

Report on ICCJ Manchester Conference 1–4 July 2012

It was a great privilege to be able to attend this year's ICCJ conference, held in Manchester in recognition of the fact that the Council was founded there 70 years ago. The majority of delegates were accommodated at the Copthorne Hotel, at Salford Quays, and several of the events took place there. The other main venue was the Manchester Communication Academy, utilised for the plenary sessions and workshops on Monday through Wednesday, with delegates being transferred to and fro by coach. While the travel to the venue took up valuable time, it also offered an opportunity for socialising and networking.

The conference theme was “New Neighbours, New Opportunities: The Challenges of Multiculturalism and Social Responsibility.” Each of the five sessions of concurrent workshops focused on a particular aspect of the overall theme. As all the keynote lectures and several of the workshop presentations are available online on the ICCJ website, this report contains only what I consider the highlights of the plenary sessions, and gives an overview of the five workshops which I attended, and of the additional gatherings.

The first scheduled event was an open meeting arranged by the ICCJ International Abrahamic Forum, and held at the Copthorne Hotel on Sunday 1 July, 2:00 to 3:30pm. The topic: “Being a Minority, Being a Majority: Challenges for Interfaith Relations,” was addressed in turn by presenters from each of the Abrahamic faiths. IAF Chair, Rabbi Ehud Bandel invited the three to speak in “reverse historical order.” Mr Mustafa Baig, Lecturer in Islamic Studies, University of Manchester, spoke to the topic on the basis of his personal experiences as a student from primary school onwards, of being at times in the majority, and other times in the minority group, and the complexities of how the “other” is viewed. He noted that since 9/11, islamophobia has been a big issue, with the media constantly portraying Muslims negatively, and he made a plea for people to see Muslims as they really are.

A Christian viewpoint was then given by Prof. Heidi Hadsell, President, Hartford Seminary, Connecticut, who as a Protestant originally belonged in the majority group, but now, with the increasing religious diversity in the US, has seen that majority shrinking. She regards this as an opportunity for authenticity, to be divorced from a position of power and privilege, and to engage in interfaith dialogue. However, not all are willing to walk away from being in charge. Another important point was that participants in formal interfaith dialogue are typically powerful people — people with “voice” — and that in this field, women are much less represented than men.

The third speaker was Reuven Firestone, Professor of Medieval Judaism and Islam, Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles. Drawing on the work of Alexis de Tocqueville, he observed that all of us have experienced being both in the majority and the minority. All have experience of being the odd one out. He then used a series of stark images in a PowerPoint presentation to demonstrate how the adherents of each of the Abrahamic faiths had been victims of persecution over the centuries, that typically what is directed against victims is used by them against others, and that the sending of such messages of denigration is culturally embedded. Reference was then made to the fact that the Golden Rule features in all three Abrahamic faiths.

A lively discussion ensued. One of the significant points to emerge was made by Reuven: that there is a tendency to look at the best of one's own tradition, and the worst of others' traditions, but that there are peaceful and violent traditions in each of the faiths. Ehud Bandel concluded the discussion by quoting Krister Stendahl's remark that "We are all minorities from God's perspective."

The formal conference program began on the Sunday evening with an official welcome to the delegates at Manchester Town Hall. The speakers were introduced by Nigel McCulloch, Bishop of Manchester, and Chair of the national (UK) CCJ. They included the Deputy Lord Mayor of Manchester, Councillor Naeem ul Hassan, who was acting as host, and ICCJ President Dr Deborah Weissman. In her address, Dr Weissman used word play to underline the theme of social responsibility, pointing out that the Hebrew terms for "brother" and "other" are *ach* and *acher*, while the word for "responsibility" is *achrayut*, all three deriving from the same root. She concluded by quoting John Donne's famous lines: "No man is an island, entire of itself ... therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee," linking this ethos with the conference theme by citing Churchill: "The price of greatness is responsibility." Later, a short presentation was given by Rebecca Brückner, Chair of the ICCJ Young Leadership Council, impressing all with her enthusiasm, and with the slogan developed by the group: "Equip, Encounter, Exchange." A festive dinner, provided by the Manchester City Council, concluded the evening.

On Monday, 2 July, the keynote lecture on "The Challenges of Multiculturalism and Social Responsibility," was given by Clive Lawton, co-founder of Limmud. He began by recalling that he had been an invited speaker at the CCJ conference for its 40th anniversary in 1982, and had utilised the analogy then of "middle age," emphasising the need for Jews and Christians to move on toward more robust engagement. Now that the organisation had reached its "full life span," he suggested that it could no longer hide behind immaturity or middle-aged respectability. He then referred to the PowerPoint presentation which just beforehand had been offered for the Meditative Moment — comprising images from the Shoah, and culminating in a "Never again!" testimony. Commenting respectfully but with some reservations on the video, he expressed the hope "that we can move on from the Shoah as the most important thing we have to talk about between us."

