Editorial

Five years ago, we published an issue marking the fortieth anniversary of the creation of the annual international student conference established by the Standing Conference of Jews, Christians and Muslims in Europe (JCM).¹ Interfaith dialogue is one of the topics regularly addressed by this journal, reflecting a long-standing commitment to such programmes by Leo Baeck College. The aim of the conference from its inception was to invite future religious leaders within their respective faiths to meet one another while still students in the hope that this direct experience of sharing time together with the ‘other’ would influence their work in the communities that they would subsequently serve.

The journal regularly publishes articles from the annual JCM conference in order to indicate current trends, concerns and developments in this field within Europe. The nature of these contributions reflects one of the principles underlying the methodology of the conference. Though considered unusual at the time, rather than focus on lectures, the week-long programme was constructed so as to offer as many opportunities as possible for personal encounter and dialogue among the participants. This included different kinds of discussion and other forms of working groups, as well as attending each other’s religious services and a shared morning silent meditation.

The reason for this emphasis on individual engagement lay in a reaction against earlier forms of such meetings, in which people often participated as official ‘representatives’ of particular faith organisations, even bringing with them an agenda to promote or a position to defend. The aim was to produce public ‘joint declarations’ on contemporary issues or general policy guidelines. Valuable as this might be on a political level, it was felt that it risked undermining the potential for long-term gain from the spiritual and personal dimensions of a religious encounter. Such was the pressure to produce ‘results’ in the early years of the conference that the JCM organising team found themselves having to resist attempts to publicise this unusual gathering of people of the three faiths by proposing and voting on some kind of collective statement. Instead, the goal was to create a basis of confidentiality and mutual trust among these

pioneering partners, some of whom participated at personal risk to themselves, that would endure and further the dialogue on an individual basis. Within this framework, those invited to offer one of the three 'keynote' lectures from the perspective of their own faith community were also asked to speak from a personal point of view.

This explains the nature of the articles gathered here, which are offered as a documentation of contemporary beliefs, attitudes and perspectives. The different topics chosen for the annual conferences of the past four years included here locate us at different points on the spectrum between the purely personal and experiential on the one side and attempts at providing a reasoned approach to evaluating contemporary issues on the other.

The three articles from the 2016 conference, 'God's Voice in a Secular Society', reflect a degree of confidence in offering a critical evaluation of both secular society and of religion itself, from within a contemporary religious framework. Taniya Hussain views God's voice as expressed in the call for social justice, and offers different definitions of both secularism and religion. Trevor Wedman argues that it is not secularism, but Manichaeism, a tendency to split the happenings of the world into good and evil, which is the greatest threat. The real conflict is between the presence of values and the absence of values. Coming from a different perspective, Moshe Lavee similarly suggests that the issue of a modern scientific denial of God has been replaced by a contemporaneous post-modern loss of faith in the possibility of good.

The 2017 conference on 'Migration – A New Normal' produced theologically orientated articles which lead to practical recommendations on the appropriate treatment of migrants. Amira Abdin writes as someone with a lifelong history as a migrant. She seeks to anchor her views on society's responsibility towards migrants, and, conversely, migrants' responsibility towards their host society, within Qur'anic teachings. She outlines concrete steps that need to be taken to foster effective integration of migrants. Similarly, Lea Mühlstein looks initially within Jewish Scripture and rabbinic tradition for models of migrant experience and guidance on how this must lead to support of the stranger. She links her article to the experience of her parents as political refugees in Germany, her mother from East Germany and her father from Czechoslovakia. She argues for the need for faith communities to come together to advocate for changes to government policies. Michael Bothner speaks of his experience working in a commune for 'unaccompanied minor foreigners' in Germany. He examines the plight of so-called 'economic refugees' and argues that the use of such 'single story' definitions of people creates stereotypes, robs people of their dignity and makes it harder to recognise

our common humanity. Flight requires awareness of a ‘new normality’ but should at the same time never be considered ‘normal’.

