Developing an Internet-Based Trialogue on Peace and Reconciliation in Judaic, Christian, and Islamic Thought

Solomon Schimmel

1. Introduction

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Professor Mori and to Professor Kohara, and to the entire Faculty of Theology and CISMOR for inviting me to be a Visiting Scholar at Doshisha. My brief stay at the university and in Kyoto has been educational, enlightening, and delightful. The staff at CISMOR have been generous and patient in providing me with all kinds of assistance.

I have organized my presentation into three sections. First, I would like to outline a proposal for the development of a Jewish, Christian, and Muslim trialogue on inter-religious understanding and reconciliation that would be conducted over the Internet. Second, I would like to use the Jewish and Muslim values of repentance (*teshuva*/*tawba*) as an example of one concept among many that would be discussed in such a trialogue. Third, I would like to demonstrate one particular educational software program that can be used to conduct the trialogue, which my institution, Hebrew College, uses to teach online courses in our Master's degree program. It can be easily adapted for use in the proposed trialogue. I will illustrate segments from an online course I taught which dealt with Jewish Ethics.

2.

The project on which I am working—to develop an Internet-based trialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims on themes of peace, reconciliation, and respect for members of each other's faiths—presents both opportunities and challenges. Technology provides the opportunities. The challenges are in the proper conceptualization of the philosophy and goals of the trialogue and its teaching strategies. I will begin by discussing pedagogic opportunities provided by Internet technology.

The Internet makes it feasible for individuals in different countries, teachers and students, to communicate with one another using text, audio, graphic, and video modes, both "live" and a-synchronously. In addition, websites make the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, the Koran, and much of the three faiths' post-scriptural religious literature—both

traditional and critical-academic—easily accessible. This can be done in a synoptic format, for study, contrast, and comparison. For example, students can call up on their screens texts from Genesis Chapters 15 and 17, Romans Chapter 4, Galatians Chapter 3, and the Koran Suras 2 and 22 to compare and contrast how Abraham's covenant with God is viewed by the three scriptures. They can then access medieval Jewish, Christian, and Muslim commentaries to examine how they elaborated on these foundational texts. They can listen to instructors' audio files explaining the texts. Students can pose questions they have about the texts and their implications to a panel of scholars representing the different faiths. Groups of three students can be formed including a Muslim, a Christian, and a Jew, to study texts and their commentaries together, engaging each other in analyzing what a text says, what it might mean, what its implications are and what the problems it generates might be. Each tri-faith student group can be presented with a set of questions by a teacher, and then report their responses back to the entire group. All of this material can be reviewed at any time because it remains on the website.

The challenges in developing a Christian-Muslim-Jewish Internet-based trialogue on peace, reconciliation, and mutual respect are in five areas:

1) defining its educational goals
2) specifying its curricular content
3) recruiting its instructors and guest presenters
4) selecting its students
5) coordinating its diverse teaching strategies

The Internet provides a way to bring Jewish, Christian, and Muslim voices under a single "virtual roof" and to enable participant students to interact with scholars of religion from around the world. One goal of the trialogue is to provide students with access not only to multiple inter-religious voices, but to multiple *intra*-religious voices as well: for example, Catholics and Protestants, Sunnis and Shiites, Orthodox and Reform Jews.

What are the educational goals of the trialogue? The course should do at least two things. First, it should give participants a better understanding of some of the ideological and theological sources of the conflicts, animosities, and hatreds that have so often characterized the relationships of the three faiths towards each other. This is not to imply that theology and ideology were the only causes of conflict and hatred. History, economics, and politics also had their roles. But this trialogue will focus on the world of religious ideas, attitudes, and values, especially as expressed in textual traditions and their interpretations. So, for example, we would want to explore the origin, meanings, and implications of the biblical concept that the people of Israel were chosen by God for a special relationship with Him. How did the biblical concept of a covenanted nation affect ancient Israel's and later Jews' attitudes and behaviors

towards pagans, Christians, and Muslims? How did the Christian concepts that salvation is only through Christ, that the Church has supplanted the people of Israel, and that Jews and Muslims are infidels because they deny the divinity of Jesus, affect Christian attitudes and behaviors towards Muslims and Jews? How did the Islamic distinctions between believers and heretics, between the Umma of believers in Muhammad and the Koran on the one hand, and, on the other, the lower level *dhimmi* (Christians and Jews), or again, the belief that the Koran is the perfect and final revelation of God, affect Islamic attitudes and behavior towards Jews, Christians, and polytheists? How have these concepts themselves been interpreted in different ways within each faith to blunt some of their harsher implications? Each of the faiths has within it respected and venerated teachers who have chosen to interpret their sacred scriptures and traditions in ways that take out much or even most of the sting from concepts that have generated hatred and violence towards others.

The second educational goal of the trialogue is to study concepts within each religion which explicitly or implicitly teach pro-social attitudes and behaviors towards the 'other.' For example, rabbinic Judaism developed the notions of the "Seven Noahide Laws" and of the "Righteous of the Nations" which, for some commentators, mean the universality of salvation for those who lead a life of ethical and moral righteousness. The New Testament parable of the Good Samaritan has been understood by many Christians to teach that God loves people who love their neighbors as expressed in deeds of caring and compassion, even if these Good Samaritans do not or do not yet put their faith in Christ. Islam teaches that Allah's mercy and compassion extend to all of his creatures. All three faiths teach that we are to imitate God, and since in all three, God is often described as merciful, compassionate, forgiving, and charitable, even to sinners (at least for a while), it is incumbent upon us to imitate these divine qualities.

Marc Gopin[1] enumerates religious values which can contribute to inter-religious conflict resolution and peace-making endeavors. The participants in the trialogue will study texts from each tradition that express the importance of these values in the truly devout life; among them are the following eight:

1) Empathy – the ability to experience the pain and suffering of another, even of your enemy.
2) Nonviolence – the preference for non-violent resolutions of conflict over violent ones.
3) Sanctity of life – the belief that all humans are creatures of God who has endowed them with a fundamental sanctity and dignity.
4) Humility and self-criticism – by focusing on one's limits and imperfections one can be more tolerant and accepting of others.
5) Repentance – the expectation that sinners will acknowledge their misdeeds, express remorse for them, apologize to those whom they have hurt, make financial and psychological reparation when it is possible to do so, and request forgiveness from their victims.