Turning to the topic of "Multiculturalism," and whether this concept had failed, he spoke of the distinct difference between "integration" and "assimilation," which he likened to "becoming a square in a patchwork quilt," as against "becoming a thread in a cloth." He moved on to speak of the original "melting pot" model of multiculturalism, then to the "salad bowl" concept which probably has consensus today, and then to the worrying ideas that are now evolving of "separate tables," and even "separate restaurants." Applying his observations on "the intermingling and coexistence of cultures" to the matter of interfaith dialogue, he then turned to the challenges faced by Jews and Christians 70 years on. He concluded by asking: "In short, can we both come out fighting for causes that don't serve our own private ends? — the Christian aspiration of the spreading of Christianity and the Jewish aspiration for security. Time will tell. After 70 years, time to start!"

The response to Clive Lawton's address was given by the Rev Dr Helene Egnell, of the Lutheran Church in Sweden. While Dr Egnell's experience of multiculturalism in Sweden was different from the UK context, she endorsed Clive Lawton's assertion that repentance was essential in Jewish-Christian dialogue, saying that: "We need to be honest about the traits in our own traditions that contribute to hate and violence, and God willing, to help each other to deal with them." In closing, she referred to the surprising level of prejudice and negative attitudes toward Islam that she had encountered in a CCJ context. Warning of the possible danger that a new "us" and "them" mentality might develop, with Jewish-Christian relations becoming insular, she expressed the hope that the conference might offer a remedy.

The first group of workshops was based on the topic "Multiculturalism, Past and Present," and was coordinated by the Parkes Institute, University of Southampton. My choice was "The Conflict of Church and Synagogue," offered by Dr Helen Spurling. Her focus was the legacy of James Parkes, especially his 1934 doctoral dissertation "The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism," which had a significant impact on the understanding of the roots of animosity between Jews and Christians. She observed that it is possible to conclude from Parkes' work that separation of church and synagogue occurred towards the end of the first century, but she challenges this reading, urging that one should look for nuances in what Parkes was trying to do, and noting that he always mentioned the positives. In her conclusion she stressed that the positive evidence of Jewish-Christian relations is a reminder that we should seek commonalities as well as differences. For the "hands-on" segment of the session we worked in small groups, examining primary sources (from *Genesis Rabbah* and Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis*), addressed in Parkes' dissertation, both from his perspective, and in the light of modern scholarship on the same texts. This task was extraordinarily difficult but our group managed to conclude that the texts we studied (GenR 97 and Ephrem, *CommGen* 42.5) supported the argument against an early parting of the ways.

Session 2 of the workshops was organised by the Woolf Institute, Cambridge, and focused on the theme "Israel, Islam, and Interfaith Relations." I had enrolled for Workshop 8, "Exporting the Conflict: Lining up behind Israel and Palestine," presented by Jane Clements, Director of FODIP (Forum for Discussion of Israel and Palestine). The topic was explained in terms of the phenomenon whereby groups or individuals who are actually outside the relevant communities "take sides," in what then becomes a "second-hand" conflict. The expression "lining up behind" refers to a situation like being in a queue, where you cannot see past the person in front of you. We viewed a seven-minute video showing scenes in Trafalgar Square during demonstrations over Operation Cast Lead in January 2009. Among the speakers who featured was Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, expressing his wish for peace for both Israel and Palestine. Jane provided some positive examples of Jews, Christians and Muslims working cooperatively, and referred to the availability of pilgrimage and study tours, and opportunities to experience each other's worship. Her presentation was followed by a lively discussion on the topic.

On Tuesday 3 July, the Meditative Moment was coordinated by the Young Leadership Council, and offered by a Jewish-Christian-Muslim trio. Their presentation comprised a solemn liturgy which included a candle-lighting ritual and prayer from each of the faith traditions.

