THE CHILDREN OF SARAH, HAGAR AND MARY

A Feminist Perspective on Judaism, Islam and Christianity

Oscar Momanyi

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy.[1]

THE THREE MAIN ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS—Judaism, Islam and Christianity—have been linked, historically and theologically, to the patriarch Abraham, to whom God promised 'I will make of you a great nation' (Genesis 12:2).[2] This relationship has been taken for granted as an interpretative lens for understanding the three religions. But such a viewpoint has relegated the three matriarchs of the faiths—Sarah, Hagar and Mary—to the periphery of discourses about them. Reflecting on Judaism, Islam and Christianity from the perspective of women can elicit fresh insights within the self-understanding of the three faiths and help foster a dialogue between them that can result in reconciliation and peace.

I shall begin this reflection by rereading the stories of Sarah, Hagar and Mary, exploring the lessons that we can learn from the struggles of these three mothers. I shall then turn to my own encounter with people who practise the three religions in Israel-Palestine, and especially to the women I met there. I think these contemporary women, like our ancient mothers, Sarah, Hagar and Mary, can teach us how to overcome hostility, violence and suspicion in the name of religion.

Rereading the Stories of the Mothers

Challenging the patriarchal foundations of Judaism, Islam and Christianity by shifting the focus precisely from patriarchs to matriarchs, studying

---

[1] All the *sura* (chapters) in the Qur'ān begin with this line.

[2] See Aaron W. Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Oxford UP, 2012), 1–33. In this introductory chapter, Hughes deconstructs the idea of 'Abrahamic religions' and argues that too much attention has been given to the similarities between these religions. He proposes that studying them by focusing on their differences instead can enrich our understanding of them.

The Way, 56/2 (April 2017), 73–87

read more at www.theway.org.uk

religion from the perspective of women, can enrich our understanding of these religions. It can suggest alternative interpretations on the basis of an 'ethics of care', manifested in motherly care and often associated with feminist ethical theory, rather than the 'ethics of justice' sometimes associated with patriarchy.[3]

The three mothers can teach us that religious differences should not necessarily be experienced as negative. Differences can be integrated into people's experience in creative ways that can lead to life in abundance. This does not preclude tension and conflicts, rather it entails imaginative possibilities for transforming them into positive energies. The lives of the three mothers are full of conflict, but a rereading of the biblical narratives reveals that positive guidance can be fashioned from their stories for the religious quest in the twenty-first century, so that religious pluralism does not threaten peace and stability.

Religious differences should not necessarily be experienced as negative

How are the three mothers connected to the three major religions? Jacob (Israel), the younger son of Isaac, himself the son of Sarah (formerly Sarai) and Abraham (Abram), is considered as a patriarch of Israel. Jacob had twelve sons, who represent the twelve tribes of Israel. Thus, through this special connection to Jacob, Jews consider themselves as directly connected to Abraham and Sarah. Ishmael, the son of Hagar and Abraham, is considered as a prophet and patriarch of Islam.[4] Mary, the wife of Joseph in the New Testament, is the mother of Jesus, who, in Matthew's genealogy, can also be traced back to Abraham. All Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and Muslims also consider him to be a prophet. Thus, the mothers link these three religions in a special way.

The story of Sarah and Hagar, and their children, Isaac and Ishmael, narrated in Genesis is a story of struggle. It is convenient for us to avoid facing the struggle that these mothers go through in Genesis—to read past it. However, I think that the struggles of these mothers can help us reflect on the struggle that the three major religions face in the twenty-first century, and can be a way to begin healing religious division. In order to understand the story and the struggle of these two women, the reader needs to resist the narrator in the Genesis account. Resisting the narrator means reading the narrative in a manner that documents a different perspective from the narrator's.[5] Avoiding the narrator's focus on major male characters to read Genesis 16 from the perspectives of Sarah and Hagar can be enlightening.

---

[3] See Nel Noddings, *Caring, a Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: U. of California P, 1984), 1: 'One might say that ethics has been discussed largely in the language of the father: in principles and propositions, in terms such as justification, fairness, justice. The mother's voice has been silent.'