6) Forgiveness – the expectation that, when appropriate, a victim will forgive those who have offended or injured him.[2]

7) Religious discipline of the emotions, such as pride, anger, envy, and greed, which contribute to hatred and violence. People nurtured by the religious values of humility, forbearance, contentment, and moderation will be more inclined to pacific and pro-social modes of responding to and evaluating others.[3]

8) Messianic eschatology and imagination – In Gopin's words: "All three monotheisms have a crucial contribution to make to conflict resolution … in their vision of a more just society amid new possibilities for the human social order."

Some of these values are explicitly meant to be expressed only towards members of one's own faith community, and not universally. Others, though originally meant to be universally applied, were later interpreted to apply more narrowly, excluding, for example, not only members of other faiths, but even, within a faith community, sinners or heretics. In teaching the texts that espouse these pro-social, reconciliatory, peace-oriented values, the dual ethic that each of the faiths manifests needs to be acknowledged. However, one goal of the trialogue is to reflect upon why the dual ethic developed within each religion, and how these religious values are being or might be universalized from within the religious traditions themselves, usually by means of reinterpretation or contextualization.

One topic that was debated within the Hebrew College group working with me on developing the trialogue is the extent to which it will deal, if at all, with the axiological bases of each religion. Should one goal of the trialogue ultimately be to challenge the claims of each religion that it possesses absolute religious truth? The argument was that if everyone would acknowledge the subjectivity of their particular faith claims and religious beliefs, this would eventually result in greater religious tolerance, a positive attitude towards religious pluralism, and a universalization of the best ethical values of each of the religions. Or, should the trialogue eschew challenging each religions' truth claims and focus instead upon teachings on topics like tolerance, peace, reconciliation, and love for persons of other faiths and for humanity as a whole that are contained within each faith, even while each faith retains its claim to privileged possession of the divine truth? My personal preference is for the latter approach, though on pragmatic rather than theological grounds. I see as a central educational goal of the trialogue the nurturing of tolerance, compassion, and reconciliation, through joint study of religious texts, in those who remain faithful to their basic, particularistic religious commitments. To challenge axiological beliefs would deter too many from participation in the trialogue, especially those who perhaps most need to learn what is being taught, and who are sufficiently open intellectually to enter into trialogue rather than shun it altogether. It is enough of an accomplishment to get people to reflect upon diverse religious traditions with a willingness to acknowledge the need to rectify certain moral and ethical deficiencies in some

teachings and understandings of their own religion, without challenging the fundamental existential core of their faith.

To whom should the trialogue be directed? I feel that three categories of participants should have priority:

1) Clergy of the three faiths who are interested in improving inter-religious understanding and interaction, but who do not know enough about what the different traditions have to say that can support this goal.

2) Lay leaders of churches, synagogues, mosques, and other religious institutions who help shape their institutions' direction, especially that of their educational programs.

3) Students studying to be rabbis, priests, ministers, Muslim clergy, and religious leaders.

These three groups have or will eventually have significant influence in their respective faith communities. By focusing on them the trialogue will, hopefully, have its greatest impact as a vehicle for peace and reconciliation.

One idea I am considering is organizing a group of institutions, such as seminaries, departments of religion, and churches, synagogues, and mosques, to form a consortium to participate in the trialogue, so that they will offer the trialogue to their constituents and provide some of the faculty and other resources for it.[4]

The faculty for the trialogue will be multi-disciplinary and include professors of religion, clergy of the three faiths, a specialist in conflict resolution, and a psychologist. The professors will be the major resources for the scholarly presentation, analysis, and discussion of the relevant texts and ideas from the three religions. The clergy will discuss the practical question of how the pro-social values of their religious tradition, as extrapolated from the texts that are studied, can be incorporated into the lives of their constituents. They will also provide examples from their professional experience of how anti-social religious texts and attitudes retain their power and influence. The conflict resolution expert will discuss strategies by which members of the different faiths can ameliorate inter-religious tension and hostility. The psychologist will provide insight into the psychological and emotional sources of animosity, and understanding of how individuals might overcome them. For example, she might discuss the social psychological literature on prejudice and hate and the psychological literature on overcoming anger, hatred, and envy, cultivating respect and, perhaps, even love.

In addition to these faculty, the course will include guest lecturers or guest resource persons, with whom participants will be able to interact online.[5]

The syllabus of the trialogue will include:

1) Primary and secondary readings from the three religions, and readings from the fields of conflict resolution and psychology.

2) Audio-visual lectures, and audio-visual readings of scriptural and other passages

whose effectiveness when orally presented is significantly more powerful than when only read as a text.

3) Text, audio, and video clips relevant to specific topics. For example, the picture and text of a *New York Times* article describing the late Jordanian King Hussein's visit to the Israeli families mourning the deaths of their daughters who were killed by a Jordanian soldier, along with an audio clip of his comments and the comments of the families of the victims in response to his visit. These clips can be analyzed by the psychologist and/or conflict resolution expert as examples of steps that can be taken to overcome hatred and create a basis for reconciliation between antagonists.

4) Archives of all of the lectures and discussions, so that participants can access them for review and study at their convenience.

3.

I turn now to the second component of my presentation, the theme of repentance in Judaism and Islam, which would be one of the themes of the trialogue.

This section of my presentation is based upon a paper I gave in June 2004 at the Conference on *Religions and the Politics of Peace and Conflict* sponsored by the Irish School of Ecumenics at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. The paper was titled, "Repentance as a Facilitator of Inter-group Reconciliation in Jewish and Islamic Devotional and Legal Literature."[6]

Judaism and Islam emphasize repentance (*teshuva/tawba*) for *one's misdeeds against another* as a core religious value. Repentance includes self-examination and self-criticism, overcoming the denial of one's wrongdoing, remorse, apology, and restitution. The ultimate goals of repentance are spiritual self-improvement, justice, and reconciliation with man and with God. These teachings are developed in breadth and in depth in the devotional literatures of Judaism and of Islam, which are guides to spiritual growth and "righteous living." They are also given concrete manifestation in the legal literatures of Judaism and Islam: Halakha based upon the Torah and rabbinic literature, and Sharia, based upon the Koran and the Hadith. One can find in these literatures specific directives as to how one must repair wrongs committed against another, and pacify and request forgiveness from the victim of one's misdeeds.