The keynote address on “Multiculturalism and Shared Responsibility” was given by John Denham MP, and the respondent was Dr Ed Kessler MBE, co-founder and director of the Cambridge Woolf Institute. John Denham introduced the topic by recalling the riots which occurred in 2001 in the north of England. As Home Office Minister at the time, he led the subsequent enquiry, which found that “community cohesion” was needed, but lacking. Faith was identified as just one important element in a complex multi-dimensional problem, and it was recognised that *belonging* shapes behaviour more than *believing*. The main finding was that it was necessary to “create the places and the spaces that brought people together to develop their shared sense, shared stories, of communities, citizenship and of the country.” The atrocity of 9/11 followed soon afterward, immediately resulting in discrimination against Muslims; and this was exacerbated after the 7/7 bombings. Many now see multiculturalism as having failed, and want more emphasis on integration. John Denham argued that what the narratives of multiculturalism and integration both lack is: “the action of nation building; and the act of community building.” He went on to observe that “the key moments of our national story have only rarely been defined by migration,” and that equally often they have been about faith. In conclusion, he stated that “our common future in our own nation is one we need to forge together,” and that “our very diversity may turn out to be not a weakness but a strength.”

In his response, Dr Kessler picked up on two motifs in John Denham’s address — identity and personal encounter. He agreed that “the issue of identity is always a complex and multidimensional problem,” and spoke of the fragility of people’s identities during times of change, when they have to redefine and readjust who they are. This is a difficult task which “can lead to prejudice as a defensive mechanism.” He observed that “one of the challenges of living in multi-cultural society [is that] our common over-arching identity needs to allow sufficient space for other identities all of which need to be open and inclusive.” On the second subject, Dr Kessler referred to the finding after the 2001 riots that communities were identified as “barely meeting, let alone talking,” and the necessity for increased levels of personal encounter. He then outlined the work done in this area at the Woolf Institute, stating that: “at the heart of encounter lies the sharing of personal stories which help the listener to see beyond their own experience.”

The third group of workshops took place later that morning, and I attended Workshop 11, led by Philip Alexander, Emeritus Professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Manchester. His approach to the topic, “The Academic Study of Religion in Relationship to the Faith Communities,” drew on his experience over 38 years, of teaching students from Jewish, Christian and Muslim backgrounds about Judaism. His presentation was based on the belief that an academic with expertise in a specific religious tradition, but not an adherent of that faith, may have a significant role to play in interfaith dialogue. He began with a review of the emergence of academia, explaining then how, following the Enlightenment, the central teaching of the Catholic Church had been challenged by the universities, with some tensions continuing today. Speaking of the fundamental values of academia currently being under threat, he named them as: openness and freedom of enquiry; the requirement for conclusions to be evidence-based; and the need for analysis and rational argument. He then turned to the relationship between the study of religion in an academic environment, and the study of the same texts in the faith community. The question as to whether one person could be involved at both levels so engaged some group members that they began to offer comments, and a lively discussion ensued. While not all agreed, Prof. Alexander thought

that it would be untenable to teach using two different sets of values. He referred to a 2006 article written by his wife, Loveday Alexander, in which she argued for a “eucharistic” reading of scripture as a tool for interpreting it creatively. While he agreed that within the church, the texts were meant to be read that way, he asserted that within the academy it would be problematic unless there was a good reason for doing so. Later he did acknowledge that someone who is both a believer and an academic can draw on liturgical experience while teaching. Some other important points made were: that one can moderate conflict by means of scripture, tradition and reason, on the basis that truth is being disclosed over time; that dialogue needs to include openness to change; that academics can offer useful neutral ground in which people of different faiths can come together; and that they have a role in keeping the debate honest. This was a most interesting and stimulating session.

In the afternoon, five different outings were offered, and I opted for the “Introduction to Manchester,” which comprised a guided walking tour through the city centre. Starting at the Town Hall, we visited many sites of particular interest to group members, including various places of worship, the John Rylands Library, and Chetham’s Library. Our excellent guide provided a detailed historical commentary, and many interesting anecdotes. In the evening we travelled by coach to King David School, where we enjoyed an informal buffet dinner together with key members of Manchester’s Jewish community, and other locals involved in interfaith and community relations.

The third full conference day started with a sobering Meditative Moment in which it was acknowledged that as well as being Independence Day in the US, 4 July is the anniversary of the murder of 42 Jews, and the wounding of nearly 100, in Kielce, Poland, 1946. Among images shown during the moving address was a photograph of the Jewish Menorah Monument, a sculpture of a partially-buried menorah, which was erected in 2007 in remembrance of the victims of the pogrom.

