



in cooperation with
University of Manchester Centre for Jewish Studies

International Conference, Manchester, July 1- July 4, 2012

New Neighbours, New Opportunities
The challenges of Multiculturalism and Social Responsibility

Wednesday, July 4, 2012

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Response to the lecture by Prof. Kwok Pui-Lan

I was so moved by the moment of reflection in memory of the victims of the Kielce pogrom in 1946. At my first synagogue, South London Liberal Synagogue, we had members who were descendants of some of those returnees from the camps to Kielce, who then left after the pogrom. And it is right we should remember them now.

I want first to pay tribute to Professor Kwok's paper, and to say how sorry I am that my response to her will be partial, as her paper only came last week, and I had too little time to discuss in depth what she has said about Jewish Christian dialogue in non-Western countries. But I do want to mention that in 2006, some six years ago, I was the Bloomberg Professor at Harvard Divinity School, teaching about philanthropy and public policy with an emphasis on the religious drivers of some philanthropy, and I was delighted to have two excellent students from Professor Kwok's programme at Episcopalian in my class.

Let me start my response by saying that Professor Kwok has shone a spotlight on disappeared or very small Jewish communities in India and China. That wonderful but now completely disappeared Jewish community of Kaifeng, on a branch of the Silk Road, a community about which we know remarkably little, was a glory in its heyday but is no more. There are of course Jewish communities living and thriving in modern China, and it seems to me that it is those communities- such as Shanghai and Hong Kong- where our attention ought to be focused. Professor Kwok mentioned dialogue in Hong Kong in 1992, but that is 20 years ago. However, there was a conference held at Hong Kong University, this past March, which maybe more pertinent. That was under the aegis of the European Studies Programme of the School of Modern Languages and Cultures, and was entitled **Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Collaboration and Conflict**. Now it was billed as focusing on extending an on-going conversation about collaboration (rather than enmity) among these Abrahamic religions. The conflicts exist ...yet the parallel questions of collaboration, alliance building, dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims seems to have been relegated to the periphery.

What was interesting about the blurb- and I'm sorry I wasn't there- is that the organisers, including that well known teacher and thinker Professor Sander Gilman, argued that "Such a conversation held in Hong Kong has a slightly difference resonance from parallel discussions in Europe and the Americas and should lead to new insights.... speakers from a number of disciplines (historical, cultural, social science, religious studies) (were to) facilitate a cross-disciplinary discussion on the question of these major religions and their past and present relationships." Precisely so- a different resonance. Both universities in Hong Kong could, and are beginning to, work on this agenda

I was delighted to read about this particular conference, as indeed I was to discover that in Mumbai, where there is still a thriving community of the Jewish Religious Union, unlike the remarkable but sadly reduced community of Cochin, there was a big interfaith conference of scholars only last year, as well as a Sikh sponsored multifaith conference that same week.

Meanwhile, just four years ago at Yale, there was a meeting of senior Christian and Muslim scholars and leaders seeking common ground in their different faiths to foster better understanding between Islam and the West. It was the first public dialogue launched by Muslim intellectuals in the Common Word group which had appealed to Christian leaders in 2007 for discussions among theologians to promote peace.

Most of the U.S. participants were Protestant theologians and church leaders, including some prominent evangelicals, but some Catholics and Jews took part too. The Muslims, both Sunnis and Shi'ites, hailed from around the world, and the conference took place just a week after King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, home of Islam's strict Wahhabi sect, had hosted an unprecedented meeting of Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists in Madrid and pledged to pursue interfaith dialogue. On that occasion, the wonderful Mustafa Ceric, grand mufti of Bosnia, said that "In world affairs today, the rule should not be the argument of force but the force of argument. "As we all know, Ceric's homeland in former Yugoslavia was torn apart by ethnic and religious strife in the 1990s. Nevertheless, he said it was time for serious dialogue among mainstream faith leaders after years in which violence by Islamist radicals has dominated the headlines. The Common Word project, started by 138 Muslim scholars, says Christianity and Islam share two common core values -- love of God and love of neighbor. Its aim is to use discussions on this among experts to defuse tensions between the faiths. "In the modern era, we have never had anything like this where such a large group of people from all kinds of religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds agreed on an issue such as this," said Ibrahim Kalin, a spokesman for the group. "The common understanding here is that we have different theological languages but the ultimate object of our discussion is the same.....There is only one God but we approach God with different languages." The Common Word appeal did not address Jews but the group invited some Jewish scholars to join the talks. "At the end of the day," Kalin said, "we are really talking about a Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition." At that particular conference, in an ongoing series, Rabbi Burton Visotzky of New York's Jewish Theological Seminary was among the speakers: "If religious leaders can help move political issues to peace rather than war, then we've done God's work," he said.

