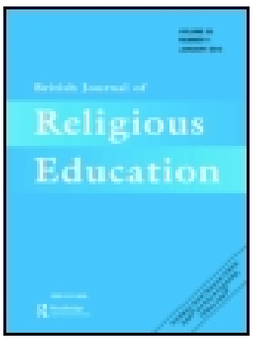

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'From the wells': teaching openness in Judaism and Islam towards a shared society in Israel?

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the case study of a programme for Jewish and Palestinian educators in Israel and our initial insights into the outcome of the initiative. The programme aims to address racism, segregation, and prejudice and to support educators to teach culture and tradition in a more humanistic, inclusive, and critical way. To achieve this, it draws on inter-religious and intercultural dialogue. We will discuss how this method is rooted in both Judaism and Islam thus paving the way for participants to not only develop a better understanding of their own but also of others' tradition. Importantly, it also highlights the interrelations of these traditions, which can contribute to the development of a shared society.

KEYWORDS

Peace education; interreligious dialogue; israeli-Palestinian relations; scripture reasoning

Introduction

The trenches that separate different groups in Israel and continue to fuel the ongoing conflict run along the lines of different religious and national identities. In conflict-affected societies such as Israel, there is a tradition of educational initiatives that seek to contribute to reconciliation, tolerance and mutual acceptance by facilitating contact between the different groups who are in conflict.

Since the 1970s, such educational programmes have been developed that promote coexistence and facilitate contact between Arabs and Jews (Abu-Nimer 2004). As Abu-Nimer noted, they shifted from a cultural approach that sought to introduce Jewish-Israelis to Arab culture through folklore, food, etc., to a prejudice reduction approach that addressed prejudices towards the respective 'other', and finally to a conflict approach, which recognised the inherent role of conflict and without prioritising cultural harmony.

Despite their considerable progress, these initiatives have been criticised for failing to address structural power imbalances, and for imposing predefined roles of what constitutes an Arab and a Jew (Abu-Nimer 2004). Similarly, Bekerman (2018) concluded that they tend to be limited to short-term intergroup effects but do not impact on larger societal relationships between the groups or participants' everyday realities as they neglect institutionalised injustice and inequality that exists between the groups.

These deficiencies of previous educational initiatives in conflict-affected societies point to the need for a rethinking and development of new approaches. This appears to be a particularly pressing need in Israel, where education is increasingly undermined by an ethno-religious agenda that is at risk of widening the national, religious and cultural trenches and tensions. The impact of this agenda on the education system is particularly concerning as it further curtails teachers' opportunities to

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discuss issues related to other religious groups and to address racism and prejudice (Agbaria 2018, 2016).

In light of these developments, we will discuss the case study of an emerging civil society initiative called 'From the Wells' (FTW) that seeks to respond to these problems, by establishing a sustainable educational programmes for Jewish and Palestinians educators in Israel that seeks to transform the learning and teaching culture and tradition in Israeli schools in a more humanistic, inclusive and critical way. Kuttner (2017) has noted a recent shift among these peace initiatives from promoting coexistence to shared society as a desirable outcome. As opposed to the coexistence mindset, the ideal of a shared society seeks to engage the groups in a dialogic process of co-construction of a shared reality and the gradual cultivation of a shared society mindset. We argue that the FTW initiative fits into this new paradigm shift towards a shared society, as it (1) builds on the connection to one's own tradition and (2) facilitates the incorporation of another tradition. This inter-religious dialogue can enlarge believers' religious imagery, enrich their religious experience, and enable participants to reflect critically yet empathetically on their own beliefs.

Context: Palestinian and Jewish educators in Israel

Palestinian citizens of Israel are Arab residents of Mandatory Palestine who remained within Israel's borders following the 1948 War and the establishment of the state of Israel. In 2019, their official number was about 1.6 million people, representing close to 20% of Israel's population. Most of them are Muslim (82% Sunni and 9% Druze), and around 9% are Christian (Central Bureau of Statistics 2020). A variety of academic studies, governmental reports, civil society reviews, and media coverages highlight the discrimination that affect this homeland national minority in Israel in almost all socio-economic indicators (See more in Khattab, Miaari and Stier 2016; Lewin-Epstein and Semyonov 2019; Smooha 2019). Despite improvements of their situation, they continue to be marginalised in the public sphere, which privileges mainly its Jewish citizens. Although most of them seek to integrate into Israeli society, especially in terms of the workplace, they often feel unwanted and unwelcome (Hager and Jabareen 2016). This sense of marginalisation applies not only to the individual but also to the collective. As Palestinians feel that their culture and religion are ignored and disrespected, they constantly struggle for recognition of their national, cultural and religious identity (Agbaria 2016).

