

Shoah Memorial Service: A Christian Perspective
NSW Council of Christians and Jews
The Great Synagogue
166 Castlereagh Street, Sydney NSW
Rev Dr Patrick McInerney
31 May 2022

INTRODUCTION

Good evening. *Shalom Aleichem*. Peace be with you.

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land where we are gathered, the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation. I acknowledge their elders, past, present and emerging.

I stand before you with fear and trepidation. The speakers for this occasion in previous years were all survivors of the Shoah or children of survivors. I am not able to talk about the Shoah as they did. All I can share is the humble story of my belated journey from ignorance – about Jews, Judaism and the Shoah – to knowledge, from being part of the problem to hopefully being part of the solution.

BACKGROUND

Upbringing

I grew up on a farm in South Australia, 100 kms north of Adelaide. Ours was a completely Anglo-Christian world, the descendants of European migrants. I am 5th generation Irish-Catholic, raised with daily family rosary and Sunday Mass. We lived in a Catholic bubble. I knew we Catholics were assured of heaven, but I was not so sure about our Protestant neighbours.¹ Jews, Muslims and others were completely outside my Christian horizon, and presumably outside salvation too.

Seminary

Being devout about my Catholic faith, I felt called to missionary priesthood, so after completing secondary school,² I joined the Columban seminary in Sydney. In 7 years in formation, I did not meet any Jews. Along with philosophy and theology, I studied the Bible. To me it was both *ancient* history and *present* word of God, but it never struck me as the living word of a *living* people.

Pakistan

Despite 7 years of tertiary education, my ignorance of Jews and Judaism remained intact, but I was deemed worthy of ordination and assigned to Pakistan, a 96% Muslim-majority country.³ In 20 years in Pakistan, I never encountered any Jews nor even heard of their existence.⁴

¹ It was only years later I realised that the Schunke, Blucher, and Heinrich names indicated descent from German Lutheran migrants.

² I attended the local primary school and then a Catholic boarding school in Adelaide. With few exceptions, the boarders were mostly, like me, Anglo-Catholics from a rural background, but among the day scholars there was some cultural diversity, including the sons of recent Italian and other European migrants, who were labelled with pejorative terms that are not acceptable now and should not have been then.

³ Christians and Hindus each number about 2%, and Sikhs a tiny remnant, the majority having been killed or fled in the bloody convulsions of partition as India and Pakistan were torn apart in 1947.

⁴ Research for this paper uncovered that there are about 200 Jews in Pakistan, the tiny remnant of a much larger community from Persia and India from the 1800s, most of whom emigrated immediately before and after partition. I have read that the Jewish graveyards in Karachi are sometimes the target of vandalism. The only two times I heard of Jews in Pakistan were associated with violent deaths:

1. Arnold Lewis Raphel, the 18th United States Ambassador to Pakistan, was Jewish. On 17 August 1988, an explosion caused the plane he was travelling in to crash, resulting in his and General Zia's deaths, along with 32 other passengers and crew.

Rome

From 1983 to 1986 I studied Arabic and Islamic studies in Rome. During those 3 years, my focus was on Islam and Muslims. I met no Jews. The only mention of Jews I recall, apart from the tribes in 7th century Medina, was a comment about a Hebrew inscription on a Roman church which occasioned ignorant mirth. More on that later.

I spent two summers in the Yemen in 1984 and 1985. One day in the *souq* in the capital, Sana'a, I saw one of the remnant Jews, readily identifiable by his sidelocks. I knew he was biblical 'kin', yet I had no common language or culture. He remained the exotic, esoteric "other".

I spent a week in Israel in 1984, following in the footsteps of Jesus, but ironically, was not aware of following in the footsteps of a Jew.

After completing my Arabic and Islamic studies, I resumed ministry in Pakistan.

I returned to Australia in 2000 and completed a Masters in Theology, again without encountering Jews or study of Judaism.

THE TURNING POINT

First Encounter

In late 2002 I was appointed to the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations here in Sydney. It was at the Abraham Conference, as I approached 50 years of age, that I first met a Jew – and my long overdue remedial work began.

