Article

Anthropological Theory
2024, Vol. 24(1) 67–87

DOI: 10.1177/14634996231179520
journals.sagepub.com/home/ant


Common difference: Conceptualising simultaneity and racial sincerity in Jewish-Muslim relations in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Building upon ethnographic research conducted among participants in UK-based initiatives in Jewish-Muslim dialogue, the paper contributes to anthropological literature on the essentialising nature of state-sponsored constructions of minoritised groups. More specifically, I put forward two sets of arguments. Firstly, I suggest a concept of simultaneity that challenges colonially inflected conceptualisations of the relationship between communities and their respective traditions. Activists of Jewish-Muslim inter-community work subvert dominant conceptualisations of intergroup commonalities and divergencies by developing a theorisation of Jewish-Muslim relations that acknowledges group similarities and differences as overlapping categories. Secondly, I contribute to John Jackson's (2005) theorisation of racial sincerity, a notion offering a conceptual challenge to the notion of authenticity. I argue that the complexity of my interlocutors' thematisations of Jewish-Muslim relations underpinned by the diversity of the sources of knowledge that they rely on could be best understood as an example of this analytic. On a broader theoretical plane, the paper proposes a framework that underscores the agentive power of minority communities and pays close attention to the way they define their positionalities vis-à-vis the majorities and each other in ways that go beyond binaries-based theorisations.

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Keywords
Sincerity, difference, Judaism, Islam, dialogue, inter-faith, relations, essentialism

Introduction

At the end of the meeting, one of its convenors, Renata, did a vote of thanks, noting how pleased she was with a good turnout of both Jewish and Muslim participants: 'It is also wonderful to see members of other communities – Gillian, Arthur and Yulia'. I was pleasantly surprised to be included in this category. During the meetings of the network, I often stayed away from group discussions. My conversations with its members would normally take place over tea before or after meetings and during other occasions for informal mingling. Though the network aimed to bring together specifically Jewish and Muslim residents of the city where it was based, it also welcomed representatives of other faiths or those who had no religious affiliation at all. I never felt it was appropriate for me to take an active part in the formal side of the deliberations either as an anthropologist or as a representative of other groups. Nevertheless, I felt grateful to Renata for including me in this category, an act which to me signalled a transition from a status of an outsider to that of a fully-fledged member of the network. It also furnished an extra and a productively personal illustration of the flexibility with which its members moved between different understandings of belonging, engaging conceptualisations both of a stabilised community connection, and of multiplicities of similarity and difference. Indeed, while the network had a clear 'bilateral' remit in that it was set up as an initiative in Jewish-Muslim dialogue, members of other groups appeared to be not only welcomed, but also encouraged to express their views in the meetings, and on a number of occasions (and sometimes, to my surprise), I would see them challenge Jewish and Muslim participants about their beliefs and practices and receive answers that were always patient and considerate of the positionality of the questioner.

In the past decade, the UK has become home to a plethora of initiatives focusing on Jewish-Muslim dialogue (Van Esdonk and Wiegers, 2019). From 2013 to 2023, I followed one such network, which by the time of writing had been in existence for 18 years.[1] The network was originally started by a small group of professionals who felt that their city needed an initiative that would bring together Jewish and Muslim residents from the local communities to educate them and the wider society about Judaism and Islam and to address the common challenges that Jewish and Muslim populations face as minority groups in the UK. By 2023, the network had grown to include over 300 members on its mailing list. The actual meetings would normally attract between 20 and 40 people, who would meet once every 6–8 weeks to share a meal, get together for a celebration of a Jewish or Muslim festival or have a session involving a discussion of a topic that the convenors saw as an issue of common interest or concern for Jewish and Muslim communities in the UK or in Europe. The participants coming to the meetings regularly tended to be either professionals in middle to later stages of their careers or retired professionals, though younger participants would also occasionally join the

sessions. Throughout the period of research, I also attended inter-faith and inter-community events in different parts of the country, which would often be pointed out to me by my research participants from the network, and conducted formal interviews with about 50 people in different parts of the UK, who identified as either Jewish or Muslim and who were either actively involved in the activities in Jewish-Muslim dialogue or had expressed an interest in this topic, even if they were not formally participating in such fora.[2] While participant observation in the study was mainly limited to the activities of the network, the interviews were conducted in different parts of the country.

Anthropologists have critically discussed how in the past two decades the British government has promoted the agenda of social cohesion aimed at bridging communicative gaps between different ethnic groups, gaps that the actors of the state have decried as an outcome of the so called 'failure' of multiculturalism policies that allegedly effected the separation of citizens from different ethnicities and hindered the development of positive interactions between them (Wessendorf, 2014: 13; Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2010). Research has documented how state-sponsored criticisms of multiculturalism, which increased after the 2001 riots in some of the northern cities in England and the 7 July 2005 attacks in London, tended to essentialise perceived cultural differences between communities and construe them as the root of inter-community tensions, placing the main responsibility for achieving societal integration specifically on minority groups (Wessendorf, 2014: 21; Amin, 2002).[3]

More broadly, scholars have for a long time observed how, because of colonially informed discourses of the majorities and state-enforced practices of censuring, policing and surveillance, indigenous and migrant communities have often been politically construed in essentialising terms. They have been expected to narrate and perform their modalities of self-identification in particular ways that conform to pre-determined blueprints of what it means to be a good citizen of the state, or more generally, to various constructs of the conduct of minoritised groups (Arkin, 2013; Coutin, 2003; De Genova and Ramos-Zayas, 2003; Egorova, 2015; Jackson, 2008; Özyürek, 2014; Povinelli, 2002; Silverstein, 2005). At the same time, social scientists have also examined how minority and subaltern groups themselves would sometimes strategically present their community identities in essentialist ways for the purposes of political gain. They have highlighted the empowering potential of this deployment of stabilised notions of collective belonging in different regional contexts around the world involving actors with a wide range of positionalities and intersectionalities pertaining to gender, class, religion, race, ethnicity or indigeneity (Leshkowich, 2011; Sylvain, 2014; Watanabe, 2008).[4]

