

# SECULAR LOGIC AND FAITH: A DIALOGUE OF THE DEAF?

David Mendelsohn

Can the faithful and the secular understand each other? Is reason and logic the sole and ultimate recourse to settle conflicts and divergence of views? Maybe not, says Trudeau Scholar David Mendelsohn. Based on his personal experience as a secular Jew with Muslim friends and currently preparing a Ph.D. in Islamic studies, he explores some of these themes and concludes that “we will continue to miss the point whenever attempting to use Western style dialogue and reason or what we term ‘logic’ with people who live a life in which belief in God comes first.” To help shift the obstacles on the road to understanding and facilitate the dialogue, he suggests three types of expert should be questioned: religious figures such as rabbis, imams and priests; academic religious experts; and former practitioners of the faith who have chosen to live a secular life.

Peut-il y avoir rencontre entre le sacré et le profane ? La logique et la raison sont-elles l'ultime recours face aux conflits et divergences de vues ? Peut-être pas, croit David Mendelshon. S'inspirant de sa propre expérience de juif laïc qui cultive des amitiés musulmanes et prépare un doctorat en études islamiques, il examine ces questions pour en conclure que « nous continuerons de faire fausse route en maintenant un raisonnement et un langage de type occidental, c'est-à-dire fondés sur ce que nous qualifions de “logique,” avec des gens dont la vie repose en priorité sur la foi en Dieu ». Pour surmonter les obstacles vers une meilleure compréhension et faciliter le dialogue, l'auteur propose de consulter des experts de trois groupes : des personnalités religieuses comme les prêtres, imams et rabbins, des universitaires spécialisés en études religieuses et d'anciens religieux ayant choisi la vie laïque.



**M**y friend Ali is a Muslim from Pakistan who immigrated to Canada at the age of seven with his family. As a boy and teenager I spent most of my holidays at his home and became quite close with his family. One summer, about 15 years ago, I engaged in a heated debate with his uncle, who believed that Jews and Christians should be free to worship as they pleased but held that Hindus, Buddhists or indeed any others that did not believe in the One God, as he phrased it, should be forced to convert. He went even further, suggesting that those who refused to embrace the one true god deserved death.

It seemed an easy argument to refute and I jumped into the fray with great enthusiasm, brandishing precedents, human rights and noble ideas like any precocious and pretentious young Canadian might do in my place. At a certain point in the debate, I glanced at Ali expecting an approving nod or perhaps even an admiring shake of his head at my cleverness. Instead, to my bewilderment and annoyance I found my friend chuckling in fond and, to my mind,

patronizing amusement at my efforts. “Are my arguments that stupid?” I demanded. “No, no, of course not” he hastened to assure me, “it’s just that I understand what you are saying and I understand what my uncle is telling you but you are both incapable of understanding each other.”

**I**n fact I did understand the arguments brandished by Ali’s uncle as they were surprisingly similar to the rabbinical reasoning taught at the Orthodox Jewish Yeshiva I had attended in elementary school in Montreal. The image of the believer beleaguered by the evils of the secular world is the one constant that holds true — at least in Islamic-Judeo-Christian tradition. As a Yeshiva bocher (student) we were always warned to be vigilant against the temptations of the outside world. We were discouraged from watching television or seeing movies — even reading secular literature was considered dangerous in terms of its possible corrupting influence. The lure of gentile learning was recognized and disparaged for its lack of spiritual depth.

At 15 years of age, I realized that I was unhappy in the religious milieu and asked my father to enrol me in a regular public school. In a very unusual move, for an Orthodox Jew, he agreed and my secular training ensued.

A decade and a half later, in the summer of 2006, I found myself in Arara, an Arab town located in the Wadi Ara region of Northern Israel anxiously checking the news as Katyusha rockets rained down on Haifa and the Israeli North. The missiles were being

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fired by Hezbollah or “the Party of God,” a militant group populated and supported by those who believe in God and who are determined to use all sacrifices necessary to bring about what they believe to be his wishes.

Of course I was anxious at the fact that my family and friends, both Jewish and Arab, were being targeted. But in addition to my personal concerns, I felt frustrated at the inability of the liberal Westerner to understand that something more than insane fanaticism was at the core of the conflict.

I and many other Westerners have been raised in a world that prizes logic and reasoning above emotion and fervour. We were taught to disdain arguments and desires based solely on emotion. We tend to forget that logic, as brandished by many Westerners in any type of argument, is in fact a Western ideal and one that often holds little currency in many other parts of the world.

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is intended as a clarifier for the Jewish Torah while the Hadith fulfils a similar function as a clarifier for the words of Muhammad for the Muslims. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all maintain religious institutions in which discussion and debate are encouraged. But of course the debate and discussion rarely stray far from the central pillar of all three faiths, namely understanding God’s will. Any debater daring to challenge this central theme risks being labelled a blasphemer and, in exceptional cases, even excommunication

from the faith. Individuals who by choice or birth do not belong to a particular faith are automatically relegated by believers to the status of an outsider. And outsiders, whether malignant or well intentioned, can never understand why a believer follows a particular religion.

It is difficult for any of us raised in a secular milieu to grasp that our so-called scientific methods of reasoning and logic are not the ultimate recourse to resolve debate in a world increasingly influenced by the faithful of all religions. Even conscientious journalists, attempting to be fair and unbiased in their reporting, often find themselves hopelessly out of their depth when covering matters of religion. Martin Marty, historian of religion at the University of Chicago Divinity School, observes that journalists have been and will continue to incorrectly cover the post-September 11 world until they “get” religion.