[4] Qur'ān 2: 127–138.

What do we learn from the struggle of Sarah and Hagar? It revolves around two issues: the fertility of the two women and the oppression out of which the narrative itself emerges.[6] In regard to fertility, the narrator in Genesis 16 informs the reader that Sarai had not given birth to a child and that she said to Abram: 'You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her' (Genesis 16:2). Therefore, Abram had intercourse with the Egyptian slave, Hagar, and she conceived. However, afterwards Sarai felt insulted and belittled, and she began to be hostile to Hagar, treating her so badly that Hagar had to run away into the desert. But when Hagar was in the wilderness, an angel of the Lord appeared to her near a spring and told her to return, announcing: 'I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude' (Genesis 16:10).

At a personal level, the basic conflict between Sarah and Hagar arises from human feelings linked to fertility.[7] Sarai's bold move of asking Abraham to take Hagar as a wife in order to get a child who would continue the lineage (Genesis 16:3) can be seen as repulsive, even abhorrent, by twenty-first-century readers who generally tend to favour monogamy over polygamy. But Sarai's boldness needs to be read within the patriarchal context of ancient Canaan. For a woman to take the initiative in this way was unprecedented. Sarai was challenging the passivity that was expected of women in the patriarchal societies of Genesis. She becomes an agent of her own desire for a child, and this agency is also intended to advance the promise of descendants that God had made to Abram. The promise that the angel gives to Hagar in the desert points to the fact that Hagar, too, is an agent, through whom God's will to bless the people will be fulfilled. The two women are both active rather than passive, and without them God's plan for Abraham and these women would not have materialised.

---

[5] I borrow the concept of 'resisting the narrator' from Gina-Hens Piazza, 'Violence in Joshua and Judges: How to Address Violence and Its Victims', *The Bible Today*, 39 (July 2001).

[6] See Letty M. Russell. 'Children of Struggle', in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, edited by Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 186.

[7] See *The Anchor Bible: Genesis*, edited by E. A. Speiser (London: Doubleday, 1964), 119.

The women in Genesis 16 are the principal actors; the man, Abram, passively accepts what he is told.[8] And the promise of blessing made to Abram in Genesis 15 is also made to Hagar in the next chapter; God not only makes a covenant with the patriarch but also with a mother in distress. This parity can offer hope to contemporary women who face oppression. The story of Hagar can help them interpret a situation of oppression imaginatively in such a way that it is not final, but offers hope for a new blessing from God and a homecoming where there will be no oppression.[9] In contemporary theology God's promise made to Abram seems to have eclipsed the promise to the lowly slave woman. But what can be made of this promise to Hagar? Is it possible to argue that the promise encompasses Muslims, who trace their line to Abraham through Hagar?

In the New Testament Gospels, we can see Mary, too, having her struggles in the patriarchal context of the first century. But she nevertheless accepts the enormous responsibility of being the mother of Jesus. How can the struggles of two mothers in the Torah, Sarah and Hagar, along with that of Mary, be interpreted in life-giving ways for a twenty-first-century reader of the scriptures? How can the mothers rather than the fathers be a model of peace instead of enmity and violence between the three Abrahamic religions?

The Daily Lives of the Children of Sarah, Hagar and Mary

In her book *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, Judith Berling outlines five threads in the process of learning about other religions. The first of these involves 'entering other worlds through engaging and crossing boundaries of significant difference'.[10] Encountering difference can startle us, but it is from that unsettled state that understanding another religious world begins. This does not need to lead to conversion, but can result in broadened sensibilities and a refined view of our own religious identity.[11]

---

[8] See Gordon John Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16–50* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 5.

[9] See Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 115.

[10] Judith A. Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds: A Guide for Interreligious Education* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 64.

[11] Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, 13.

Participants in the author's immersion programme praying at the Western Wall, Jerusalem

In appreciating the goodness of another religion, we are able to appreciate the goodness of the Christian faith that we ourselves profess.