This discrimination is also prevalent in the education system. Being divided into different sectors that cater for different groups,[1] the sector that comprises Arab schools has suffered from an unequal allocation of state resources, lack of recognition of Palestinian culture in the curriculum, and a reduction of the Arab leadership's influence on education policy (Abu-Saad 2019; Agbaria 2016). Segregation, which is also evident in terms of residential areas, is fertile soil for the development of prejudice and negative feelings of one group towards each other. (Albayrak 2012; Ford 2006; Kepnes 2006; Ochs 2006)

Theoretical background

Barriers to the engagement with (other) religion

Despite the rich diversity within cultural and religious traditions, they are often reduced to thin and generic versions. Intellectual debates, doctrinal disagreements and critical stances are often ignored for the sake of presenting a harmonised system of beliefs that can unite adherents around a standardised agenda (Agbaria 2012; Panjwani and Agbaria 2018). Such reduction can be politicised for the sake of nation-building projects, allowing the dominant group to utilise all cultural and religious resources in order to legitimise their interests while downplaying or ignoring the elements in their traditions that don't seem to fit the national project.

In Israel, this opposition to the idea that Palestinian and Jewish educators can jointly enrich their lives and professional practices by opening themselves and their schools to other traditions has two sources. The first is religious, as devout followers often believe that their faith contains the whole and exclusive truth about reality and, therefore, justifying that there is no need in studying other religions' scriptures. The second reason for this opposition is national, as nation states tend to recruit all available sources from the history of the nation to advance a unified narrative while downplaying aspects that do not accord with the assumed authentic existence of the nation. The nation's religion can be also recruited for the sake of this project, again leading to a measure of separation vis-à-vis other religions and streams within the same religion which are seen as less conducive to the national project (Guyver 2016).

This lack of openness towards other religions and cultures as a byproduct of nation-building projects remains prevalent in Israel, arguably for the following reasons: (a) the ongoing Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which represents a context where different groups view each other as enemies or at least as a real threat. This certainly contributes to the lack of readiness of both sides to open themselves to the other's religion and culture. (b) As part of the nation-building project, Jewish educational system puts much more emphasis on the strengthening of Jewish identity than on education for peace and dialogue, and (c) the right-wing government, which has remained in power since 2009, has been promoting the strengthening of an ethno-religious identity over openness to other national, cultural, and religious groups as part of its educational policies.

Moreover, another barrier is perhaps the tendency among the Palestinian minority to prioritise its collective national identity over different religious identities as a unifying strategy as part of its struggle to counter efforts to shape Israel as an exclusively Jewish state. Thus, from the Palestinian perspective, entering a dialogue with Israeli-Jews on a religious basis runs the risk of deemphasizing their common *national* identity (Agbaria, Mustafa and Jabareen 2015).

Inter-religious dialogue through hermeneutics

Carson (1992) applied hermeneutics to peace education, arguing that 'Interpretation is necessary with a topic as education for peace, where many of the old assurances and certainties of direction begin to break down' (p. 113). Al-Daraweesh and Snauwaert (2017, 2015) have applied hermeneutics to the field of peace education and moral discourse, arguing that hermeneutics is conducive to the promotion of human rights, democracy, peace, and social justice. According to them, the discourse on human rights, social justice and peace 'requires the interpretation of values-based collective identities situated within diverse cultural horizons *as well as* the fusion of horizons' (p. 14).