Visit to a Synagogue

I had often attended Friday prayers and Eid prayers in mosques in Pakistan and Australia – but had never been inside a synagogue. I asked a Jewish friend who kindly invited me to a *Shabbat* Service followed by a *Shabbat* meal. As I sat in the congregation, it struck me that Jesus would have felt 'at home' with the service, whereas I, his follower, felt like a stranger.⁵

First Learnings

I attended a talk by Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar of the New Testament. Challenged by her forthright and entertaining presentation, I bought and read her book, *The Misunderstood Jew*.⁶

- I was shocked by her statement, "Jesus lived and died a faithful Jew". Since I am a Catholic priest and the Letter to the Hebrews describes Jesus as a "High Priest" (Heb 2:17 *et alii*), I had assumed that Jesus was like the Irish Catholic priests of my childhood.
- I also learned about the harmful effects of anti-Jewish stereotypes in Christian preaching down through the ages, and that still occur in 'populist' preaching, especially on Good Friday. These include removing Jesus from his Jewish context; making him look better by falsely casting him as a freedom-loving, inclusive, egalitarian revolutionary against the fabricated foil of legalistic, misogynistic, hierarchical Judaism; and where "Good Samaritan" implied "bad Jew"! I was mortified to recognise that I too had occasionally committed such inadvertent blunders.

2. Daniel Pearl was a 39-year-old Jewish American journalist who worked for the Wall Street Journal. He was kidnapped by terrorists on 23 January 2002 and beheaded a week later.

⁵ I acknowledge that the service was not identical to what would have happened in early first century synagogue in Nazareth but would have been similar.

⁶ Levine, Amy-Jill. *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006.

I made one such gaffe when I was teaching Islam at the Catholic Institute of Sydney. One of my students raised his hand, and demolished my inadvertent slur with a few well-informed sentences, for which he received a round of applause both from the students and from me. The interjector was Dr Paul O'Shea.

My Teachers

My student of Islam subsequently became my teacher of Judaism, and whenever I taught a course on Interreligious Dialogue, I invited Dr Paul O'Shea to present on Jewish-Christian relations. I am indebted to his scholarship.⁷

I served three terms on the Australian Catholic Council for Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue which advises the Bishops Commission, where I had the privilege of working closely with Sr Mary Reaburn of the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion. I learned a lot from her deep familiarity with Jewish-Christian relations.

I served on the Organising Committee of the Abraham Conference for many years and became personal friends with the Jewish members, including the indomitable Josie Lacey.

In a discussion group at one Abraham Conference, a child survivor of the Holocaust shared how, when he moved to the suburbs, a neighbour offered him milk and some ANZAC biscuits. He said, with tears in his eyes: "That experience changed my life. I never knew anyone could be so kind." I had tears in my eyes as I listened to his account of that transformative moment. I have felt connected to George Sternfeld ever since.

I have been deeply moved each time I have attended Shoah Memorial Services held by the NSW Council of Christians and Jews and by the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies, and on visits to the Sydney Jewish Museum.⁸

JEWISH-CHRISTIAN PILGRIMAGE IN ROME

Pilgrimage in Rome 2013

In June 2013, I attended a meeting of the Islamic-Catholic Liaison Committee in Rome. On Sunday 23 June 2013, a free day, I made a personal Jewish-Christian pilgrimage in reparation for the mistakes I had inadvertently made over decades, and in profound gratitude for the conversion I had undergone in more recent years.

Pope John XXIII

I first visited and prayed at the grave of Pope Saint John XXIII.

As Apostolic Delegate to Greece and Turkey from 1934 to 1944, he procured immigration, visa and other documents and intervened with the Slovakian government and the King of Bulgaria. His actions saved the lives of thousands of Jews from being deported to Nazi Germany.⁹

⁷ I am the webmaster of an international Columban website dedicated to interreligious dialogue. It includes a section on Judaism, including 21 documents on Jewish-Christian relations, annotated by Dr Paul O'Shea:

<https://columbanird.org/religions/judaism/>

⁸ <https://sydneyjewishmuseum.com.au/>

⁹ <https://www.raoulwallenberg.net/roncalli/articles-11/pope-john-xxiii-jews/>

On the 29 March 1959, just months after his election, Pope John XXIII ordered that the adjective “*perfidus*” (“faithless” or “unbelieving” – associated with “perfidious” or “treacherous”) be removed from the Good Friday Prayer for the Jews.¹⁰