Al-Ghazali and Maimonides, each perhaps the greatest of medieval jurists and theologians of Islam and Judaism respectively, wrote extensively on repentance. Their works continue to be authoritative to this day within their religious communities. Both were masters of three domains of religious literature, the legal, the devotional, and the theological-philosophical, and their most influential works incorporated and integrated elements of all three. Al-Ghazali authored the *Ihya Ulum ad-Din* (Revival of the Religious Sciences) and Maimonides wrote the *Mishneh Torah* (Restatement of the Torah). Both of them devoted a section to the nature of repentance, its consequences, and the procedures necessary for implementing it. There are deep similarities between al-Ghazali and Maimonides, on many levels.[7]

Al-Ghazali in his *Treatise on Repentance* writes:[8]

The correction of [injustices towards one's fellow men], insofar as they pertain to God's due, is achieved through remorse, contrition, renunciation of similar acts in the future, and the performance of good deeds counted as opposites of the sins. The penitent will requite with benevolence toward men for the hurt he may have caused them.

As I read the next passage from Al-Ghazali, I keep in mind the demonization of Jews and the vilification of Judaism that one hears today from many Muslim clerics.[9]

[Injurious] remark and characterization, again, is an evil from which expiation must be sought. Whenever the penitent mentions his offense and announces it to the aggrieved, yet [the latter's] soul does not permit expiation, the penitent's guilt remains. Such is the right of the aggrieved. The penitent must, therefore, subtly win him over, act in his interests, and show love and solicitude such as would take sway over his heart. Indeed, man yields to beneficence. Everyone who feels aversion to an evil may be swayed by a good deed. When [the aggrieved man's] heart recovers, through the abundance of [the sinner's] affection and solicitude, he will permit himself pardon ... Let [the sinner's] effort at gladdening the other's heart through tenderness be as great as it was in *inflicting it*.

As I read the following passage from Maimonides' *Laws of Repentance*,[10] I keep in mind the loss, pain, and humiliation that many Palestinian Arabs have experienced in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Repentance on the Day of Atonement atones only for those sins that are between man and the Most High, for example, eating forbidden food ... But sins which are between man and his fellow men, such as injuring or cursing, or robbing him ... are never pardoned until he makes restitution and appeases his fellow. Even if he returns money which is owed, he must appease and ask for pardon. Even if he has only provoked his neighbor in words, he must make peace and entreat him until he forgives. If his friend is not willing to forgive him, he must bring a group of three neighbors to appease him. If he still refuses, a second or third group should be brought and, if they are refused, he should be left. For then the sin of refusing to forgive rests on him...

Before examining how repentance can play a constructive role in the Jewish-Muslim conflict, the idea of the heretic, the sinner, and other 'others' has to be addressed.

Traditional Judaism and Islam have little sympathy for those perceived to be heretics who deny the fundamentals of the faith, and for other sinners whose sins are especially grave.[11]

The Hebrew term *kofer* (*be'ikar*) and the Arabic term *kafir* were the terms used to describe those who deny God, or God's sovereignty, who in principle (if not always in practice) were deserving of death. Judaism and Islam each considered the other faith to be a distortion of religious truths, and hence their adherents were sinners, although not necessarily in the same category as the *kofer/kafir*. Although the legal codes of both religions extend protections and legal rights to some of the members of the other faith, these rights were not equal to the rights and to the compassion due to 'believers.' Thus in both religions there developed a dual ethic.

The negative categorization of the 'other,' heretic or sinner, makes it possible to justify, condone, ignore, or encourage aggressive and injurious actions against him. Even where the Halakha or the Sharia would not officially permit such behavior, these negative attitudes contributed to attacks on the 'other.' In some cases the Halakha and the Sharia even mandate violence against the 'heretic' or the incorrigible sinner.[12]

Are devout Jews and Muslims capable of greater tolerance and pluralism? Can they accept the notion that injurious, aggressive actions against heretics and adherents of the other religion are sins rather than meritorious actions? It is difficult for them to do so, not only because of the teachings of their 'fundamental' texts, but because they believe that heretics and members of other faiths are potentially dangerous. They engage in behaviors that are sinful, corrupt, and corrupting, and they support and spread ideas that contaminate and threaten the well-being of the community of the faithful.

If, however, devout Jews and Muslims can develop a rationale for tolerance of the heretical or sinful 'other,' it might be possible for them to then cultivate the notion that the devout believer is obligated to repent for injurious actions against 'others,' with whose views he disagrees but to whom he now accords the right to dignity and justice.

These, then, are some of the tasks for contemporary Jewish and Muslim religious leaders, scholars, and teachers:

1) They need to broaden the category of who counts as a person towards whom one is obligated to behave justly, and even with love and compassion, to encompass many non-believers.

2) They need to limit the religious justifications for injuring the non-believer and certain sinners. For example, should they continue to teach that the Japanese man or woman who prays at a Buddhist Temple or a Shinto Shrine here in Kyoto is an idolater who should in principle, if not in practice, be put to death? Should they teach that the Kannon statues at Sanjusangendo Temple must be destroyed because they are despicable idols, as the Taliban did to Buddha statues in Afghanistan?

3) They need to extend the central religious obligation of repentance (*tawba*) to instances of one's wrongful actions against the non-believer, the sinner, or the adherent of another religion.

4) They need to extend the obligation of repentance (*tawba*) to instances of one's wrongful actions even towards an 'enemy.' There should be strict and carefully defined limits on the injury that one is permitted to inflict even on an enemy, and surely on innocent members of the enemy's community.

A fascinating description of a Muslim's repentance appeared in a letter by Mansour al-Nogaidan to the *New York Times* on November 28, 2003 (Section A, page 43), under the title "Telling the Truth, Facing the Whip." Mr. Nogaidan is a journalist in Saudi Arabia.