In January 2016, I participated, together with thirteen other Christian men and women, in two weeks' immersion in Israel-Palestine, where we encountered in a radical way the differences between the three Abrahamic religions and lived through the tension that those differences elicited.[12] We observed how people practising these religions side by side interact and engage with one another and, in that process, we hoped to learn more about ourselves and the way we live, and should live, as Christians. We deliberately focused our observation on women, with the aim of gaining insights into how the women's ethic of hospitality and generosity can emerge in a situation of tension that sometimes leads to violence. We attempted to resist the masculine narrative about the three religions that emphasizes justice and retribution over forgiveness and understanding. The experience opened our eyes to the reality that members of these three religions are all children of God.

The Holy Land, paradoxically, is where the children of Sarah, Hagar and Mary struggle most to live in harmony with each other. Much blood has been shed in the process. A poor understanding of the religions' differences has been one of the causes of the escalating violence between them. The three mothers remind us that we can be different and yet still understand each other. They themselves are different in many ways. Differences can serve as points of departure for reflection that can enhance dialogue and mutual trust between the three major religions. The encounter with difference can also help us to appreciate how the struggle of the three faiths can be a struggle for life and reconciliation rather than one that leads to division and antagonism. Celebrating differences while engaging in dialogue is important in living with religious tension and diversity, so that our differences may become a blessing rather than a curse.

---

[12] This was a semester-long graduate course with an immersion component, entitled 'Children of Sarah, Hagar and Mary' taught at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University in Berkeley, California, as part of the Master of Divinity programme. It was directed by a professor of Old Testament studies, Gina-Hens Piazza.

Children of Mary at the Via Dolorosa

Our encounter began at the Ecce Homo convent and pilgrim house, Via Dolorosa 41 in Jerusalem. We met children of Mary—fellow Christians: the Sisters of Zion. These are Christian women who live in the Muslim quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. The Sisters of Zion strive to give prophetic witness in the middle of the religious hostility of the Holy Land. Their charism reflects a particular awareness of God's love for the Jewish people.[13]

© Djampa

The Ecce Homo Convent, and the Ghawanima Minaret of the al-Aqsa Mosque

---

[13] 'Charism', at http://www.notredamedesion.org/en/page.php?id=2&T=1, accessed 17 February 2017.

Their lives offer an alternative story: a counter-narrative that peace and reconciliation are possible. They do not need to speak; they proclaim this story by their lives. They preach by their lives. Their hospitality to the many pilgrims flowing into Jerusalem is a prophetic witness: the sisters welcome everyone, no matter what their faith. In a place full of enmity and suspicion, here we meet women of faith who welcome people and share their lives with them in joy. Hospitality does not know difference of religion; it is God's welcoming embrace in the midst of difference.[14]

Many mosques can be seen in the Muslim quarter. Just across from the Sisters of Zion convent there is a large mosque from which the muezzin's call to prayer can be heard five times a day. The sisters do not seem disturbed by it; they have embraced the call to prayer as a constant reminder that, as Christians, they too are called to a life of prayer and reflection. Growing up in Kenya, I felt that the muezzin's call was a rude interruption to the tranquillity of our neighbourhood. But standing in Jerusalem, the holiest site in Christendom, my perspective on Islam began to change. I started to appreciate that other people have their own way of seeking God; they have the desire, just as I do, to seek the face of God. That awareness made me feel solidarity with people of other religions.

Praying with the Psalms and the Torah

Our group arrived in Jerusalem at the beginning of Shabbat (Friday at sunset), the Jewish holy day of rest and prayer. After settling in, we headed to the Jewish quarter, where we encountered thousands of Jewish people praying at the Western Wall. They believe that God's presence rests in the wall, part of which is understood to be a remnant of the Second Temple, destroyed in AD 70. Initially I was scared of the numerous soldiers wielding M-16s whom we met on the streets on our way and as we went through the checkpoints. The number of people praying at the wall at Shabbat was also overwhelming. Eventually we reached the prayer area and prayed together with the many Jews there. My fear dissipated as I found myself side by side with the children of Sarah, most of them wearing their Shabbat dresses and deeply immersed in prayer. The men prayed separately from the women according to Jewish custom.

