Celebrating Difference and Dissonance

Saying goodbye and relinquishing leadership in an organisation you founded seventeen years ago is harder than I thought it would be. Especially when you add three further years prior to that initiating and leading a working group to bring this Council into being. But it is time to leave, and to hand the work over to others with new visions and new energy and different directions to bring to the work. But before I pass the responsibility on I thought it might be useful to speak about what led me to undertake this work, and why I believe such an interfaith Council between these two religions is important.

Even as a child, I learned from history that when religion gets into bed with political power it generally makes a foul mess. I cannot remember the time in my childhood when I was not interested in history. At primary school we used to do what were called 'projects', topics of interest displayed on a wall of the classroom on white cartridge paper. I remember my mother helping me with a project on Napoleon, in which she typed out my childish prose. When I pasted the neat typewritten sheets of paper amongst my illustrations it made the project look so professional. I was the toast of the teacher and the target of my classmates. Around the same time our neighbours got television where I saw for the first time an image that has haunted me to this day. I don't remember the programme, but it showed in black and white film the liberation by British forces of Belsen concentration camp. The film was of a British soldier driving a bulldozer, a handkerchief over his mouth, as his machine pushed dozens of dead Jews into a mass grave, like so many logs of wood. Even today that image has power to move me; but as a child my historical curiosity made me want to know why. Why should a country want to kill people of a particular religion? From my project on Napoleon I was familiar with the idea of armies fighting and killing one another in such a savage, organised, and merciless way; but why were women and children being shovelled into graves and ovens? They were not soldiers.

So began my acquaintance with the horrible history of Anti-Semitism. It has influenced my life in many ways. It has made me a supporter, though not an uncritical one, of the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state. Anti-Semitism has also shown me the foul mess that Christianity has made at times of its own Gospel. But it was never enough just to know about something. Simon Schama (a fellow historian, though a little more famous than yours truly) concluded his television series on the history of Britain by saying 'History is not written to revere the dead but to inspire the living'. Knowing the past is not much use if history does not push us into action. So knowing the history of the Holocaust led me to become a member of the Council of Christians and Jews, first in Melbourne and then in Edinburgh. But when I arrived in Perth in 1992 no such Council existed, so I set about founding one. Thanks to the support and willingness of the major Christian and Jewish communities in Perth, after three years work, in 1995 such a Council came into existence in Western Australia and still goes on. But why should the history of the Holocaust have led me to this particular path of purpose? Why would Holocaust history bring about a Council of Christians and Jews in Western Australia?

There are two reasons for this, which I want to explore with you tonight, both of which have to do with history. It should hardly come as a surprise that history should be a motivation for someone who has dedicated the past twenty years of his professional life to the task that Herodotus, the ancient Greek instigator of narrative history, called 'what is learned by inquiry is set forth'. History is first Inquiry, then setting out the result of that

inquiry, and that explication of the past can prompt action in the present. So inquiry into history has been, for me, one of the instigators of this Council. Inquiry into the history of the Holocaust, and into the history of Christianity, has brought me to the realisation that historical context is a vital component in the understanding and practice of any religious belief. So Church History is necessary in a university Theology department, because it provides an awareness of the historical context of a religious tradition which prevents us making an idol out of religion, and bowing down and serving it. So, for example, the history of Christianity tells us that women did exercise leadership in certain Churches in the first Christian centuries. So any Christian position opposed to female leadership in the Church on the basis of it being an unwarranted innovation in Christianity is open to question, however hard its proponents try to assert otherwise. History also tells us a number of things in respect of Christians and Jews which, I believe, Councils of Christians and Jews should explore.

First, historical inquiry brings us to the unalterable fact that the Holocaust did happen. The evidence is overwhelming; that German Fascism between 1934 and 1945 programmatically set out to exterminate the Jewish people, and achieved its goal to the extent of over 6,000,000 planned murders of Jewish men, women, children, and babies. You cannot be a historian, or a Christian, or a Jew, and a Holocaust denier. Genuine historical inquiry will simply not permit that option.