A week ago yesterday I was supposed to appear at the Sahafa police station to receive seventy-five lashes on my back. I had been sentenced by a religious court because of articles I had written calling for freedom of speech and criticizing Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia's official religious doctrine ... I cannot but wonder at our officials and pundits who continue to claim that Saudi society loves other nations and wishes them peace, when state-sponsored preachers in some of our largest mosques continue to curse and call for the destruction of all non-Muslims. As the recent attacks show, now more than ever we are in need of support and help from other countries to help us stand up against our extremist religious culture, which discriminates against its own religious minorities, including Shiites and Sufis. But we must be aware that this religious extremism, which has been indoctrinated in several Saudi generations, will be very difficult to defeat. I know because I once espoused it. For eleven years, from the age of sixteen, I was a Wahhabi extremist. With like-minded companions I set fire to video stores selling Western movies and even burned down a charitable society for widows and orphans in our village because we were convinced it would lead to the liberation of women. Then during my second two-year stint in jail, my sister brought me books, and alone in my cell I was introduced to liberal Muslim philosophers. It was with wrenching disbelief that I came to realize that Islam was not only Wahhabism, and that other forms preached love and tolerance. To rid myself of the pain of that discovery I started writing against Wahhabism, achieving some peace and atonement for my past ignorance and violence. And that is what Saudi Arabia, as a nation, also needs: a rebirth. We need to embrace the pain of it and learn how to accept change. We need patience and the ability to withstand the consequences of our crimes over the past two decades. Only when we see ourselves the way the rest of the world sees us—a nation that spawns terrorists—and think about why that is and what it means will we be able to take the first step toward correcting that image and eradicating its roots.

If repentance, and the forgiveness that it should elicit in the victim, are to play constructive roles in group conflict resolution, the question of the *degree of moral blame* of the antagonists cannot be shunted aside for the sake of peace. This does not, however, mean that reconciliation between groups should always be made contingent upon both parties eventually adopting a shared interpretation of their painful interactions, since that will rarely happen. Reconciliation also cannot be made contingent upon *full* repentance and *full* forgiveness, or on the rectification of *all* the injustices perpetrated during the protracted conflict, because that too can rarely happen. However, if each side comes to better understand and empathize with the other side, and some elements of repentance and forgiveness are employed at the individual and the 'political' and economic levels, there is a chance for the cessation of the conflict and for peaceful coexistence. In some cases a deeper reconciliation, with the development of positive attitudes and feelings between the antagonists, may emerge over time. Conflict resolution and reconciliation do not require that the antagonists deny or ignore the terrible wrongs of the past. On the contrary, the more honest an acceptance of the past, and acknowledgment of wrongs committed in the past, and expressions of regret for them, and some efforts at reparation and of forgiveness in response to these, the greater the probability of an enduring peaceful relationship between the two groups in the future.

Group reconciliation and conflict resolution can take place directly between small groups of individuals who are members of the groups in conflict as well as at the level of national, political leadership. Where the individuals who meet for the purpose of reconciliation have themselves suffered directly from the actions of their antagonist, the attempt has greater legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the group than when the conciliators haven't suffered directly from the conflict. If Jews who were injured by Palestinian bombs and Palestinians who were injured by Israeli bombs, or if parents of Jews and of Palestinians who died in the conflict, can meet in a serious endeavor to overcome antagonisms and hatreds, other Jews and Palestinians, whose sufferings have been less direct, will find it easier to accept the possibility of reconciliation. One such group, *Parents Circle,* of parents and relatives of Israelis and Palestinians killed in the conflict, has been meeting to see if steps towards reconciliation can be taken. Since both groups believe that justice is on their side it is difficult to think of reconciliation in terms of repentance, which implies admission of guilt, or of forgiveness— since who should be forgiving whom? The focus is more on the pragmatic and mutually beneficial goal of overcoming the enmity on the person-to-person level in the hopes that this will reinforce the political attempts to negotiate a peace.

However, to be willing to make peace with an enemy, when under no duress to do so, suggests a measure of empathy for him and perhaps a willingness to concede that there is some justification for his animosity, if not for his behavior. It may also suggest a willingness to be sufficiently self-critical of one's own position, to concede that what one's own group has done hasn't always been justifiable. These are early stages of repentance.

Group repentance, reconciliation, and conflict resolution can also occur at the level of group *leadership*, political or religious. The acknowledged leaders of the groups in conflict can have a powerful influence on the groups they lead when the leaders take the initiative to work towards reconciliation, whether by way of apology and repentance or forgiveness. Gestures and actions by leaders are important in *modeling* peaceful approaches to conflict resolution for their *own* constituencies. Moreover, they can have a powerful impact on the *opposing group*, by suggesting to it that its adversary, or at least its adversary's leader(s), might be reevaluating its role and responsibility in the conflict and hence be a possible party to reconciliation.

To the extent that the antagonists in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict identify with the religious values of Judaism and Islam respectively, calls for repentance can be meaningful to both sides. Appeals to religious values are most effective when made by recognized spiritual leaders to their own adherents, rather than when made by the antagonist. For a rabbi to preach repentance to a Muslim or for an Imam to preach repentance to Jews would engender indignation, resistance, and hostility, rather than a move towards the difficult, emotionally wrenching process of repentance.[13]

Perhaps the most effective approach to harnessing religious values such as remorse, repentance, and forgiveness to group conflict resolution would be for clergy of the different faiths that are in conflict to try to better understand how their own religious traditions can enhance peace-making. If they can arrive at a consensus, for example, that there have been sinful behaviors engaged in by members of their group in the context of the conflict which need to be repented for, they can work towards educating their followers towards the process of self-transformation that is repentance. Rabbis and imams have to vociferously condemn murderers as sinners. They have to condemn as well those who support the murderers. To condemn means to call upon supporters of the murderers to reassess and change their attitudes and behaviors in light of religious teachings—in other words, to call them to repentance. Religious leaders regularly admonish their flock to repent for *personal* sins. They have to be willing to do so for sins committed under the aegis of *political* acts.