---

[14] See Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference*, edited by J. Shannon Clarkson and Kate M. Ott (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

All the men, including visitors, were offered a *kippah*, that little Jewish sacred skullcap, to wear before entering the prayer area. As a Christian, I found it humbling to wear a sacred Jewish object. I felt that this outward gesture was a sign of solidarity with these people who were extending a welcoming embrace to me even though they did not know who I was. Most important was to realise that the *kippah* is a symbol of Someone above who looks after us below. The *kippah* reminded me of my humanity and helped me appreciate how I depend on the One who is above.

One member of our group brought his Liturgy of the Hours (a collection of prayers, mainly from the book of Psalms, used in the Roman Catholic Church) to the prayer area. He described feeling at peace praying the Psalms alongside thousands of other people praying their Torah. I carried prayers written on small pieces of paper and inserted them in the cracks on the Western Wall—an ancient tradition. These were prayers I had brought for various people who had asked me to pray for them in the Holy Land. I felt deeply connected to all those whose prayers I could see stuck in the cracks all over the wall. There was a deep sense of communion between the people there, no matter what their prayers were. We are all created in the image of God, and I did not feel judged because of my colour or religion but accepted as a child of God.

Shabbat Shalom: Shabbat of a Lifetime

The next moving experience was our Shabbat meal with a Jewish family. I had read about this Jewish holy practice but had never taken part in it before. It was a life-changing experience to join in that sacred meal in a Jewish household: ours was Shabbat of a lifetime. Our host, let us call him Yacob, was a young man.[15] Yacob and his wife, Rahab, are blessed with five children: three girls and two boys. We quickly felt at home in their house; Rahab and her children offered us a warm, welcoming embrace. They met us with a *Shabbat shalom*, a special Jewish greeting wishing us a peaceful Shabbat. Rahab had already lit candles. She told me that the lighting of candles by the women of the house is a custom during Shabbat that is supposed to create a sense of peace in the home (*shalom bayit*). As she spoke I reflected on the role of women as conduits of peace.

---

[15] Names have been changed to preserve the privacy of the persons concerned.

We began the Shabbat rituals with songs and prayers. Before we washed our hands, silence was observed and all the children of the house were blessed by their parents. This was a powerful symbol of how we are always blessed as unique and different children of God: our differences do not stop God from blessing us. Therefore we need to celebrate difference, even religious differences, in ways that manifest God's love for us.

Afterwards, the meal was punctuated by prayers, moments of silence, sharing of experiences and laughter. There was joy in the encounter by which Christians learnt from Jews and vice versa. I felt connected with everyone at that table. Eating together has a way of bringing people together in a profound way. It is not surprising that both Christianity and Judaism have table fellowship at the centre of their liturgies. Participating in that Shabbat meal helped to reinforce in me the idea that mealtimes are an opportunity to encounter God. Although I was in a Jewish home, I also felt deeply connected to my Christian roots. The experience reminded me of the Last Supper.

During and after our Shabbat meal, Rahab shared passionately with us the struggles that her family faces in living in the tension-filled city of Jerusalem. She noted that most of their neighbours are Muslims, and they generally have a good relationship. It is only when radical groups incite violence that there is suspicion and sometimes hatred. 'Deep down', she said, 'we know that our Muslim neighbours are good people, and we want to live in harmony with them'. Listening to Rahab speak about her experience moved me and made me feel that reconciliation is possible, especially if we let love and care, embodied in women such as Rahab, lead the process.

Rahab seemed to care deeply not only for her family but also for her Muslim neighbours, and she yearned for peace and tranquillity. She embodied an ethic of care, hospitality and welcome. She treated us as part of her family. Her home was small, yet she managed to find space for fourteen of us and to feed us on Shabbat. She taught me that there is always space for everyone I meet in my heart, whatever his or her religious affiliation. I just have to open myself to encounter people who are different.

