From Apologetics to Self-confidence. A New Form of Interreligious Dialogue.

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Ladies and gentlemen, dear participants and presenters. It is a great honor for me to speak here in Lund at the annual conference of the ICCJ. The topic of my speech is „From apologetics to self-confidence. A new form of interreligious dialogue."

When we think about the encounters between Christian and Jews – than we remember that for a very long time in history these encounters took place often in encounters in the margins of society between Christians and their Jewish neighbours, or a Jewish merchant or medicus, and these encounters were often uneasy because of superstition and prejudice against Jews, or they took the form of forced debates. Those were usually characterized by loud accusatory voices, about deicide and of stiff-necked refusal to acknowledge the „one true religion" and were countered in turn by the Jewish side by muttered replies and suspicious glances, rooted in a deep distrust, occasionally giving way to internally circulated pamphlets and descriptions about non-Jews that were everything else but flattering... And sometimes these superstitions and prejudices and forced debates lead to horrid violence against Jews.

One famous example of a forced debate was the disputation of Barcelona in which Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, known as Nachmanides, who as the leader of the Spanish Jewry was ordered by the King of Aragon, James I, to appear in court in 1263 and defend the Jewish refusal to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. His opponent was Pablo Christiani, the name already indicating that he was a Jew who had converted to Christianity. Forced disputations between Christians and Jews are nothing new – they happened through all the Middle Ages, together with burning of the Talmud, like the (in)famous burning of the Talmud in Paris in 1244 – in which wagonloads of Talmudic and other rabbinic manuscripts that had been collected throughout the land were thrown into the flames. An intellectual pogrom that left its mark to this day. But the disputation in 1263 in Barcelona was unique in one aspect: it not only drew on the texts of the Hebrew Bible but also on Talmud and Midrash. Nachmanides was given the right to use whatever sources he liked and defend Judaism as he saw fit and he was given guarantees for his personal safety and the safety of the surrounding Jewish communities: that such a thing was necessary just proves how precarious the situation was and that even the disputation in Barcelona did not have an entirely equal playing field. Disputations elsewhere used to be rigged and made impossible for the Jewish side to win and often became the trigger for violence against the local Jewish communities.

There is no doubt that much has happened than these days of the past: Especially after World War II and the publication of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965 the landscape of Jewish-Christian dialogue has changed. *Nostra Aetate* has done more, it even changed interreligious dialogue as such and has opened the door to dialogue with other religions and religious leaders.

What has happened is essentially that we have moved away from accusation to dialogue, from confrontation to cooperation and from persecution to partnership, as Rabbi Ron Kronish, founder of the Israeli Interreligious Coordinating Council once said in an interview in the documentary „I am Joseph Your brother" following Pope John Paul II's visit to Israel in the year 2000. But it would be

foolish to pretend that there aren't still some continuing lingering tension, the role of Pope Pius XII during the Holocaust and his pending canonization, is just one of them.

We can say that it is now perceived as normal for Jewish and Christian leaders to be in dialogue with representatives of the other religion and their respective leaders. It is normal for churches, synagogues, and increasingly also mosques to have regular programs in which their leaders but also their laity meet with representatives of other faiths. Much has happened since the time when interactions between religions consisted primarily of monologues of the majority religion „preaching the gospel" to those who had not yet seen the light, and the sometimes almost paranoid refusal by Jews to have anything to do with them, to read about or to engage in discourse with anything that might be seen as Christian in origin, and therefore to be feared or at least strongly distrusted, almost as if contact with the other faith might be a contagious disease.

So, yes, interreligious dialogue has become mainstream. So all is well...

Yet, interreligious dialogue is a delicate creature. Because of its history, it is very susceptible to become rote. It is in constant danger of being filled with clichés of mutual displays of appreciation on noncontentious areas of „discourse": yes, we all want world peace, we all want equality, we all support human rights, we all support freedom of religion... But it is when religious rights stand in seeming conflict with secular and/or democratic values; when religious norms contradict secular norms – This is when the mettle is put to the test! It might be over an issue such as church bells, or dress code, circumcision, or religious schools, religious slaughter, minarets or segregation by gender... Yet, nothing is easier than to get self-satisfied with mutual statements of support and the odd panel debate on topics so generalized and abstract that the outcome is given and where any representative of any of the world religion can answer the questions in our sleep. In our fear of offending the other side and in recognition of the often abusive forced dialogues, in attempts to convert, the parties are tiptoeing around each other. The scars are still there and easily old specters are called to life again. This leads us that we all too often miss an opportunity to truly and honestly look at our own and other religious traditions critically and really, truly learn from each other and about ourselves.

