

Islam through Jewish Eyes, Judaism through Muslim Eyes

Veranstalter: Michael Brenner (LMU München); John Efron (UC Berkeley)

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In the beautiful setting of Schloss Elmau international scholars came together to discuss the mutual perceptions of Muslims and Jews. Organized by Michael Brenner (Munich) and John Efron (Berkeley), the conference's intention was to ask interdisciplinary questions regarding the complex relationships and meeting points of the two worlds. The direction of the conference was, as Michael Brenner said in the opening remarks, to leave aside the political field and to concentrate on academic questions that could present the complexity of the relations between Jews and Muslims, a complexity which derives not only from differences but also from similarities and mutual influences.

At the beginning, Menahem Ben-Sasson (Jerusalem) pointed out that thinking about oneself through the eyes of the other creates a perspective which in the end contributes to a better understanding of oneself in his or her surroundings. Dan Diner (Leipzig) posed the question to what extent the Jewish model of Diaspora existence is applicable to the contemporary integration of Muslim minorities in the west. Diner made a comparison between the Jews in Europe at the time of Emancipation and the American Muslims nowadays. The paper by Saad A. Al-Bazei (Riad) concentrated on the perception of philosophers of Jewish origin, such as Spinoza, by Muslim intellectuals. Al-Bazei emphasized the ambivalence among contemporary Muslim intellectuals in referring to the Jewish background of such philosophers. This, he argued, reflects a superficial perception of Judaism and the Jews. Jews are regarded by many Muslim intellectuals as a historical fact, but not as a living force in history.

The next panel was dedicated to the examination of specific cases of mutual perceptions

of the two religions. Georges Tamer (Berlin) argued that Maimonides should be considered first and foremost as a product of the Muslim world in which he lived, and a central protagonist in the creation of an Arab-Jewish identity in the Middle Ages. Khaleel Mohammed (San Diego) analyzed Abraham Geiger's perception of the prophet Mohammed and the Jewish influences on him. According to Khaleel Mohammed, Geiger's work was the basis for subsequent research of the two religions. At the end of this panel Joseph Sadan (Tel Aviv) talked about Jewish secular poetry in medieval Spain and its affinity to contemporary Arabic verse. Sadan argued that competition between Jewish and Muslim poets was a catalyst for both sides to deal more intensively with their own sources, which strengthened the connection of each side to its own tradition.

On his presentation, Eli Bar-Chen (Munich/Berlin) focused on the reception of colonialism in the eyes of the European Jews. Bar-Chen posed the question of how Jews experienced Muslims suffering in the Arab world under the colonization by the west. In a controversial and challenging talk Yehuda Bauer (Jerusalem) discussed 'Genocidal Aspects of Radical Islam'. At the center of his talk stood the notion that radical Islam, being actually a mutation of Islam, is a danger to the whole world and especially to any dialogue between Muslims and the western world. Bauer compared radical Islam with two other extreme movements in history: Nazism and Stalinism. According to Bauer, radical Islam is genocidal, motivated by the wish to exterminate Israel, in combination with modern antisemitic tendencies. Bauer argued that radical Islam is first of all a danger to non-radical Muslims but also to Europe as a whole. Closing the day, writers Zafer Senocak (Berlin) and Doron Rabinovici (Vienna) read from their books.

The second day started with a discussion concentrating on mutual perceptions in literature and art. Ella Shohat (New York) dealt with visual representations of Muslim holiness in film. Avinoam Shalem (Munich/Florence) compared the works of two artists, one of Palestinian and one of Israeli origin. In the center of the two works stood

the Kaffiyah – the religious Muslim male head dress, identified with the Palestinians. Shalem compared the work of Palestinian artist, Mona Hatoum, a Kaffiyah made of human hair woven into a white cloth with several paintings of the Israeli artist Tzivi Geva presenting motifs from the Kaffiyah-weaving patterns in different contexts. The different perceptions of the Kaffiyah reflected, according to Shalem, the difference in the mutual understanding of the peoples. But points of difference could be matched with similarities. Both works are a metaphor for the collective trauma created by the tragic encounter between the two peoples. The lecture of Mehnaz M. Afridi (Los Angeles) discussed relations between Jews and Muslims in modern Egyptian literature. Egyptian Jews and Muslims, Afridi argued, had much in common until 1952 when the attitude towards Israel influenced the relations towards the Jews. In order to understand the similarities between Muslims and Jews Afridi recommended both sides to read each others contemporary literature. The last paper on this panel was given by Atef Botros (Leipzig) and dealt with the reception of Kafka in the Arab world. Through the prism of the understanding of Kafka Botros showed the different ways in which Muslims dealt with the contribution of Jews to European culture.