However, they argue, this discourse has been shaped, yet paralysed, by the debate between the two 'opposed schools of thought on human rights: universalism and cultural relativism' (p. 1). For them, hermeneutics enable avoiding the cultural imperialism of a universalist approach, on the one hand, and the tolerance of injustice implied by the relativist approach, on the other. It promotes, instead, a rationalist approach guided by a pedagogy of inquiry that emphasises reflection, dialogue, interpretation, and deliberation. The hermeneutical move between text and context, between present and past, and between diverse and disparate individuals and cultures has great potential to promote education for peace and coexistence. Al-Daraweesh and Snauwaert explain,

To have a historical horizon means to understand the relationship between part and whole, and to be capable of placing this understanding within a cultural framework. This means that the interpreter must think within the culture's ideas, thoughts, and structure, that is, its constitutive rules. To reach an adequate understanding of human rights one needs to place oneself within the historical horizon of the society constituted by its basic rules and norms (Al-Daraweesh and Snauwaert 2017, 11–12).

Indeed, a central concept in hermeneutics is horizon. A horizon represents the limits of one's perspective and thus shaping one's worldview. It 'includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point' (Gadamer 1976, 128). To gain access to a different horizon, one has to

be ready to change one's perspective and adopt different vantage points to allow different horizons to emerge. These different horizons can give rise to a cohesive worldview when being fused through a hermeneutical process called *fusion of horizons*. Ricoeur (1981) defined the fusion of horizons as:

> a dialectical concept which results from the rejection of two alternatives: objectivism, whereby the objectification of the other is premised on the forgetting of oneself; and absolute knowledge, according to which universal history can be articulated within a single horizon. We exist neither in closed horizons, nor within a horizon that is unique. No horizon is closed, since it is possible to place oneself in another point of view and in another culture. (p. 75)

Drawing on the method of hermeneutics and the concept of horizon we will discuss how the tradition of Judaism and Islam applies these in their relationship to other Abrahamic religions.

Jewish openness to other traditions

Whereas the study of Jewish texts and the debate about Jewish customs and laws are mostly carried without reference to other Abrahamic traditions, there some Jewish communities stressed their openness to learn from other traditions, not only regarding science or medicine but also about philosophy, theology, and even the worship of God. The acclaimed thinker and *halakhist* Maimonides once stated in his commentary to tractate *Avot*, that one should listen to the truth regardless of who said it. Indeed, in his work *Guide of the Perplexed* Maimonides is explicit about his debt to non-Jewish philosophers, such as Aristotle ('head of philosophers', as he calls him) and Al-Farabi, while being critical about Jewish philosophers that preceded him. He emphasised the need for Jews to remain open to other influences to understand others' traditions.

Rabbi Abraham, son of Maimonides and his successor as the leader of the Jewish community in Egypt, took this approach one step further applying it to the domain of worship as well. Being frustrated by the way prayers were carried out in synagogues as he noticed that many people found it hard to concentrate and spent much of the time chatting, he proposed to reform Jewish prayer by introducing some elements from the Muslim prayer. For example, more thoughtful preparation for prayer, including a thorough washing of hands and legs like the Muslim Wudu (the ritual purification before prayer); praying in rows as in mosques and, most dramatically, importing the Muslim *Sujud*, prostration to God, in Jewish prayer (Ben Maimon and Moshe 1989). In the eyes of R. Abraham son of Maimonides, Jews and Muslim are praying to the same God, hence, they have much to learn from each other about how to arrange and run this vital religious institution.

R. Abraham realised that his suggestion to import elements from the Muslim prayer into the synagogue might be resisted by his community based on the Talmudic prohibition on 'following the manners of the nations', which is an expansion of the Biblical injunction 'And ye shall not walk in the manners of the nation, which I cast out before you' (Lev. 20:23).[2] While the suggestion to introduce the Muslim *Sujud* and *Wudu* into synagogues was arguably a violation of this injunction, R. Abraham responded to this objection at length, arguing that the prohibition applied only to manners that were unique to forms of idolatry and not to all manners followed by idolaters.[3] He further argued that it is acceptable to consciously import manners from non-Jewish cultures if the norms make sense and if they fit Jewish values and practices. Even more so as they are imported from Islam, which monotheistic nature is beyond doubt (Maimonides 1990, 448).

