

“In quest of high quality conversation”  
by Dr Michael Levitt AM FRACS

(Address to CCJWA 2025 Annual General Meeting held 15 February 2026)

Thank you Rowan for your kind introduction and for the privilege of addressing the 2025 AGM of the Council for Christians and Jews of Western Australia.

At the outset, I am proud to acknowledge the Whadjuk People of the Noongar Nation, the original inhabitants and eternal custodians of the land upon which we are meeting today. I extend to their Elders, past and present, my deep respect for their ancient traditions and customs, their languages and art.

I thought that I would provide a little more background about myself as a means of progressing the theme of this speech.

Both my parents were born in Adelaide but, by chance, I was born in London England while my late father, Sol Levitt, was completing his surgical training. My parents, my older brother (Leon, aged just two) and I returned to Perth in early 1958 travelling via Israel, a country that was, itself, not yet 10 years old.

Dad, although born in Australia, had actually been brought up in British mandate Palestine in the 1930s as a toddler and primary school student. His mother had been born in what was then Turkish Mandate Palestine in 1905, had emigrated to Perth and then Adelaide in the 1920s but had dragged her family back to her home in Palestine having found Australia not quite ready for her and her family.

At the time my family was heading back to Australia from London in early 1958, dad's grandmother was still alive and living in Petach Tikva, just inland from Tel Aviv.

Grandma – Safta - Rachel's antecedents were from Eastern Europe which they had left in the mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> century, 30 years or more before the term Zionism had even been coined. They had determined that Eastern Europe was no longer a safe place for them to live, and they sailed to Palestine to settle in what turned out to be malaria-infested swampland that they had purchased from the Arab landowners. In fact, they became the founders of the modern town of Petach Tikva.

Ever since the sacking of Jerusalem in 70 AD when Jews were expelled from the Holy Land by the Romans, we Jews have yearned to return to our ancestral homeland; my Eastern European antecedents would not have known to call themselves Zionists; yet Zion was the eternal homeland of their daily prayers. It was the landscape in which the very first Jews had emerged and prospered as a distinct People in around 2000 BC. And it was the land to which their antecedents – to which **my** antecedents – were indigenous.

To labour the point, Israel is not only the biblical homeland of the Jews, it is the historically and archaeologically verifiable birthplace of Judaism. That's why my family moved from Eastern Europe to live there and that's why dad took his family there as he returned from England to Australia to live and work.

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I was educated at Carmel School in Dianella, even today Perth's only Jewish Day School. I'm proud to say that my parents helped to found Carmel School in 1959. But, since Carmel School did not then extend beyond Year 7, I went to Scotch College for my secondary school education.

Save for my contact with St John of God Subiaco and Belmont Hospitals in the 1960s, their Christmas parties and some of the nuns who worked closely with dad in those hospitals, my first exposure to Christianity and to the New Testament was at Scotch.

There, to my genuine astonishment, my Scripture Class textbook advised me that "the Jews" had killed Jesus. To be honest, I had no idea what they were talking about. I knew precious little about Christianity, and I couldn't see how I - or my Jewish friends and family - bore any responsibility for the death of Jesus. Moreover, I found the suggestion that any Jews alive that year - in 1970 - were somehow implicated in killing Jesus to be self-evidently misguided.

However, my classmates – many of whom had only recently met a Jew (me) for the first time in their lives - also got to read, and to be told, that "the Jews", of whom I was openly and unashamedly one, were somehow collectively guilty of an unmistakably serious crime.

I have since realised that it was this subliminal message to my classmates - and not the direct message to me - that was the problem. By and large, thirteen-year-old schoolboys being what they are, we paid little attention to the positive messages - forgiveness, love and redemption attained through acts of kindness and through faith in Jesus - that were also contained in that textbook.

Those positive sentiments, also conveyed in parables and apocryphal tales, were lost on schoolboys too immature and self-centred to be receptive.

Yet the bold announcement of Jewish deicide and the fact that those parables were often accompanied by a Jewish villain, served to deliver subliminal messages to every schoolboy in those classes about collective Jewish culpability, insensitivity and greed.

