



Confessions of a Jewish Ecumenist

31.01.2018 | Deborah Weissman

I often joke that I have probably attended more World Council of Churches functions than any other Jew in the world. I feel that I owe the WCC a great debt of gratitude. In June of 1988, through the WCC, I underwent a life-transforming experience.

They invited about sixty women from all over the world, representing nine different religions, to a week-long conference in Toronto, on religion, politics and feminism. The nine religions represented at the Toronto conference were Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, the Sikh and Baha'i faiths, Native American Indian spiritual traditions, and the Wiccan religion. This week was, to me, life-changing. It set me on a path that led to my further involvement in interreligious work, including much with the WCC. I have been to many conferences since. But I don't think I've ever attended a conference quite like this one. Usually, the most important part is the informal contact over coffee and meals. In Toronto, every morning I awoke eager to attend the sessions themselves.

In what way did this experience transform me? Growing up in the USA, I had always had Christian friends. But I had made a conscious decision in 1972 to move to Israel and work in the field of Jewish education. Thus, for the first 16 years of living in Jerusalem, I knew relatively few non-Jews. Through my work in Diaspora Jewish education, I met people from throughout the world—but they were all Jews. The women's conference in Toronto put me on a trajectory that led to my devoting years to interreligious dialogue in general and Jewish-Christian dialogue in particular. From 2002 until 2009, I was part of a WCC international interreligious framework called "Thinking Together," with Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews and Muslims. We served as a kind of think tank and issued several publications. I am convinced that dialogue and positive interaction among people of different religious and spiritual traditions is one of the important ways through which we can build peace and understanding in our world.

One of the amazing discoveries for me has been what Jews share in common with Hindus – for example, a similar attachment to our respective homelands. Neither religion is on a world campaign of proselytizing. One of my dialogue partners insists that Hinduism at its heart is monotheistic, and that the many deities are manifestations of the central Godhead, an idea that echoes some strands of Jewish mysticism, or Kabbalah. Any similarities between the Hindu and Jewish traditions are not likely to be the product of historical interaction, so that makes them even more interesting to me.

When I began this journey, I was of the opinion that Jews and Muslims had a great deal in common, more than either had with Christians. Historically, Jewish commentators have had fewer theological problems with Islam than with Christianity. Muslims seem to be even more radical in their monotheism and rejection of images than we are. Both traditions are based on a complex legal system – Sharia and Halakha, respectively – which include some of the same prescriptions (such as male circumcision) and prohibitions (such as pork). Both are de-centralized and generally non-hierarchical.

Still, since 2006, I have focused primarily on the bilateral dialogue between Jews and Christians, which, I believe, reflects a unique relationship. I served for two terms as President of the International Council of Christians and Jews. Under my leadership, the ICCJ revived a framework

called the International Abrahamic Forum for trilateral dialogue among Jews, Christians and Muslims. I believe that that conversation is increasingly important, especially as more and more Muslims immigrate to Western countries. Some Jews, frightened by the rise of violent forms of fundamentalist Islam, have begun to view Jewish-Christian dialogue as a waste of time, in which there is very little left to discuss. For them, dialogue with Muslims is a political and existential need, of great urgency. There are even some who would like to change the ICCJ into the "ICCJM." I support trilateral dialogue as well as bilateral Jewish-Muslim or Christian-Muslim dialogue ... but not at the expense of Jewish-Christian dialogue. When a third group is involved, there is a different dynamic.

In order to explain why, I would like to borrow a phrase from Psalms 34:14, "turn from evil, and do good." Under the category of "turn from evil," there are two aspects of the bilateral Jewish-Christian relationship:

1) There is still a great deal of unfinished business between us. One need only glance at Sections 1 through 8 of the ICCJ Berlin Document from 2009^[1] to see that we have much work to do on both sides. Many non-Western Christians, including in the Middle East, adhere to beliefs in supersessionism and even traditional Christian anti-Judaism. Christianity is growing fastest in places where there are very few, if any, Jews. Jews, for our part, must respond more significantly to the profound changes that have taken place within the churches in the last 50 years.

2) Unfortunately, even when a problem appears to have been "solved," we cannot always assume that it won't crop up again. There needs to be constant vigilance on the part of all sides to the dialogue to make sure that its positive outcomes remain intact. We have witnessed in the last few years an alarming resurgence of antisemitism, particularly in Europe.

These points do not necessarily mean that our dialogue hasn't succeeded so far. As Hebrew University Bible scholar, the late and sorely missed Moshe Greenberg, once suggested, on another topic: "Even the choicest vine needs seasonal pruning to ensure more fruitful growth."^[2]

But once we have "turned away from evil," it still remains for us to "do good." Here again, I would point out two aspects:

1) Even if "the problems" had all been solved, Jews and Christians have a great deal of common ground, chiefly because of historical ties and shared scripture. I do not know of two other distinct faith communities who have such a close tie. Study of our shared texts and also of each other's texts and their interpretations is particularly rewarding and spiritually enriching. Because we share common scripture, we also share some common liturgy; for example, the Psalms. Here in Jerusalem, I belong to a Jewish-Christian study group called The Rainbow. One year, we chose as our theme for that year "The Psalms." One month, a Christian would give his or her interpretation of a particular Psalm and a Jew would respond; the next month, vice versa. Clearly, such a dialogue, meaningful and important to Christians and Jews, is irrelevant to Muslims and any others who do not have the Psalms as a sacred text.

2) For Christians, the study of Judaism is the study of the Jewish roots of their own faith. For Jews, the study of Christianity is, at the very least, an exploration of "the road not taken." It can also shed much light on Jewish culture in the early centuries of the Common Era. Much of Rabbinic Judaism developed in response to the challenge of Christianity. Learning about the other helps us learn more and understand more about ourselves.

On June 30, 2015, the ICCJ was privileged to be hosted by Pope Francis in the Vatican.

Speaking to the 260 participants in our annual international conference, he said, referring to *Nostra Aetate*, "This document represents a definitive 'yes' to the Jewish roots of Christianity and an

irrevocable 'no' to antisemitism.”

I hope that his optimism is justified and that Jews and Christians continue our special dialogue, while continuing, as well, to interact on other levels with other “Abrahamic” worshippers and the rest of our fellow human beings.

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