The keynote lecture titled “Jewish-Christian Dialogue in the Non-Western World,” was given by Professor Kwok Pui-Lan, of the Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts. She commenced by giving some historical background concerning Jewish and Christian communities in the East, and arguing that since the majority of Christians are now situated in the Global South, it was important to consider Jewish-Christian dialogue beyond the North Atlantic context. Some examples were offered of African and Asian contextual theologies which view God as being “within their own anti-colonial and anti-dictatorship struggles,” and relate biblical narratives like Deut 26:5 and the exodus to their own situation. Such transpositions are not regarded by them as undermining the special relationship between God and Israel, but rather as affirming God’s relationship with all nations. Prof. Pui-Lan referred to the fact that in the 70s and early 80s some third world feminist liberation theologies had received sharp criticism from Jewish scholars, e.g. Judith Plaskow, who discerned an anti-Jewish tendency. Such critique of liberation theologies has continued into the present, notably by Amy-Jill Levine, and the professor observed that: “The exchange between Levine and feminist theologians in the Global South highlights the multilayered and complex nature of religious dialogue between different races and across the divide of the Global North and the Global South.” She queried how we might be aware of potentially harmful formulations, and suggested that the notion of “multiple modernities” and “alternative modernities” could be useful. Referring to the Arab Spring, she noted “people’s new political and cultural consciousness and their determination to seek an alternative future.”

She also mentioned the “dark side” of Western modernity, and in conclusion proposed that: “Jewish-Christian dialogue in the non-Western world can examine how Western Christianity has colluded with and provided justification for anti-Semitism and colonialism as not two different phenomena, but as part and parcel of the ideology of Western hegemony.” She expressed the hope that “the discussion of Jewish-Christian dialogue in the non-Western world will give us food for thought and impetus to try something new.”

The response to the keynote address was given by Baroness Dr Julia Neuberger DBE, Chief Rabbi, West London Synagogue. Paying tribute to Prof. Pui-Lan’s paper, Rabbi Neuberger apologised that her response was only partial. She then stressed the importance of focusing on religious communities in *modern* China, and drew attention to an interfaith conference titled “Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Collaboration and Conflict,” held in Hong Kong in March 2012. Noting that conflicts do exist, she lamented the fact that “parallel questions of collaboration, alliance building, dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims ... have been relegated to the periphery.” She also observed that the promotional material for the Hong Kong conference stated: “Such a conversation ... has a slightly different resonance from parallel discussions in Europe and the Americas and should lead to new insights.” Rabbi Neuberger went on to speak of several other recent interfaith conferences, particularly highlighting the 2008 meeting at Yale, organised under the Common Word project. Making her first specific response to Professor Kwok’s address, she asserted that “we need to look at dialogue wherever it is happening, and take from it the need to include Muslims within it.” She went on to state that “part of the power of dialogue is to lead to action — it’s not just about peace making with words.” Rabbi Neuberger then provided a practical example of how interfaith dialogue had facilitated the establishment thirty years ago of the multi-faith North London Hospice. Asserting passionately that “what will change the world is action,” she spoke of the need now to work towards multi-faith schools, citing as models those in Northern Ireland, and the Hand in Hand schools in Israel. She concluded by saying that: “what will ultimately make dialogue mean something is the work we do together as the product of the conversations we have had,” and that “building institutions together as the fruit of dialogue, is the only thing that will really bring us together, and promote peace.”

The fourth set of workshops, coordinated by the ICCJ, had the theme “Non-Western Countries, International Interfaith Developments.” My choice was #17, “New Research Important for Jewish-Christian Dialogue” for which there were four panelists. The first to present was Ruth Langer, Professor of Jewish Studies, Boston College, USA, who offered reviews of several recent works on Jewish Theologies of Christianity. After describing progress in the field since the publication of *Dabru Emet*, Prof. Langer spoke very positively about Alan Brill’s two-volume set, *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding* (2010) and *Judaism and World Religions* (2012). A little less enthusiastically, she then discussed two other titles: Michael Kogan, *Opening the Covenant: A Jewish Theology of Christianity* (2008), and Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Eugene Korn, eds., *Jewish Theology and World Religions* (2012).

The second presenter was Joseph Sievers, Professor of Jewish History and Literature at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, speaking as one of the five editors of *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today: New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships* (2011).

He described the process which led to the publication of the volume, and mentioned many of the scholars who had been involved, including three who have died. In attempting to measure the success of the project, he spoke of the importance of scholars being able to listen to each other, and of building relationships that went beyond their differences. The book was highly recommended.

Daniel Langton, Professor of the History of Jewish-Christian Relations, University of Manchester, spoke on publications focusing on Jewish scholarship on the New Testament, particularly on Paul. Prof. Langton devoted most of his presentation to a review of Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (2011), describing its contents, and referring to a hand-out which included a list of contributors, and photocopied excerpts from the Gospel of Luke, and 1 Thessalonians.