On 13 June 1960, the distinguished French historian and intellectual Jules Isaac presented Pope John XXIII with a dossier on “The Teaching of Contempt”¹¹, the pejorative account of Jews in Christian documents which had contributed to antisemitism and the toxic environment in which Nazi socialism flourished and led to the Shoah. Pope John XXIII assured him that “he had the right to more than just hope” that something would be done. Later that year, true to his word, he tasked Cardinal Augustin Bea to write a “Decree on the Jews” for the Council, which evolved into the ground-breaking document, *Nostra Aetate*.

On 17 October 1960, Pope John XXIII, whose baptismal name was Giuseppe, greeted a delegation of American Jews with, “*Io sono Giuseppe, il vostro fratello*” (“I am Joseph, your brother”),¹² making his own the words of Patriarch Joseph revealing his identity to his brothers who had come from Canaan to buy grain in Egypt, a reference to Genesis 45:4 not lost on the rabbis.¹³

Pope Paul VI

I next visited and prayed at the grave of Pope Saint Paul VI.

He was the first pope to travel outside Italy and his first trip was a pastoral visit to Israel.

His magisterial encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, published on 6 August 1964, introduced “dialogue” into the teaching of the Catholic Church.¹⁴

He oversaw the completion of the Second Vatican Council, including the promulgation on 28 October 1965 of *Nostra Aetate*, which revolutionised the Catholic Church’s attitude towards believers from other religions, especially Jews.¹⁵

On 22 October 1974, building on the foundations laid by his predecessor and Cardinal Bea, Pope Paul VI established the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews as an office distinct from but closely linked with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.¹⁶

¹⁰ When the offensive word was recited four years later, he stopped the solemn liturgy and directed that the entire series of intercessions be started again from the beginning, this time following the revised text.

<https://christopherblosser.blogspot.com/2008/04/pope-benedict-jews-and-friday-prayer.html>

¹¹ *The Teaching of Contempt: The Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism*. By Jules Isaac. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1964.

¹² This was in stark contrast to one of his predecessors, Pope Pius X, who, when Theodore Herzl, the founder of political Zionism, approached him for support for Jewish migration to Israel, refused to recognise the Jews and proffered to baptise them: “The soil of Jerusalem, if it was not always sacred, has been sanctified by the life of Jesus Christ. As head of the Church, I cannot tell you anything different. The Jews have not recognised Our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people. ... And so, if you come to Palestine, and settle your people there, we shall have churches and priests ready to baptize you all.”

<https://jewinthepew.org/2015/01/25/25-january-1904-pope-pius-x-gives-theodor-herzls-zionist-project-a-cold-reception-otdimjh-onthisday/>

¹³ <https://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/naprecursors/j231960oct19>

<https://khnseattle.org/writing/i-am-joseph-your-brother-bridging-the-great-divide/>

¹⁴ https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html

¹⁵ https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

¹⁶ <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo-crre.html>

Pope John Paul II

Then I visited and prayed at the grave of Pope Saint John Paul II.

Growing up in Poland, Karol Wojtyła had Jewish friends who were taken in the Shoah, never to be seen again. This wrong shaped the young man's attitudes to Judaism and Jews. One life-long Jewish friend was Jerzy Kluger, who in later years used to visit the papal palace at the Vatican,¹⁷ and acted as the pope's personal emissary in establishing diplomatic relations with the State of Israel in 1994.¹⁸

On the 26 March 2000, Pope John Paul II became the first pope to pray at the *Kotel* or Western Wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, where he inserted into the wall a slip of paper with the prayer from the Day of Pardon held two weeks earlier for the Great Jubilee of the year 2000.

God of our fathers,
you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your Name to the Nations:
we are deeply saddened by the behaviour of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer,
and asking your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant.¹⁹

Roman Synagogue

On 13 April 1986, John Paul II became the first pope in centuries to visit the Roman Synagogue. I was living in Rome at that time but had been completely unaware of this historic event. On my personal pilgrimage 27 years later, I followed in his footsteps across the Tiber.

