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**Forum for the Comparative Study of Jews and Muslims in Britain,  
Europe and North America**

**Summary:**

These workshops break new ground by creating a forum in which comparative studies of Muslims and Jews can be explored as a means to achieve an improved understanding of contemporary Muslim-Jewish relations. There has been no comparative research on this field despite the urgent need for data in view of contentious claims made by some within each faith-group regarding the historical record and current behaviour of the other. By bringing scholars, students and practitioners of the Jewish and Muslim experience together, current comparative research can be presented and the possibilities for future studies explored.

**Outline of the Project:**

Muslims and Jews in the West represent two very important minority faith groups, who share many similarities in terms of migration, diaspora and identity. At various different times, they have been forced to migrate, often as refugees or during periods of political and economic uncertainty, and have subsequently faced the challenge of establishing their communities in new, and sometimes alien, settings. In the case of Jews, their decision to migrate, whether in the nineteenth or the twentieth centuries, was often forced upon them by political circumstances that frequently transformed them into refugees. For Muslims, political pressures have also played a part in their becoming migrants. In some cases, they migrated to the West to escape the upheavals and uncertainties that followed decolonisation and independence. In others, they were drawn by the economic opportunities on offer. Alongside these similarities, however, there have also been important differences in terms of experience, linked, for instance, to the broader context in which processes of migration and community formation have taken place. European and American societies were very different places in the late nineteenth century, when large-scale Jewish immigration started to occur, to what they had become by the late twentieth century which was when Muslim community-formation got underway. There have also been significant differences in terms of the extent to which Jews and Muslims have been able to integrate themselves into wider society and into political life. Jews in many cases were able to penetrate these circles while Muslims – perhaps because they are more recent migrants on the whole – have yet to do so with the same level of success. Factors such as these have influenced the levels and nature of wider social integration that has taken place, as well as perhaps the degree of acceptance of community practices and beliefs. In addition, while Jewish

communities are far from uniform in terms of their composition, there would seem to be far greater diversity, in ethnic and linguistic terms alone, within their Muslim counterparts, again a factor that has important consequence for issues such as community identity.

**Aims & objectives:**

The primary aim of these workshops is to facilitate improved understanding about the experiences of Muslims and Jews living as members of minority faith groups in western societies, often as part of migrant or diasporic communities. It also aims to make long-overdue connections between academics and students working in the field, and practitioners involved in community affairs, whether specifically religious or otherwise. By organising two workshops that bring these various specialists together, the main objective of this initiative is to achieve a better understanding of contemporary Muslim-Jewish relations, and create a solid basis or framework of interaction on which future dialogue can take place. The publication of the book will be important for those working in community relations.

**Approach:**

There will be a two-day workshop to which academics working in the field in relation to Britain, Europe and North America will be invited.

There will be a separate workshop held for practitioners (eg rabbis, imams, representatives of inter-faith organisations, community leaders), which will facilitate the effective exchange and interaction between academics and others operating at the community level. The one-day follow-up conference for practitioners will invite c. 20 rabbis, imams, representatives of inter-faith organisations (eg *Alif-Aleph UK*, the leading British Jewish-Muslim interfaith organisation), and community leaders from different parts of the UK. In this way, engagement with public, voluntary and communities bodies will permit the sharing of knowledge and the development of outcomes of mutual interest and benefit.

The main themes to be addressed will include:

- Comparative perspectives on the Jewish and Muslim experiences in the West
- since 1800
- Muslim and Jewish memory in the communal and the public realm
- Jews and Muslims and framing the law
- Jews and Muslims in western culture
- Patterns of political mobilization, inclusion and exclusion
- Representations of Muslims and Jews in the media/popular culture
- Jews and Muslims in the economy: historical and current perspectives
- The experience of interfaith dialogue
- The impact of Middle East conflict on Muslims and Jews in the West

An edited book of academic papers (derived from the first workshop) will be produced in order to allow a wider scholarly engagement with the subject and to help establish the field of comparative Muslim-Jewish studies.

A website, linked to the Royal Holloway History Department website, will be constructed in order to provide information and links concerning Muslim-Jewish interfaith activities, as well as academic initiatives in this field.

**Outcomes:**

Better understanding of these kinds of distinctions will place into clearer perspective the range of experiences involved in processes of migration and diaspora-formation as explored by Nancy Green (ed. 1998); Andrew Godley (2001); and Todd Endelman (1997) and the work of Cornel West and Michael Lerner on Black-Jewish relations in the USA. Surprisingly, there has been no comparative research in the area of Jewish-Muslim relations, despite the topicality of the subject (Ansari, *'The Infidel Within' Muslims in Britain since the 1800*, 2004; Cesarani, ed, *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990). Muslim-Jewish relations are presently complicated by political developments, particularly in the Middle East, something that makes it very timely to conduct a comparative study of the commonalties and differences of Jewish and Muslim experiences as migrants and members of diasporas, and what this has meant as far as identities are concerned. By breaking new ground, this comparative initiative will also help to change the way in which diasporas, migration and identities are understood, both in Britain and also in relation to Europe and North America.