In this paper, I suggest that the activism and the conceptualisations of the relationship between Jewish and Muslim British citizens and their respective traditions espoused by my interlocutors from the network, as well as by other research participants I interviewed for the study, cast a new analytical light on the way similarities and differences between perceived ethnic and religious groups can be conceptualised by actors involved in inter-faith and inter-community work. The network is a grassroots initiative in that it is led by volunteers and is not funded or in any way formally supported by any state-related structures. At the same time, on the face of it, it may indeed appear that its activities and ethos to a degree map onto the state-sponsored agenda of promoting intergroup cohesion

underpinned by sedimented notions of community belonging. Its members thus may seem to essentialise the positionalities of Jewish and Muslim groups for the purpose of community empowerment, stabilizing belonging around two clearly contrastive forms of identification.

However, in this paper, I argue that what transpired in the meetings of the network and the interviews that I conducted with the members of this and other initiatives of Jewish-Muslim dialogue in the UK is a particular theorisation of Jewish-Muslim relations that understands group similarity and difference as overlapping and simultaneous categories and subverts dominant conceptualisations of intergroup commonalities and divergencies. I also suggest that my interlocutors developed this fluid and complex theorisation as a result of different personal experiences and engagement with multiple personal, professional and community-based knowledge archives, and that it is this expertise and experiences that underpin their interest and participation in inter-community work rather than purely strategic thinking.

On a wider theoretical plane, I suggest that the actions of my interlocutors could be thematised as sincere, and in using this particular term, I rely on the theorisation of sincerity in the context of self-identification of minoritised groups put forward by John Jackson (2005) in his ethnography of constructions of black cultures in New York urban neighbourhoods. In this work, Jackson develops the concept of racial sincerity and argues that it could be used as a category to challenge and replace the idea of authenticity as it has been used in assessing the public discourse of racialised persons. Jackson suggests that while the notion of authenticity denies people agency in their search for identity, sincerity re-claims their integrity and 'highlights the ever-fleeting "liveliness" of everyday racial performances that cannot be completely captured by authenticating mediations of any kind' (2005: 18). This theorisation of racial sincerity does not allow one 'to see into the other', but, in Jackson's words, it 'recognises that people are not simply racial objects … but racial subjects with an interiority that is never completely and unquestionably clear' (2005: 18).

Building upon this insight, in this paper, I aim to highlight the fluidity of my interlocutors' thematisations of what it means to be Jewish and Muslim and of the relationship between Judaism and Islam. I use race and racial sincerity as germane concepts when considering ethnoreligious Jewish and Muslim identities in order to highlight past and present colonially inflected histories of subordination and differentiation of European Jewish and Muslim populations, as I will discuss in more detail in the following section.

My goal is an analytical framework that theorises racial sincerity as a personal and political stance continually reconfigured in relationship to state sponsored constructions of similarity and difference between perceived majorities and minorities, as well as within the plurality of minoritised groups. This theoretical framework allows me to situate initiatives in inter-community dialogue in ways that highlight their agentive power. I discard accounts that see these interactions primarily as examples of minority groups engaging in strategic alliance building. My framing also contests the argument that they are presentations and performance of traditions that are made congruent with dominant understandings of minority difference in order to secure the support of the ruling majority. In my ethnographic analysis, I pay particular attention to the diversity

of sources of knowledge that my interlocutors have been drawing on to develop their understanding of their relational positionalities. This includes their experiences of living as Jewish and Muslim citizens in the UK, their expertise in different forms of what could be broadly described as religious belief and practice, their independent and/or professional research into Jewish and Muslim histories, the position of minorities in the UK and other topics that they saw as relevant to Jewish and Muslim experience.

Jewish-Muslim relations in the UK and beyond

The UK presents an important site for the study of Jewish and Muslim populations and of their interactions mediated by the state and the wider society (Van Esdonk and Wiegers, 2019; Van Esdonk, 2020; Kasstan, 2022). According to the Census data of 2021, the total number of people who recorded as Jewish in England and Wales under the question on religion was 271,327, comprising 0.46% of the population of England and Wales.[5] The total number of people who recorded as Muslim was 3.87 million, or 6.5% of the total population of England and Wales, which, as the Muslim Council of Britain report has pointed out, stands in sharp contrast to the public perceptions suggesting much higher numbers. Jewish communities have been shaped by a number of waves of migration and today include Jewish groups of Ashkenazi, Mizrahi and Sephardi descent, with the main centres of Jewish life being located in London, Manchester, Leeds and Gateshead. The majority of the Muslim population in the UK derive from the colonial and postcolonial waves of migration, with many tracing descent to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (Kasstan, 2022: 251-252). The main centres of Muslim population comprise Bradford, Birmingham, Manchester and London, though recent census data suggest that Muslim communities have started spreading out from these major urban locales.[6]

Similarly to many other European countries,[7] British Muslim groups have been subjected to stereotyping, which collectively associates them with terrorism and illiberal values. This equation has found expression in public policy interventions aimed at managing Muslim citizens in the aftermath of the attacks on 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005 (Kasstan, 2022: 253). At the same time, the Jewish population has been portrayed as a 'model minority' (Kasstan, 2022; Sheldon, 2016; Meer and Noorani, 2008), though, importantly, narratives of the perceived 'success' that Jewish communities had achieved in integrating into British society have contained clear anti-Semitic tropes (Egorova, 2022).