Even regarding Christianity, about which the Jewish tradition is theologically more ambivalent, rabbis have expressed views similar to those of R. Abraham. For instance, R. Israel Moses Hazan (1808–1863) argued that Jews have a lot to learn from churches; their architecture, the dress code of worshippers, the silence, the atmosphere of reverence and so on. Even the tunes used in Christian services, insofar as they are inspiring, may be introduced into Judaism. He argued that there is nothing wrong with Jews singing their prayers in Christian melodies that they picked up from the neighbouring Church (Hazan 1991).

Islamic openness to other traditions

In the Islamic tradition, Jewish and Christian literature can be used in the interpretation of, in the Holy Qur'an, especially when it comes to understanding tales of the various prophets. While this used to be a common practice, it has become exceptional. We argue this practice does not only contribute to an interreligious dialogue but also to expand and enrich the Muslim religious experience and imagination. Its main purpose is to construct a textual dialogue, which is not necessarily theological (Haney 2004; Lategan 1996), but a dialogue that is capable of moving intercultural encounters beyond the limits of the idea that the Qur'an had grown out of a Judaism or Christianity. Such a dialogue is less concerned with the origin of the Qur'an and other Muslim foundational texts and is more attentive to their content, presentation, and structure.

For most Muslims, the Qur'an is the unaltered, eternal, and immutable Word of God. It is not only a Book of ritual (*aibadah)*, prayer (*duaa*), contemplation (*fikr*), but also a Book of remembrance (*dhikr*). As such, it retells stories found in the Bible in a recognisable form but the accounts are generally different from the Biblical narrative context. Frequently the Qur'anic narratives are shortened and so many Muslim commentators embellish these stories with reference to the Biblical sources.

I argue that how these narratives are explained and commented on in Islamic sources in general, and the Muslim exegeses and commentaries, *Tafsirs*, in particular, provide an excellent opportunity to examine how Islamic sacred texts draw on Judaism and Christianity. Another important field of study is to what extent Jews and Christians were involved in the development of Muslims' understanding of their own religion in general, and the meaning and significance of the 'Tales of the Prophets' in particular. These stories were detailed and scrutinised in a variety of books of Tafsir, exegeses, including those authored by al-Tabari (839–923), al-Zamakhshari (1075–1144), al-Razi (1149–1209), and Ibn Kathir (1301–1373).

For the examination of this interreligious dialogue in Islam, the evaluation and accommodation of the *Israiliyat* is particularly relevant. In brief, Israiliyat refers to the traditions and reports that contain elements of the legendary religious literature of the Jews, but also to Christian, Zoroastrian and other Near Eastern elements including folklore (Albayrak 2012, 2002). I investigate in particular the following three issues: first, whether it is permissible for a Muslim to read Jewish and Christian religious texts; second, whether it is permissible for Muslims to translate from them; and third, whether it is permissible for a Muslim to question and consult with Jews and Christians in searching for meaning and significance of Islamic religious texts.

Yet, there is also a strong tradition that forbids questioning and encourages the avoidance of information from Jewish and Christian sources. This tradition draws on various Islamic reports, Hadith. For example, one report states that Umar, the second caliph, found some part of the Torah in Arabic and read it in the presence of Prophet Muhamad. According to this report, the Prophet addressed Umar saying:

> Are you being reckless O son of Khattab!? By the oath of Allah! I have brought it (religion) to you in a state that is bright and clear. Do not ask them (People of the Book) about anything, because it shouldn't be that you end up denying the truth they tell or you believe the falsehood that they tell. I swear that even if Moses was alive among you nothing would be opened to him but to follow me. (The Hadith, Ahmad Musnad, Vol. 3 p. 387).

This report represents an extremely strict attitude towards any knowledge deriving from the People of the Book, despite the potential of finding truth in their books and answers. It explicitly discourages Muslims from questioning them.

However, according to another report:

The people of the Scripture (Jews) used to recite the Torah in Hebrew and they used to explain it in Arabic to the Muslims. On that Allah's Messenger said, 'Do not believe the people of the Scripture or disbelieve them', but say: 'We believe in Allah and what is revealed to us.' (The Hadith, Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 6, Book 60, Hadith 12)

In contrast, according to this report, Muslims should adopt a non-committal attitude to what they hear, being asked to delay their judgement. This more moderate approach, according to which the

questioning of Jews and Christians seems to be permitted, reveals itself also in another known Hadith:

> The Prophet said, 'Convey (my teachings) to the people even if it were a single sentence, and tell others the stories of Bani Israel (which have been taught to you), for it is not sinful to do so. And whoever tells a lie on me intentionally, will surely take his place in the (Hell) Fire.' (The Hadith, Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 4, Book 55, Hadith 667).

