

## **A Lecture by Rabbi Dr Andrew Goldstein on 16 October 2008 “Jewish–Christian Dialogue: Has it all been said?”**

On Thursday 16 October Rabbi Dr Andrew Goldstein addressed a CCJWA gathering of 40 members and visitors at the Temple David, responding to the question as to whether Jewish–Christian Dialogue is “all said and done”? Warmly informal, he narrated experiences drawn from the conferences he had attended over the years in his capacity as the representative Jewish theologian to the WCC. Dr Goldstein, who was a rabbi of Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue since 1970 following his ordination at Leo Baeck College, is Vice Chair of the European Board of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, member of the ICCJ’s executive board, and co-chair of the ICCJ’s Theology Committee.

Dr Goldstein began by reviewing his discouraging start in Jewish–Christian dialogue. In the role of invited ‘Jewish speaker’ to Baptist and Methodist women’s meetings, after a hesitancy to “say yes to Jesus,” he was never invited back. Things improved when he attended a conference (outside Florence) where he met Rev Bill Simpson, a Methodist Minister, providing an opportunity to mix with Christian Clergy, who shared familiar Jewish jokes in a changed context. The conferences he attended subsequently made him aware of divides other than faith. Exchange occurs, he noted, on the level of humanity rather than theology.

As the Jewish component to a WWC conference, Dr Goldstein found one colleague’s theology, though in English, to be incomprehensibly complex. This he saw not as an interfaith problem but one of verbosity. At another conference where each day was hosted by a different faith representative, Dr Goldstein observed that the food provided by the Buddhists at their temple was first eaten by Arab, then Jewish, and lastly, Christian delegates, which revealed a cultural rather than faith divide.

Another observation was drawn from the WCC conference in Harare, Zimbabwe. There was a sense of unity as all sat down together for Bible study in humble huts, until a Coptic priest lambasted those assembled for ‘being complicit’ with corruption of the Church. This priest undermined the progress of human fraternity not through his faith stance, but through his intolerant orthodoxy. At another conference involving Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish representations, Dr Goldstein discovered the necessity for sensitivity toward worship practice. At this meeting, he found an opportunity not usually afforded a Jewish rabbi, to cross denominational divisions. In spite of being Liberal, he was entrusted by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks to oversee the kosher food for Orthodox members. When a woman rabbi was placed behind the screen in the Orthodox service at the conference, it was agreed that this was inappropriate. Finally, it was decided, in a spirit of fraternity, to allow members of the respective groups to attend each other’s service so as to make the necessary quorum, rather than running parallel Orthodox and Liberal Jewish services.

At a conference held at Montevideo, Dr Goldstein invited Cardinal Kasper to attend a service at a synagogue, as the Cardinal had thus far never attended one. Surprisingly, Bosanova music was the order of the day. The drumming rhythm of this meeting symbolized for Dr Goldstein an aspect of religious identity. Africans brought to America as slaves, separated from their cultural roots had developed rhythms, and passed them onto their children, with the *thought* that these represented their origins. Dr Goldstein pondered: Might there be a parallel here with regard to our theological origins?

Dr Goldstein then turned to the progress made through the Conciliar Declaration “Nostra Aetate,” and the Jewish equivalent “Dabru Emet.” The strength of these documents was in their conceding theological differences while pronouncing the necessity for equality, that is, ‘we both use wine, but it symbolizes different things for us’. These signs of progress, however secure they seem, have been threatened by recent setbacks which Dr Goldstein enumerated.

In America there has been lobbying by a right wing evangelical group, appealing to conscience, to cease investment in Jewish corporations so as to refrain from complicity in their political aims. Not long ago, there was a time of apprehensiveness at the possibility of an anti-Semitic outbreak in relation to the portrayal of Jews in the “The Passion of the Christ” (averted through the US Conference of Catholic Bishops’ statement that this portrayal was not an accurate representation of the gospel accounts of the Passion). Another concern was the recent approval of the celebration of the Latin Mass, which included the phrase “pernicious Jews.” Another problem involved the preparation of material based on a literalist reading of the New Testament, by people who did not appreciate the progress that had been made in Jewish–Christian relations. The dissemination of fundamentalist Christian literature for evangelical Christians who might never meet a Jew in their life is a new threat to improved Jewish–Christian relations.

On the subject of the Lebanese war, the assumption made by some theologians that all Jewish persons were in favour of it was insensitive. A further problem occurred when a committee produced a brochure condemning the formation of the state of Israel, confusing the events of 1948 with those of 1967. Finally, concern remains over the beatification of Pope Pius XII, whose war time affiliations are still questioned. At a Switzerland meeting, the Catholic contingent condemned a certain Protestant spirit of ‘supercessionism’. Openness to criticism, Dr Goldstein stated, needed to occur *within* our faiths, and interfaith dialogue was often the occasion for developing sensitivity to human sensibilities.

Quoting Rabbi Michael Melchior, Dr Goldstein concluded: “what is spoken is political, but deep down it is first religious.” If we who are religious cannot speak about this, then, who can? A quote from Malachi (2:10) summed it up, “Have we not all one parent? Why then do we treat each other so treacherously?” Dr Goldstein observed that was there a cyclic pattern in interfaith dialogue, and that we had to be constantly vigilant against anti-Semitism, not just by resolving difficulties, but by learning from each other.

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