The constructions of Jewish and Muslim minorities in Europe more broadly has been attracting growing attention of anthropologists and researchers from other fields, including explorations of complex examples of interactions between Jewish and Muslim actants in organised initiatives of Jewish-Muslim dialogue (Roggeveen, Vellenga and Wiegers, 2017; Van Esdonk and Wiegers, 2019), everyday encounters (Everett, 2020; Sheldon, 2022a; Sheldon, 2022b), the intersections between imageries that have become to be associated with the two groups (Anidjar, 2008; Judaken, 2018; Katz, 2015; Klug, 2014; Mandel, 2016; Meer, 2013; Meer and Modood, 2012; Meer and Noorani, 2008; Renton and Gidley, 2017) and the overlapping experiences of Jewish and Muslim

communities (Arkin, 2013; Arkin, 2018; Bunzl, 2007; Everett, 2018; Everett and Gidley, 2018; Mandel, 2008; Özyürek, 2016; Özyürek, 2018; Silverstein, 2018; Werbner, 2013).

Scholars have also pointed out the importance of paying close attention to how the meta-discourses of alterity permeate European portrayals not only of Jewish and Muslim communities per se, but also of their interactions with each other, portrayals which in the European public discourse have been strongly informed by a Christian theological frame and have produced accounts that see Judaism and Islam as overly legalistic and illiberal contrasted with Christianity understood as forbearing (Klug, 2014; Gidley and Everett, 2022). At the same time, the second half of the 20th century also saw the emergence and development of a host of conceptualisations that have stressed the impact of the conflict in the Middle East on Jewish-Muslim relations and have come to see Judaism as part of the broader 'Judeo-Christian' tradition. In the narratives of the latter, Muslims were portrayed as a threat to both Jews and Christians and were placed outside European civilisational frame. Jewish populations, at the same time, were seen as part of this frame, but were relegated to a subaltern position within it (Gidley and Everett, 2022; Nathan and Topolski, 2016; Topolski, 2020).

In the following two sections, I will demonstrate how, on the basis of their personal and community-based expertise and experiences, activists of Jewish-Muslim dialogue theorise their groups' relationship with the other community in complex ways that go beyond binaries of sameness and difference. I challenge both the trope of the so-called Judeo-Christian tradition that constructs Judaism and Islam in opposition to each other and simplistic, colonially inflected narratives that portray Judaism and Islam as similar religions in that they allegedly promote illiberal ideas and practices not congruent with European values.

Common differences

During the outbreak of COVID-19, the network switched to online meetings, most of which were, not surprisingly, focusing on the pandemic and the challenges that it presented for the network and for Jewish and Muslim communities in the UK more generally. One of the meetings addressed the topic of faith and whether the challenges of the pandemic had strengthened or weakened it. As was often the case with the meetings of the network, the topic was first introduced by a Jewish and a Muslim speaker (in any order), who made a presentation talking on behalf of their respective constituencies before the discussion was opened to the floor. On this occasion, the presenters were in complete agreement with each other. Each speaker pointed out that in their congregations, faith was unconditional, and that as much as the pandemic presented a challenge for their physical wellbeing, social life and mental health, it was not going to weaken their faith. Speaking from experience, both speakers suggested that, if anything, their lives as religious persons had only been enriched by the conditions of the lockdown, as they now had more time to pray, to reflect on their faith and to pay attention to their religious observance. During the discussion, the speakers kept referring to each other's presentations, agreeing with everything that their counterpart had said.

The session reminded me about the way those of my interlocutors who were religious leaders of Jewish and Muslim congregations would often tell me that they felt that Judaism and Islam sometimes almost completely converged for them in organised multi-faith settings. For instance, this is how Jacob described to me how in his view he could relate to his Muslim counterparts in such contexts: 'I am a rabbi, I am interested in dialogue between religions and I often get invited to inter-faith events where different religions are represented. And when I hear a speech by an imam, I often think to myself – if I were to replace the word "Islam" with "Judaism" in his talk, it could have been my own presentation'. Jacob then explained that in his opinion, which he had formed on the basis of his religious education in Judaism and personal research that he had conducted on Islam, this was a religion that was the closest to Judaism in terms of its belief and practice.

I suggest that this theorisation of the closeness between Judaism and Islam in the way it is articulated by my interlocutors unsettles dominant European constructions of Jewish-Muslim relations on a number of registers. Firstly, it challenges the 20th century European construct of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which imagines Judaism to be aligned with Christianity and to stand in opposition to Islam (Nathan and Topolski, 2016; Topolski, 2020). Secondly, while at first glance, it may appear to map onto another dominant European discourse that I noted in the previous section, the discourse that thematises Judaism and Islam as two religions similar to each other, on closer reading, it significantly differs from the prevalent narrative, as it empties the parallels between the two religions of the negative connotations that they have in the majoritarian discourse and imbues them with a potential to disrupt the binary not only between any two religious traditions, but also between the religious and the secular community membership.

Ben Gidley and Sami Everett point out that while in Europe the liberal democratic state positions itself as a supposedly neutral arbiter between Jewish and Muslim populations, it could be best understood as a 'secular-Christian formation', which relegates the two communities to a subaltern position and often either pitches them against each other or constructs them as the illiberal other of the West. The latter narrative becomes particularly strong when applied to the 'Orthodox' parts of the minority populations, whose purportedly conservative practices are contrasted with 'normative Christianity's invisibility as liberal common-sense' (Gidley and Everett, 2022: 7; see also Kasstan, 2022).

