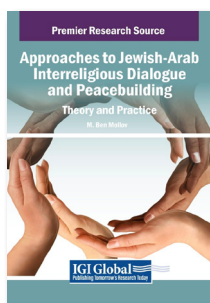


BOOK REVIEW

Approaches to Jewish-Arab Interreligious Dialogue and Peacebuilding: Theory and Practice

By M. Ben Mollov. Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2025. 417 pp. ISBN 978-1-6684-9476-4. \$245.00 (hardcover); \$245.00 (e-book); \$295.00 (hardcover + e-book); \$185.00 (softcover); \$37.50 (individual chapters).



Many people in the world feel that religion is the source of much conflict in contemporary times—that it is the problem, rather than part of the solution. Ben Mollov, a veteran peacebuilder and academic, thinks otherwise, and he makes his case very strongly in his new book *Approaches to Jewish-Arab Interreligious Dialogue and Peacebuilding: Theory and Practice*, which is the culmination of more than twenty-five years in this field in Israel and abroad.

Mollov is on the faculty of the Graduate Program in Conflict Management, Resolution and Negotiation of the School of Communications and is Head of the Project for the Study of Religion, Culture and Peace at Bar-Ilan University, Israel. He has been specializing in the Jewish Political Tradition and Interreligious/Intercultural approaches to Dialogue and Conflict Resolution for a long time. His work in fostering dialogue between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, which began in the early 1990s, brought him to many fascinating places—including Hebron, the Gush Etzion block near Bethlehem, Khan Unis in the Gaza Strip, Akko in Northern Israel, as well as to Malaysia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. In addition, he was a member of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI), the multi-religious and multi-cultural organization that I founded and directed from 1991 until the end of 2014.

One of the fundamental ideas that Mollov presents comprehensively in this book is that “there is no escaping the Arab-Israeli Conflict becoming a religiously based conflict.” As he argues cogently, it has already become a religiously based conflict since “it is rooted in a clash of narratives ultimately based upon religion, culture and identity, three different but closely related

concepts.” Much of this book explains how these concepts are related and offers new ideas and strategies as to how to integrate these strands of the topic into effective dialogue work.

This book is organized as two main sections. The first one serves as background to the rest of the book. It contains three chapters: an Introduction, a chapter on “Religion, Conflict and Conflict Resolution,” and one on “the Arab-Israeli Conflict as Rooted in Religion and Culture.” The second section of the book contains Mollov’s main findings and applications, which are evidenced especially in chapters 4–6, in which he brings empirical research to bear on Jewish-Arab Interreligious Dialogue. In addition, he adds some very interesting chapters on “Idealism, and Realism in the Jewish Political Tradition,” “A Federalist Covenantal Approach to Peacebuilding and Religious Diplomacy,” and “The Abraham Accords.” All these chapters reflect his research interests over many years. Also, each chapter begins with an abstract and concludes with references and endnotes.

This book is part of a growing literature in recent decades that tries to explain how religion can be a positive force in conflict resolution. The fact is that religion is highly relevant for dialogue and conflict resolution, although much of the secular world still does not recognize that this is the case. In his introduction to this book, Mollov mentions a number of books that have dealt with the theme of religion, dialogue and peacebuilding during the past few decades, such as Abu Nimer, Welty, and Khoury, *Unity in Diversity: Interfaith Dialogue in the Middle East* (2007); Appleby, *Ambivalence of the Sacred* (2000); Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religions Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (2005); Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence and Peacemaking* (2002); Ronald Kronish, *The Other Peace Process: Interreligious Dialogue, a View from Jerusalem* (2017); Omer, Appleby, and Little, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict and Peacebuilding* (2015); and Smock, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding* (2002).

Indeed, in this book, Mollov does provides an excellent literature review on the interrelated themes of religion, dialogue, and peacebuilding. In addition, he summarizes much of what he has learned from his twenty-five years in this field in his conclusion to this book. The major themes that he emphasizes in this book are:

- Religion can provide a bridge between Jews and Arab in the Middle East, based on the similarities between Judaism and Islam.