Ehud Luz (quoting Ben Halpern) points out in his book, *Wrestling with an Angel: Power, Morality, and Jewish Identity* (Yale U Press, 2003):

Every nation that wishes to survive must, on occasion, breach the rules of absolute morality. But, as Martin Buber rightly stresses, the fate of a nation depends on whether, from time to time, its leaders are willing to make a thoroughgoing moral reckoning… What is … common in relations among people is the placing of mutual blame rather than recognition of one's own failings…. Every civilized nation needs a certain amount of guilt feelings … The assumption that we are always in the right and that all blame is to be placed on the enemy rules out any possibility of dialogue with him. "He who sees himself as entirely innocent … will never reach agreement with his fellow man … There can be

no real accord or lasting arrangement between two parties unless they realize that they are obligated to each other; and before there can be a sense of obligation there must be a sense of guilt." (244-246)

The challenge of peacemaking is formidable, daunting, and perhaps unattainable in the foreseeable future given the levels of animosity and hatred between the Jews and Palestinians/Arabs. But some steps have been taken in the past, others are taking place now, mostly in private, and in some cases even in public (especially in Israel), as Marc Gopin describes in his book, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East*.[14]

The first century Rabbi Tarfon says: "You are not called upon to complete the work, yet you are not free to evade it" (Ethics of the Fathers 1:21). Organizing and participating in conferences and projects such as those sponsored by CISMOR is one way of responding to Rabbi Tarfon's admonition.

4.

I turn now to the third section of my presentation, an illustration of the use of the Internet to teach a course on Jewish ethics. The educational software platform, Blackboard, which we use at Hebrew College and is widely used throughout the United States for Distance Learning courses at colleges, universities, and corporations, can be easily adapted for use in the proposed trialogue.

The course, titled *Using Midrash Aggadah to Teach Ethics*, was conducted as an online seminar with six graduate students from the United States, Switzerland, and Israel. The syllabus and some of the assigned readings for the course were posted by me on the website. Students were also required to purchase a digital coursepack of texts, articles, and book excerpts, which are available on the website where they can be read, or downloaded and printed.[15]

The students and I introduce ourselves to one another by posting on the website photos of ourselves, and a text and an audio file in which we briefly introduce ourselves and some of our interests. This serves to create a sense of 'real' rather than merely 'virtual' interaction. I also scheduled a live teleconference during the semester for the same purpose.

The 'heart' of the course is the section of the website called the *Discussion Board*. It is to this section that I post assignments to the students and to where they post their responses. All of us can read (or hear, if I or a student post an audio file) what each of us has to say, and can respond to one another's postings, creating a vibrant discussion among us. For each topic a separate *thread* is created. All of this material is permanently on the website for the duration of the course, so throughout the semester all of us can refer back to postings from the beginning of the course.
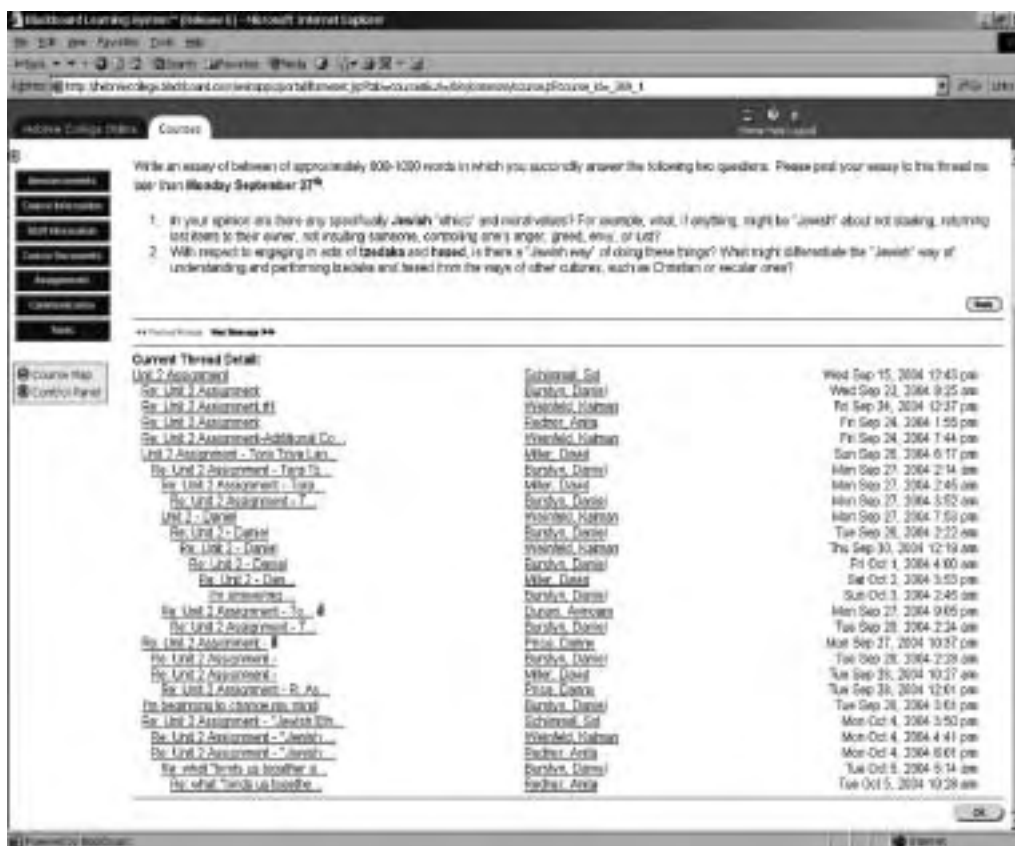
Figure 1

Figure 1 is a copy of one webpage from the course. This particular thread dealt with the issue of defining the meaning of the expression "Jewish Ethics." As you can see (by following the pattern of indentations), the two questions I posed generated several discussions between the students that went beyond the responses they initially posted to the questions.

Following my presentation at CISMOR of how this online course functions and the way it makes possible, as the proposed trialogue intends to do, the bringing together of faculty and students from around the world for joint study and discussion, there was an animated conversation among those present about the promise and the challenges of this technology. What follows is a summary of some of the questions that were raised in this discussion and the answers I gave based upon my own and my colleagues' experience at Hebrew College, where we have been successfully teaching online courses for eight years and offer an online Masters Degree in Judaic Studies.

5. _____

QUESTION: I was curious about how you deal with the copyright issues of putting so much material into a coursepack.