I suggest that the activities and the membership of the network that I followed disrupt accounts of these alleged Jewish/Muslim illiberal convergencies. As I noted at the beginning of the paper, the network was open not only to people of all faiths, but also to those who had no faith at all – indeed, many of the meetings that I attended featured the presence of humanists and some of my Jewish interlocutors from the network described themselves as Jewish in purely cultural terms. Nevertheless, as I could observe during the meetings, they would often take an active part in theologically-themed sessions, such as the one described above, with non-religious Jewish participants drawing parallels between practices and notions derived from Muslim theology and what they understand as their own everyday Jewish cultural practice. In doing so, they would thus construct an overarching concept of Jewish/Muslim similarity that goes beyond drawing simplistic parallels between Judaism and Islam. Moreover, the engaged exchanges that I would

often witness between those participants who saw themselves as secular and those who identified as religious suggest that the network had succeeded in creating a space that was comfortable for all its members irrespective not only of their community affiliation, but also of the degree and modality of religiosity (or lack thereof) that they espoused. Practices in this space challenge neo-Orientalist narratives that sediment these traditions around a set of perceived attitudes and practices conceptualised as illiberal and incompatible with the principles of a liberal state.

At the same time, some of the activists of Jewish-Muslim dialogue, whom I interviewed within and outside the network, described themselves as religiously observant persons and told me that they were interested specifically in the inter-religious dimension of this work because of the opportunities that it presented for interacting with people who, in their view, had congruent beliefs and practices. However, the modes of theorising the relationship between Judaism and Islam that they have developed also reveal complexity that goes beyond facile narratives about Judaism and Islam being similar. Indeed, sometimes, in the narratives and actions of my research participants accounts of Jewish/Muslim convergences would sit organically alongside theorisations that foreground difference. For instance, Michael, who described himself as a member of an Orthodox Jewish congregation, was not a member of any formal network of Jewish-Muslim dialogue, but got involved in an educational initiative comprising Jewish and Muslim high school students. Michael told me that he was passionate about the religious education of children in his community and was concerned about the lack of interest that some of them were showing in matters of faith, which was precisely the reason he chose to reach out to a Muslim educational organisation to bring Jewish and Muslim students together for a number of encounters. 'I noticed that some children here were not really engaging with their faith, but just saw it as a tradition', he said. 'So I thought that if I brought them in contact with other religions, they would start thinking about their own faith more'. He said he had chosen a Muslim rather than a Christian community not only because their beliefs and practices were (in his view) closer to Judaism, but also because they were less likely to attempt to convert a person from a different community, as, in his opinion, they themselves represented a tight knit group.

Thus, for Michael it is precisely the strength and the more sedimented nature of the perceived community difference between Jews and Muslims that turned an intellectual and social exchange with Muslim students into a fruitful site for his students to develop and enhance their Jewish faith. In Michael's account Jews and Muslims are theorised as simultaneously similar and different. Their perceived theological proximity and societal distance are conceptualised as each other's valences in ways that are illustrative of what Glick Schiller, Darieva and Gruner-Domic (2011: 401) have theorised as 'sociabilities in which a shared sense of common sensibilities does not override but coexist with ongoing diversity of perspective and practice'.

The mode of thematising one's relations with the 'other' displayed in Michael's account is also reminiscent of that discussed by Rupert Stasch in his analysis of what he has described as the Korowai 'love without assimilation', when actants would see certain others positively precisely because of their unassimilable difference (Stasch, 2009: 265). Stasch argues that at the core of what constitutes social bonds for the

Korowai is 'the joining of closeness and distance in different aspects of single relations' (2009: 265), in addition to different strands of social relations working independently of each other. This observation rings particularly true in the example of Michael's work, in the course of which he has to negotiate both different types of broader inter-community perceptions and encounters between Jewish and Muslim audiences and different dimensions of one particular type of encounter – the inter-faith one. I suggest that this example also allows us to take Stasch's insight further and argue that it is illuminative of some cases where the 'joining of closeness and distance' transpires both within and across different types of bonds. Indeed, Michael chose to engage with a set of students from a different faith group (rather than with, for instance, another Jewish group) precisely because he thought that it was the religious experience of the other that would enthuse his students. Nevertheless, in doing so, he chose a group that he conceptualised as being particularly close to his own in doctrinal terms. Arguably, he relied on the closeness and the distance within the strand of specifically inter-faith relations. At the same time, another reason why he chose this group was because he theorised it as being distant from his own in social terms in the hope that it is exactly this distance that would ensure the desired social safety of the encounter (through the avoidance of potential conversion), allowing him to bring his students in proximity with the other precisely because of this distance.

At first blush, it may be suggested that these examples elucidate a degree of tension between my interlocutors emphasising that Jews and Muslims are similar and at the same time engaging discourses that appear to sediment their accounts of self-identification around Jews and Muslims as two separate categories. However, this ostensible tension between the notions of shared and discrete Jewish and Muslim identities was hardly seen as a paradox by my research participants. For instance, Ameera, a Muslim member of a network that brings together Jewish and Muslim women, started her first interview with me by saying that it was interesting how much Jews and Muslims in the UK had in common, given how different they were. However, she also felt that the overall similarities between the two communities and specifically between Jewish and Muslim women were significant enough to inspire her to join this network. 'I would sometimes talk to my female Jewish friends and see how much we have in common, be it the religious tradition we follow or the experiences we have had in the community and the family', she told me.

