How Dialogue with Jews has transformed the Holy Week Liturgy

| Radcliffe, Albert

Canon Albert Radcliffe from Manchester Cathedral offers an Anglican view of progress in freeing the liturgy from anti-Judaism.

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Albert Radcliffe

As a Christian, I have some experience of what it feels like to attend a commemoration on Yom Hashoah. I have a lump in my throat, an Englishman"s dread of tears, and when, in class, I teach the Cathedral choristers about the Holocaust, I bring an outsider’s sense of that depth of sorrow to the lesson, but it communicates itself. The class is better behaved. They know they are in the presence of something at once evil, yet paradoxically Holy, for God is somehow there, even when he might seem absent.

Now Jewish friends should know that something akin to that depth of feeling can happen to Christians in Holy Week. It"s not just a recital of texts and prayers. It can be, of course, but for me it never has been. On Good Friday, I have often found it difficult to take the service, and you should know that I don"t count myself a very emotional sort of person.

So in talking of Holy Week we are talking serious faith and religion. Last year, for example, when I should really have stood my ground with a particular person over a particular issue, I found I couldn"t because it was Holy Week and a row would have spoilt my inner communion with God and my identification with the meaning of the crucifixion. So, I let the matter pass. Nothing was going to get in the way of my prayers. If there"s any place when I feel as a Christian that I touch the bottom of human existence and find God there, then it"s in Holy Week and on Good Friday in particular. I say that so that Jewish friends will appreciate all the more what I am going to say next which is that because of my own experience of Jewish-Christian dialogue I know *that the Church’s understanding and experience of Holy Week has been historically corrupted by its attitudes towards and treatment of the Jews*.

What has been wrong with the ways Christians have observed Holy Week?

Perhaps I can begin this explanation of what was wrong with Holy Week by reading one of the prayers I grew up on. I did not question it then; though I can"t and don"t use it now. I deliberately omitted it from the service in the Cathedral, this Good Friday morning, when we used the old and

still much loved Book of Common Prayer.

The particular prayer is known as a *Collect*, a particular prayer for a particular occasion. At a time when the liturgical fashion is for just one Collect, even for Christmas and Easter, Good Friday is unique in having three. Traditionally, the third mentions Jews. Here is the 1662 version:

O merciful God, who hast made all Men, and hatest nothing that thou hast made, nor wouldest the death of a sinner, but rather that he should be converted and live; have mercy upon all Jews, Turks, Infidels and Hereticks and take from them all ignorance, hardness of heart, and contempt of thy Word, and so fetch them home blessed Lord, to they flock, that they may be saved among the remnants of the true Israelites, and be made one fold, under one shepherd, Jesus Christ, our Lord…

By Turks, of course, the prayer means Muslims. Their armies were still trying to conquer Europe when the Collect was written. For infidels we would probably understand today, "atheists", and by "Hereticks", other Christians who happened to disagree with us! I"m sure for our Vicar it meant Roman Catholics and Unitarians.

There is much that"s good in that prayer. God does not hate anything that he has made, and I"m sure that his will is constantly that we should all continually turn to him and live, and that, whoever we are, we should always pray to be delivered from ignorance, hardness of heart and contempt of his word.

But on the Collect"s debit side, Jews are lumped together with atheists and accused of ignorance, hardness of heart and even of contempt for the very Word of God they shared with the Church

The prayer also asks for their conversion which remains a continuing obstacle to dialogue and good relations between us.

When the old prayer book, the BCP, was supplemented by the Alternative Service Book, the ASB in 1980, the central part of the prayer was changed; but only in form, not spirit. It read, and still reads:

Have mercy upon your ancient people the Jews, and upon all who have not known you, or who deny the faith of Christ crucified, take from them all ignorance, hardness of heart and contempt for your word.

The amazing thing is that as recently as 1980, the prayer actually got through a committee of experts, the House of Bishops and General Synod. In 1984, yet another supplementary service book, for Lent, Holy Week and Easter was issued, this time with only one Collect for Good Friday. The traditional prayer for Jews for that day was moved to the intercession, as a Bidding Prayer, in another part of the service. It now reads:

Let us pray for God"s ancient people, the Jews, the first to hear his word—for greater understanding between Christian and Jew, for the removal of our blindness of heart, that God will grant us grace to be faithful to his covenant and grow to the love of his name.

Now let us see how the prayer tackles the vexed issue of conversion:

Lord God of Abraham, bless the children of your covenant, both Jews and Christians, and take from us all blindness and bitterness of heart, and hasten the coming of your kingdom, when Israel shall be saved, the Gentiles gathered in, and we shall dwell together in mutual love and peace.

Holy Week is no longer the focus of an ancient hatred. In the Council of Christians and Jews, those

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who once were seen as enemies are becoming acquaintances if not friends.

In his poem, *A Prayer for my Daughter*, W B Yeats has the verse:

An intellectual hatred is the worst,

So let her think opinions are accursed.

Have I not seen the loveliest woman born

Out of the mouth of plenty's horn,

Because of her opinionated mind

Barter that horn and every good

By quiet natures understood

For an old bellows full of angry wind.

It could well apply to the Church. Some theologians have alas been little more than *old bellows full of angry wind.*

An intellectual hatred is the worst, and if the Church has learned that at all in my lifetime, and begun to repair some of the damage, particularly as focused upon Holy Week, then, to a large extent, we owe it as gentiles to those who through the Jew Jesus called us to love and serve the one God, and later to those who through dialogue were gentle with us in helping to set our house in order.

Revd. Albert Radcliffe is Canon at Manchester Anglican Cathedral

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