany and present-day (largely Arab) regimes and even world Islam, proclaiming them to be threats to Israel’s existence and to our Western way of life. These destructive and divisive messages are tightly interwoven with the prevailing dominant American political narrative that portrays a democratic, Judeo-Christian West in a mortal struggle against a hostile culture of “radical Islam.” Combined with the deeply felt needs of Christians to correct for historic sins against the Jews, these attitudes have a powerful effect on our ability to carry on productive conversations about Israel and Palestine.”

Discussion:

1. According to this statement, how do our thoughts and assumptions about Islam and Muslims influence our understanding of this conflict?
2. Have you observed or experienced this on an interpersonal level? Within our national conversation? Within conversations in our church?

Read aloud:

“We must take extreme care not to cast Muslims or Islam as the adversary—culturally, religiously or politically. At the same time we must recognize the extent to which the radicalization of Islamic identity has been fueled by the injustice against Palestinians, beginning in 1948 and intensifying in 1967 and thereafter. Indeed, the cause of justice in historic Palestine brings to the surface crucial issues about the long-term consequences of diplomatic and military policies that Western governments have implemented in the Middle East beginning early in the 20th century. As the church of Jesus Christ, we are called to overcome our imperial past and to remember, as Jesus instructs, to “do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31).”

Discussion:

1. This paragraph cites Luke 6:31, which is the Golden Rule. How does this passage serve as lens through which to think about Islam, its radicalization, and our government policies in the Middle East?

## Facing the Future of Interfaith Dialogue

Read aloud:

“...if interfaith conversation is to become a part of the struggle for peace in the Holy Land, it must include an open discussion of the way our beliefs affect our perceptions of the political reality in Palestine and Israel today.”

“As we face the future, we ask our Jewish brothers and sisters to join us in building bridges that connect rather than walls that separate. We ask our Muslim sisters and brothers to join with us in the spirit of trust and community. And we reach out in love to Palestinian Christians. Together, we can overcome the fear of the other and, together, with all nations and all faiths, build a global society based on trust and compassion.”

Discussion:

1. In light of the past history—religious, political, military, economic, cultural—what do we need to do to “face the future” and “build a global society based on trust and compassion”?
2. How can we do this on a local level?