I would therefore hesitate to describe the way in which my interlocutors theorise commonality and difference among Jewish and Muslim populations as contradictory and, instead, argue that their thinking about these topics does not lend itself easily to dominant European discourses about Jewish-Muslim relations or, on a broader plane, politically constructed binaries of difference that nation-state building projects can deploy as instruments in organising and governing difference. To give an example of recent research that casts congruent theoretical light on communal self-understandings, Chandana Mathur's (2020) discussion of Muslim women's protests in India suggests that while the protesters' discourses were oftentimes based on ideas that essentialise Muslim women in gendered terms, they also incorporated and engendered a nation-wide proliferation of much more inclusive narratives asserting that Muslim protesters were as Indian as anybody else in the

country. Another useful theoretical departure point to illustrate my interlocutors' conceptualisation of the commonality and difference between Jewish and Muslim traditions may be found in Paolo Heywood's suggestion that different actors espouse different styles of thinking about difference (Heywood, 2020). Heywood proposes that 'people "do" difference differently all the time', and these styles of doing difference may include theories that treat it as context dependent, as essentialist and as anything in between (2020).

To return to my conversation with Ameera, it is not at all my objective to argue either that Jewish and Muslim women are closer to each other in terms of their experiences in the UK than any other two groups, or that this is how Jewish and Muslim women in the UK would uniformly understand their relationship. Instead, I suggest that this is how Ameera and, arguably, other members of her network understand it, and that in doing so they embrace a particular mode of theorising the conceptual relationship between imageries associated with Judaism and Islam more broadly and specifically in the context of gender. I also propose that they arrived at their specific modes of theorising this relationship on the basis of their lived experiences (sometimes complemented by independent research into Jewish and Muslim traditions) using them as their sources of knowledge in developing the specifics of this understanding. These and other examples described above usefully highlight how my interlocutors actively dismantle dominant societal discourses about the relationship between Jews and Muslims, as they constantly switch registers from identifying their counter-parts in inter-community initiatives as members of one particular group or the other. As I will now discuss in the following section, an important dimension of their theorisation of Jewish/Muslim similarities and differences is also based on what they understand as their common experiences as minority groups in the UK.

(Not) strategic (not) essentialism

The network's discussion of the effect of COVID-19 on religious faith was remarkably uniform in the way it engaged the topic – all those who chose to comment were in complete agreement with the speakers who in their turn agreed with each other. On other occasions, deliberations would spill into dynamic (though amicable) debates with different presenters and audience members embracing different positions, even though the fault lines in the debates never followed the group's division into Jewish and Muslim constituencies.

For instance, one of the meetings involved the participation of lawyers who had either Jewish or Muslim background, and who were invited to discuss whether UK legislation was adequate to deal with the rise in hate crime directed at Jewish and Muslim persons. This time the opinions of the speakers diverged on a number of accounts. Some felt that the current legislation was adequate and that decreasing the level of hate crime required wider societal change. This is how Ahmed, one of the presenters, put it: 'As far as criminal sanctions are concerned, there are mechanisms in place to deal with hate crime. However, there is not sufficient societal awareness of it to ensure that hate crime diminishes in society as a whole. You need to energise ordinary members of the public to condemn this behaviour. The legislative framework is as good as it can be,

because we can't legislate to protect a specific faith group. What we need is peer pressure'. Another presenter, Nazimah, politely disagreed with (some) of this argument: 'I think the law does require some change and it can be strengthened, but you need to change society too. Racial discrimination is recognised in law, but religious is not. There can be cases when you can be abused on account of your religion, and the perpetrator will not be prosecuted. But what does not help either is the mass media portraying minorities in a particular way'.

Both presenters were Muslim, and their (partly similar, but partly, and, in an important way, divergent) views were voiced and supported also by their Jewish counterparts and different Jewish and Muslim audience members. In discussing the issue, both lay participants and the speakers would often refer to their experiences of being subjected to prejudice and drew multiple parallels between what they described as antisemitism and Islamophobia, though some also pointed out that these terms were contested and not necessarily adequate to describe all their personal experiences with prejudice.

Though most meetings of the network would have a clear objective of focusing on issues seen as being of common concern, there have also been occasions when the topic of community-based divergencies would nevertheless be alluded to. During the meeting focusing on hate crime Javed, a Muslim lawyer, suggested that the members of the network should be doing more to keep reminding their respective congregations that hate crime was a common challenge that Jews and Muslims faced and that antisemitism and Islamophobia were similar phenomena: 'We need to be together. There are a lot of common causes that we have – for instance, we need to oppose those who lobby against so called animal slaughter in Judaism and Islam … but we are preaching to the converted here. What we need to do is to reach out to our wider communities and to get them to understand that our interests are coincidental'.

Javed's remark hints in a subtle way at a topic that does not often get discussed at the meetings of the network – the topic of differences and even various forms of opposition between Jewish and Muslim populations that my interlocutors would see thematised as such in their congregations. In their conversations with me, almost each of my interlocutors also pointed out that they knew to what a high degree Jewish and Muslim groups were constructed in opposition to each other in the wider society. Javed's observation thus casts an important light on the activities and the philosophy of the network in that it highlights the very dissimilitudes that normally would not get much attention in the deliberations of the network's meetings. His words reveal that he, like most other network members, was aware of these divisions and was encouraging the two communities to make an effort to overcome their differences for the sake of achieving a very specific aim of challenging hate crime or confronting jointly those opposing the slaughter of animals for the production of kosher or halal meat.

