

YOU, FAITH AND THE 21ST CENTURY

What is faith? What is holiness? Can we live a holy life in an unholy world? What shape is the faith landscape taking on in the 21st century?

Rabbi Bradley Bleefeld, together with a group of Christians and Jews, explored these questions and their underlying concepts at a seminar entitled, “You, Faith and the 21st Century”, held in the afternoon of Sunday, 22 April at the Jewish Community Centre, Yokine, Western Australia.

Rabbi Bleefeld is Rabbi of Temple Beth Hillel of Carmel, Vineland, New Jersey, USA. He is a consultant on Biomedical and Integrated Academic and Corporate Strategies and was formerly the Governor of Pennsylvania's Advisor on Academic and Economic Development.

Rabbi Bleefeld has served on the Boards of the Mid Atlantic Australia New Zealand Chamber of Commerce and the American Israel Chamber of Commerce. As a passionate advocate of Liberal Judaism, he has also served on the boards of the Association of Reform Zionists of America (ARZA) and the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

In 1995, on a previous visit to Western Australia, Rabbi Bleefeld addressed the Council of Christians and Jews at the inaugural general meeting when he spoke on the topic of Christian-Jewish Relationships in the USA.

On this occasion, Rabbi Bleefeld set out to explore the issues of the current topic in an interactive and dynamic way, building upon concepts in an effort to refine one another's understanding. As he did so, the group moved towards a deeper understanding of the current trend taking place in today's religious world.

What is faith? It is a sense of the holy. What is it to be holy? We understand that it is linked to the divine, but how? For Christians and Jews, our God is distinct from all other gods that other people believe in. He is One, distinct in all the universe and there is no other. As He is unique, we as people who worship and walk according to His ways are also distinct, unique and set apart. Religion, or living in a state of holiness, is the path by which we make ourselves distinct. As such we are distinct in our thoughts, attitudes and behaviour. We separate ourselves from animals and from people who act like animals, who live only to fulfil their own needs, with nary a thought as to the impact on that which surrounds them, whether it be other people, animals or the environment. Obviously, we experience triumph and failure as we attempt to live a holy life with varying levels of success.

Those who live the faith-walk understand the struggle in being set apart and being different from others, and there is a growing realisation that it is becoming increasingly difficult to live a holy life in the 21st century. The current trend of popular culture which more often than not produces images and messages enticing us to behave in ways which could be best described as “animalistic”, does not reflect our core values as holy people. This “animalistic” behaviour is usually hedonistic and self-serving. Judaism and Christianity require us to act differently. Both faiths require that we are kind, decent, caring, treating those around us with dignity and respect and always being mindful of our impact on God's creation.

However, within our own faith communities and those of others, we are beginning to see a rather concerning trend, one which Rabbi Bleefeld noted taking shape approximately a decade ago — the “religious fanatics” are emerging once again. Previously, these “fanatics” had been sidelined without a platform and not given much attention, but now, as has been the pattern of human history, they are once again “taking centre stage”, attempting to seize the world's attention and to manipulate world events. The “quiet, gentle people”, the holy people who “live and let live” are being pushed to the sidelines and as we give the “fanatics” free reign, they are beginning to feel empowered to wield their faith as a club with their only agenda being to gain power.

Although difficult to define, we all know what the “religious fanatic” looks like. They are usually self-righteous, elitist, engaging in violence, abuse, incitement and coercion. Their motto is: “My way and only my way and you should get out of my way.” They are only interested in silencing the opposition, and not in dialogue, nor in debate, and certainly do not subscribe to the “live and let live” principle of the “quiet and kind” holy people.

Often we mistake fundamentalism for fanaticism and although they often come hand in hand, a person can hold a religious fundamental viewpoint but only move into the realm of fanaticism when they begin to enforce their fundamental view on someone else through coercion or violence.

Rabbi Bleefeld encouraged us all to define “fanatic” for ourselves and as to how we might contradict and confine them according to our individual place in the world. He added that our benchmark should be linked to the degree of “abuse” used to enforce values and ideology, not just in the political realm, but also in the spiritual. He reminded us all that the purpose of faith is to elevate the individual to the highest level as we strive to reach our potential as human beings, created in the image of God, and that this ultimately is the purpose of linking oneself to God.

We, the “kind and gentle” holy people have two options: We can let the “fanatics” continue to become empowered without taking a stand and perhaps someone else will step in and change things at the last moment as the Allies did in WWII; or we can be polite, but firm, labelling fanaticism for what it is, treating it with zero-tolerance and sidelining those who would try to seize world attention and manipulate world affairs for their own purposes. It is a responsibility that is carried by us all — the “gentle and kind” holy people as well as those who are just “gentle and kind”.

*Shelley Rush
Council of Christians and Jews WA Inc.*



L to R: The Revd Dr Rowan Strong, Chairperson CCJWA, Rabbi Bradley Bleefeld and Revd Marie Wilson of the Uniting Church.