Second, historical inquiry brings us to the equally stark fact that Christianity contributed to this genocidal extermination of the innocent. This genocide occurred because Christians distorted their own history almost from the beginning, to make the Jews the murderers of Jesus rather than actual culprits — the Roman occupying power of first-century Palestine and their collaborators, the Hellenised Temple authorities. This unhistorical Christian blame upon all Jews, past and present, has had heinous consequences. In making Jews the murderers of Jesus, whom Christians believed to be God incarnate, this historical lie brought about open season on Jewish God-killers. This Christian persecution was bad enough, but it became truly devastating when Christianity became the official religion of numerous European states. From the fourth century until the twentieth century Jews were robbed, exiled, discriminated against in law, forcibly converted, subjected to violence, and murdered, not just by Christian mobs, but by the state, with all the power of coercive force that belongs to political powers.

But it wasn't just the state. The Christian Church also actively participated in this historical orgy of fostering hatred and oppression; not excluding direct involvement in murdering the people of its own founder. Consequently, building on centuries of Christian anti-Jewish hatred Hitler and the Nazis found it a comparatively easy task to re-direct this virulence and garner support, complicity, or passive obedience for the death camps. Two sad examples of this history of hate — one large, one small — will have to suffice here. In the fifteenth century the very Christian kingdom of Spain celebrated its newfound unity, and final military victory over the Muslim Moors, by turning the Inquisition of the Church on its Jewish and Muslim citizens. By the sixteenth century the combination of Church and state had burned to death hundreds, if not thousands, of those people who had been forcibly converted and continued to practise their former faith in secret. Finally, in 1492, the Jews, who had lived in Spain for centuries, were expelled; but not before they were compelled to leave behind most of their possessions for the enjoyment of Christians.

In the 1940s, notwithstanding the protests of a number of courageous churchmen, both Catholic and Protestant, there was Christian complicity in the rounding-up of Jews for extermination in some parts of the Church. Christian clergy and lay people, formed by centuries of seeing Jews as despicable God-killers, had no qualms handing Jews over to the murderers, or doing the job themselves. For example, when the Ukraine was occupied by German forces during World War Two centuries of Russian Christian Anti-Semitism bore its usual murderous fruit. In one village the priest celebrated the arrival of the Nazi forces by inciting his parishioners so that they dragged several Jews that night from their bed and drowned them in the river. [Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust* (1986), 175] This Anti-Semitism remains present even today. In 2004, when visiting the Polish city of Krakow, I found on a wall of the old city a depressing graffito — 'Jude gang' ('Jews out'). But the Jews had already been 'outed' from Krakow in their tens of thousands when the Nazis had first put them into a ghetto and then deported them to death camps. This hate-filled scrawl was a testament to the persistence of centuries of Christian-fostered hatred of the Jews, even when they were no longer there.

But this historical truth about the oppressiveness of religion and power is not confined to Christianity. Because of the growth of Christianity in Western history, it has been many centuries since Jews have been in a dominant place in any society. But in the years of earliest Christianity, before the extinction of Jewish Palestine in the first century, Jews did to the tiny Christian minority what would be done to them over the next twenty centuries. Christian heretics were thrown out of synagogues, Jewish mobs rioted against them, and they were dobbed in to the Roman authorities to bring about their trial and execution as followers of an illegal religion. Also today, in the only Jewish state in the world, the political system allows religious Jews of extreme right-wing views to implement political policies that a majority of Israelis, who are secular, believe leads to the persecution of Israeli Arabs and holds most Israeli citizens to ransom to the agenda of a tiny minority.