Rev Dr Michael Trainor, Executive board member of ICCJ, and Senior Lecturer, Department of Theology, Flinders University, Australia, spoke of his forthcoming volume *About Earth's Child: An Ecological Listening to the Gospel of Luke*, due to be published shortly by Sheffield. He introduced his topic by quoting from an article by Jo Berry in the 30 June 2012 edition of *The Tablet*. Inspired by the handshake between the Queen and Martin McGuinness, she wrote:

I passionately believe that there is humanity in everyone, and every time we demonise the "other" we are delaying the onset of peace in this world. Once we find our own humanity, and we see the humanity in the other, then we are going to want them to have their human rights, their good housing, food, medicine, education and freedom to be themselves, to be safe and secure. We will want for them all what we want for ourselves. Peace happens when we treasure everyone, all creatures, our land, our planet, and work together to find solutions in which everyone wins.

Dr Trainor then made a connection between this statement and a hand-out he had distributed, titled "Theologies of Land from an environmental Perspective." Speaking to this document, he referred to the fact that land has been a primary issue in Australia, to the overturning 20 years ago of the fiction of *terra nullius*, and the consequent acknowledgment of the land rights of the nation's Indigenous people. He explained that our environmental context affects the way we do theology, and referred to the Earth Bible project. Using the hand-out on *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* he illustrated how new light was shed for him on e.g. Luke 15:14 by applying principles of biblical eco-justice.

Philip Cunningham, Professor of Theology, St Joseph's University, Philadelphia, was the Moderator for the workshop, and he spoke at this point about the ICCJ-supported project "Promise, Land, and Hope: Jews and Christians Seeking Understanding to Enable Constructive Dialogue about Israeli-Palestinian Issues." Other relevant titles were mentioned during the discussion which followed.

The theme for session 5 of the workshops, coordinated by the UK CCJ, was "The Dialogic Interface: Lessons, Reflections and Principles," and the presenter was the Rev David Gifford, Chief Executive of the UK CCJ. He began by drawing attention to the controversial matter of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), conducted by the Society of Friends. While the objectives of the programme were

ostensibly worthy, there were concerns about its bias in favour of Palestine, and that its outcomes could be detrimental to the work of CCJ. This was a particularly topical issue because there was a motion due to be brought to General Synod, for the worth of the programme to be acknowledged, and to affirm support for it. Rev Gifford referred to relevant articles published in *The Church of England Newspaper*, Sunday July 1, 2012, pp. 7 and 9, the latter being his own commentary on the matter. Turning then to the workshop topic, he said his aim was to ask if we as Christians and Jews can be reconciled in the light of the past. His address would cover four areas: (1) current theological thinking/reflection; (2) critique of some assumptions; (3) placing the reconciliation agenda in the context of the past and contemporary pain; and (4) proposing that reconciliation must be the final objective of encounter.

In attempting to define reconciliation, Rev Gifford said that the tensions between Christians and Jews must be acknowledged and addressed. He considered the matter from the perspective of some pertinent Jewish and Christian scriptures, concluding that the concept of forgiveness is essential, and then, citing the example of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, he asserted that painful truths must be faced. He also observed that many assumptions are made and that these must be critiqued. He listed five key points: (1) serious wrongs must have been committed by one group to another; (2) these wrongs have to be admitted; (3) painful truths must be spoken; (4) there must be willingness to forgive wrongs; (5) the manifestation of desire for revenge has no place. Undergirding all is the fact that reconciliation must be wanted by both parties. Some contemporary examples were given of attempts toward reconciliation. After again raising the issues over EAPPI returnees, Rev Gifford stated his opinion that the Israel-Palestine conflict will eventually define Jewish-Christian relations. Turning again to the point that reconciliation is the desired objective, he noted that dialogue is a two-way street. It is hard; it confronts participants full-on; it is personal and painful; it touches the heart. He also observed that while there are now 8 to 10 centres in the UK offering study courses on Jewish-Christian relations, and awarding degrees, dialogue is actually occurring less. He concluded by saying that the point of dialogue is to change us. A very lively discussion followed.

The conference concluded on the Wednesday evening with a Gala Dinner to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of CCJ. The gathering was held in the Knight's Lounge, Manchester United Football Club, and special guests included two founding members, Mrs Myra Cohen, aged almost 102, and Mrs Barbara Aubrey, aged 97. The conference was voted a huge success.

Mary J. Marshall