The various approaches towards Jewish and Christian texts and scholars can be classified into three types based on the widely used categories propped by Ibn Kathir who clarified that Israiliyyat is to be referenced or quoted only for supplementary attestation, not for full support. According to him (Dogan 2015, 181), these categories are:

(i) Those which are known to be true because they are attested to in the Qur'anic revelation, and thus should be accepted.
(ii) Those whose falsehood is certified from the Qur'an, and thus should be rejected.
(iii) Those which fall into neither of the other classes and thus can be read and learned in search of personal lessons and significance.

This spectrum of approaches resulted in a wide inclusion of Jewish and Christian references in Muslim exegesis and commentaries, while it also outlines its limitations. Interestingly, the rejection of Israliyyat did not become a major concern of Quranic exegesis until the reformist movement of the 19th and 20th centuries. They promoted the development of new methodological approaches to the Quran but also political transformations. As a result, for Muslims, especially those who are critical of the political developments in Israel, the term Israliyyat in qur'anic exegesis has negative connotations.

Nevertheless, we argue that the reference to Israliyyat literature in Muslim exegeses and commentaries forms a potential bridge between Islam and the other Abrahamic religions. Most importantly, this literature provides evidence for Muslims that they are encouraged to examine other scriptures, learn from their wisdom, and enrich their religious experience; yet, without compromising or relinquishing their own Islamic beliefs.

FTW: background, approach and initial insights

FTW started with the conviction that to make a real impact on society it is necessary to work with 'agents of change' for a significant period. Principals and teachers school of history, civics, religion and tradition were identified as agents of change due to their influence on schools and communities. So far, four cohorts of principals and three groups of teachers have graduated from the two-year program while two other groups have completed their first of two years. To ensure consistency, the groups meet approximately ten to twelve times a year, for five to six hours each time, besides two to three field study tours at the community level.

Textual reasoning in small groups is the core of the FTW activity. In the Jewish tradition, it is known as *havruta* and *halaqa* in the Islamic tradition. It is structured around topics which seem pertinent to both Jews and Arabs in Israel such as human dignity, forgiveness, pluralism and so forth.

FTW speakers and facilitators are given the freedom to select texts that they feel comfortable and experienced to present and lead discussions on them. However, when prepared for the meetings, they are always asked to consider the potential of these texts to encourage dialogue and reflexivity among participants. To ensure flexibility and yet consistency with FTW goals, no specific or strict parameters were defined for the texts selection. Nonetheless, FTW speakers and facilitators are guided to select texts that fit FTW purposes, namely, texts that entail a humanistic approach, a critical stance, intertextuality and dialogue with other texts, and positions that value debate, doubt, personal growth, and openness to other traditions.

The study texts are always provided to the participants in Hebrew and Arabic. They include significant extracts from the Quran, New Testament, and Tanakh. Most of the provided translations, be it in Hebrew or Arabic, are extracted from trusted academic works authored by established scholars. However, some philosophical and literary extracts are translated especially for FTW. Professional translators were commissioned and their translations are revised by FTW team and academic advisors.

This approach seeks to promote a sense of equality by enabling each participant to express his or her view freely and to reflect on its relevance for their personal or professional life. Through this method, participants encounter the texts directly with no meditation by any authorities and they are encouraged to examine them critically. Participants are exposed to different perspectives and interpretations of the text by members of other religious/cultural groups. Finally, this method can also promote trust and improve relationships among participants by providing opportunities for participants from different backgrounds to attempt sincerely to understand each others' foundational texts.