SOLOMON SCHIMMEL: Coursepacks are used in numerous universities in the United States, and they are economically feasible. There have been cases where we couldn't get the copyright for a particular article, so we didn't use that article and had to find an alternative one. It is important to have the coursepack available for the students by, or before the first day of class. So you have to prepare your syllabus a few months in advance because the company that prepares the coursepacks has to apply for the copyright permission, and then it has to scan the material if it isn't already available in digital form, or print it out if you want a printed version available to the students.

QUESTION: I wanted to ask about the teaching experience. Teaching a class in which you rarely, or almost never see the students, and where everything is done only through written materials—how does it compare with teaching a normal class? So from both points of view, of the teacher and the students [what is the teaching experience like?].

SCHIMMEL: It's a very good question and there are a lot of points there that are worth touching upon. First of all, keep in mind that it's not only text, but there are audio files, and some teachers use audio files very extensively. I did so in several courses, based upon the nature of the course.

Within a year or so, almost every laptop will have video streaming capability. That's going to change the whole distance learning environment, because you're going to see an actual live presentation (which can also be archived).

Another thing that I've done is to ask the students to post a picture of themselves on the website with a brief description of their background and their interests. That way they get to know each other. Here is an example from my course "Using Midrash and Aggadah to Teach Ethics." This is a fellow from Israel. He tells you a little bit about himself, and his life on a kibbutz, and provides links to his favorite websites. So you and the other students get to know him more personally. This fellow is very proud of playing his guitar. He lives in Connecticut and is actually studying to be a rabbi at a school in New York City but he was taking my online course which he can transfer to that school. He tells us that he was a director and a television producer, for many years, then got interested in becoming a rabbi.

So I and the students see photos of each other, read each other's statement of interests, perhaps hear each other's voice because we have posted audio files to the website.

Another thing we do is require that every student in the program come to our actual campus in Boston for a week in the summer to participate in a conventional course designed exclusively for online students. We had a minister from Ghana in Africa who came, and the Brazilian deputy consul who is posted in Tokyo, and many others from around the world.

Another thing I did, which isn't always easy, is schedule a live teleconference. We blocked out two hours of telephone time using the services of a telephone communications company, and had a live discussion. The problem there is not so much the cost, since it wasn't very expensive, but rather time zone problems; not everybody was able to participate.

If you're creative you can think about a lot of ways to generate a sense of a learning community in the online environment. Many students were eager to come to Boston to meet each other and when they did it was an experience like, "Oh, so you're the guy that I was communicating with so much, and now I see you for real. Great to meet you in person."

Overall, while online teaching and learning is a challenge, it is working out nicely.

A very important thing which I have learned from the experience of online teaching is that it doesn't pay to use the technology if really all you do is put on the website a text version of a lecture that you would give in class. That's not taking advantage of the technology. In addition to all the different combinations of things that you can do with the technology, the teaching style has to be different. You have to learn—by experience, or by taking courses on using this technology effectively—how to create a sense of community between people when they are only connected virtually. Since we at Hebrew College have small classes, it's easier to do, but even there it takes thought, and one way is not just to give lectures; it's to really encourage people to interact with each other, for example, by saying so-and-so said this, what do you think about that? You have to know how to be a moderator, so to speak, to get people to interact.

Often students get very interested in the topic, but then they get into tangential issues, side issues. Now remember, everybody is supposed to be reading what everybody else wrote; that takes a lot of time and energy. So you don't want distractions that are not necessary. So what I did was create a special discussion board where the students can "shmooze." "Shmoozing" is a Yiddish word (not Hebrew, but a Jewish-German dialect that developed in Europe), which means getting together to "shoot the breeze." I don't know the Japanese expression for just having an informal conversation, like in a cafeteria, but I am sure there is one. So I say to the students, if you want to talk with him about the fact that he's a guitar player, and he is interested in hearing from you how the Kibbutz puts on musicals, by all means, get to know each other, but don't do it on the specific "thread" of the discussion board that is dealing with the questions that we're supposed to be discussing from an academic point of view. Do it on the "shmoozing" area of the website. So on the "shmoozing" area they "shmooze" a lot. There are all kinds of conversations going on there, about their families, their vacations, the Boston Red Sox, whatever they want. This is fine and creates community because the students are getting to know their fellow students in a personal way.

I still personally prefer to teach a regular course because there is something about the personal interaction, the eye contact, the gestures, the intonation, which can't be replicated in the online environment (unless you can have video streaming). That's the negative. But

look at the positive: I have people from Israel, from Japan, from all over the world studying together. Look at the diversity I can include. Moreover, you don't have to be physically present to participate, and you can be in different time zones. So one person, maybe he likes to work at 2:00 in the morning because at 2:00 in the morning he has time, the kids are sleeping, whatever. So that's when he goes to his computer and gets involved reading and posting messages. It gives tremendous flexibility to the students.

I tell my students at the outset that I am only going to be looking at the course website on a certain day of the week. Don't expect me to become involved on a daily basis in what you are doing for this course because I have other things in my life. I would inform them, for example, that on Thursdays I will be submitting my next posting, and responding to their questions or postings, et cetera. I kept a pretty tight schedule because otherwise I would be overwhelmed even with only six students. Imagine if I had twenty! Professor Kohara told me how many student papers he has to grade. I couldn't believe it. I said I'm not coming to Japan to teach if I have to do that. So you have to keep things in tight control, but it's doable.

In this course on Jewish ethics I was 'preaching' about the virtue of humility. But let's leave humility aside for a minute, for the sake of honest reporting. The students really liked the course, and it received very good evaluations.

We tend to get very good students at Hebrew College, and some of our best students have Ph.D.s in math or physics and then got interested in Jewish studies. They can't come to classes at the College. They don't live nearby, or don't have the time because they work full time at their jobs, but they can take one or several online courses, or even earn a graduate level degree in our Hebrew College Online Master of Arts in Judaic Studies program.

QUESTION: I want to go back to your outline for the proposal and the idea that an instructional team could be created of these clergy from three faiths, the psychologist, and the expert in conflict resolution. I have done some team teaching and I know how difficult that is, and team teaching from these different [disciplines] could be extremely [hard]. Before you get any students, you've got a big problem. How are the instructors going to relate? So as you think about this proposal and creating a grant request for it, how do you prepare the instructors to do this work? Do you have some thoughts about what would you do with them to help them learn how to teach this way?

