

CCJWA: An Address to the Shabbat Congregation of Temple David, Perth

The Revd Prof. Rowan Strong, Chairperson, CCJWA

This occasion is one of the most exceptional experiences of my life. That a Christian priest should be invited to address a Jewish congregation during their Shabbat worship. For this experience I want to sincerely thank Rabbi Ettlinger and you, members of Temple David, for your generosity in allowing me to speak to you about the Council of Christians and Jews, Western Australia. Your rabbi's invitation to me as the Chairperson of the Council of Jews, Western Australia is surely an illustration of the commitment to dialogue and understanding upheld in Judaism, that puts the dark history of Christian persecution of Jews to shame.

Life, and what we do with it, depends on what we believe. What we truly believe; because it on those true beliefs we hold to that we act. This came home to me with rather horrible force just recently. I read reports out of Britain about so-called 'grooming gangs'. These were gangs of men, usually Pakistan, who had been targeting young white working-class British girls for sexual abuse and rape. They operated for years without anyone in authority doing anything. And even when it was known it still took years and a royal commission before there was anything remotely like justice for these abused girls. Why was such an obvious evil crime allowed to be pursued for so long? Because of what the perpetrators and the authorities each believed. If you and your culture holds that white girls are inferior trash to superior men then they are seen as 'fair game'. If authorities hold the belief that coloured people are always victims and white people are always the imperialist abusers, then helping the abusers over the victims is an injustice. It immorally turned the real world

upside down and made the abusers the victims and the victims the abusers. Additionally, there was the fear in the institutions of the police and government of being labelled a 'racist', which in today's secular society is just about the most evil tag you can slap on someone.

To flip to another evil. If you believe, against all the evidence, that Jews as Zionists are colonialist oppressors in the state of Israel which practice genocide, then it is OK to call for their extermination in slogans such as 'from the River to the Sea'. Or, if you believe Jews were the killers of Christ, and that Christ is the incarnation of God's goodness, then Jews must be the opposite of God, the opposite of good. Consequently, Jews must be evil. And what do you do about evil.? You either convert it to good or exterminate it. The Church tried the conversion strategy; but Jews, holding to their age-old faith, the faith of Jews of Nazareth also, proved damned difficult to convert. And even when you tried conversion with oppression, by compelling them into Christianity, these damnable people almost always kept their old faith secretly. So the other strategy to defeat this evil was brought into play. Jews would be exterminated.

Well, thank God, this evil strategy was not always reverted to throughout the entirety of the Church's two-thousand year-old history,. It flourished particularly in the later Middle Ages under the Spanish Inquisition, and more informally in other countries when Christian people took it into their own hands to exterminate Jews locally without too much distress to their Christian governments. But the extermination strategy birthed by the Christian Church came to a dreadful maturity when, for the first time in history, a government with the resources of a modern industrial state took it up. And we all know the evil consequence of the Nazi genocide

– a real attempt to exterminate all the Jews of Europe by killing six million of them as being sub-human, evil, a virus in the bloodstream of pure humanity.

Action is born out of what we truly believe. And it was a realisation of this that caused the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom to act. Motivated by stories of Nazi atrocities towards Jews In 1941 the Archbishop of York, William Temple, invited leaders of various communities to discuss proposals for an intentional Christian-Jewish dialogue. Temple outlined the mission of what was to become the Council of Christians and Jews. The Council would work against all forms of discrimination and promote the 'fundamental ethical teachings which are common to Judaism and Christianity' The Chief Rabbi, Dr Joseph Hertz agreed with this approach and highlighted the central point as being 'the danger to civilisation involved in antisemitism, as well as the steps that might be taken by Christians, working in consultation with Jews, to prevent its spread in this country',

At a subsequent meeting in March 1942 of Christian and Jewish leaders chaired by William Temple, now the nominated as Archbishop of Canterbury the formation of the Council of Christians and Jews was agreed. The aims of the council were specified as:

- To check and combat religious and racial intolerance.
- To promote mutual understanding and goodwill between Christians and Jews in all sections of the community.
- To promote fellowship between Christian and Jewish youth organisations in educational and cultural activities.
- To foster co-operation of Christians and Jews in study and service directed to post-war reconstruction.

In his history of the Council of Christians and Jews Marcus Braybrooke noted that 'Much is said of the silence of the Churches, which was often all too evident' but

he picks out Temple, and the leaders of the various Churches who supported him, as an outspoken critic on this issue.

