

CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RECONCILIATION:

On the world and local stage.

Ruth Rosenberg, Melbourne Journalist

While many eyes have been on the highly publicised, deeply symbolic and groundbreaking visit of Pope John Paul II to the Holy Land, a small group of dedicated volunteers has been quietly working for many years at the grass-roots level on the business of Christian-Jewish reconciliation in Australia. On April 10 the Victorian Council of Christians and Jews launched a new document titled “Re-reading Paul: A fresh look at his attitude to Torah and Judaism” at St Kevin’s College, Toorak. Written by the internationally renowned Jesuit theologian Father Brendan Byrne SJ, it was edited by Uniting Church theologian Reverend Professor Robert Anderson, a co-founder of the Council. The purpose of this booklet, which is a supplement to its predecessor “Rightly Interpreting the Word of Truth” (1995), is to present guidelines for Christian clergy, lecturers and teachers on how to re-interpret problematic anti-Jewish texts in the Gospels and early Church writings. This interpretation, without seeking to undermine Christian faith in the New Testament and other scriptures, uses historical evidence to show that anti-Jewish texts were part of the heated debate and polemic of their time, and not intended to underpin the kind of vicious anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism that later developed from them.

Father Byrne, who teaches New Testament Studies at Melbourne’s Jesuit Theological College, explained that 4th century St Augustine may have put the wrong emphasis on what Paul was saying. “In the last 20 years or so Christians have come to realise that Paul was not anti-Jewish.” On the road to Damascus he was trying to find a way to include the Gentiles in a new covenant. Paul did not originally want to reject the Torah, but he ended up doing so. “He saw that if Judaism was defined by Moses, then it excluded the Gentiles.” However, the covenant God made with Abraham includes other nations. According to Father Byrne, a close reading of Paul’s writings shows he considered himself a Jew all his life, and did not “convert” to another religion. Paul was not trying to replace Israel with a new community: he was only trying to broaden the concept of Israel to include the gentiles.

Father Byrne believes the Pope’s latest apology for the persecution of Jews is a “step in the right direction, but it doesn’t go far enough. To be adequate it needs to look closer at the archives relating to Pope Pius XII and the lead-up to World War II. On the other hand, he has done more than any of his predecessors. There are pressures in the Roman Catholic Church that prevent the Pope from going further along that track.”

Reverend Anderson also thinks there is nothing particularly new in the Pope’s recent apology. “The question of reconciliation has been going on for 30 years.” He acknowledges that the Pope’s recent visit to Israel “draws attention” to this process, but “journalists are prone to think that this is a breakthrough. Remember that the Catholic Church may be a very large Church, but it’s not the only Church. Other Churches also have to come to terms.” Reverend Anderson believes it is imperative to acknowledge Christian complicity in the Holocaust. “The population of Germany was approximately 50:50 Lutheran and Catholic. Both were silent during the war. Both in various ways allowed themselves to be used by the Nazis.” It has recently been made public that “the highest prelate in Germany, Cardinal Bertram of Breslaw, sent Hitler a birthday greeting every year. When he heard Hitler had died he issued a directive (which was never followed) to celebrate a mass, mourning his death.”

Unlike the Vatican, which was reluctant to mention the Holocaust by name, the Lutheran Church of Australia's Council of Presidents issued a statement in 1996, following the example of their Church overseas, which among other things explicitly confesses "our silence over the Holocaust and other such attacks on Jews". Its first paragraph acknowledges that "Judaism, like Christianity, is one of the world's "living religions. Although Jewish people have settled around the world, the state of Israel and the city of Jerusalem still hold a central place in the faith and life of most Jews."

It is hard for committed Jews who celebrate their Sabbaths and colourful Jewish festivals with enthusiasm to grasp the fact that traditional Christian theology believes that Judaism without the Temple was dead, and Jews that lived on were no more than ghouls or ghosts of a past glory, their religion a mere fossil.

The second sentence in this statement acknowledges something few other Churches are able to admit: the special commitment of Jews to that land of Israel and its capital, Jerusalem. In fact, with the establishment of the Victorian CCJ, in order to get the backing of the major Church leaders in Victoria, the Council had to make it clear it was not part of the Zionist cause.

Along with Reverend Anderson, two Melbourne rabbis co-founded the Council and have been very active in its leadership: the late Rabbi Ronald Lubofsky, emeritus rabbi of St Kilda Hebrew Congregation, and Rabbi John Levi, emeritus rabbi of St Kilda's Temple Beth Israel Progressive Congregation. Rabbi Lubofsky commented, "The three of us debated forming the council for quite a while in the 1980s. The question was: could we get the approbation of the Catholic and Anglican Archbishops, and of the Presbyterian Moderator? Many Christians were concerned that we were pro-Zionist and political. We had to make it clear we were concerned with anti-Semitism, racism, bias and historic attitudes."