Memories of the Second Intifada: Two Women Decide to Say No to Violence

We were fortunate to meet two particularly remarkable women. One is a Jew (let us call her Rebecca), and the other is a Muslim (let us call her Fatma). Both of them have suffered in the violence and atrocities that

Jerusalem has experienced over the years. However, they have decided that violence and hatred cannot be stumbling blocks on their road to peace and reconciliation. They feel that if women from the two religions can begin to come together to pray, talk about their experiences and eat, that could be the first step back from violence and hatred between the Muslims and the Jews of Jerusalem. This is a risky venture because leaders from both sides of the religious divide (mostly men) discourage such meetings. In patriarchal societies such as those of Jerusalem it is a very bold step for women to reject the status quo and initiate change from the grassroots.

During the Second Intifada, or the Al-Aqsa Intifada, which began in 2000, there were many suicide bombings in Jerusalem. The Intifada was basically a Palestinian uprising against the Israelis, but it quickly took on religious dimensions (Muslims versus Jews). For Rebecca, the Second Intifada was personal. Her son was severely injured by a suicide bomb in central Jerusalem. He was rushed to the Hadassah (Esther) Ein Kerem Hospital, where his mother found him. He had serious wounds and it was not clear if he would survive.

The Hadassah Ein Kerem Hospital was originally built and is still supported by a Jewish foundation, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, but serves everyone, no matter what their religious affiliation. It is another example of women taking the initiative to bring peace, harmony and healing in a broken society. When Rebecca arrived at the hospital, shocked and angry, she asked to meet the doctor who was caring for her son, and was surprised to find out that he was a Muslim. Rebecca felt conflicted: 'one Muslim wanted to kill my son, and another Muslim wants to save his life'. But at that moment her anger was transformed; she started thinking of ways to channel her anger creatively so as to change the world for the better. Her experience altered Rebecca's perception of Muslims.

After the recovery of her son, Rebecca decided to set up an interfaith group bringing Muslim and Jewish women together in order to foster reconciliation and peace. Christian women are welcomed too. Rebecca was lucky to find Fatma, a Muslim who was ready to enter into dialogue with Jewish women. Over the years the two have maintained the interfaith group of women, which makes a discreet impact on the Muslim and Jewish communities in Jerusalem and other parts of the Holy Land. These children of Sarah, Hagar and Mary are turning their struggles into an opportunity for positive change in their communities. They are convinced that women have a better chance than men of helping reduce the tension and violence in the Holy Land. Rebecca and Fatma are 'midwives for peace, justice, and reconciliation'.[16] They are agents of change motivated by the desire to do good in this broken world.

Finding God at the Temple Mount

One morning after breakfast, we headed towards the Temple Mount (הַבַּיִת הַר, Har HaBáyitin in Hebrew and الحرم الشريف, al-Ḥaram al-Šarīf in Arabic), the holiest site in Judaism and the third holiest in Islam. There we met Professor Mustafa Abu Sway, a Muslim scholar who would help us to understand the struggles that have taken place on the Temple Mount over the years.[17] He seemed to me a joyful man who recognised the presence of Allah in his life. I did not feel a sense of bitterness in him, although he had clearly experienced difficult times living in the Holy City. He was a gracious, caring guide, who exemplified hospitality between one religious tradition and another.

The Temple Mount has been at the centre of tensions between Muslims and Jews in Israel. The Jews believe that the Second Temple once stood there, hence the holy of holies—the place where God's presence is manifested more than anywhere else—is located somewhere on the Temple Mount. The Muslims also have important sites: the

© Ralf Roletschek

Inside the al-Aqsa Mosque, Temple Mount

---

[16] L. Juliana M. Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 79.

[17] See http://www.alquds.edu/en/staff-profiles/faculty-of-arts-staff/116-department-of-philosophy/465-mustafa-abu-sway.html, accessed 15 October 2016.

Dome of the Rock, the Dome of the Chains and the al-Aqsa mosque. Soldiers could be seen everywhere and tension was in the air. However, I felt a deep sense of peace, reverence and holiness as we approached the Temple Mount. I clearly felt God's presence; despite the human tensions I felt that God was close to me.