At first glance, it is tempting to theorise Javed's suggestion to reach out to the wider communities, to 'remind' them about the shared challenges and to move beyond all that divides them as an example of strategic alliance building deployed by an activist of inter-community dialogue. However, I argue that to reduce my interlocutors' inter-community work to its strategic dimension would mean ignoring the complexities (and the sincerity in Jackson's conceptualisation discussed above) of the ways they develop different

modes of theorising the relationship between the two groups on the basis of their experiences of engaging in Jewish-Muslim dialogue, broader experiences of living as Jewish and Muslim British citizens and other sources of knowledge, such as professional expertise and independent research. For instance, it appears that in the case of Javed, it is his expertise of a lawyer, his experience of living as a Muslim person in the UK and his independent interest in the histories of minority communities that led him to making a conjecture that Jewish and Muslim British citizens were up against similar challenges and should therefore move beyond social hesitation[8] about each other and cooperate.

To offer another example, David, a rabbi, who was not a member of the network, but for a long time had been taking part in different multifaith events, told me that on the basis of his exposure to inter-faith initiatives involving different communities, he arrived at a conclusion that such activities worked much better for Jewish and Muslim participants when they focused on their common experiences rather than on theological dialogue. In this respect, he drew a parallel between contemporary state sponsored inter-faith structures and theological debates deriving from the history of Christianity. 'I mean here the type of model where you talk about what their faith says about us, and we talk about what our faith says about them. It is almost like a continuation from the Middle Ages, but friendlier', he said. David noted that he was not very familiar with the activities of the network that I was following but felt enthused to hear that it was initiated by Jewish and Muslim residents. Later in the interview, David elaborated on this observation:

> I think any kind of, how do I put it … inter-faith relations traditionally have used the Christian/Jewish model, that really focused a lot on theology. Personally, a lot of Jews are very uncomfortable with it. I am… I don't attend events like that, so for example events where they discuss the theology of or the attitude of Jews towards Christ and so on and so forth, it's not for me, I'm not interested. I don't go. The type of event that I go to is more social events where you meet other people and you see their faith and you see what they do – that kind of thing is much more interesting, and I think also it works a lot better with the Muslim community as well … I mean it doesn't bother me on a theological level what a Christian thinks of Judaism, if you're following me, and I think that's the case with Islam as well. We're both comfortable in our religions, and it is with people that we need to interrelate. Theological debate is interesting. I like to hear the sermons sometimes given at these inter-faith events. I find it interesting because I find the similarities are very interesting; but as a rule, it's more of a personal thing, personal interaction that is useful and fruitful, and judging, assessing our common experiences, our common problems, that's where a lot is possible.

I suggest that David's words expose some of the types of inter-faith work supported by the state and the performative expectations associated with it as an example of social cohesion initiatives imbued with an underlying secular/Christian agenda that religious specialists representing minoritised congregations are not comfortable with. Importantly, David has willingly engaged in inter-faith work and, arguably, is not at all opposed to the community harmony agenda in principle. However, on the basis of his experience and knowledge of Judaism and Islam, he also arrived at a conclusion

that the types of encounters that were particularly positive and productive for Jewish and Muslim participants were those that focused on confronting challenges to their religious practices in the UK, because, in his opinion, some of these practices not only had significant commonalities but also had commonalities that were negatively viewed by the majority.

> The shechita[9] debate has definitely raised awareness of the commonality between Jews and Muslims in our communities, as has the circumcision debate. I think that has really raised the awareness that actually there are a lot of things we have in common. Speaking about the shechita debate, I think part of it is just the animal-rights movement grabbing the thin end of the wedge, so I think they oppose any kind of slaughter really, but it's easier to argue your point this way. I do worry though that the people leading the campaign are starting with what they call 'ritual slaughter', which we don't actually use – it's not actually 'ritual' slaughter – the word 'ritual' gives an impression of dancing around an animal, but we're just killing an animal at the end of the day. I think that's why they do it. I don't think it's necessarily anti-semitic, or Islamophobic, I think they're just against slaughtering an animal at all, and they're starting there. I do think the popular support of it though **does** smack quite largely of antisemitism and Islamophobia. I'm worried that it's an easy way to attack a minority … For the Jewish community it's a very serious threat – Jewish life in a country wouldn't really be possible on any kind of major scale, if they did seriously restrict shechita, so it's almost a back-door way of getting rid of us, and I hope that's not what they're doing. Also, I heard on the radio this morning that somebody took an issue with Tesco selling halal meat. I'm not quite sure what the problem is with that, and I wonder if part of the problem with it is that people think 'these minorities know they should keep quiet and not come into our Tesco'. And I am worried that that is a part of it.

The narrative that sees Judaism and Islam as implacable religions, poles apart from the purportedly forbearing Christianity, developed over the centuries in Christian polemics and was secularised during the Enlightenment era, which construed Jewish and Muslim traditions as irrational and therefore antithetical to the project of promoting reason, science and freedom (Klug, 2014: 453; Kalmar and Penslar, 2005). Controversies surrounding the issue of the so called 'ritual slaughter', in which Jewish and Muslim ways of killing animals for food are singled out as inhumane (Klug, 2014) is arguably one contemporary ethnographic and political site in which these images appear to be still inflected. Countering this narrative, David calls out the use of the term 'ritual' slaughter as part of an Orientalist discourse aimed at stigmatising both Jewish and Muslim minorities. In doing so, he also implicitly challenges accounts that see Jewish-Muslim relations as predominantly negative, overdetermined by the conflict in the Middle East. Moreover, I suggest that, as it transpires in David' comment on the controversy around Tesco and halal meat, he not only feels solidarity with British Muslims, but identifies with their concerns to the extent that he finds the controversy unsettling, if not outright threatening, on a very personal level, reconstituting in this conversation the two communities as one on the basis of his experiences, even if he himself clearly identifies as a practitioner of Judaism and not Islam.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the complexity of my interlocutors' theorisations of the commonalities and differences between the religious traditions and experiences of Jewish and Muslim citizens is put into further relief through their understanding of traditions that go outside the Jewish/Muslim binary. For instance, this is how Nadeem answered an interview question about how he would assess the way Judaism is seen by his co-religionists in the UK:

> Actually, I have another view on the whole subject, and that is that I believe that the three faiths are Abrahamic faiths, and their actual core values are the same – it's almost like the same tree with different branches, so they're not really different that much. That's how I see it, you know, it's actually the same tree which with time evolved so it has slightly different branches. That's how it is, and I usually say if somebody came from Mars, and looked at these three, they'd say "stop messing around, because, you know, you're the same".