Because, in the end it is in the critical encounter in which we become aware of our differences that we learn true tolerance and appreciation of our differences but where we also learn to disagree and **how** to disagree and what to do with our disagreement then. Interreligious dialogue cannot and should not be a road to moral relativism. But I think the time has come to shift our focus from „dialogue", „panel debates" and „discussions" (and in no means am I calling to abandon these altogether) to concrete cooperation and partnerships on specific questions and issues that arise in our respective societies. The Jews have a specific concept for this task „tikkun olam" – „to repair the world", according to this, humanity has been given a very specific task by God, to be partner in creation, and to assist in improving and repairing the world that we have inherited. The aim is to contribute with specific actions and tasks to this ultimate goal. The outcome of any true and genuine dialogue should be a practical component and each time and at the end of each panel debate and interreligious dialogue there should be a question: „...and now: what are we going to do about it?"

Looking at the landscape of our societies and despite almost 50 years of interreligious dialogue we have to admit that the number one problem that we are still facing in our societies is ignorance. We need to step up our efforts in education. The wider laity still doesn't know enough about other faiths and other traditions (and often also about their own faiths) because all too often, dialogue has been the favorite pastime of seminarians, clergy and other self-selected groups of the laity.

Truth be told, to some extent Christian denominations have in part been better in starting to educate about Jews and Judaism, even though they sometimes took a christo-centric approach or ended in something close to cultural appropriation. But it was a start and it is something that is still

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not widespread in most Jewish schools and institutions. Part of this is historical: Christianity is of course much more rooted in Judaism, and knowledge of Judaism is for many Christians essential to understanding their sacred writings and teachings and a way to gain a deeper understanding of Jesus as a Jewish person living in mishnaic times in ancient Israel. The reverse is not true for Judaism – Judaism, although indirectly influenced by surrounding majority culture that especially in Europe was Christian, does not need to relate to Christianity in order to make sense of Judaism. On top of it is an almost genetically inherited aversion of many Jews of engaging with things that even remotely smell „Christian“ as a consequence of centuries of oppression and forced conversion. But this doesn't mean that Jews have nothing to learn from learning about Christianity – it's just that the reason for Jews is different than the reason for Christians.

But this cannot and should not stop us. What is needed is to move from „feel-good discussions“ between self-selected groups of participants from the respective communities to genuine meetings in which all can learn from each other. A learning that is based on reciprocity in order to find a better way to live together in a changing society around us. We will probably encounter new challenges on the road ahead of us, once we start talking about the challenging aspects of each other's traditions we will open new areas of theological debate that we so far didn't have the courage to enter, because of the proverbial 800 pound gorilla in the room and that all too often have been willfully overlooked in a kindhearted but in the long run counter-productive attempt to create a pleasant debate climate.

What we need to learn is the capacity to politely agree to disagree and to move forward from there. And where values clash, we need to learn how to relate to each other in the light of this and how to make space but also to set borders in our public spheres in society, for again, we are not looking for moral relativism. But we need to have the competence and the knowledge to be able to speak up.

Let me return briefly to *Nostra Aetate*: the document is often described as a call for Jewish-Christian dialogue but it is in fact also a call for dialogue with Muslims as well. In the years ahead this dialogue between Christians and Jews need to be broadened and need to include a Christian-Muslim, a Jewish- Muslim and a Christian-Jewish-Muslim dialogue: the same combination of basic „getting to know the other dialogue“ that characterised the beginnings of Jewish-Christian dialogue but also the new kind of dialogue in which we open and without fear confront our own challenging texts, assumptions and traditions and share them with others.