Years later, I encountered similar hostility to Jews in contributions to the bi-annual magazine sent to all Scotch College Old Boys of whom I was, by then, one. Tellingly, these were authored by the then Chaplain at Scotch. On the first occasion, the Chaplain had boldly commenced one sentence of his Easter message with: "And when the Jews killed Christ ..."

On the second occasion, a few years later, the Chaplain chose to liken the terrorist bombing of a civilian train in Madrid (which you may recall from 2004) to the IDF's targeted assassination of the founder and so-called spiritual leader of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. In so doing, the Chaplain equated the innocent Madrid victims to a truly despicable man, an unashamedly genocidal murderer, surely the antithesis of what Jesus stood for. And, no less, through its assassination of Sheik Yassin, he equated Israel with the Islamist terrorist group that undertook the bombing that had killed 191 Spanish innocents.

In both cases, I wrote to the School indicating my objections to what the Chaplain had chosen to include in these messages which were received and read by all Old Boys and many school parents. To the first such letter, the Principal ultimately responded, followed by a response from the Chaplain.

To the second letter, I received no response at all.

Again, the impact upon me of what the Chaplain had written was not the point. The real problem was the impact that this sort of disinformation had or might have had on all the magazine's readers of many different levels of understanding. Those readers would have ample reason to assume that the word of the Chaplain – the archetypal role model of peace and love – would have been the truth. If he was putting these thoughts into writing, in an official School publication, then who would doubt that the threshold for certainty had been reached and checked.

You might imagine, therefore, that my confidence in Christianity had not been bolstered by these encounters. Yet, to be fair, Scotch College was very good to me. Despite my limited abilities in Aussie Rules football, I thrived in the presence of first-class teachers, clear rules and the encouragement of academic achievement. I qualified for Medicine at UWA and went on to train in General Surgery here in Perth.

Like dad, I went to the UK to pursue a sub-specialist training in colorectal surgery, and I returned to Perth in 1990. I have since worked as a surgeon and in medical administration both in the public and private sectors; I served on the Medical Board of WA for ten years and on the St John of God Health Care board for nine years. I spent three years as Chief Medical Officer for Western Australia inside the Health Department, corresponding to the onset of - and the State's initial response to - the Covid pandemic.

Inside the Perth Jewish Community, I was, in the mid-late 1970's, President of the WA chapter of the Australian Union of Jewish Students. Even at that time anti-Israel propaganda and aggressive anti-Israel debates were being conducted on campus. In this manner, we were all introduced to the language and the modus operandi of the left-leaning, anti-colonialist student movement that has spawned so many of the current crop of Australia's political leaders.

I was President of the Board of Carmel School for six years and have recently completed a similar length of time as President of the Perth Hebrew Congregation. I am now President of the Jewish Community Council of WA.

I especially enjoyed my time on the St John of God board. I loved that in all our deliberations, connection was consistently brought back to the healing mission of Jesus Christ, a concept that I found easy to sign up to. This experience, in particular, broadened my perspective and caused me to question, not my Faith, but my previously ambiguous attitude towards Christianity in general.

As it turns out, Christianity comprises a wide collection of beautiful traditions and myriad of decent, open-minded, warm and welcoming people.

Who knew?

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The recent explosion of outright antisemitism in Australia has been graphically demonstrated in public through perfidious university leaders who have allowed offensive encampments to intimidate and even attack Jewish students and staff;

Through craven political leaders permitting protestors to roam our cities' streets unashamedly shouting and proudly displaying posters with vulgar insults and intimidating, thinly veiled antisemitic slogans.

Through damage to Jewish property, cancellation of Jewish businesses and creatives, and through the merciless murder of Jews on Bondi Beach.

Yet this is all underpinned and promulgated online through an endless torrent of adverse characterisations about Jews and about Israel, age-old perceptions and slurs, responses that flood every post whether that post is for or against Jews, whether that post is for or against Israel. The scale and intensity – and the unremitting persistence - of this flagrant detachment from reality is unnerving to me and frankly terrifying to many Jews.