- Religion can be used to recontextualize/reframe dialogue between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs (particularly given that Islam constitutes an important underlying foundation of Arab identity and worldview).
- The promotion of mutual respect between Jews and Arabs is crucial, which can be advanced by interreligious dialogue is paramount in the Middle East for peacebuilding and conflict resolution.
- Interreligious dialogue does not stand alone as a factor for advancing conflict resolution; peacebuilding must be combined with the traditional elements of diplomacy which also includes at times hard power as well as soft power, that can bring about stable balances of power.” (pp.361-362)

His conclusions are based on many years of research and experience in dialogue. In particular, he taught a course entitled “Jewish-Arab-Interreligious Dialogue” at Bar Ilan University under the auspices of the School of Communications International Program. That course, which ran for six academic cycles, provided a new model for Jewish-Arab relations based on the interreligious approach at the university level. Through it, the author gained valuable experience as a facilitator of dialogue. In addition, he conducted innovative empirical research through questionnaires and interviews with participants. *Approaches to Jewish-Arab Interreligious Dialogue and Peacebuilding* benefits from the resulting insights.

One of the most interesting aspects of this book is the author’s discussion of the Abrahamic Accords and their significance for interreligious dialogue. He asserts: “The Abrahamic Accords of 2020 can be considered the beginning of a game-changer in that its legitimacy (as opposed to merely de facto recognition) to a Jewish collective in the Middle East which had essentially been absent in peacebuilding efforts prior to the Accords” (362). The Abraham Accords were negotiated during the last year of the previous Trump administration (2020), as a way to expand the peace process in the region. Agreements were reached with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain and later with Morocco. Many critics, myself among them, viewed these agreements as an end-run on the Palestinians, who were left out of this process. Yet, Molloy sees much value to these agreements, especially from an interreligious perspective. For example, under Point 6 in the Accords, one can find this uplifting paragraph:

Mutual Understanding and Co-existence: The parties undertake to foster mutual understanding, respect, co-existence and a culture of peace between their societies in the spirit of their common ancestor, Abraham, and the new era of peace and friendly relations ushered in by this treaty, including by cultivating people-to-people programs, interfaith dialogue, and cultural, academic, youth, scientific and other exchanges between their peoples... They shall work towards establishing a High-Level Joint Forum for Peace and Coexistence dedicated to advancing these goals” (345).

But did any of this every happen in any significant or substantive way? Not really. In my view, the language of the Abraham Accords is loftily aspirational. As yet, these accords have had no major impact in the region of the Middle East.

The recent Israel-Hamas war has made interreligious dialogue as a method of peacebuilding in the region much more difficult. According to Mollov: “Recent events sparked by the Hamas perpetrated massacre of October 7, 2023, have sent shock waves through the Middle East and seemingly severely undermined hopes for peacebuilding between Jews and Arabs” (366). I would say that he was using great understatement here, since in practice the war has been so severe that almost no dialogue has been possible between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs during the past 15 months. Nevertheless, Mollov is more optimistic than I am, since he believes that the pendulum can swing back:

When peacemaking/peacebuilding once again comes on to the agenda, the interreligious approach to dialogue and peacebuilding should be called upon. Indeed, the history of the twentieth century shows that humanity cannot live indefinitely in a cycle of violence and terror and vision is called for to allow us to exist in some worthy manner. Indeed, all the more so in the Holy Land” (366).

I hope he is correct, but I am not as sanguine as he is. I haven’t seen many visionaries around here lately. Maybe they will somehow arise out of the depths of despair.

This well researched and comprehensive book will be useful for faculty who teach about interreligious dialogue in the context of conflict resolution around the world, as well as for students who study interreligious relations, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding at many colleges, seminaries, and post-graduate institutions. It will also be relevant to anyone interested in learning about people and institutions who have contributed positively to interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding in Israel and Palestine in recent decades.

Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish
Independent scholar, author, and peacebuilder
Jerusalem, Israel



The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS) are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of Interreligious Studies Media (ISM).