Most meetings have the following format: the first part focuses on deliberating about a foundational text in small and mixed groups. Invited academic lecturers and religious leaders (e.g. a sheikh, priest or rabbi) provide introductory remarks and guiding questions as to how to approach the selected text, while linking it to universal themes and values, highlighting interfaces and possibilities of the intertextuality of with other philosophical, theological texts and literary texts. Then, participants divide into smaller groups of three to five people and study the sources in the handouts, focusing on a few guiding questions. This is followed by a group discussion about participants' insights.

The second part consists of workshops that provide opportunities for participants to get to know each other, to discuss the study text's relevance to Israel's sociopolitical reality and how to incorporate the text into their teaching or schools. The programme also designates hours or curricula for teaching FTW content. To facilitate the translation of FTW content into schools' curricula and pedagogy, the FTW team collected and edited study texts, handouts and guiding questions into study units and lesson plans for middle and high school teachers, including a special curriculum on family relations in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

In addition to the standard meetings which follow the above structure, FTW includes visits to churches, mosques, to an Islamic college and a Jewish seminary (a yeshiva).

The program's approach draws on previous scholarship in the field of education about the importance of intercultural or inter-religious dialogue (Albayrak 2012; Ganesh and Holmes 2011; Glaser 1997; Holmes, Dooly, and O'Regan 2017; Halperin 1995; Knitter 2009; Newby 1979, 1986). The underlining assumption is that by reading others' texts from their perspective not only facilitates understanding of it but also provides a step towards mutual understanding as an import aspect of dialogue (Albayrak 2012). Since many Jewish and Muslim political movements formulate their visions and demands in religious language, and as conceptions of homeland, peoplehood, sovereignty, and governance are often framed through theological frameworks, we argue that any genuine dialogue between Jews and Arabs in Israel must engage with the foundational texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The program draws on the method of 'scriptural reasoning', in which participants are encouraged to engage in a critical reading of texts from their own traditions and from those of other participants (Ford 2006; Kepnes 2006; Ochs 2006). Kepnes (2006, 381–83) provides the following general guidelines for conducting sessions using scriptural reasoning: (a) to select a text that focuses on a common figure, theme or issue from all traditions, (b) to facilitate small group discussions, (c) to create a sense of equality among participants; (d) to ensure that all traditions are represented in the study groups; and (e) and not to privilege a single methodological approach to the scriptures.

Importantly, FTW goes beyond scripture and includes a wide variety of texts – classical and modern, religious and philosophical, poetic and fictional – from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. The goal is to train educators to deliberate on the relevance of these texts for their

personal growth, sociopolitical reality, and professional practice. It seeks to achieve personal and group empowerment through the study of one's own culture and through an open engagement with the cultures of others. Some of the selected texts reflect empathy and tolerance, while others reflect racism and hatred. Some manifest rational and critical thinking, while others manifest irrationality and conformity.

Even though we have not conducted an empirical study yet on the outcome of the FTW initiative, we like to discuss our initial insights. Regarding its positive impact, participants and graduates have independently started various projects in the FTW spirit. Participants have initiated meetings between Arab and Jewish teachers, introduced new curricular materials and inter-school projects that encourage tolerance and intercultural capacities, and advanced professional cooperation with neighbouring Arab and Jewish schools and communities. Furthermore, a network of graduates has been established, which convenes regularly. Finally, FTW was invited to work with directors of community centres and collaborative initiatives between Arab and Jewish community centres have started to emerge.

Regarding the participants' attitudes towards their and others' religion, we found that the Jewish Israeli participants, who are mostly secular developed a more sensitive approach to their own tradition as they encountered the Palestinian participants for whom their religion is more foundational in their identity and existence. The Israeli Palestinian participants, who are mostly religious or traditional developed a more critical and more reflective approach towards their own religion, as they encountered the Jewish participants who are less committed to religious language and ideals. Generally, we observed that participants developed a form of intimacy and mutual trust that seemed to enable these processes. The dynamics of this mediation process merits further research and exploration.

Another important insight concerns Islamic education in Israel. The program exposed the shortcomings of Islamic education in Israel, which is taught as a generic, monolithic and ahistorical religion. For many Muslim educators, the program functioned as a remedy for the light version of Islam that they find in the curriculum. It provided them with the opportunity to learn more about denominational differences, the intellectual debates in Islamic theology and Jurisprudence; to go beyond literal interpretations, and to question manifestations of fatalism, conformity, and hyper-solidarity (Agbaria 2019). The Israeli curriculum of Islamic education can be best described as detached from the impoverished socio-political reality of the pupils, as ignoring the significance of many holy places for the Palestinians in Israel, and as strict and dogmatic in its emphasis on ritual instead of on values and ethics (Agbaria 2012).