At a meeting of the CCJ held on the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht in 1988 Dr Robert Rucie, then Archbishop of Canterbury, acknowledged that the roots of these events lay in the preceding centuries of Christian anti-Semitism:

Without centuries of Christian anti-Semitism, Hitler's passionate hatred would never have been so passionately echoed . . . The travesty of Kristallnacht and all that followed is that so much was perpetrated in Christ's name. To glorify the Third Reich, the Christian faith was betrayed. We cannot say, 'We did not know'" We did - and stood by. And even today there are many Christians who fail to see it as self-evident and why this blindness? Because for centuries Christians have held Jews collectively responsible for the death of Jesus. On Good Friday Jews have, in times past, cowered behind locked doors for fear of a Christian mob seeking 'revenge' for deicide. Without the poisoning of Christian minds through the centuries, the holocaust is unthinkable.

Since 1942 Councils of Christians and Jews have been formed internationally. The International CCJ in 1947 as an umbrella organisation for councils around the world; in Germany in 1949; the Australian Council in 1985; and in WA in 1995, alongside those in Victoria, NSW, and South Australia. Here in WA our purposes are fairly standard for Councils of Christians and Jews:

1. To promote the education of Christians and Jews so as to appreciate each other's distinctive beliefs and practices and their common ground
2. To provide a forum for the discussion of issues of common interest or concern between Christians and Jews; and
3. The Council is not a missionary organisation nor is it a political organisation. The aim is to promote dialogue, recognising that the Land of Israel has a significant bearing on Christian/Jewish relations.

In 1993, the year after I arrived in Perth, I set about instigating the formation of a Council of Christians and Jews in Perth, as there was none. I believed then, as I do now, that such Councils are a significant way in which to combat antisemitism. Both as a historian, an Anglican priest, and earlier as a schoolboy fascinated by history, I was conscious of how Christianity functioned as a transmitter of this evil sin from the earlier antisemitism of the ancient pre-Christian world to the present. As I said in an address in a CCJWA event last year about being a Christian and a Jew in a society that has largely turned its back on history, or distorted it to suit its own purposes:

Jews and Christians are by definition counter-cultural communities because we are both indelibly historical faiths. We are formed by our histories because it is our histories that, we believe, take us back to God. Jews find the revelations of the one and only God in the history of the people of Israel and, for Christians, in the history of Jesus of Nazareth and the Church that grew from his teaching. Christians and Jews will have to survive and flourish in this ahistorical non-religious western culture we now live in. To do so as two peoples formed by our historical revelations of the Divine and Holy One we worship, we will need each other if we are to find ways to live by our religious histories in our present and on into our futures.

But any effectiveness of a Council of Christians and Jews fails utterly if there are not Jews and Christians willing to join it and engage with each other in genuine, honest, and difficult dialogue. To give you one example that I have been reflecting on since the appalling massacre of Jews at Bondi Beach. I have been encouraged, amidst the constant disheartening events of antisemitism in Australia, by stories of the sacrificial and counter-cultural lives of rabbis who have been motivated by the love of God and God's requirements to work in service for their people and others. This servant leadership is in contrast to the self-interested sectional ideologies of the secular world and its culture. I believe it comes from the way in which rabbis are

more often than not part of a community, a synagogue, and are therefore connected to and responsive to others who share their faith. This is also in contrast to growing disappointment and disenchantment among everyday people in this country and elsewhere with elite leadership in almost all aspects of our society – media, politics, the law, and even churches such as mine. Regarding my own Church, the only one I am able to speak of in this regard, our leaders, our bishops, are increasingly bureaucrats and lack that integration in a real community I have seen among rabbis. Differences in leadership may be just one of many dimensions that our faith communities can learn from one another.

It is appropriate in this sacred space to let a rabbi have the last word. It comes from Rabbi Jonathan Sachs in his address to the Council of Christians and Jews in Britain on the fiftieth anniversary of their founding. He spoke of fighting against the darkness of the antisemitism of Nazi Germany in words that are, horribly, just as apposite to today.

At times of crisis and tension and turmoil and upheaval and insecurity, each of us is faced with a fundamental and decisive choice: are we dust of the earth or are we the breath of God? Do we go along with humanity's natural base instincts towards fear, fear of the other . . . Do we let fear dominate us and turn hatred into violence or do we stand up against those instincts and fight them knowing that every human being, whoever he or she is, is the image of God. All too few take that second course. But Archbishop Temple and Rabbi Hertz did so then and CCJ and all its members have done so ever since, and they have done collectively no small deed in redeeming humanity from the darkness of those days.

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