Facing what had been the Jewish Quarter stands San Gregorio della Divina Pietà.²⁰ Up until 1870, the pope had required Jews to attend compulsory sermons every sabbath in the *Piazza Gerusalemme* in front of this church. To avoid hearing them, the Jews put wax in their ears. When their ruse was discovered, the authorities carved into the façade of the church the Hebrew inscription from the Prophet Isaiah to which I referred earlier:

²I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people,
who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices;
³a people who provoke me to my face continually,
sacrificing in gardens and offering incense on bricks. (Is 65:2-3)

In the piazza in front of the synagogue, a plaque commemorates the Jews who had been corralled there in 1943. Of the 1,259 people, numbering 363 men, 689 women and 207 children, arrested by the Gestapo on the night of 16 October, 1,023 were identified as Jews and deported to Auschwitz. Of these, only fifteen men and one woman survived.²¹

In the synagogue itself, in contrast to this historical hatred and fratricide, Pope John Paul II's words of fresh, new, fraternal relations still echo:

¹⁷ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/jerzy-kluger-boyhood-friend-of-pope-john-paul-ii/2012/01/02/gIQAhxR2WP_story.html

¹⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/08/world/europe/jerzy-kluger-pope-john-paul-iis-jewish-confidant-dies-at-90.html>; https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/jerzy-kluger-boyhood-friend-of-pope-john-paul-ii/2012/01/02/gIQAhxR2WP_story.html

¹⁹ https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/documents/ns_lit_doc_20000312_prayer-day-pardon_en.html

²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Gregorio_della_Divina_Piet%C3%A0

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raid_of_the_Ghetto_of_Rome

The Jewish religion is not "extrinsic" to us, but in a certain way is "intrinsic" to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers, and in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers.²²

Jerusalem

In 2014, I did a month-long biblical course run by Sisters of Zion at their Ecce Homo Pilgrim House on the famous Via Dolorosa in the heart of the historic Old City of Jerusalem.²³ 30 years previously when I had visited as a Christian pilgrim, I had been blind to its Jewishness. This time my eyes were opened. Through long years in Christian-Muslim relations, my eyes were also opened to its Islamic character and to the constrained situation of the Palestinians.

Abraham Conference

Being on the Organising Committee of the Abraham Conference over many years has attuned me to the complex sensitivities and loyalties within and across the three Abrahamic religions. The Abraham Conference has been held every year in Sydney since 2002, "with the exception of 2009 and 2010 when reactions here in Sydney to conflicts in the Middle East made it very difficult for the local representatives of the Abrahamic religions to meet amicably."²⁴ After that hiatus, I insisted on reviving the Abraham Conference, convinced that we if cannot talk to each other on this side of the world, there is little hope for peace on the other side of the world. Besides, as the title of the 2013 Statement of the Executive of the International Council of Christians and Jews affirms, "As long as you believe in a living God, you must have hope".²⁵

LESSONS LEARNED

My former situation is typical of many Christians of my generation, not through malice but largely through circumstance, and is still found in many postcodes throughout Australia. I have been blessed by encounter with Jews and by learning about Judaism.

As I look back on my pilgrim journey in Jewish-Christian relations over the past 20 years, what have I learned?

It is said, "Ignorance is bliss". This is not true. Ignorance is risky, and potentially fatal. While the ignorant may be blissful, he or she may be trampling on the sensitivities of others. The Shoah was facilitated by centuries of Christian ignorance and antipathy towards Jews. My ignorance of Jews and Judaism risked perpetuating that animosity. To change this tragic course of history, I had to overcome my ignorance.

And not just me. The Shoah was facilitated by Christian "teaching of contempt"²⁶. I would not have inadvertently committed contemptuous blunders for so long in my Christian preaching if I had been educated earlier. Priests, ministers, seminarians and others training for Christian ministry must be formally educated and inducted into Jewish-Christian relations.

It is also said, "you cannot know where you are going if you do not know where you have come from". Since Christianity emerged out of ancient Israel; since Jesus, his mother, foster father, and first followers were all Jews; since Christians and Jews share in part a common scripture and the

²² <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/04/14/world/text-of-pope-s-speech-at-rome-synagogue-you-are-our-elder-brothers.html>

²³ <https://www.eccehomopilgrimhouse.com/>

²⁴ Preamble, The Abraham Conference, Terms of Reference, approved 19/01/2020.

