

Building Jewish–Christian Friendship

In a congenial atmosphere, about thirty-five members and guests listened to CCJWA executive member Dr Glenn Morrison speak about building Jewish–Christian friendship in philosophic, poetic, and practical terms, at St Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church Hall in Claremont, on Tuesday the 20th of September. Dr Morrison, senior lecturer in Systematic theology at Notre Dame University, Fremantle, and formerly at Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, has published in such as *The Heythrop Journal*, *Irish Theological Quarterly*, the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* and the *Australian eJournal of Theology*.

In his address, Dr Morrison brought together insights from various quarters, including the thought of French-Jewish philosopher and Talmudic scholar Emmanuel Levinas, on whom he wrote his doctoral thesis. Beginning with the love of friendship as the “heart of human existence and reality” and conveying our “hunger and thirst for meaning and truth,” Dr Morrison reflected that only when we are touched by the loneliness of our existence, do we begin to value friendship. In our “inbetween world of loneliness and friendship,” we are confronted by mystery, which draws us to go out to “new cultures, learn different languages, meet new people, study different subjects, re-define our dreams, re-habituate our behaviours and join together what seems impossible.” When mystery encounters melancholy, hope, that we might give meaning to our loneliness, a spiritual condition, wells up.

Speaking through images, such as “transfiguration and transformation,” Dr Morrison described friendship as an “ethical spiritual journey.” Friendship, which begins with being at home with one’s self in solitude, overflows to the blessing of “Hello!” to another (from hunger for hospitality, peace, healing and prayer), which awaits unlocking some of their mystery. A “super craft of love,” Christian-Jewish friendship requires intersubjectivity and embodied personhood, that is, face-to-face relations, in a shared “hope of resembling God’s likeness,” as its beginning point. On our part, love entails the embodiment of “responsibility, care, sensitivity and compassion.”

Dr Morrison then introduced “ethical melancholy and ethical insomnia,” metaphysical states to be journeyed through, beyond the ego’s manipulation, to be transformed into God’s own vision of “peace justice, mercy and having a heart,” heightening our sense of good in everyday reality.

He continued by naming Emmanuel Levinas as an example of Christian–Jewish friendship. A number of Christian theologians, feeling an affinity for his thought, have employed it to develop theirs. At the fourth colloquium of French speaking Jews (1961), Levinas was taken by the words of Catholic philosopher Madaule: in their waiting for Christ’s return, Christians appreciate (and join in) Jewish waiting for the messiah. This represents a turn away from a perception of Judaism as a residue, to ground for friendship. Rather than sharing in mere humanity, Jews and Christians share in the melancholy of waiting for salvation. Something new has arrived in the theological drama.

What does this mean for the Christian conscience? For friendship to be possible, “not only must there be respect for Jews, but Judaism itself.” Here we find an invitation for sharing in a vintage “maturing since the days of creation” — a possible realization for “living together in unity.” Dr Morrison turned from “ethical melancholy” to “ethical insomnia” (ethical vigilance), representing wakefulness to such as the “evil of Hitlerism.” He explained Levinas’s thought: that perpetrators of evil dehumanize victims, and in doing so they lose their personhood, becoming anonymous. Their self is eaten up, as it were, expelling the ‘I’ through the presence of fear. We, thus, must take care not to extinguish our neighbour through hostility and self-interest.

As the Spirit of God (in Isa 57: 19, Isa 64:4 and 1 Cor 2:7) has worked since Eden to bring peace, we must practise not just hope, but courage, to nurture a positive state of mind, and enact friendship bodily. Dr Morrison noted that Pope John Paul II did this in his recitation of Ps 31:12-15, and silent remembering, at Yad Vashem. Silent, affective, remembering of the Shoah evokes anticipating the hope of building a Jewish–Christian friendship. We can imagine in the silence “God encouraging the pope to approach his talk in a spirit of humility.” For Levinas this would mean admitting: “I am first a servant of a neighbour, already late and guilty for being late.” John Paul II expressed his remembering by saying “Men, women, and children cry out to us from the depth of the horror they knew. How can we fail to heed their cry? No one can forget or ignore what happened.”

“For Christians the temptation is to reduce relations with Jews to a theological-cognitive solution. This can never work because of the ‘disproportion between suffering’ and ... theological attempts to explain suffering and why there is a God.” Auschwitz has shown this. If friendship is begun by the benediction “Hello!” the next ‘word’ speaks of the immediacy of bodily, face-to-face relation, deepened by ethical melancholy and ethical vigilance. Hope might then be transformed into responsibility, justice and the promise of peace.

At the conclusion of this address, Dr Morrison took questions from the audience. These surrounded the phenomenon of friendship, and the new ‘distance’ created by the convenience offered by electronic communication. Refreshments were then served, allowing for further discussion on the topic, taken up by those present.

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