Importantly, Nadeem was one of the core members of the network and, despite his inclusive conceptualisation of what he describes as Abrahamic religions, which transpired in the way he politely but firmly dismantled the binary implicit in my very question, in terms of the network's practice, he was strongly committed to its 'bilateral' nature. Nadeem explained to me that the reason why he chose to set up a network in Muslim-Jewish rather than Muslim-Christian dialogue was because he felt that in contemporary society Jews and Muslims were strongly constructed in opposition to each other. He also felt that there was more of a need for a Muslim activist to reach out to the Jewish community because, being a numerically smaller group in the UK, they were in a more vulnerable position in comparison with their Christian and Muslim counterparts.

Arguably, Nadeem's theorisation of the connection between Judaism, Christianity and Islam affirms the notion of Abrahamic religions, which builds on a theological Christian frame (Gidley and Everett, 2022; Hughes, 2012); however, he offers his own reading of this concept, which posits that British Muslims firstly need to engage their Jewish co-citizens and do it not only on account of them being another minority group in a Christian majority state, but also a minority group at a numerical disadvantage in comparison with Muslims. Gidley and Everett suggested in their discussion of the existing public and academic discourses on Jewish-Muslim encounters that one of the alternative analytical frames that could help us move beyond dominant accounts stemming from the secular-Christian context, is one which draws on the resources offered by the whole spectrum of contemporary religious experiences (2022: 10-11). Nadeem's history of interfaith work, which simultaneously engages and de-centres Christianity, offers one example of such an alternative avenue for approaching both the problematic of Jewish-Muslim relations and the concept of the Abrahamic religions. Arguably, Nadeem's theorisation also simultaneously engages and de-centres the state and state-sponsored community harmony agendas and positions Jewish and Muslim participants as equal partners of these triangular communicative circuits.

Similarly, it is evident in the first quotation from the interview with David that he is open to engaging both with his Muslim and Christian counterparts but would prefer to

do it through formats that he finds more apposite for Jewish and Muslim religious actors, such as personal interactions, observation of the practices of the other community and focusing on common challenges and experiences, rather than engaging in debate about religious doctrine. Both examples suggest that my interlocutors' conceptualisations of cultural and religious difference, which they developed on the basis of their personal and community-based experiences, do not lend themselves easily to any one sedimented account of Jewish and Muslim similarities and divergencies. On different registers, they both mirror and contrast a variety of understandings of intergroup relations circulating in the space between community-led activism and state funded social cohesion agendas, conveying a complex solidarity-based approach to inter-community work.

To return to Nadeem's case, his actions may also seem to have a pragmatic dimension, as he speaks about the 'need' to set up a network specifically in Jewish-Muslim than Muslim-Christian dialogue being stronger. Nevertheless, I would suggest that this example too is revealing of what Jackson theorised as racial sincerity in that it demonstrates the way 'racial subjects', or, in this analysis, subjects of inter-community engagement, can act in ways that are both complex and full of integrity. Moreover, while at first sight it may appear that Nadeem's theorisation of the three theologies was an outlier in relation to that of most other members, it was not at all incongruent with the overall inclusive spirit of the network convenors, who were happy to accommodate participants who were not either Jewish or Muslim, as we saw in the opening episode to which I will now return.

Conclusion

As it would often be the case at the end of the meeting, Renata called on network members to do a write-up for a press release on the event on behalf of their respective groups. 'Could I ask Esther and Gillian to write something on behalf of our Jewish and other community members? And who would like to be the Muslim person?' Did Renata's question evoke a conceptualisation of being Muslim that sedimented it around a specific set of imageries? On first reading, it did appear to project an expectation of a volunteer action coming from a very specific constituency of network members. But she asked the question with a smile, almost trying to suppress a laugh, as if hinting that it was a joke and therefore immediately dismantling this projection. It may be argued that this one sentence and its delivery indexed a sense of irony, which signalled that Renata was not only aware of the essentialising nature of her question and of the potential criticisms that it could invite, but was also critical of it herself. The way she phrased the question also implied a possibility of one choosing to be 'a Muslim person', if one so wished, and I would argue that this one sentence reveals in its delivery the way Renata's theoretical thinking about community belonging momentarily oscillated between (or simultaneously combined) the notion's both fixed and fluid valences, indexing the dependence of its meanings on differing contexts, as well as these contexts' fundamental equity.