Conclusion and implications

The FTW program attempts to reclaim the moment in which traditions spoke with each other from within. In multicultural societies, which are facing increasing challenges in the form of racism, segregation, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, this attempt seems a worthy endeavour. We argue that educating for openness, reflexivity and dialogue through working with foundational texts from different religious traditions can contribute to develop culturally responsive pedagogies (Pirbhai-Illich, Pete, and Martin 2017) and to cultivate intercultural capacities (Woodrow et al. 1997) at school and community levels, especially in conflict-ridden societies. In a time when authenticity is marketed as a form of radicalisation and religiosity is equated with close-mindedness, we believe that it is critical to reclaim the strands within Judaism and Islam that provide the potential for overlap and dialogue.

Although most of FTW components have been utilised in other peacebuilding programs (Mollov and Lavie 2001, 2019; Firestone and Farrag 2011), we argue that the outline of the FTW initiative and its methodology is unique. Drawing on our experiences, the combination of the following components seem particularly promising as a theory of change in the field of interreligious dialogue:

Working with agents of change, i.e. principals, teachers, and directors of community centres;

(a) Extended sessions with ample time for participants to talk, study, and to get to know each another. FTW is a lengthy program of two years with subsequent long-term activities for alumni;
(b) To reserve issues related to the Jewish-Arab conflict, addressing them only after trust has been established, and examining them not only through the lenses of politics but also of culture and tradition.
(c) A joint study of texts from the three monotheistic traditions in an atmosphere of equality, pluralism and mutual respect;
(d) The provision of a framework that encourages and helps participants to initiate programs in the spirit of FTW in their own schools and communities.

(a) The development of a curriculum for discussions on values and moral dilemmas through a study of Muslim, Jewish and Christian sources. This included developing supplementary materials to support teachers in their efforts to teach in their classes in the spirit of FTW.

However, a few limitations of this approach need to be noted. First, the textual dialogue between religions and traditions is a risky business, as it might lead to reifying and essentialising cultural differences (Banks and Banks 2019). To avoid this result, FTW has to do more to reflect and deliberate on the intra-religious pluralism (internal pluralism) in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. While FTW advocates learning from texts that reflect pluralism and diversity, it seems that these efforts are still wanting in terms of the internal diversity, say between the different sects and factions in Islam (e.g., studying the Shia and Sunni relations), the variety of denominations in Christianity(e.g. studying Catholic and Protestant relations), and the wide array of religious circles and groups in Judaism (e.g., studying the Ashkenazi and Sephardic relations).

Second, although some participants and alumni have become active in the initiation and the implementation of various FTW programs in their schools, most of them have not. The way they *think* about Jewish–Arab relations might have changed but the expectation that they how they address these relations in the classroom is yet to be seen. Third, given that Israeli society is de facto segregated in ways described above and the politics that sustain the conflict, it is hard to know how much promise programs like FTW carry for building lasting bridges between Arabs and Jews and for overcoming prejudice and hostility – a critique that has been already raised about other peacebuilding initiatives (Bekerman 2018). Yet educators have always been notoriously optimistic when dealing with problematic children or with troubled societies, and FTW is no exception. Whether or not FTW makes a real impact on the Israeli educational system and can contribute towards a shared society remains to be seen and requires further research.

Notes

1. The educational system in Israel is de facto segregated, as different groups (i.e. Jewish, Arab, national-religious and the religious population).
2. Originally this referred to not being involved in idolatry but was extended to include a prohibition on the imitation of any social rule or custom which characterised idolaters, such as their haircut or their clothes.
3. Otherwise we would have to conclude that since idolaters pray, Jews may not do so, or since they wash their wash their hands before prayer, Jews may not do so. To put the point in positive terms, if some religious norm is valuable there is no reason to refrain from following it just because it is followed by idolaters.

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