SCHIMMEL: First of all, you'd have to get instructors who appreciate and are excited about doing this kind of trialogue. As you know, where there's a will, there's a way. If there is a motivation to get involved in a project like this, then there are two further questions. The first is training the teachers on how to use the Internet in a pedagogically effective way. That's a technical and pedagogic issue. Part of a grant proposal would include a one-week intensive training session for teachers. Also, by now, there are a good number of teachers who, at least in America, do use these kinds of software platforms to teach. But even if you want to use teachers who lack this experience, as long as they are willing to learn, it is not a major problem.

I am not particularly computer savvy. I'm not technologically savvy at all. But eight years ago I said to myself that at some point in life I'm going to retire and I hope to be able to do some teaching even after I retire. With this technology I could teach from Mars. Or I can go to Kurama where I was in that beautiful spa, and teach a course sitting there in a spa with a laptop, a wireless laptop. So there are good practical reasons why people should want to learn how to use this technology.

But I think the deeper issue is how to get people who are willing to look at the difficult issues involved in examining their own faiths in a critical way. Once you find such people, and there are many in the world—indeed you at CISMOR are involved in these kinds of activities—the trialogue needs a director because it is like a stage production. You need one person who will be responsible for allocating responsibility to different members of the teaching team for different purposes, in accordance with the goals of the trialogue.

The trialogue is not the same thing as just teaching a course. That's why you're going to need a grant from some foundation that is interested in inter-religious dialogue, perhaps the Pew or the Lilly or the Ford Foundation. The potential of the trialogue is so great, in my opinion, that I think that a grant proposal can be put together that will be persuasive and marketable.

There is another issue, which I raised in the paper. When you get people from three different religious faiths together, and you want to get them to engage in honest, self-critical dialogue and also mutual respect for one another, how do you go about it? One way to get people to become pluralists is to get them to acknowledge that their beliefs are not absolute and exclusive. You might be willing to say that my version of Christianity is meaningful to me because I was socialized into it, or it speaks to me, but I realize that to another person Islam or Judaism or Buddhism or Shintoism or Hinduism is meaningful, and my truth is not a greater truth than theirs.

I was walking around yesterday at the Zen Buddhist temple right behind Doshisha and got into a conversation with a monk in training, who doesn't plan to get married because he wants to devote his entire life to teaching and living Buddhism. He told me that he was interested in Christianity and the New Testament, and had visited Israel several times. I asked him if he perceived any conflict between his interest in Christianity and his reverence for Jesus and the sacraments, and his commitment to Buddhism? He said that he did not see these as in conflict. I sense that there is a certain tolerance or religious pluralism in Japan and maybe in some other Asian cultures, which is absent in many ways in certain of the more dogmatic approaches of the monotheistic religions of the West.

So if someone is willing to accept that their religious perspective is not the sole, absolute truth, then it's easier for them to participate in the trialogue.

But the ones who really have to participate are the ones who don't have that point of view. So you might have to adopt a different approach, and say to the participating teachers from the three religions that you should teach what you believe, and maintain your view that your

religion attests to some absolute truth. For the Muslim, the Koran is the perfect revelation of God. For the Christian, Jesus is the Son of God. For the Jew, the Torah was revealed by God to Moses. It's your right to believe that and you don't have to give up on your absolutisms. However, even within the framework of your respective absolutisms and traditions, you can acknowledge and teach the pro-social elements, and encourage their development and application today, as I tried to explain in my paper.

QUESTION: I guess it takes a long time to carry on the online classes compared to the ordinary courses.

SCHIMMEL: Yes, it can be very time-consuming for the professor, and that's another challenge. Some professors are more conscientious and some are less conscientious about this. Some will spend hours and hours responding to students. I tell the students that because it is so time-consuming, you have to understand that I cannot necessarily respond to everything you say. I will take some of the points that you mentioned and I will respond to them.

If I am a student and I spend two hours writing a little essay, I want the teacher to read it and respond to it. But if I am the teacher and have fifteen people doing that, it may take too much time. So you have to work out a system which is fair to the students, but at the same time is pragmatic and fair to the instructor.

COMMENT: I have been working on the e-learning teaching for a year-and-a-half at the Open University [in Israel]. We have [basically] the same system as we just saw on the Blackboard. It takes a lot of time for the person who coordinates the course, whether it's the professor or someone else, to prepare in advance. And while I was doing the course itself, I was online everyday to respond to about seventy people in one course.

QUESTION: Do the faculty members have the obligation to participate in the online process?

SCHIMMEL: No. We don't require teachers to use the system, but we encourage them. For example, we pay the professor a little extra money for preparation because to prepare this kind of a course is different than preparing a regular course.

Remember though, that once the materials are prepared, you can often reuse them with slight changes.

I want to get back to the question Prof. Mori raised about the time consumption element. There are two things here. Our classes are small, up to about fifteen students, which, though time-consuming, is doable. What I'm talking about are graduate level seminars. In the proposed trialogue, there may be twenty or twenty-five people per "class," and the trialogue can be repeated with different participants.

Another thing about our style of teaching which is very important is that both in American education, at least top quality American education, and also in the Jewish tradition of study of Talmud, what's extremely important is interaction, debate, and dialectical questioning and

answering. It's not top-down. I don't come in and say, I'm the professor, I have all the wisdom, take my knowledge and be happy that I'm willing to give it to you, even though you're paying $30,000 in tuition. The beauty of the Blackboard platform is that it fits an educational philosophy that encourages students to question, to challenge, to ask, to debate, to interact with one another and with the professor. It doesn't mean that you, the professor, don't have more knowledge. But you want to encourage critical thinking, and this format is very conducive to that if it's done properly. So from an American point of view or from a Jewish point of view, it fits in very well with our educational philosophy.

QUESTION: Another problem is language. If we do [the trialogue] in Japan, the language must be English.
SCHIMMEL: That's probably right, especially if it's an American foundation that's giving the money. If an Islamic foundation wants to give the money, and have the trialogue conducted in Arabic, they would have a right to do that, but that would eliminate non-Arabic speakers.