Rabbi Lubofsky believed his knowledge of Latin and Greek was the key to understanding the New Testament scriptures, and his friendship with Reverend Anderson had been a personally rewarding one. Rabbi Levi, who teaches Judaism at the Yarra Theological Union College, is keen to educate Christians about the historical beginnings of their own religion because of his childhood experiences at Melbourne Grammar School. "What worried me as a teenager was the ignorance and misinformation about Jews that was being taught."

The Victorian CCJ, which started in 1985, is a branch of an international organisation that began in England in the 1940s. Rabbi Israel Porush, who moved from London to Sydney's Great Synagogue in the 1940s, tried to keep the dialogue going, but it lapsed until the 1970s and 1980s brought a renewal around the world. "Re-reading Paul" will be launched by Rabbi Raymond Apple, Rabbi Porush's successor at the Great Synagogue.

Not all Jews are keen to take part in such a reconciliation process. Many feel a deep distrust and anger at the Church which made them suffer for so many centuries, and others do not forget the theological debates of the Middle Ages, where Jews were compelled to listen to sermons encouraging them to convert. Some believe that Christians can never give up their mission to convert Jews to Christianity. Rabbi Apple, an executive member of the NSW Council of Christians and Jews, has been involved in interfaith work for over 40 years. "I've found it to be one of the most exciting endeavours I've ever been involved in." However, he acknowledges, "there are some things Jews will never understand about Christians and vice versa. A Jew will never understand why Christians believe Jesus to be divine, and a Christian will never understand why a Jew won't believe in Jesus. But the Christians I've come to know over many years of dialogue have almost always been admirable people without hidden motive."

Reverend Anderson has been actively involved in interfaith dialogue for 35 years. "It all began with the study of the Hebrew language as a theology student at

Edinburgh University. I found I had a great love for that language. It seemed to be natural to study the Old Testament — more properly called the Hebrew Scriptures.” After completing his studies and starting to teach, he gradually realised he had learned “a caricature of the Jewish religion”.

Another influence on his views was Sister Shirlie Sedawie, of the Catholic order Sisters of our Lady of Sion. This unusual order was created by Theodor Ratisbonne in 1846 Paris. He was part of a wave of Jewish conversions to Catholicism at the time. Although a sincere convert, he promoted a positive view of the Hebrew scriptures and the Jews as Chosen People. After the war, in particular, the Sisters of Sion have been pioneers in Christian-Jewish reconciliation. Their Cotham Road headquarters, the Shalom Centre, houses a special library on Judaism as well as the offices of the Council of Christians and Jews. All those involved at the CCJ are proud of the publication of the booklet, “Rightly Explaining the Word of Truth”, in 1995. Dealing with how to teach problematic Christian texts that caricature or condemn Jews, it includes: the trial and death of Jesus: the ‘new’ and the ‘old’: the depiction of the Pharisees: the expression ‘the Jews’ in the Fourth Gospel: and Jesus, Judaism and the Torah.

Regarding the death of Jesus, Christians are reminded that because the Roman Empire was the superpower of the time, the early Christians were not going to jeopardise their own precarious position by blaming Pontius Pilate, the notoriously corrupt Roman ruler of Judea for Jesus’ death. It was easier to blame the Jews. A statement from the Vatican in 1985 also reminded Christians to read the Gospels in their historical context.

This blaming of the Jews for Jesus’ death has been the single most deadly accusation throughout Western history, with countless murderous rampages taking place against Jews following enthusiastic sermonising at Easter time.

The impetus for publishing such a work began with an incident in 1991, when local Jewish community identity Mark Leibler visited a Church school to attend a debate his daughter was in, and read some words left on the blackboard regarding the martyr Stephen, blaming the Jews for his imminent death and for the death of Jesus. He brought his concerns to the attention of the school and then the Anglican Archbishop Keith Rayner. This correspondence was published in the Generation journal, with responses from around the Christian and Jewish community.

“The point is,” said Rabbi Lubofsky, “that the Council of Christians and Jews responded.” This booklet was later distributed by the Uniting Church to thousands of its clergy. The mouthpiece for the CCJ in Victoria for the past ten years has been its annual publication of “Geshet”, Hebrew for “Bridge”, edited by Iraqi-born and London-educated Jewish solicitor Gad Ben-Meir. It is highly regarded for its range of informative articles.

The founding and recently retired executive chairman of the CCJ is Justice William Kaye. His successor, Reverend Anne Amos, spent several years as a missionary with Aborigines in Arnhem Land, becoming very aware of Land Rights issues, and was later active in the Aboriginal Women’s Resource Centre in Darwin. She later studied at Ormond College and then spent a year at Oxford University’s Jewish Studies Centre, specialising in Hebrew texts and First Century Jewish history.

She believes the greatest achievements of the Council are its publications, because “they educate others”, and its ongoing lecture series. From her experience in the Aboriginal reconciliation process, she brings to the CCJ a knowledge of “how you go about reconciliation: through dialogue, respect, friendship, a willingness to be in it for the long haul” despite hiccups and huge disappointments.

She believes the Council’s work continues to have relevance. “I think we’re living in much less benign times than ten years ago, with racism and anti-Semitism on the rise.