

## **Light Eternal**

### **Dialogue with Rabbi Fred Morgan**

#### **Introduction**

Let me begin by saying how happy I am to be here this evening at this gathering of the Council of Christians and Jews, WA. I am especially pleased to be sharing this podium with Rabbi Fred Morgan. In a world that I often find insane, foolish, and all out of whack I have appreciated Rabbi Fred's thoughts and words for their sanity, wisdom and balance!! In particular, I think the typology of Christian–Jewish relationships which Fred has adopted from Lawrence Hoffman, of Disputation, Diplomacy and Dialogue speaks volumes to where we are in the Uniting Church in Australia in our relations with the Jewish community and indeed with other communities with whom we share this good earth.

Friends, I have never been one for Disputation. Which is not to say that I do not harbour some very strong views, and nor do I suffer fools gladly. But disputation has never seemed to me to be part of the way of the person of deep faith. As for Diplomacy, I haven't reached this mature age or this point in my profession without having learnt some of the arts of diplomacy. As a Minister of the Word in the Uniting Church of some 25 years standing, I have had to practise a lot of diplomacy over the years. But when it comes to conversation with other people of faith, it seems to me that neither Diplomacy nor, heaven forbid, Disputation is the appropriate mode.

I come to you tonight as one who believes in and wishes to practice dialogue. And dialogue of the kind that Fred has so cogently outlined, dialogue that involves not self-defensive strategies, but the opening of areas of vulnerability, and dialogue which sees its end as redemptive. I expect in every real encounter to be changed, to be deepened, challenged, and enabled to see beyond what I see at the outset. Of course dialogue is not pussy footing around difficult issues—dialogue needs to be passionate and engaged if it is to be authentic.

But some will say, this is easy. Easy for a white male Christian living in Australia today to be committed to dialogue. We do not face attack or violent dispossession, no one is particularly interested in contesting our right to live in freedom and to hold our religious views quite openly. How different from a Jewish child growing up in occupied territory or a Palestinian child coming to adolescence in the West Bank. The conditions of life for these children, would make the dialogue that we assume is possible, very problematic indeed.

So whilst I want to affirm my wholehearted commitment to dialogue, I don't want to suggest that such dialogue is ever easy. In my view it is a privilege, and it is always costly, albeit, in Australia today, the risks are not as great as elsewhere.

#### **Light Eternal**

It seems to me that the Light Eternal booklet and DVD, together with the resolutions of the twelfth Assembly of the Uniting Church it contains, offers the basis for a true dialogue between the Uniting Church and the Jewish Community. It has evolved out of conversation which perhaps began with a background of disputation, and entered into the new ground of diplomacy, but which firmly moves us on towards dialogue.

What is laid out here are views to which the whole of our Church is now (at least in theory) committed. In a spirit of penitence, we have seen the evil that has flowed from Christian notions of supersessionism and the very narrow and self-serving descriptions of Judaism that have been allowed to have currency in Christian churches, and we have said “enough”. Such “teachings of contempt” will no longer be the framework within which we seek to understand our Jewish friends and associates. We will accord to them and their faith the kind of respect that we expect in turn from them. We will do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

There is so much we affirm together in our two faiths. As the signatories to the 2000 document, ***Dabru Emet*** affirm,

1. We worship the same God,
2. We seek authority from the same book — the Bible (what Jews call “Tanakh” and Christians call the “Old Testament”);
3. We Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel,
4. We together accept the moral principles of Torah.
5. We agree that Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon.
6. Together we believe that the humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture.
7. A new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice.
8. Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace.

Of course, within the Christian Church there is a wide variety of views, just as within the Jewish Community. There are liberals who favour a “minimalist” approach to Christian doctrine, and there are evangelicals who hold more firmly to our biblical traditions. Some of the first group seek a “universalist” understanding of all particular religions, and for them, perhaps, dialogue with Jews comes somewhat easily. Where they have trouble is seeking dialogue with the conservative sisters and brothers of their own religion!

In this debate, I am in agreement with Rabbi Jonathan Sacks when he writes that the genius of the Jewish faith is that it moves from the universality of God to the particularity of one people, living under one covenant. For Sacks it is in our particularities that our faith takes root, and any too easy access to “universalism” can breed new forms of oppression.<sup>1</sup> I think we see this in Australia today, when a form of “political correctness” means that people of religious faith, such as our Muslim brothers and sisters, often feel marginalized in the very secularity of public debate and public policy. I am with Jonathan Sacks in believing that it is out of our very particularity as Christians and Jews (and Muslims) that we will have our best and most authentic dialogue.

What is most interesting to me about the Light Eternal material is that it seeks to foster this kind of dialogue of particularities. The material makes abundantly clear that Christians who persist in thinking in supersessionist terms are guilty of not being true to their Christian faith. Members of our Churches who consider Judaism as a preliminary, incomplete or insufficient faith have not truly followed the way of Jesus. It’s really as simple as that. For us in the Uniting Church, it is not out of some desire to be “tolerant” men and women, or to be enlightened citizens guided only by reason that we take up the resolutions of our Church. Rather it is our faith in Jesus that requires this of us. Let me illustrate this point by sharing a couple of reflections on my recent experience of teaching Christology to students preparing for Christian ministry at Murdoch University.