So more is happening, across the south, the east, the west, and it encompasses Jews, Christians, and Muslims, with, in my view, the greatest need being for Muslims to be included. So my first response to Professor Kwok is that we need to look at dialogue wherever it is happening, and take from it the need to include Muslims within it-be it in Africa, China, Argentina, or wherever. For I believe that part of the power of dialogue is to lead to action-it's not just about peace making with words, though I agree that situating dialogue in a global context will help us to think through issues "around justice, reconciliation and empowerment

world wide.” I believe it is also about action, and one of the reasons I often feel impatient with dialogue per se is that it has so often led to nothing else but more dialogue. To what end? And why would we do that, unless we simply wanted to be part of that army of academics and clergy who travel round the world from conference to conference, without staying long enough to embed some of the thinking?

So let me give some examples of where I think dialogue can lead to action- and why I believe it's so important. One comes from Northern Ireland, another from Israel. But my first example is closer to home. Let me tell you the story:

Many years ago, when I was a very new rabbi, I gave Yom Kippur sermon at my then synagogue, South London Liberal Synagogue, and talked about how, in my view, Jews were very good at dealing with bereavement and Christians really good at dealing with people who are dying. A generalisation, I know, but that realisation has led to much of my life's work. In my tradition, the Jewish tradition, we are not good at dying. We don't die well. Within the Jewish tradition as a whole, life - chayyim - is the greatest blessing, when we raise a glass, 'l'chayyim', a toast to life. From the earliest rabbinic teachings we're taught: 'One single man was created in the world, to teach that, if any man has caused a single soul to perish, it is as if he has caused a whole world to perish. If any man saves alive a single person, it is as if he has saved a whole world.' (Mishnah. Sanhedrin 4.5) In my tradition life is God's gift, and the emphasis is quite clear that we had better value it, and do anything we possibly can to preserve it. So in Ecclesiasticus (Ben Sirach 38:1-2) we find this: 'Honour a physician according to thy need of him, with the honours due unto him. For verily the Lord hath created him.'

And in our Jewish tradition, we have traditionally put ourselves through everything, to preserve life. I don't think we have been kind in the process and I would say that the creation of the modern hospice movement as it was refined by Dame Cicely Saunders out of the Protestant tradition, but started by Mary Aikenhead, of the Irish Sisters of Mercy, a former Protestant who became a Catholic, has given us a far better approach to death.

So **why** are we so life-affirming? We recognise that ultimately we must surrender to God's will, and that God is just, and we hold a strong belief, (some people think this is a medical tradition and we have inherited it partly from the Greeks) that you must do everything you can and try every medical intervention you possibly can. It may be, and it is worthy saying here at the ICCJ, that Jews are what you call a bit shaky on the afterlife and, since we know what we have in this life, we tend to feel it is as well to stick with it as long as we can. My Orthodox coreligionists assert as an article of faith in their daily morning prayers that they believe in an afterlife, but quite what that afterlife is like is pretty unclear. There are statements by the rabbis of old about all this life being a prelude to the world to come, but they are relatively late, and there's little evidence of earlier traditions in Judaism. The belief which is absolutely clear is in the existence of a place called Sheol, the pit, which you read about in the Old Testament or what we would call the Hebrew Bible, the shady place where nothing much happens and where all is colourless. And, though that does not produce fear amongst Jews, it does seem to produce a determination to hang on to life, whatever it's like, possibly for a bit too long.