Of course, the most venomous of these attitudes stem from Islamist extremists and Islamic Jihadists and from their dismal non-Muslim apologists who masquerade as people of a progressive mindset. Our school educators seem to be at the forefront of this homegrown and cultivated ideological contagion.

I make this point clearly so that you do not imagine that Jewish Australians fail to appreciate – or that we lack the courage to state openly – that the primary threat to us comes from these extreme Islamist attitudes and from both extremes of the political spectrum.

But this is a meeting of Jews and Christians, and my message today is directed primarily at us.

Until recently, I had focused little attention on my interactions with Christians and, specifically, my interactions with this Council. But I have – as have many Jews - appreciated the authenticity of the support for Jews that has emanated from Christian groups across the very broad spectrum of Christian life, especially following on from Bondi.

There is, of course, the love for all humankind that Christians exude. And there is palpable indignation amongst Church leaders of all persuasions at the prospect of the exclusion of - or the abuse and violence directed at - Jews simply for being Jews.

Rejection by Christian leaders of the antisemitic actions and attitudes we have seen over the last two years has become clear and resolute; and unimaginably reassuring to the Jewish community.

Yet many of the people in the university encampments, in the protest marches, holding those offensive posters, shamelessly seeking to indoctrinate their classrooms, and penning those despicable accusations and characterisations about Jews online, are products of Australian life and education. Their often-odious opinions are not imported and do not originate from Islamist religious texts or propaganda.

There is a real disconnect between what Christian leaders are saying to the Jewish community and what can be heard and read from a seething mob of Australian-born, Australian-educated people firing up to express grotesquely adverse perceptions of Jews and to blame we Jews outright for our own damnation.

It is difficult to pinpoint where each or any of them has acquired these ugly attitudes towards Jews. But they are present, and they are plentiful.

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On the board at St Johns, I came into the orbit of a number of truly great Western Australians, almost all of them of Christian Faith. The attitudes towards organisational leadership and governance to which I was exposed on the St Johns board were inspirational and formative.

One of those leaders was Tony Howarth who is a well-known figure in Western Australian business and banking circles. He told me that he believed in “leadership through high quality conversations”.

He did not mean happy or necessarily comfortable conversations.

He meant leadership through dialogue that was honest yet always kind.

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I want to embrace and return the wonderful support that we Jews here in Perth have received from our Christian friends. I can only do this with authenticity, however, if I am true to Tony Howarth’s maxim to speak with honesty and kindness.

For your love of me to be reciprocated – and I speak only on my own behalf - the denigration and the adverse characterisation of Jews that remains embedded in Christian teaching and discourse will need to be spoken about openly.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance – abbreviated IHRA - working definition of antisemitism that was finalised in 2016 and that has, in the wake of the Bondi massacre, been adopted by the Australian Government, commences as follows:

“Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews one manifestation of which is hatred.”

Let me repeat that so it is clear how we – the Jews – define antisemitism. “Antisemitism is a **certain perception** of Jews” and hatred is just one of its manifestations. It is the perception of Jews moreso than the hatred that is foundational to antisemitism.

Antisemitism is probably best thought of as a sort of conspiracy theory that sees any or all of society’s shortcomings as being attributable to one or other of innumerable character flaws said to be unique to - or uniquely prevalent (or uniquely pronounced) amongst Jews.

It begins with the perception, the subliminal adverse characterisation of Jews that I first encountered at school. The Jews as Christ killers. The Levite, indifferent to human suffering in the story of the Good Samaritan. Zachaeus, the thief and the cheat in Jesus’ visit to Jericho, to name just some that I’ve experienced.

Those perceptions and adverse characterisations were written in the latter part of the first century AD, almost **2,000 years** ago, but are still being repeated and referenced right up until today. They serve to lower the threshold for perceiving perverse motivation in every act of every living Jew. And in the actions of the world's solitary Jewish State which, let's face it, was only established in 1948.