In the center of the next panel stood the figure of the Egyptian Muslim intellectual Abdel Wahab al-Missiri. Omar Kamil (Leipzig) examined al-Missiri's understanding of the Holocaust as connected with modernization, enlightenment and secularization in Europe. Kamil suggested analyzing al-Missiri's thoughts against the background of the process of the 'islamisation of knowledge' – the attempt to solve the problems of modern Islam by intellectualizing them. Reuven Firestone (Los Angeles) concentrated in his talk on al-Missiri's work, the Egyptian Encyclopaedia of Jews, Judaism and Zionism, which is very successful in Egypt. Al-Missiri's depiction of the Jews, Firestone argued, is that of a people with a functional role in society that detached itself emotionally from its non-Jewish surroundings and prevented its members from integration. The functionality of the Jews brought them money and power

and made them hated by the poor. The modern state of Israel intended, according to al-Missiri, to end this situation but created the opposite: the same function that Jewish individuals had before was taken over by the Jewish State as a collective. As John Efron argued in the discussion following the panel, Firestone did not depict al-Missiri as an anti-semitic although his arguments, as presented by Firestone, were clearly antisemitic. Firestone replied that not every critic of Judaism should be labeled as antisemitic. At the end of the discussion Mirjam Triendl-Zadoff (Munich) pointed out that the fact that al-Missiri's writings are not translated to European languages, but remain inside the Egyptian Muslim realm, leaves the impression of them as polemical literature.

The last panel was dedicated to educational representations of the encounter between Judaism and Islam. Carlos Fraenkel (Montreal) told his experiences of teaching philosophy at the al-Quds University in East Jerusalem and in Makassar, Indonesia. Fraenkel emphasized the role of philosophy in helping to solve the crisis in the Middle-East and the discipline's ability to build bridges between Muslims and Jews. The speech by the psychologist Shoshana Steinberg (Beer-Sheva) was a report on a fascinating project, in which Palestinian and Israeli teachers have written a history book for Palestinian and Israeli high schools. In the book the two narratives of the two peoples are presented next to each other in a synoptic way. Steinberg accompanied the group in the process of writing and observed the changes which occurred on both sides, as tension and suspicion gave way to understanding and empathy. The lecture of Mohamed Hawary (Cairo) depicted the department of Hebrew and Jewish studies at the University of Cairo. The last lecturer Hamed Abdel-Samad (Braunschweig) opened with reflections on his personal background, growing up in Egypt before the peace agreement with Israel in an antisemitic and antizionist atmosphere. His paper dealt with the image of Jews and Judaism in Arabic school textbooks. Abdel-Samad compared three different Muslim countries: Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority. While Saudi Arabian textbooks are still depicting Jews as enemies, in

Egypt and Palestine the books are being constantly modified.

The personal perspective given by Abdel-Samad was continued by Dan Diner at the concluding round table hosted by Sonia Zekri (Munich). Diner as well talked about his personal encounters with Arabs in Israel, but his conclusions on bridge building between Muslims and Jews were very pessimistic. According to Diner mutual attitudes need to undergo a deep change in order to create hope for a dialogue. Najem Wali (Hamburg) replied that in his view there is hope, but one should overcome the fear of extinction from both sides.

As Sonia Zekri emphasized at the beginning of the round table, this conference was a courageous one. Its importance, aside from gathering scholars with a broad spectrum of scholarly opinions, was the encounter of Muslims and Jews presenting their research results about perceiving the other side. This special combination between the scholar and his scholarship may be regarded as the beginning of bridge building between the two cultures. One can only hope that such an event will take place soon again.

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