But neither is religious oppression a monopoly of Jews and Christians. It is disturbing to watch the way in which current events in Egypt are being portrayed in our media, as a conflict between the oppressive regime of Mubarak and 'pro-democracy' demonstrators on the streets. But in Egypt somewhere between 10–20% of Egyptians are Coptic Christians, the largest ancient Christian population in the Middle East. Although these people have been the victims of anti-Christian violence under Mubarak — at least forty incidents in the last ten years — they have not been supporting the anti-Mubarak demonstrations because they fear the outcome will be an even more persecuting Islamist regime. [Angela Shanahan, 'Fate of Copts ignored by the secular West', *Weekend Australian: Inquirer*, (5-6 Feb 2011), 11] So much for 'pro-democracy' demonstrations when one large minority group fears for its life from any such pro-Islamic 'democracy'.

Third, historical context reminds us of the plurality of religious cultures and beliefs, against those who want to idolise or reduce their faith to a monolithic image of their own position. History tells us that there has never been a single version of Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. Nevertheless, fanatics of all three faiths have persisted in claiming theirs is the only truth. Just to look at my own faith, we see that tendency to privilege one version of truth and attack others appearing almost from the beginning of Christian history. In the earliest Christian gospel, the Gospel of Mark, there is an inconvenient story about one of Jesus' chosen disciples, John, coming to Jesus with the news that someone not of his band of disciples was casting out demons in the name of Jesus. John tells Jesus, 'we tried to stop

him, because he was not following us'. It is the action of persecutors everywhere. How dare this unauthorised person go about doing things in the name of Jesus. He must be stopped. John is obviously expecting Jesus to approve his disciples' intervention against this unauthorised practice. But Jesus, no doubt to John's surprise (and perhaps disappointment) says, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us'. (Mk 9.38-9)

A knowledge of the diversity of religious history, and the practice of inter-faith dialogue that is aware of that history, is therefore part of the antidote against this sort of monopolistic religious fanaticism. Councils such as ours, where people intentionally meet together to expose their faith to the questions and observations of others, form communities of inter-religious encounter and diversity. Being a member of an organisation dedicated to the exploration of religious diversity makes a person almost immediately aware that theirs is not the only way of holding to their own religious truth, let alone the belief they encounter in people of other faiths. In our own Council, Jews are not just Jews; they are Liberal or Orthodox Jews who do not necessarily agree with each other even about major aspects of their own religious tradition, including the interpretation of their own sacred scriptures. Christians come in an even more bewildering variety, whose history is littered with examples of holding different and even contradictory things, over which they have sometimes even gone to war or violently persecuted each other. It becomes very difficult in the face of that experience of religious diversity, and in the face of the facts of history, for one variety of either Christianity or Judaism to claim an absolute monopoly on truth. We may attempt to do that, but then someone will come along with the different truth of inconvenient history and remind us that other Jews, or Christians, have thought and practised their faith differently. Variety is not just the spice of life, it is the uncomfortable truth of our own religious histories.

So the exploration of difference, and of dissonance (the internal disagreements and disharmonies in a religious tradition) is vital in interfaith dialogue. Not only is such an awareness of these divergences true to our own religious histories; they help avoid the capture of our religious faith by fanaticism. I know of no more powerful example of this in Christian history than for a short period in the early twelfth century, in the city of Toledo under the rule of its archbishop, Raymond. Using the great libraries of its former Moorish rulers, the archbishop set up a European translation centre, welcoming into the project Christian, Jewish, and Muslim scholars. Together these practitioners of different and even antagonistic faiths translated Arabic and Hebrew translations of philosophy and classical works into Latin. That led directly to new works of Arabic science becoming known to the West, along with the works of the Greek philosopher Aristotle. In turn, that gave us the use of reason in Scholastic Theology. Those developments also contributed to the initiation of a new western institution, the university; though I wish I could say that successive Australian government supported this institution as well as the medieval Church did.