In this paper, I suggested that, at first blush, it may appear that there is a tension in the way my interlocutors present their work to emphasise the shared histories and experiences of Jewish and Muslim British citizens and the perception that these efforts only

fix notions of what it means to be Jewish and Muslim (as well as narratives about Jewish-Muslim relations) around a specific sets of concepts. However, I argued that while, on the one hand, notions that seem to inscribe Jewish and Muslim populations as different could be read as constitutive of fixed differentiated identities, their proliferation was not by any means its sole outcome. I suggest that ideas about Jews and Muslims being different furnish just one strand of such logics, which, seemingly paradoxically, but also inexorably, goes hand in hand with narratives that inscribe the two groups as remarkably and in some aspects even uniquely similar to each other. Domains of similarity may emphasise shared histories or go completely beyond the discursive boundaries of religion, race or ethnicity altogether and foreground very different sets of commonalities provided by other constructed affiliations, such as those of gender or profession. I therefore argued that the very richness of these theorisations challenges wider societal preconceptions harking back to colonial and Orientalist constructions that either see Jews and Muslims in opposition to each other or describe them as the unreformed other of the West.

I also suggested that while at first glance inter-community initiatives such as the one that I have been following could be seen as examples of minority groups engaging in strategic alliance building or attempting to follow state-sponsored community cohesion agendas in the way they privilege points of contact that unite Jewish and Muslim audiences and avoid topics that could potentially be divisive, describing them as purely strategic would imply denying their actors agency and integrity. I also argued that the complexity of my interlocutors' thematisations of Jewish-Muslim relations underpinned by the diversity of the sources of knowledge that they relied on in arriving at these conceptualisations could best be understood as an example of what Jackson has described as racial sincerity, an analytics which offers a conceptual challenge to the notion of authenticity.

On a wider theoretical plane, building upon the insights offered in recent scholarship on Jewish-Muslim interactions (Everett and Gidley, 2022; Klug, 2014; Sheldon, 2022a; 2022b; Kasstan, 2022) and research highlighting the flexibility and plurality in human actants' analytical thinking (Glick Schiller, Darieva, Gruner Domic, 2011; Heywood, 2020; Mathur, 2020; Stasch, 2009), I proposed a framework that underscores the agentive power of minoritised groups. This framework invites us to pay closer attention to the way racialised communities develop and express their ethnic, racial and religious self-understandings, as well as define their positionalities vis-à-vis the majorities and other minorities in ways that go beyond binaries-based theorisations and emphasise the simultaneity of similarity and difference. While, on the one hand, my approach challenges essentialising, colonially inflected discourses about minority difference, as they transpire in state funded initiatives and quotidian attitudes of the wider population, it at the same time complicates polarising accounts that construct minorities as positioned singularly either in alliance or in opposition to the state, to the perceived majorities or to each other. Moreover, this analytics casts light on the agentive capacity of minoritised groups to engage different communities and state structures in ways that re-negotiate on the basis of the plurality of concepts and practices emergent from the subaltern traditions the frames of reference in relation to how inter-community dialogue is formulated

and actualised. The proposed framework also underscores a more general human tendency to act in and think about their social relationships through conceptualisations that convey fluid multiplicities rather than sedimented opposites.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Chima Anyadike-Danes for his excellent suggestions regarding the theoretical framing of this study and to Paolo Heywood for his insightful feedback on an earlier version of this paper. I also benefitted from presenting parts of this paper at the annual meetings of the British and Irish Association for Jewish Studies and of the European Association of Social Anthropologists. I also wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers and the editor of the journal, Nina Glick Schiller, for their detailed and constructive comments.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: The paper stems from the ORA-funded project Muslim-Jewish encounter, diversity and distance in urban Europe: religion, culture and social model (ENCOUNTERS), PI Ben Gidley, award reference ES/V013637/1. Economic and Social Research Council, (grant number ES/V013637/1).

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Notes

1. For the purposes of protecting the anonymity of my interlocutors I am not disclosing either the name or the geographic location of the initiative that I followed.
2. I conducted nine interviews together with Fiaz Ahmed, who worked with me in the first year of the project, and I am very grateful to him for this support.
3. Outside the context of research focusing on organised top-down social cohesion initiatives, essentialising practices and thinking have also been discussed by social scientists in relation to quotidian intergroup street encounters in the UK and other parts of Europe. For instance, Anick Volleberg (2016) in her study of inter-community exchanges in a multiethnic neighbourhood in Antwerp demonstrates how white urban residents draw on social cohesion policies in their day-to-day interactions with their Orthodox Jewish and Moroccan neighbours in order to engage them in inter-community events that arguably essentialise their ethnoreligious positionality. Congruently, Ruth Sheldon has critically discussed how the Haredi Jewish communities in London have been constructed in essentialising and othering ways both in the conceptualization of their secular/Christian neighbours and in academic and policy diversity discourses (2022a; 2022b).

4. Some of this scholarship has engaged the concept of strategic essentialism developed by Gayatri Spivak in the 1980s in the course of her collaboration with the Subaltern Studies group of historians. Spivak conceptualises as strategic essentialism the efforts of the Subaltern Studies collective to theorise as historically possible, if not completely recoverable, consciousness of subordinated groups (Spivak 1988).
5. Institute for Jewish Policy Research. Jews in Britain 2021: First Results from the census of England and Wales. https://www.jpr.org.uk/reports/jews-britain-2021-first-results-census-england-and-wales (accessed on 5 December 2022).
6. Muslim Council of Britain. 2021 Census: As UK Population Grows, So Do British Muslim Communities https://mcb.org.uk/general/census-2021-mcb-first-look/. Accessed on 5 December 2022.
7. For instance, see Bharat, 2020 and Silverstein, 2018 for the case of France.
8. I have discussed the issue of social hesitation in the context of interactions between Jewish and Muslim communities in Egorova, 2018 building upon Jackson's theorisation of social fears in race relations (Jackson, 2008).
9. Shechita in Judaism is slaughtering of animals for food according to the requirements of kashrut (regulations that prohibit the eating of certain foods and require that other foods are prepared in a certain manner).

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