



ICCJ Philadelphia Conference 2016



"The Dynamics of Religious Pluralism in a Changing World:
The Philadelphia, United States and International Contexts"

PLENARY SESSIONS

PLENARY SESSION C:

WEDNESDAY, JULY 13, 2016 - SAINT JOSEPH'S UNIVERSITY - DOYLE BANQUET HALL NORTH

International Perspectives on Religious Pluralism: Challenges, Limits, and Possibilities – (Israel)

Dr Deborah Weissman

I have lived in Israel for the past forty-four years. I am from the only country in the world where the majority religion is Jewish. However, Israel is not a religious state. In this context, a "Jewish state" refers to ethnicity. But I'll relate to the challenges of religious pluralism.

I am happy that through the programs of our annual conferences, we have explored the question of different models for the relations between religion and state. The United States model is, of course, one among many: three years ago, we were in France—next year, we'll be in Germany. These are all very different, and of course the models are different in the United Kingdom and Scandinavia.

It would be too easy to compare ourselves to our neighbors in the Middle East. We are a very modern, Western-style democracy, so comparisons to Europe and North America are fair. I am not referring to the West Bank and Gaza. Long-term Occupation is inherently undemocratic. But within its internationally recognized borders, Israel is a lively democracy, with, for example, a huge gay pride parade in Tel-Aviv and smaller ones in other cities.

The religious affiliation of the Israeli population as of 2011 was 75.4% Jewish, 16.9% Muslim, 2.1% Christian, and 1.7% Druze, with the remaining 4.0% not classified by religion, and a small Baha'i community. I would add that there are some Hindu and Buddhist migrants, but we do not have good statistics on them, yet.

We are, therefore, a plural society, but are we also a pluralistic one? I will try to answer this question on two levels. First, vis-à-vis the other two major religious groups: the Muslims and the Christians. Even though we call ourselves a secular state, there is no official separation between religion and state, and not yet officially recognized civil marriage and divorce. Matters of personal status are determined by the religious courts of the three groups. By law, we have freedom of worship, and for the most part, that is the reality, too. But there are many intergroup tensions and unfortunately a growing number of extremists who desecrate houses of worship. It is sometimes difficult to separate tensions from their political context, in which there is a national struggle that sometimes has religious overtones. This is especially true on what the Arabs call *Haram al-Sharif* and what Jews call the Temple Mount.



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Another problem is religious pluralism within the Jewish community. The Chief Rabbinate promotes a particular kind of Jewish Orthodoxy, but I believe that the situation is improving slowly. There are some significant grass-roots efforts, in the direction of non-Rabbinate weddings, alternative Kashrut supervision, and even some forms of public transportation on Shabbat. Jerusalem is the most Jewishly pluralistic city in the world.