²⁵ <https://www.bbcatholic.org.au/ArticleDocuments/1494/EI%20ICCJ%20Pentecost%202013.pdf.aspx>

²⁶ *The Teaching of Contempt: The Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism*. By Jules Isaac. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1964.

other part is written by Jewish followers of Jesus; since the Christian faith, liturgy, major feasts, and moral code all draw from the Jewish heritage; I cannot know my Christian self unless I learn about my Jewish ancestry.

From a lifetime of missionary “crossing boundaries of country, language and culture”²⁷, of academic work, and interfaith engagements, I know that the best way to learn about a religion is to get to know its followers, not as objects, but as subjects, as persons and fellow believers.

- I am convinced that Pope John Paul II was able to make prophetic advances in Jewish-Christian relations because he had life-long Jewish friends and firsthand encounter with the horrors of the Shoah.
- Similarly, I am convinced that Pope Francis is making impactful contributions to Jewish-Christian relations because of his 20 plus years of close friendship with Rabbi Abraham Skorka.
- I too have been privileged that Jews have extended the hand of friendship across the abyss of my ignorance and shared their stories with me, including the horrors of the Shoah, for which I am very grateful.

Being an ordained minister with academic and leadership roles in interfaith, I needed more than simply having Jewish friends in my ‘social’ circle. I needed “professional development”. I have been privileged to have Jewish and Christian ‘scholars’ who dismantled my ignorance and educated me about Jews and Judaism. To those already mentioned, I add Rabbi David Rosen, whom I have heard speak many times at international interfaith events, and Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks²⁸, whose books have inspired and challenged me, whose snippets of profound wisdom I have often quoted, and whom I heard speak in this synagogue in January 2012.²⁹ He was a moral compass for the world. May his memory be a blessing.

It is significant that I have mentioned both Jewish *and* Christian ‘friends’ and ‘scholars’. This highlights the need for “allies” or “partners” *within* our traditions who bridge our traditions, that is, Jews and Christians who model the type of friendly relationship we want to cultivate between our communities, and Jewish and Christian scholars who work collaboratively to educate their own and each other’s communities. I am privileged that Rabbi Zalman Kastel and I share such collaboration. Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton also collaborates in interfaith activities.

Finally, I believe that Christians have a particular contribution to make to interfaith relations. Because of our place in history at the beginning of the Common Era and our theology of reconciliation in Jesus Christ, Christians can stand in solidarity with *both* Israelis and Palestinians – without taking sides for or against either but being a bridge between both.³⁰

²⁷ C.102, Constitutions and Directory, The Missionary Society of Saint Columban, p. 2.

²⁸ <https://www.rabbisacks.org/>

²⁹ <https://www.jwire.com.au/chief-rabbi-captivates-the-great/>

³⁰ As the Justice and Peace Office of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem said in relation to the current violence in the Middle East: “We mourn all the victims of this unending bloodshed, Jewish Israelis, Palestinian Arabs and others who have died. ... We continue to cry out that violence is wrong and will not bring a solution but only more violence.” <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2022/05/16/palestine-israel-shireen-abu-akleh-funeral-242994>

CONCLUSION

The Shoah was an abomination, the industrialised murder of millions of people simply for being Jews. There has been nothing as evil before or since. But rising tides of antisemitism, islamophobia, and other fundamentalist ideologies threaten to tear the fabric of our society.³¹ Jews and Christians must stand together to defend the inviolable dignity of all people made “in the image and likeness of God” (Gen 1:26) and work together for *tikkun olam*, the healing of the world.

The Shoah stands as a stark reminder of what happens when ignorance, prejudice and hatred prevail.

- Never forget!
- Never again!
- May Jews and Christians be “a blessing to one another”³².

Thank you.

³¹ E.g. Christianophobia, rigid secularism which sidelines religion, white supremacy and other racist, nationalist and political ideologies.

³² “As Christians and Jews, following the example of the faith of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing for the world (cf. *Gen* 12: 2ss.). This is the common task awaiting us. It is therefore necessary for us, Christians and Jews, to be first a blessing to one another.” John Paul II, Message on the occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/pont_messages/1993/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19930406_ebrei-polacchi.html