

Inter-religious Dialogue: An Israeli Perspective

About 30 CCJWA members and guests gathered at the Perth Synagogue on Tuesday 20 May to hear Dr Debbie Weissman give "an Israeli perspective on inter-religious dialogue." Dr Weissman, president of the International Council of Christians and Jews, and, amongst other things, deputy Co-Chair of the Inter-Religious Coordinating Council in Israel, did not disappoint those in attendance.

After some adjustment to flights, Dr Weissman arrived in Perth later than expected, but thanked all involved in her being here – Dr Mary Marshall (whom she'd met at several ICCJ conferences), Mrs Ann Smith, who had provided transport from the airport, and Rabbi Dovid and Mrs Aviva Freilich, with whom she was staying – for her second visit to Perth.

As a preliminary, Dr Weissman directed all present to the ICCJ Website (involving 30 countries), not just to admire her photographs and writings, but to be informed about important progress made by the organization: the Berlin Statement – a summary of how far The Council of Christians and Jews has come, and a 'to do' list with respect to where we still have to go. Further, the document serves as an excellent educational guide.

The website also features a statement on Israel and Palestine. In 2002 (the worst year in Weissman's memory), Dr Weissman recalled, Mounib Younan, the Palestinian Lutheran Bishop of Jerusalem, had reflected: "As long as you believe in a living God, you must have hope." This quotation was adopted as the title of the 2013 document, a statement that "has helped us, but caused argument elsewhere."

Embarking on her talk, Dr Weissman asserted that "inter-religious dialogue" is, at present, the third most important issue in the world. The first is "environmental damage," evidenced in climate change; the second is the "socio-economic gap" between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'; and the third is learning to live with the other (in terms of ethnicity, gender, and religion) within an air of mutual respect. In her article entitled "Pride without Prejudice," Dr Weissman encourages each to celebrate with gusto one's own religious feasts, remaining respectful of the other who is different.

Weissman noted that Israel had its own unique problem. In deeply religious countries like the U.S. and Poland, or more secular countries like Sweden or Australia, there is a Christian majority and a tiny Jewish minority. But in Israel, the opposite situation exists: there is a Jewish majority, an Islamic component, and a very small Christian minority. Dr Weissman then turned to the 1993 Oslo peace process (which some mourned and some celebrated), recalling Yitzhak Rabin shaking hands with PLO leader Yasser Arafat. For the politician this was "a window of opportunity," but thinking as a cautious educator, she felt this unplanned moment fraught with uncertainty. A more considered approach would have been for these two leaders to have been guided to interact slowly at a distance to get to know each other – a diplomatic process deconstructing stereotypes and preconceptions, peace-building at a

grass-roots level to sustain peace. One method to unite persons from very different groups is through doing things together such as cooking, sport, books, gardening. This can be applied to inter-religious harmony. While extremism, xenophobia, violence, pose an unattractive, negative image in religion (many of faith think in terms of absolute – sometimes their vision of a world-to-come impelling them to do violence to the world-that-is), there is also a positive image.

Dr Weissman reflected that one would hope that peaceful dialogue would be newsworthy; but sadly violence seems to be considered more captivating. Religion provides people with many different things: (1) it provides people with identity, with particularism – this is a particular group that nourishes our morality. (Speaking on behalf of the contribution of 'righteous Gentiles' to Jewish survival, Dr Debbie Weissman cited the occasion where French Huguenots of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon sheltered, and saved, thousands of Jews during WWII – receiving the Righteous Among the Nations-award from Yad Vashem – sheltering them because they had themselves experienced persecution and exile. They understood what it meant to be a "stranger" in their own land). (2) Religion gives a repository of cultural identities (examples) of their own suffering. (3) Monotheistic faith follows a merciful compassionate God, and expects us to emulate this God. It has stories of 'saints' as models to follow. (4) Religion offers systems of law, such as Halacha, Sharia. (5) Each has a notion of hope, important as despair breeds violence. We should acknowledge in each of our traditions/texts that which encourages tolerance, peace, and interaction that deals with the violent.

When we suddenly feel our own identity under threat that is when we might be provoked to violence, hence the need for parochial identities to be preserved. The "dignity of difference" needs to be upheld. World peace is not gained through homogeneity – through consensus – but through respect for diversity.

Israel's own composition is mostly Jewish, with about 20-25% Israeli Arabs and Palestinians (many of whom are Muslim). There is some tension, but it is not serious. We (Jewish persons) are skilled at being Diaspora, but not so good at being a sovereign. This is something being learned at present. We are amused by our own tendencies: a typical Israeli telegram reads "Be very anxious for what lies ahead. Details to follow." However, as the saying goes, just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean that they're not out to get you! In this present time, perhaps for the first time, we Christians and Jews can be together without fear. But, even with friends, there is still the powerful effect of memory (of persecution and atrocities). What do we do with our memory?

As a Zionist, Dr Weissman moved to Israel (from New York) forty years ago to contribute to forming a Jewish homeland. It is necessary for Jews to have a safe homeland, but in making (achieving) this, it should generate compassion for others who still struggle to make their home, such as we see in present-day painful conflicts. While in Perth the focus is still on Christian-Jewish relations, in Israel the ICCJ involves trilateral dialogue – an international Abrahamic dialogue – reflective of a wider aim for peace.

At this point Dr Weissman invited questions from the audience. In reply to whether she approved of the BDS movement (whose goal is to delegitimize the state of Israel), Dr Weissman expressed disagreement with its aims. To describe her approach, she cited an example: when invited to speak by the Sabeel Palestinians, a hard-line Christian group, she agreed because it was an opportunity to build relations, and educate. In Israel, Jews need to be encouraged to reach out to non-Jews to broaden their horizon and succeed at developing healthy regionality (regional cultural diversity).

Dr Weissman, in conclusion, turned her attention to Pope Francis' upcoming visit to Israel (which she would miss by being abroad). This would be the fourth papal visit (the first being by Pope Paul VI in 1964). Since the Fundamental Accord in Oslo in 1993, which resulted in Israel supplying an ambassador to the Vatican, Dr Weissman recalled Pope John Paul II's visit in 2000, and more recently, that of Pope Benedict XVI. She found John Paul II a compassionate leader, and, thus far, has the impression that Pope Francis is a warm and charismatic leader. This will be Pope Francis' first official trip (other than to Brazil, his homeland). Although brief (24 hr duration), visiting the Holy Land was high on his agenda. Earlier, in the wait for the new pope, she feared that if a representative from a culture unfamiliar with Jewish-Christian history were instituted, this might be a set-back for the progress in Christian-Jewish dialogue. This, however, had not occurred, and relations are set to continue improving. Finally, today attention needed (also) to be given to the shrinking of Christian populations in some regions, where Christianity is under threat.

Dr Weissman closed with the Torah, reading from Leviticus 26:36–37, "you will flee but there is no-one pursuing you," adding that we need to be courageous: "let us not flee because of our memories". "Jews will feel secure because we have wonderful friends."

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