Professor Abu Sway first took us to the al-Aqsa mosque and told us about its history, architecture and art. Although I grew up in Kenya, a country where about a third of the population are Muslims,[18] I had never entered a mosque before. This was partly because I thought that I would not be welcome, and also because my image of Muslims had been clouded by negative stereotypes. The gracious welcome that we received at the mosque overwhelmed me. After many years of living alongside Muslims but having little contact with them, I could not believe that I was entering such a holy Islamic site. We took off our shoes and entered the mosque reverently. This reminded me of Moses' experience at the burning bush: 'Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground' (Exodus 3:5). Professor Abu Sway then took us inside the Dome of the Rock and showed us around the Temple Mount area, explaining the history of the conflicts there. Soldiers kept following us and eavesdropping on what he was saying. One person in our group was touched by an act of kindness at the Dome of the Rock. As we were standing there, a Muslim woman approached her, looked her in the eye and lovingly gave her a gift. That was for me a sign that we were all welcome, although we clearly came from a different religious tradition.

Finding God at Aida Refugee Camp

The Wi'am Centre, or Agape Centre, is a Palestinian conflict resolution and transformation centre in Bethlehem.[19] It is located close to the Aida Refugee Camp, where many Palestinians from Jerusalem and Hebron have been living since about 1950. Zoughbi Zoughbi, a witty Palestinian Christian, is the founder and director. The centre is also close to the Separation

---

[18] See http://www.muslimpopulation.com/africa/, accessed 15 October 2016.

[19] Wi'am was honoured with the 2010 Peacebuilding Award by World Vision International for 'successfully integrating traditional Palestinian mediation customs with innovative academic models of conflict analysis to address the very difficult circumstances of Palestinians living in the West Bank'. See http://kroc.nd.edu/profiles-peacebuilding/zoughbi-ma-89, accessed 15 October 2016; see also http://www.alaslah.org/, accessed 20 February 2017.

Barrier, the eight-metre-high wall that separates the Palestinian areas from Israel. Zoughbi explained to us the struggles that the Palestinians face and Wi'am's efforts to help resolve conflicts within the community. Some tension was once again evident; the soldiers on the watchtowers were observing, and we were told that they were ready to retaliate at the slightest provocation.

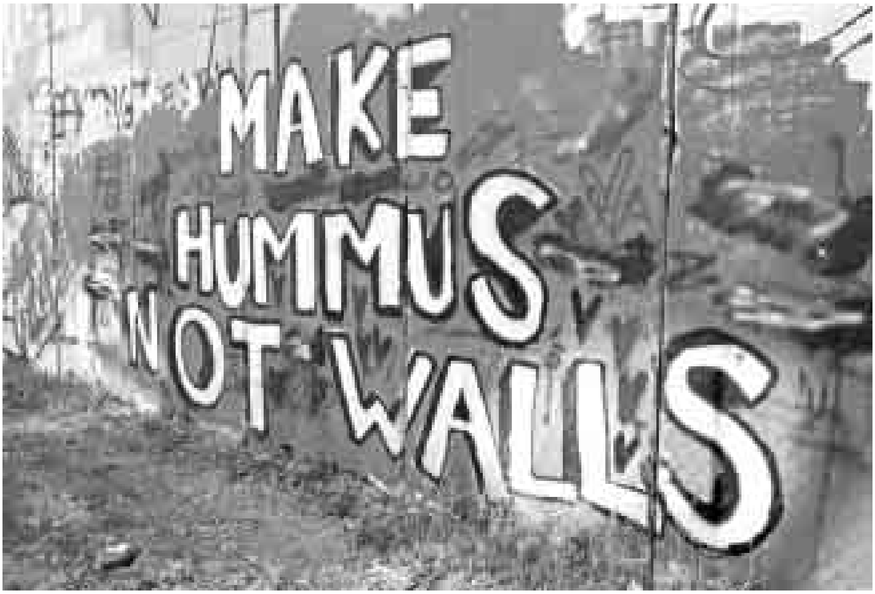
The people at the centre try to use several ways to help solve conflicts. One of them stood out; it is called *Sulha*. *Sulha* is derived from the word '*Sulh*', which means 'to make peace' or 'reconciliation' in Arabic.[20] *Sulha* is a traditional Palestinian mediation process in which mediators go to a scene of conflict and listen to people from both sides. The main mission of the mediators is to bring the aggrieved parties together and work towards restoring relationships. Drinking coffee crowns the mediation process. The aggrieved persons drink together and then they shake hands as a sign that the relationship is amended.