As we have seen, once we have lowered the threshold for attributing to **any** Jew a wicked self-interest in **any** actions they take, the door is opened to irrational hatred and to overwhelming victim blaming. That we Jews bring this all on ourselves. And if only we Jews didn't act the way we apparently do.

And then hatred of Jews emerges - and proliferates amongst the brainwashed and the insecure, the disaffected and the marginalised, the left wing and the right, the educated and the professions, and leads ultimately but predictably to violence.

I am not calling for the revision of anyone's holy texts. There are statements in the Torah that, seen through 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes, require careful interpretation and the sensitive application of contemporary perspective to be read without being summarily rejected. And I've not mentioned the contents of the Holy Koran in which unabashed and overt violence against all infidels – Jews and Christians – pose an even more stark challenge to the modern and moderate Muslim to interpret and address.

I am not downplaying the differences that do exist between Judaism and other Faiths. We are, thankfully, not all the same.

But I cannot believe that the positive impact of any individual Christian's faith in Jesus – the generosity of His spirit, the universality of His love, and the access to redemption that He offers His believers – I cannot believe that this powerful impact is somehow insufficient that it simultaneously requires the adverse characterisations of Jews long since deceased.

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I hope Rowan you are not now regretting your decision to ask me to speak. I am reminded of the fine line that separates a guest lecture from a hostage situation.

I want to be clear – over the last decade or so, my eyes have been opened in a very positive way to the world of the Christian Church. I also understand how active this Council has been in addressing precisely the sorts of messaging and adverse characterisation to which I have referred. I understand how much the Christian world has evolved over its long history; and continues to evolve.

Moreover, Jews across the globe have been literally stopped in their tracks by the expressions of support they have received from Church leaders especially since Bondi. And overwhelmed by the simple questions – “What can I do for you? How can I be of assistance?” that have been extended to us by our Christian friends.

The answer to those questions, however, is perhaps not quite so easy.

Because, if you are to do something for us, if there is to be deep and meaningful collaboration between our Faiths, if we are to find authentic expression of mutual understanding and respect; if Australian Christians are to really help Australian Jews overcome this tidal wave of irrational misperception leading to hatred and violence, it will be achieved not necessarily in comfortable agreement but through high quality conversation; through honest and kind dialogue, and through the courageous use of your voices, not only when addressing we Jews but especially when speaking to the much wider world at large.

I see no end to antisemitism until we stop restating the portrayal of Jews as inherently wicked, however concealed or even unintentional those portrayals might now seem.

Let's be clear - they do exist. And they are still being taught and preached.

I have heard them directly and we have all witnessed their consequences.

High quality conversations might be uncomfortable, but it is only through that level of simultaneous honesty and kindness that we can find the path to a world less impacted by irrational and unfounded misconceptions about Jews.

In concluding, I would like to quote from the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks who was a prolific author and an articulate and compelling philosopher. He was a proud and knowledgeable Jewish scholar who had a universal perspective on life. In his wonderful book “A Letter in the Scroll” published in 2000 – which I recommend to anyone, Jew or Christian, interested in experiencing a coherent and contemporary interpretation of the meaning of being Jewish - he wrote about his Faith as follows:

“There are other cultures, other civilisations, other peoples, other faiths. Each has contributed something unique to the total experience of mankind. Each, from its own vantage point, has been chosen. But Judaism is ours. This is our faith, our people, our heritage. By loving them, I learn to love humanity in its diversity.”

I think that if we all loved our own faith and respected other people's love of their faiths, we would all end up learning to “love humanity in all its diversity”.

I suppose that the essence of my message today is that there is surely no need to represent other faiths and cultures - or their adherents - as being somehow inferior in order to elevate our own. Each of our faiths stand on its own as being beautiful and valuable contributors to humanity.

I want to thank Rowan and the Council once again for extending me the privilege of addressing this AGM. I look forward to participating in many, many high-quality conversations between Christians and Jews. Thank you.