

## Chapter 13

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### INTERRELIGIOUS ORIGIN STORIES

*To Begin, and to Begin Again*

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In 1986, the ninth National Workshop on Christian–Jewish Relations was held in Baltimore, Maryland. Local clergy, lay congregants, and Baltimore business leaders attended the conference together and were transformed. In their social and personal lives, they had experienced the divisiveness and harms of antisemitism in Baltimore, and they understood that interreligious learning and dialogue were necessary to undo this structural and societal problem. And so, these Jewish and Christian friends began to meet regularly. They decided together that sustained, interreligious theological education would help dismantle antisemitism and strengthen the Baltimore community, and perhaps even change the wider world. Thus, the ICJS was born—with its first name—the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies. ICJS came into existence within the context of historic changes in Christian–Jewish relations. Indeed, White Christians sitting down with Ashkenazi Jews in Baltimore to learn about each other’s religious practices and beliefs and dreaming together how they could cobuild a better city was previously unthinkable. It was slow work—developing interreligious friendships and trust in the shadow of the Holocaust’s horrors—but it was necessary work. This is the origin story of ICJS.

What tales do we tell of our interreligious beginnings? And how do interreligious origin stories (both metanarratives and narratives) shape the quality of our interreligious encounters? Origin stories have enduring value. They are foundational for meaning-making. However—particularly in moments of growth, expansion, and transition—origin stories should be revisited. They should be reclaimed when they are helpful; they should be rewritten or revised when they hinder the work at hand.

In 2013, after twenty-five years as a Jewish–Christian dialogue organization, the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies (ICJS) expanded its

mission to include Muslims and the study of Islam; in 2016 ICJS changed its name to the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies.<sup>1</sup> In the midst of re-visioning and rebranding ICJS during the 2010s, we should have revisited our origin story. Failing to do so proved to be a misstep with consequences—from which much was learned. ICJS needed to be able to honor our beginnings, and at the same time we needed the courage to begin again.

Our origin story had served us well for decades, but was not up to meeting this moment of expansion. Our mistake was in canonizing our origin story without recognizing that the metanarrative of Christian–Jewish relations was not able to, nor meant to, hold Muslims and Islam. We tried simply to incorporate Muslims into a largely White Christian–Jewish dialogue that had been going on for nearly three decades. To use an analogy, we asked our Muslim partners to pull up a folding chair to the Christian–Jewish dialogue table. This was inconsistent with our methodology, our origin story, and indeed our mission—which is the urgent and essential work of dismantling religious bias and bigotry by building learning communities where religious difference becomes a powerful force for good.

For several years, ICJS has been looking for new metanarratives that can hold the complex interconnected hatreds of antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Black, anti-Brown, anti-Asian racism that challenge our communities today. We are doing a lot of listening to local narratives that are unfamiliar to us; we are seeking a broader coalition of Baltimore cobuilders for the interreligious society. To extend the analogy, we are trying to put away the folding chairs and build new interreligious dialogue tables together with new partners so that we have four: a Jewish–Muslim table, a Christian–Muslim table, a Jewish–Christian table, and a Jewish–Christian–Muslim table.

### **The Importance of Origin Stories, Metanarratives, and Narratives**

Longstanding interreligious and interfaith organizations must grapple with *local* origin stories specific to their particular efforts and institutions, as well as the more *global* metanarratives that shape the stories of interfaith relationships. The *local* origin story of the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies (ICJS) began in 1987 when ICJS was founded in Baltimore, Maryland. The more *global metanarrative* around the founding of ICJS was grounded in the framework of Jewish–Christian relations, developed in a post–World War II, post-Shoah, North Atlantic context. In 2013, a quarter century later, ICJS sought to expand its mission to include

Muslim communities and the study of Islam. In many ways, we were beginning again as an organization and needed to sit with our own origin stories, exploring how both metanarratives and local origin stories were in relationship with the mission expansion.

ICJS was founded in the context of historic changes in Jewish-Christian relations that began in a post-Holocaust, post-World War II environment. A critical moment in beginning this metanarrative of transforming and restructuring Jewish-Christian relations starts with the Roman Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council and its 1965 document *Nostra Aetate: The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*.<sup>2</sup> The theological work begun by the Roman Catholic Church was part of larger developments in the field of Jewish-Christian relations after the Holocaust that prioritized a need for Christians to reckon with anti-Judaism and antisemitism within Christian tradition.

This broader metanarrative deeply shaped the founding of ICJS: Jews and Christians had a chance to begin again; to reset and reframe; to create a new Jewish-Christian relationship. The power dynamics between the two communities and problems in their past relationship were self-evident to the founders: (White) Christians and (European) Christian culture had engaged in the *teachings of contempt vis-à-vis* Jews and Judaism for centuries, which created the theological and political environment that made the horrors of the Holocaust possible.<sup>3</sup>

Particular social contexts and local histories also must be attended to when thinking about interreligious origin stories. Baltimore has a long and shameful history of racial and religious discrimination toward its Black and Jewish residents. Baltimore earned the disgraceful distinction of being the first city in the United States to enact a municipal segregation law, in 1910.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Supreme Court invalidated segregation laws in 1917. From this point, segregation of both the Black and Jewish communities in Baltimore moved from government policy to more informal and insidious forms of segregation practice by property developers and real estate agents. As Baltimore expanded in the early to mid-twentieth century, the Roland Park Company played a major role in creating the neighborhoods it developed in the northern part of the city as exclusively White, Christian enclaves. Through explicit neighborhood covenants, as well as unwritten mandates enforced by real estate agents, the Roland Park Company excluded both Blacks and Jews for more than half a century from upscale neighborhoods in north Baltimore.