### **Teaching Christology**

If you’re not familiar with the term, Christology is simply the theology of the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is, naturally, a central and pivotal course for our students who are training for

Christian ministry—I don't expect a great many Jews in my classes! For some of our students, this is a subject to be avoided, because, they reason, it is too difficult, too much has been written, and most of it is too technical for their likes. I faced a real challenge in bringing this subject alive for my students.

We begin with the quest(s) of the historical Jesus. That is, the exercise of seeking to determine who actually was Jesus of Nazareth, known historically without all the overlay of dogma and tradition that has been heaped upon him. To begin at this point means that immediately we must confront Jesus as a loyal Jew of the Second Temple period. We must for the time bracket out what we might **believe** as Christians about his person, and seek to encounter this figure in his historical particularity. Much has been written about this. We are now in our third (or fourth) quest of the historical Jesus, and students and general reader alike are fascinated to learn what can now be said with some degree of historical certainty about this Jesus.

It is now clear to the majority of scholars that Jesus did not set out to establish a new religion, that he did not break with Judaism, although he certainly was something of a reformist voice. Whether he actually proclaimed himself as "Messiah" is very doubtful, but that his followers began to use this way of understanding him quite early after his crucifixion is also quite certain.

If we engage fully in this historical task, we can no longer see in Judaism a superseded religion, or in Christ the founder of a radically new faith. We have to see continuity, change to be sure, but nothing like the dogmatic breaks of earlier articulations. When we read the Gospel of John we must do so with a historical awareness that the portrait of Jesus there offered is coloured by the conflict the Johannine community faced in the period after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70–72. We cannot accept as historical the conflict of Jesus with the Jews that John's Gospel portrays. This tool of historical criticism, rightly understood and judiciously used, enables us to avoid the errors of earlier Christians in their misunderstandings of the Jewish faith.

But we can't stop there, we must encounter the strange paradox of the faith of the earliest Christians. Let us take Paul as an example. Here is a thoroughly orthodox Jew who believed to his dying day that the covenant of God with Israel could not be broken (Romans 9–11). Nor does Paul move from the dogmatic monotheism of his inherited faith. Yet Paul writes:

...even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist (I Cor 8. 5, 6).

Now I must say to you that I find that statement remarkable. It is clearly a commentary on the great Shema, loved of all the people of Israel, "Hear O Israel, The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." Or "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one". You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheynu Adonai echad* (Deut 6.4)

In place of, but not in contrast to "the LORD our God is one", Paul is proclaiming, "For us there is one God, the Father... and one Lord, Jesus Christ." What is remarkable to me about this is not Paul's Christology as such, but his insistence that this confession is possible within the strict confines of his monotheistic faith! He proclaims this but with no sense that he is advocating bi-theism. Remember, this is well before the Christian doctrine of the trinity has been formulated. For Paul his confession of Jesus as the LORD is seen to be quite consistent with the monotheistic faith in which he has been schooled.

As I have struggled along with my students to understand Paul and what he is saying here I have come to the view that it is rather like saying: There is One God and One Word of God, or, There is one God and one Spirit of God, remembering the words of Psalm 33.6.

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made  
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.

This is where my struggle to understand the Person of Christ has led me in my grasp of the theology of Paul, and of Paul's Judaism. May I be so bold as to suggest that it might be helpful for those of you who are Jewish in your understanding of Christian theology, and especially our Trinity.

If Christology is a core discipline of Christian clergy and the Christian Church, it is a discipline that requires that we see our common links with the Judaism of Jesus's day.

### **Light Eternal and Christian Practice within the UCA**

In the Uniting Church, as we study our faith in Jesus Christ, that very study, that very faith drives us to enter again into the faith of Judaism, and to deepen our understanding of the living faith which is Judaism today.

What will this mean in practice?

- Rabbi Fred has mentioned the offering of teaching freely to one another. I have sought to do this in what I have said about teaching Christology. Obviously we need more opportunities to listen to one another, to learn the particularities of each other's faith and practice. The work of the Council of Christians and Jews and evenings like tonight offer one such platform, but we need to seek it at the local level, with folk in our own communities, as the example given of the groups meeting in Kew.
- Lorraine Parkinson has spoken about the Building Bridges programs in Australian schools.
- I would mention the teaching of religion in West Australian primary schools, following the Religion in Life series.
- Cooperation in Justice, Peace and Liberation.
- Indigenous affairs. We recently held the 13th Assembly of the Uniting Church, this July in Adelaide. There we grappled with the issue of same gender marriage. What was most interesting to me in the reports I received of this meeting was the manner and style of the debate. Many sections of our Uniting Church have great difficulty with this issue. Among our Indigenous brothers and sisters, it is not something which can be discussed in mixed company. For some of our ethnic groups, such as the Tongans, it is similar. Rather than have a debate of disputation and opposing views vying for attention, the spirit of the Assembly was to listen with respect to the views of gay and lesbian Christians, of Indigenous leaders, of ethnic congregations. What we resolved is to carry on a dialogue, exposing the multiple theologies which underpin different points of view, and to see where this dialogue takes us.
- Refugee crisis.

As allies, as people of faith within a modern secular state, there is a great deal on which we must cooperate.

Let me conclude by saying, out of the particularity of my own religious faith:

Let us conduct our relationship as that between brothers and sisters of the same family of God, and let us learn from one another in such a way that the day of our redemption may indeed draw near in the grace and mercy of God. Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London and New York: Continuum Books, 2002), see esp. chapter 3.

**Reverend Geoffrey Lilburne**

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