The 2018 conference saw a change of emphasis, addressing ‘The Art of Doubting’. Danny Rich argues that the Hebrew Bible is replete with texts about the faithful human capacity to experience doubt about God. Persons of faith care deeply about what is true and what is false, but also affirm the autonomy of the human being, both to change for the better and to be persuaded by debate, experience and discovery even if that means doubt and a change in long-held views. Daniela Koeppler offers a view of how issues of doubt and scepticism were addressed during the history of the Reformation. She tells the story of the less familiar figure Sebastian Castellio, whose disagreements with John Calvin put his life at risk. In exile in Basel, his last, incomplete, book was entitled ‘On the Art of Doubting and of Believing, of Not Knowing and of Knowing’.

The 2019 conference returned to the practical issues of living in ‘Interfaith Families’. Eduard van Voolen writes on the challenges faced by a rabbi invited to conduct marriages between a Jew and non-Jew. Ulrika Dross-Gehring speaks as a Christian in an interfaith marriage, and analyses official attitudes of the different Churches within Germany and the practical realities of sharing two faith traditions. The conference included two Muslim papers. Karin Paustian, as a Christian married to a Muslim who chose freely to convert to Islam, discusses the impact on the wider family of such a marriage. Halima Krausen describes her experience working with young Muslims in Germany, and three crisis points that emerge when they enter an interfaith relationship. She identifies in so many families on a small scale the challenges arising from increasing differences and diversity within the wider society.

The rest of the issue addresses other ‘interfaith’ matters. Alexandra Wright discusses Jewish concerns about the texts of the Bach Passions reflecting the portrayal of the Jews in the Gospels of Matthew and John. She provides the historical background to the texts and the music, and concludes that while we cannot alter history, we can adapt our theology so that it is not hostility, resentment and supersessionism that determine our relationships with each other.

Lev Taylor’s article addresses a very different kind of ‘interfaith’ discussion from the rabbinic period about whether Jews should utilise a bathhouse dedicated to the goddess Aphrodite. He relates the issues it raises to a contemporary memoir concerning attendance at a sauna in Amsterdam.

Jeremy Schonfield examines a recent controversy in the UK when the Kaddish was recited in public by a Jewish group on behalf of Palestinians killed by Israeli soldiers while participating in the ‘Great March of Return’.

He discusses biblical and halakhic justifications for expressing concern about such an event, but argues that rather than reciting the Kaddish, a more appropriate public gesture would be through a public study session.

Sadly, we record the death within a few months in 2019 of five rabbinic graduates of Leo Baeck College.

How does one assess the life and career of a rabbi? The congregational setting of their role often hides the range and depth of the work they undertake. Hence the old joke that a rabbi is invisible six days a week and incomprehensible on the seventh! Their studies and training emphasise the manifold tasks as teacher of Jewish tradition, as spiritual guide of a very disparate community membership, and as a pastoral figure supporting people through the happy and sad stages of family life. But their greatest education comes from the daily experience of sharing the life of a Jewish community in all the variety of personal, social and political challenges that it faces. On the one hand, the rabbi is a kind of GP, the general practitioner, the rabbinical equivalent of the family doctor. That is to say, the rabbi's study, or more often telephone, represents the first port of call for all sorts of Jews in need, in trouble or in search, from within his or her official congregation, but as often as not from those with no affiliation whatsoever. Moreover, the rabbi is also a kind of 'ambassador at large', representing the Jewish people to the outside world. He or she is the one person professionally concerned with maintaining the values, truths, insights of Jewish tradition, often epitomised in his or her own person. However, the rabbi is not merely an archivist but also the interpreter of that tradition to a contemporary generation. In that sense, the rabbi is as often as not the one who is the agent of change and thus subject to controversy.

Each of the rabbis remembered and honoured here, in their own ways, fulfilled these multiple tasks. We give an overview of the very varied career of each, and include an example of their personal reflections and writings.

Shortly before 'going to press' with this issue, we were saddened to learn of the death of Evelyn Friedlander. We included a brief account of her life and work when marking her retirement from the Editorial Board of this journal in the Editorial of the issue Volume 49, No. 2 (Autumn 2016), and plan to write more in a subsequent issue.

Jonathan Magonet

Notes

1. *European Judaism* 48, no. 2 (Autumn 2015), 23–59.