Life in the refugee camps and in other Palestinians areas is rough and tough. We could see that clearly at Aida Refugee Camp, just across from the Wi'am centre: conflict within communities emerges all the time. By the use of *Sulha*, which emphasizes relationships, love and care, the mediators of Wi'am help many Palestinians cope with their difficulties and find meaning in their lives. Christians and Jews can also learn much from the *Sulha* process. The Wi'am centre is involved in many other peace initiatives, among them the empowerment of youth and women, non-violent resistance and ministry to Palestinian prisoners. The centre is helping to keep hope alive in a situation that can lead people into disillusionment. Zoughbi gives a powerful witness as a Christian who feels at home and finds joy working with his Muslim brothers and sisters. His theology is grounded on the fact that we are all children of God.

Initially, we were welcomed to the centre with endless cups of coffee and tea, then we had a huge banquet lunch. There were many Muslim women who worked behind the scenes, silently preparing the banquet for us. They cared for us even though they did not know who we were and where we came from. We felt at home in the centre, even though we were overlooking the Separation Barrier with armed soldiers looking down on us. The hospitality we experienced at Wi'am challenged us to think about the walls that we ourselves can create, and that may block us

---

[20] See http://www.alaslah.org/sulha/, accessed 15 October 2016.



© Ulkoministeriö

from experiencing the hospitality and the humanity of others. One slogan written on the Separation Barrier helped me to think about the barriers in my own life. The graffiti urged me to 'make hummus not walls'.

Hummus not Walls

The struggles that people of different religious affiliations face, in Israel-Palestine and throughout the world, are real. Exploring the religions from the perspective of women can help us to understand these struggles and thus help transform anger into a positive force. One day, as we were going to visit Rachel's tomb—a site holy to all three Abrahamic religions—we saw a young Israeli woman soldier firing tear gas at Palestinian protesters who were throwing stones over the Separation Barrier. The next day a Bedouin trader on Via Dolorosa welcomed two of us into his shop with a cup of coffee and two cups of tea. He then spent more than an hour speaking to us and showing us his shop as if we were members of his family. These two experiences reminded me that on both sides of the religious divide—and among both men and women—hospitality and enmity coexist. That is the ambiguity of life; but, as people of faith, we can still recognise God's presence in that ambiguity. Facing the tensions and struggles that arise from religious differences can be a way to overcome fear and division and can help the children of Sarah, Hagar and Mary to work together as members of one body with many parts (1 Corinthians 12:12). The ethics of care embodied in men and women can be a starting point for the healing of divisions, hatred and violence in the name of religion.

As we walked through the Old City of Jerusalem, children taught us a lot. It was difficult for us to tell the difference between Jewish and Muslim children. On many occasions, after an attempted conversation, we said *shukran* ('thank you' in Arabic) to Jewish children and *toda* ('thank you' in Hebrew) to Muslim children. Often, the children responded joyfully even so; they seemed to have embraced their differences and were not startled by the mistake. I prayed that God might grant us that childlike embrace of one another's differences.

Walking on the Via Dolorosa and praying the stations of the cross with Mary and Jesus, we came across Jewish, Muslim and Christian traders. God was there with us amidst the hustle and bustle of life. There was also tension: the soldiers with their M-16s were watching closely as ever; but God was watching even more closely, granting us peace. God continues to bless the children of Sarah, Hagar and Mary as he blessed Hagar in the desert. God continues to offer salvation to his people in all historical circumstances, even amidst deep religious conflict.

Oscar Momanyi SJ is a member of the Eastern Africa Province of the Society of Jesus. He is currently a theology student at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California. He previously worked as a teacher at Loyola Secondary School in Wau, South Sudan.