When the ICJS was created in 1987 by Christian and Jewish leaders from Baltimore's business and congregational communities, an important first step needed was for (White) Christians to do the vital work of self-reflection and self-criticism. What was the Christian role in perpetuat-

ing and continuing anti-Jewish prejudices in Baltimore and in the greater world? What role did Christian theologies, Christian scriptural interpretations, and Christian traditions play in the lead up to the Shoah, and in dividing Baltimore?

To reckon with both the local narratives of prejudice and discrimination, as well as the metanarratives of post-Holocaust Jewish-Christian relations, ICJS launched the Maryland Interfaith Project. Through this initiative, 1988–1991, nearly two hundred clergy and lay people from eleven Christian denominations conducted a sustained theological inquiry into the ways their Christian beliefs, teachings, and practices perpetuated anti-Jewish prejudice and fostered antisemitic animosity. This self-critical work by Christians was crucial preparation for a Christian-Jewish interreligious encounter. Indeed, for many Jewish partners it was a precondition to build the trust necessary to enter into an honest dialogue with Christians. It was a strong foundation upon which Jews and Christians in Baltimore constructed a dialogue table.

### **Beginning Again: Engaging Muslims and the Study of Islam**

The September 11 attacks and the protracted U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan made expansion of ICJS's mission to include Muslims and the study of Islam seem imperative to our leadership. However, the metanarrative behind this expansion was fundamentally Islamophobic. Muslims were being caricatured in the popular media as members of a violent religion. In the North Atlantic context, a culture of suspicion and surveillance of Muslim individuals and institutions were being fed by accusations that Muslims represent an internal threat to Western democracies. Consequently, in many interreligious and interfaith events, when the audience question-and-answer session occurs, there is a tendency to demand that Muslims answer for acts of terrorism committed by members of their faith around the globe, and to explain how passages in the Qur'an appear, to some readers, to justify violence. Regrettably, ICJS was not fully immune to the story of Islam in the United States that was shaped by this security-lens metanarrative.

A few mistakes are clear in hindsight. We did not give ourselves enough time and moved too quickly. Creating friendships, building trust, and gaining new literacy (both learning and unlearning) are slow work. They require patience and careful, attentive pacing. ICJS hired a Muslim scholar and began offering courses and programs without doing the foundational community work of developing trusting relationships of mutual learning with a robust number of local Muslim partners. As a successful

Jewish-Christian dialogue organization, with over twenty-five years of experience, we figured our existing methodologies and good intentions would carry us forward during this transition. We failed to reinstate the successful model of the ICJS Maryland Interfaith Project. (That is, we did not engage in a sustained theological inquiry into ways in which Christian and Jewish beliefs, teachings, and practices were participating in anti-Muslim prejudice in our community.) We did not recognize that, as an organization, we were not merely expanding our mission; rather, we truly were beginning again.

For instance, an important aspect of expanding the mission of ICJS to include Muslims is that it forced us to explore issues of race and religion in our interreligious efforts. With the inclusion of Muslims in our mission and our interreligious work, ICJS not only increased its religious diversity, but also its racial diversity. Muslim Americans are the most racially diverse religious community in the United States, where Islamophobia is deeply tied to anti-Black and anti-Brown racism.<sup>5</sup> In Maryland, Muslim Americans come primarily from the Black, South Asian, and Middle Eastern communities. In welcoming Muslims into ICJS, we incorporated people of color into our programs, staff, and leadership. The expansion of mission in 2013 forced us to begin to wrestle with our institutional whiteness. (The founders and most participants in our programs over the years had been White or European-heritage Christians and White Ashkenazi Jews within the majority Black city of Baltimore.) As an institution built and devoted to promoting understanding across religious difference, ICJS needed to explore the complex ways religion and race intersect in our religious communities, in our city, and in our country.

### **Correcting Mistakes and Beginning Again, Again**

At the critical juncture of expanding our mission, we made a mistake: we omitted a vital step of reinterpreting and reimagining our origin stories, narratives, and metanarratives. Thankfully, in the ten years since then, we have had a chance to begin again the effort to develop resilient relationships with Muslim partners and communities. ICJS is now working to cobuild a better Baltimore, and a better world. That includes the crafting of new stories to tell together.

I hope that the ICJS experience may be instructive for others. I encourage everyone committed to interfaith and interreligious encounters to pay careful attention to the ways in which origin stories, narratives, and metanarratives shape the possibilities of such work. The stories we tell about ourselves and our origins matter deeply. To ignore or forget their power is a mistake. Interreligious partners should cultivate a regular practice

of attending to questions such as: What are the interreligious origin stories operative in your interreligious work? How do metanarratives and local narratives shape your interreligious encounters? What are the possibilities and limitations of your origin stories? If you need to begin again, what story would you tell?

### Notes

1. In July 2016 I became the executive director of ICJS after Chris Leighton, its founding executive director, retired. I had joined ICJS as the Roman Catholic scholar in 2011 and took on the role of executive director amidst this organizational expansion of mission, audiences, and work.

2. For the complete text of *Nostra Aetate*, see [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html).

3. I put the terms *White* and *European* in parentheses because ICJS at the time of its founding in 1987 would not have used those adjectives to describe itself or the project of Jewish-Christian relations. But I think they are important adjectives added to augment the retelling of our organizational origin story in the 2010s as we embarked on mission expansion to include Islam, and in light of more recent scholarship interrogating the whiteness of interfaith and interreligious projects in the North Atlantic context.

4. Antero Pietila. *Not in My Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped a Great American City* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010).

5. Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, "American Muslim Poll 2017," [www.ispu.org](http://www.ispu.org). Muslims were the only religious group surveyed with no majority race, as compared with Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and nonaffiliated respondents. According to the survey, American Muslims are 24% White, 25% Black, 18% Arab, 18% Asian, 5% Hispanic, and 7% mixed.