

Beginning to talk: An interview with Rabbi David Rosen

by [Mordechai Beck](#) in the [June 11, 2014](#) issue

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*David Rosen, former chief rabbi of Ireland, is director of International Affairs for the American Jewish Committee, past chairman of the International Committee on Interreligious Consultations, and a founder of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, which among other activities brings mainstream religious leaders from Arab (Muslim and Christian) and Jewish communities in Israel together for conversation. He has served as a member of the advisory committee of the World Congress of Imams and Rabbis and has been part of the World Economic Forum's Council of 100.*



### **How would you characterize the dialogue between Christianity and Judaism in Israel?**

It ranges from excellent to nonexistent and even worse. While Israel has more interfaith activity pro rata than anywhere else in the world—and the overwhelming majority of serious theological dialogue is Jewish-Christian—all such activity involves a tiny percentage of the population.

Dialogue takes place on many different levels. Academic dialogues are sponsored by universities, institutes, and seminaries, and there is also the work of the Elijah Interfaith Institute. Mention should be made of the formal dialogues of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel with the Vatican and with the Anglican Communion. The activities of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel and the Israel Interfaith Encounter Association also include Jewish-Christian dialogues. But schools in Israel—both secular and religious—have no formal requirement for teaching even basic information on Christianity.

This is why the work of the Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations, established by the late Daniel Rossing, is so important, as it provides informal education in schools and elsewhere on Christianity and Jewish-Christian relations.

### **What do you most wish that Christians in Israel/Palestine understood about Jews and Judaism?**

First let me describe three categories of Christians in Israel/Palestine: Arab Christians (who number about 180,000); Christians of Jewish origin, mostly from the former Soviet Union (50,000 to 80,000); and foreign workers or asylum seekers (150,000). The total number is about 400,000.

I wish that the Catholics knew the positive teachings about Jews and Judaism found in the papal encyclical *Nostra Aetate* and in the Roman Catholic magisterium. I wish that Orthodox and Protestant Arab Christians had similar positive knowledge of Christianity's Jewish roots. Attitudes are better in Israel than in the Palestinian territories.

### **What is the biggest misunderstanding?**

Primarily the view that Zionism is a Western colonial import. There is ignorance of the religious and historical bond between the Jewish people and the land. In addition, there is a residual historical Christian supersessionist theology.

### **Do Christians in Israel have full social and political equality?**

Politically, yes. Socially, no. The challenges emanate above all from the political context and the fact that the "indigenous communities" are Arab. In addition, there is an anti-Christian attitude among many Jews in Israel which remains from the tragic past. (Most Israeli Jews have never met a modern Christian; even when they encounter Christians abroad, they mostly meet them as non-Jews, not as modern Christians.)

### **How might (or how do) Christians inside Israel contribute to the search for peace between Israelis and Palestinians?**

In theory, they could serve as bridge builders for Israeli-Arab and for Jewish-Muslim dialogues. In practice, however, in this regard it is unrealistic to have great expectations of people who are a minority within a minority. Nevertheless, they could enlist their international communions more toward this end.

**What about Christians in the occupied territories—how can they best work toward peace?**

The above goal and the above reservation are even more applicable to Christians in the occupied territories. Regrettably, their situation often pressures them (consciously or unconsciously) into advocating for partisanship rather than for reconciliation.

**Any version of a two-state solution would seem to demand the dismantling of at least some of the Israeli settlements in the occupied territory. Did you agree? Is that dismantling politically possible?**

Yes and yes, even though in principle, Jews should be able to live under Palestinian sovereignty.

**What role does religion play, positive or negative, in this debate?**

Regrettably it is mostly negative, as partisan political and territorial interests on all sides use religion to reinforce their claims and weaken or delegitimize those of “the other.”

**What actions by Palestinian leaders would give you the most hope that peaceful coexistence is possible?**

Their affirmation of the historical ties of the Jewish people to the land, together with the acknowledgment that such recognition and respect do not contradict the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people. Such an affirmation needs to come more widely from Israel and Jewry as well.