Yet there has to be a moment where dying well, and going peacefully into that good night, is a goal to be desired. So Christianity has much to teach us Jews. Broadly speaking, Christians are pretty interested in the afterlife, and for Dame Cicely Saunders, the founder of the modern hospice movement it was absolutely clear that the journey to the afterlife should be a good one. If suffering and pain made that impossible, something should be done about it. Part of

Cicely Saunders' revulsion towards people dying in pain and without dignity, was related to her Christian faith. For her, and by extension for the rest of us, the good death was a goal much to be desired.

I have already said to you that I think Jews are pretty bad at dying. But we are good at grieving and we have rituals that are enormously beneficial. Funerals take place very quickly, as they do in many places around the world, and then there is deep mourning for seven days and the community and people are expected to come to the house of mourning and to be there and offer sympathy and bringing food and have evening prayers with the family of the people who are bereaved. And it goes on for a week. Having been through it twice in my life there is a point at the end of the week where you are so glad to see the back of them. You have really had enough. You haven't been left alone for seven days. But, you know what, it allows you to get beyond the first stage of grieving and you get to a second stage where you can start to face slightly outward. And you know that 300 or 400 people have helped you to do that, and the community has helped you do that. In the Christian tradition there was a tradition of having prayers on the third and sixth and ninth days after death, largely disappeared except in some parts of the eastern churches. As Christians have taught Jews to die better, I think we Jews can teach Christians how to grieve better and I do think we are better at it because the rituals are more valuable – seven days being at home having someone around, however much you get irritated at the end, however much you won't want to see a roast chicken ever again, is actually quite helpful. And then you have 30 days of less mourning and you go and say kaddish, the mourners' prayer every day.

So what am I saying here? Jews and Christians have begun to discuss their ways of coping, their rituals, around death and bereavement. I think we can learn by dialogue and by discussion, from all sorts of traditions and practices in Jewish and Christian communities about how to help people both have a better death and to grieve better. In both our traditions, looking round the world, some of what's needed is missing. My view is that this is an area where dialogue can lead to action, where Jews can learn from Christians and Christians from Jews, and where all of us can work together to make dying and grieving better for us all. But here's the direct action. Over 30 years ago, we set up the North London Hospice. It is still the only multi-faith hospice in the UK. It is largely Jewish and Christian, with Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist input. But what it represents is this. We can talk to our hearts' content. But when it comes down to it, what will change the world is action. Let's use the fruit of our talking, and the trust that talking has engendered, to fashion a way of caring for dying people and their loved ones after they have gone, and create something together that takes the best of all our traditions. It hasn't been easy, but it's been there for over thirty years.

Now the time has come to do something even more complicated, and that is a multi faith school, at the beginning of life rather than the end of it. This will be hugely hard work, not least because there is such strong feeling within faiths that the only way to keep children attached to the faith is to send them to a school that is purely filled with children like them. What that says about living in a multi faith and multi-cultural society beggars belief. I believe this is where dialogue needs to move, so that just as we have integrated schools in Northern Ireland of Catholics and Protestants, and just as we have the Hand in Hand schools in Israel, with Jews, Christians, Druze and Muslims together, we should be able to have multi faith schools around the world. Integrated schools have come about as a result of newborn trust between catholic and Protestants in northern Ireland- partly as a result of dialogue, partly as a result of impatience with extremists. But it took thirty years for government to fund them, stuck as they were with listening to the more traditional leaders of churches who wanted to stay with the status quo. The Hand in hand schools get state funding, but not enough to do

what is absolutely essential in a troubled political and faith environment, to have two head teachers, one Jewish, one Muslim, to have parity of esteem in actual appointments and how the schools are run.

North, south, east or west, what will ultimately make dialogue mean something is the work we do together as the product of the conversations we have had- and in some ways I believe that's easier in the south and in the mixed communities of our inner cities in the developed world than it will ever be in the leafy suburbs of Europe or the United States where despite apparent mixing and mingling, the divisions, the sticking to communities, are still too prevalent. For me, this is the challenge the ICCJ has to face, we all have to face. And we can talk and talk. But I believe building institutions together as the fruit of dialogue, is the only thing that will really bring us together, and promote peace. Thank you