QUESTION: But we could have sub-groups within the trialogue where the Arabic-speaking teacher could have some small conversations with some Arabic-speaking students, and that could be a way of sharing across cultures.
SCHIMMEL: That's true. You would still though not want it to become a clique. The whole point is that you want everybody to be able to interact with everybody else.

QUESTION: We have Spanish and English in the courses where you have a sub-group of Spanish-speaking and a sub-group of English-speaking and then you have sharing from that. And sometimes it's very good because people who are afraid to speak in another language will be very open in their own.
SCHIMMEL: I've never thought of that and that's a very interesting idea.

Another thing too about the online format is that students learn pretty rapidly that they better think very thoughtfully before they write and post their remarks. In a classroom, if I say something foolish, by tomorrow everybody hopefully will have forgotten.

But online, once you click that "Send" button, that's it. For the rest of your life you will be held accountable for what you've submitted, so what happens is that people try to be thoughtful in what they write. You get high quality.

Another thing too that comes up, is that you have to learn sensitivity. In a personal interaction I can tell by a person's gestures or tone, that maybe I'm saying something that may be offensive to them, or I can crack a joke where I can sense from the atmosphere that it's okay. But when you're doing this online using a text format, there could be a lot of misunderstandings, and therefore everyone has to learn how to be sensitive to the participants, in what they say and how they phrase it. There have been cases in some of our

courses where there were some upset feelings. One has to learn the skill of participating in a way that is respectful of others, and particularly when you're talking about something like the trialogue where it could be very, very easy to hurt somebody's feelings, because one purpose of the trialogue is to address painful and provocative issues.

QUESTION: How many Muslim or Christian participants belong to these courses?
SCHIMMEL: We have several. One fellow is a Palestinian from Ramallah who has taken an online course and then came for the summer, stayed for an extra semester and took a course with me in Talmud.

The requirements are that if you want to matriculate in the Master's degree program then you have to go through a formal admissions process. But if somebody just wants to take a class for credit and not to earn a degree from us, then as long as they meet certain basic requirements they can do so. So if you have a student from Doshisha who might be interested in studying about rabbinic literature and you don't offer a course in Talmud, you may approve of his taking a course online with Hebrew College, and the Department of Theology will give him credit for that course towards his degree from Doshisha.

Some students just take courses as auditors, which means they're not interested in credit. We will let them do so if they meet the requirements for registering for the course, and we expect participation, although the auditor doesn't have to write a paper or take an exam. We've had several Muslim and several Arab students, and we'd like to have more.

6. Conclusion

Perhaps other institutions and organizations, such as CISMOR and the US National Council of Churches' Committee on Interreligious Dialogue, will be interested in jointly exploring with Hebrew College the next phase of the Trialogue Project, which would be to develop a grant proposal to submit to several foundations in the U.S. and in other countries that might be interested in funding it.

NOTES

1) *Between Eden and Armageddon*, Oxford University Press, 2000.
2) This is a major theme of my book *Wounds Not Healed by Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness,* Oxford University Press, 2002.
3) This is a major theme of my book *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Psychology,* Oxford University Press, 1997, which demonstrates how much Judaism and Christianity share in their teachings about vice and virtue and in considering the cultivation of skill in self-control to be a central spiritual and moral value. Self-control is crucial to inhibiting physical and verbal violence, and it is central in Islam as well.
4) Hebrew College is developing a relationship with the Andover-Newton Theological School

which we both hope will be a model for joint Jewish-Christian academic endeavors in several areas of mutual interest and concern, among them, the themes of the trialogue, which would involve faculty and students at both institutions.

5) Let me cite, for example, in slightly edited form, from a letter I received from Professor Abdul Hadi Palazzi, Director of the Cultural Institute of the Islamic Italian Community.
"I very much appreciate your Jewish/Christian/Muslim Trialogue project ... In interfaith dialogue it is very important not to disguise theological, historical and environmental sources of animosity towards others, and at the same time, to look for a contemporary orientation that can help each other to understand that diversity can be a base for mutual cooperation instead of conflict. According to the Koran, God permitted differences in belief so that the different Communities can benefit one from the other and mutually learn the ways of goodness and ethics. During past centuries it frequently happened that religious leaders betrayed this mission and made religion a cause of rivalry and bloodshed. Our duty is to learn from these mistakes and show that, since we believe in God, we must honor every human because of his divine soul."

6) Some of the material in this section is adapted from my book *Wounds Not Healed by Time.*

7) Stern, M.S. "Al-Ghazzali, Maimonides, and Ibn Paquda on Repentance: A Comparative Model." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, V. 47/4, 1979, 589-907.

8) Book 31 of the *Ihya Ulum ad-Din.*

9) See for example the article by Suha Taji-Farouki "A Contemporary Construction of the Jews in the Qur'an: A Review of Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi's *Banu Isra'il Fi Al-Qur'an Wa Al-Sunna*, and 'Afif 'Abad Al-Fattah Tabbara's *Al-Yahoud Fi Al-Qur'an*" in *Muslim-Jewish Encounters: Intellectual Traditions and Modern Politics*. Edited by Ronald Nettler and Suha Taji-Farouki. Routledge, 1998.

10) Maimonides, Moses. *Mishneh Torah, Book of Knowledge, Laws of Repentance*, Chapter 2, Paragraph 9.

11) See Gries, Ze'ev. "Heresy." In *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*. Edited by Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr. New York: The Free Press, 1987, 339-352; and Izutsu, Toshihiko. *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*. McGill University Institute of Islamic Studies, Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966.

12) See Taji-Farouki (n. 9 above).

13) Some Palestinian Arabs and some Israeli Jews are not religious, and appeals to repentance or forgiveness on theological grounds will not always speak to them. However, religious values and concepts often do influence non-religious people and value systems, unconsciously or indirectly. Many secular Jews identify with Judaism's strong emphasis on acceptance of personal responsibility for one's wrongdoing and the upholding of justice in social life. I would venture that a similar process would be reflected among non-devout or secular Arabs socialized in an Islamic milieu and nominally or culturally Muslim.

14) Gopin, Marc. *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East.* Oxford University Press, 2002.

15) Hebrew College arranges with a commercial company that produces coursepacks to acquire permission from the copyright holders to reproduce the material for the use of the students. Access to both the course and to the coursepack is with a password.