We need not travel far to have the portent behind this warning revealed. The United States grows increasingly religious as indicated by the increasing boldness of various states in voicing

opposition to the teaching of evolution and urging a return to the teaching of creationism as a rational explanation for the existence of the universe. And lest we grow too complacent in our unamericaness, let us not forget that we Canadians have recently voted in a conservative government — one that is against gay marriage partly because the Bible considers homosexuality to be an abomination. In *USA Today*, Marty warns that “the horizons of religion and the news have touched, and we all have to realize that now.” This advice

should be internalized by all who wish to understand our new world in which religion and the West have become entangled.

According to the secular way of thought, in a Western society a distinction is made between private and public expression of religion. In the

public forum, tolerance is encouraged toward all forms of expression and ideas while at the same time passionate declarations of belief are subtly discouraged. Within the private sphere of the home, places of worship, private education and sometimes community centres, religious views are permitted a greater degree of autonomy and expression. This artificial duality, deemed a kind of truce in liberal circles, is barely acknowledged in the Western religious sphere and does not exist at all in countries adhering to religious ideologies.

The recent furor over the various caricatures of Muhammad drawn by several Danish cartoonists is usually presented as a clash of ideologies in which devout Muslims, insisting that non-believers conform to their beliefs, confront the Western ideal of free speech. In reality, ideology had little to do with the Danish incentive. In a recent interview with *Time Magazine*, Flemming Rose, the editor of the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, admitted that he asked some 40 Danish cartoonists to focus their wit and artistic talent at the expense of the prophet Muhammad after observing



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Can the faithful and the secular come to terms? Not easily, says David Mendelsohn, but: "If secular thinkers learn to stop using dialogue as a tool for concessions and compromise we may learn to use it to further our understanding of the rules guiding the behaviour and reasoning of the religious practitioners."

that historians and journalists avoided criticizing the Muslim religion. Rose insists that the publication of the cartoons was not intended to engage the Muslims in any way whatsoever but rather to have a healthy debate over self-censorship in our society. According to Rose, the feelings of aggrieved Muslims should not even be part of the greater debate.

Another excuse sometimes used by Western media to explain their

decision to publish the Muhammad cartoon is the reciprocity clause: since the Arab media exhibit no restraint in publishing cartoons mocking symbols of Christianity and Judaism, Western journals are similarly justified in allowing offensive images of Muhammad to appear in our newspapers. Yet, as Stanley Fish pointed out in a recent article in the *New York Times*, the artists and publishers in the Arab world believe that

Christians, Hindus, Jews, etc. follow false religions and are thus fair game for satirical editorials and mocking cartoons. However, the editors in the Western world, who published the Muhammad cartoons generally do not consider Muslims evil infidels who must be forcibly converted to some ideal faith. The Danish press was well aware of the fact that artistic representations of Muhammad are strictly forbidden in the Muslim faith.

Despite this knowledge, the Danish press cited the ongoing struggle of Western society against censorship, and the cartoons were subsequently published and republished by the Western media at large in a whimsical fashion absent of any moral purpose.

Having the right to freedom of expression is not the same as invoking it at will. And dialogue coupled with well-reasoned arguments will not undo the damage created by sacrilege and blasphemy. Sitting in a small café in East Jerusalem, my friend, Malaeka, who is Palestinian and considers herself a moderate Moslem, wondered at the Western obsession with dialogue. "You non-Muslims believe all problems can be solved with communication. If you are depressed — talk about it with a psychiatrist. If you have a difference of opinion — solve it through dialogue." Malaeka told me that it took years of interaction with Westerners before she finally realized that many of them adhered to an assumption that no religious ideal was worth a fight to the death and that a compromise could eventually be attained "over enough coffee and hummus." Malaeka smiled as she assured me that this is not a perspective she or any other Muslim of her acquaintance shares.

Malaeka's point is well taken and deserves careful consideration. Religious followers of any faith are ultimately not

interested in dialogue; they want their beliefs to prevail. Dialogue with non-believers over possible concessions is not desirable, and attempts at engaging in what the secular term "intelligent debate" only serves to demonstrate to the faithful that we truly are lost. We will continue to miss the point whenever attempting to use Western style dialogue and reason or what we term "logic" with people who live a life in which belief in God comes first.

So is there an answer to this dilemma? If we accept the argument that debate with the faithful with a view toward obtaining concessions is not an option, then what are the alternatives?

Obviously we need religious experts to clarify the obstacles to our understanding and by experts I include three types: One — religious figures such as rabbis, imams and priests who are respected leaders of their respective faiths; two — academic religious experts who are secular yet sensitive to the social constraints of the faithful; and finally, former practitioners of the faith who have chosen to live a secular life. These three groups must be questioned carefully in order to outline the key differences between secular and religious logic. The religious leaders would be helpful in demonstrating the point of view and atti-

tudes of the religious while the non-religious academic expert would be helpful in explaining religious tradition in general cultural terms. Former practitioners are useful for explaining the emotional mindset of the religious and also in how outsiders to the faith are perceived.

Points that are not flexible must be outlined as the secular need to know where they stand in terms of potential versus hopeless paths of discussion. Presumably this would allow secular thinkers to pose questions to worshippers of a particular religion that do not challenge and thereby insult the tenets of their faith. If secular thinkers learn to stop using dialogue as a tool for concessions and compromise we may learn to use it to further our understanding of the rules guiding the behaviour and reasoning of the religious practitioners. Only through understanding the limits of religious logic will we secular thinkers appreciate the limitations we place on ourselves when we put too much faith in our own reasoning systems.

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Leading Canadian politicians and scholars reflect on the major policy debates of the Mulroney era and offer often surprising interpretations of one of Canada's most controversial prime ministers.



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