But more important even than this new institution of learning, this twelfth-century encounter between scholars of different faiths gave us an idea. It is an idea which has been at odds with the prevailing cultures of all three religions for most of their history, and one in which it has taken centuries to come to fruition in western culture. But it is an idea whose genesis lies in the history of three religious faiths, and without which our world today would be at the mercy of the monopolising fanatics who use violence to support their claim that theirs is the only way to understand truth. That idea is that religious difference

should be celebrated, not exterminated. It is one that all three religious traditions have struggled with, and still struggle with today. In my own version of Christianity, there are Anglicans who cannot, and will not, accept a conscientious divergence over the allowability of homosexuality; who would rather split their Church than allow it to live with this disagreement. But Raymond of Toledo, with his scholars disagreeing over much more fundamental matters, including the very nature of God himself, points to the fruitfulness of the celebration of difference and dissonance.

We do not agree. As Christians and Jews we shall probably never agree. And as Christians and Jews we also do not agree even with other members and communities within our own faiths. The question is what are we going to do about it? One path is that taken by our faiths for most of their history, and by many religious people today. It is the choice of religious monopoly that claims there is only one way to understand the religious revelation that has been vouchsafed to us. The usual consequence of this assertion to a sole monopoly of interpretation has been to coerce, compel, and even to kill those who disagree, as an offence to us and to God. In a globalised world, this is the path of Mutually Assured Destruction. The other path is that of the celebration and exploration of difference and dissonance, and it is to this work that I want to encourage the Council to continue under its new leadership in the coming years. We need to know more, not less, about our own divergences. Not just the differences between Christians and Jews, but also the dissonances and contradictions within each of those communities. Learning to live with difference is not just a matter of accepting the disagreements between ourselves and those of another religion; it is also celebrating the differences we have with those of the same faith.

I began with my own history and, if you will pardon the indulgence, I want to conclude with another small part of it. I grew up in a largely non-Christian home. Though my mother was a believing Anglican my father was openly agnostic about the existence of God and the worth of religion. In practice, it was his agnosticism that formed the basis of our family's lack of religious practice. My extended family was also a collection of indifferent agnostics, Communists, and de facto atheists. Though I never encountered disparagement of religion, there was no encouragement for it either. However, in my early teens I had read my way into an intellectual sort of Christian belief — history again; it is hard to avoid Christianity if you love western history. But I had no experience of the practice of my religious belief outside of my solitary attendance at the parish church and talks with the parish priest. Then, during my high school years I got an after-school job at the local dairy (that's 'deli' in Western Australian speak). The owner of the shop was an intelligent and kind Roman Catholic man. To meet a Christian life, in the flesh, so to speak, was immensely stimulating. I began to respond to that encouraging example of faith in the usual way — by wanting to emulate it. I thought seriously about becoming a Roman Catholic, notwithstanding it would have brought me up against the virulent anti-Catholicism of my former Communist, nominally Anglican, grandmother. A formidable thought indeed for a fourteen-year old boy. But here was a genuinely attractive, thoughtful, gently kind Christian life and I wanted to copy it. But then I began to explore the differences between my self-taught family Anglicanism and this other Christianity. I rejoiced in much of the other person's Christianity, but increasingly strained at some of it as well. Without going into details (though Jill will perhaps be glad to know that a bar on married priests was one of them), I elected to remain an Anglican, even though I had to admit the choice for Anglicanism seemed opting for a less exciting version of Christianity. I have not regretted the choice I made, but the exploration of difference has made an indelible impression on

my Christian faith. I learned as a youth to live with, and enjoy, religious difference, because I found the experience of that difference could be creative, not destructive. That early encounter with religious difference has meant that my Anglicanism is forever broadened by another form of Christianity in ways I won't go into in this context.

While difference must be contained if there is to be any viable existence, experience, and hope of community, when that difference is understood and appreciated it stimulates faith. Perhaps this was why Moses kept Miriam with him, because her continual disagreements with him kept him from an autocratic insistence on his own way that would have been contrary to the making of a genuine community among the Israelite people? Perhaps it is why Jesus chose among his disciples a Pharisee, a Zealot, a tax-collecting Roman collaborator, among others? The celebration of difference and dissonance is not only creative, it is a necessary learning if we are to survive and thrive in a world that pushes people of difference together as never before in human history. I commend to the Council their own part in this work of celebrating difference and dissonance in the years ahead.