And much has happened here too over the past decades but on the grassroot level, and we will hear about some examples during the course of this conference, yet Muslim-Jewish dialogue, Muslim- Christian dialogue and Muslim-Jewish-Christian dialogue is still in its infancy. The reason for this is twofold: on the one hand people are concerned, and some are afraid of Muslims in our midst, and some of this concern is justified but much of it is also quite irrational and assumes a life of its own. With the help of Media and especially Social Media Muslims and Islam are vilified and generalized in Europe. And Jews and Judaism are vilified in the media in Islamic countries. And so, nourished by centuries of prejudice and in a time of geo-political conflicts – prejudices and scapegoating are inherited down from generation to generation, making it in part difficult to even engage in the most basic „get-to-know the other“, especially if that other belongs to an ethnic and religious group that one has been taught to hate and distrust. Media loves conflict – regardless where and what it is: conflict in the Middle East, conflict between Muslim groups, conflict with fundamentalist Islam and Western societies, conflict between „religion“ and „secular society“ in general...

The other reason is that we are all too often forgetting Krister Stendahl's principle of dialogue: a) when trying to understand about another faith or tradition: ask the adherents of that faith or traditions not it's enemies b) don't compare what's best with your own tradition with what is the worst of the other's tradition and c) leave room for „holy envy“ – the capacity to be amazed by

what you see and learn about someone else's tradition. Quite a few, of not all of these three principles all too often are neglected when it comes to Islam, just as it once was neglected when it came to Judaism, as well as Christianity. We need to learn about each other's traditions, and we need to go deeper than platitudes and trivial generalised statements: we need to study Jewish; Muslim and Christian traditions with the lens of HOW THESE TEXTS AND TEACHINGS ARE UNDERSTOOD AND APPLIED BY MAINSTREAM OBSERVANT ADHERENTS of these respective faith traditions. Jews have a special way of reading texts, and so do Muslims and so do Christians. Jews and Christians share parts of a holy text, the Muslim holy text quotes some passages of that holy text as well – and yet, all have very distinct ways of reading and understanding the same text. This understanding needs to be brought to the wider public and to our societies in general.

At the same time we have a tendency in our societies in which we willfully close our eyes and look away and even make apologies for transgressions against the principles of freedom, equality and democracy - and explain them with „different cultural norms". This is nothing else but a variation of classical colonialism in which different moral codes and standards are attributed to people depending on their ethnic heritage or country of origin. This is cultural and moral relativism and nothing short of an infantilizing attitude towards the „Other". Both Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas would be appalled. Further, we need to remain diligent in not allowing political agendas and prejudice to sacrifice one part in the interreligious dialogue in order to appease the prejudice and political agenda of another part. And here I want to name very clearly that it is unacceptable that the Jewish voice is banned from the table or silenced or marginalised in order to make it more palatable to a Muslim counterpart to participate. If the price for Muslim participation is that no Jewish or Jewish-Israeli participant is in the room than the answer to ought to be: „Sorry, but we cannot agree to that. You are welcome back to the conversation when you are able to sit with us at the same table."

But we see growing examples of small initiatives in various places, here in Europe but also in Israel in which representatives of two or sometimes three of the world religions are engaged in an honest, critical and self-critical debate with each other and each other's sacred texts and teachings. We need to broaden these encounters and make them accessible to more: clergy, laity and teachers, journalists, lawmakers and politicians. We need to support each other and have each other's back – because there will be countless challenges: Fear and distrust still run deep.

We need to emphasize the need for interreligious education starting at school age about the sacred texts and teachings of the respective two other world religions. This is a much needed part of the curriculum of every school. The challenge here is to make politicians and lawmakers see this as an asset and not as a threat to a secular state or an attempt to bring in religion through the backdoor. Learning about religions in a profound, critical but at the same time respectful way is the antidote to religious extremism. The ethno-religious and sociological make-up of our societies has changed and is in a constant process of change. This will not go away. We need to prepare secular democratic societies to understand these challenges and we need to start as early as possible to provide the young generation of the future Europe to understand the Other and to address questions of justice and peace and thereby form a climate of respect and co-existence.

And most of all – they need to center around a common goal: to create a better world, a better society through „tikkun olam".

Ute Steyer is rabbi of the Great Synagogue in Stockholm/Sweden. She is a permanent researcher in residence at the Paideia Institute of Jewish Studies and professor at the Jewish Community College in Stockholm. She was program director at the Center for Jewish Law at Yeshiva University (New York) and a researcher and professor at Jewish Theological Seminary (New York).
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