

International Council for Christians and Jews

Boston Conference 2023: Report

By Freya Dasgupta

As a PhD student, I am used to academic conferences. The ICCJ conference in Boston was different even though many of the scholars I regularly study as a part of my research were among the participants. While in an academic conference, people are concerned with showcasing their individual research, the ICCJ conference was a coming together of people from diverse contexts who brought their particular skills and expertise to collectively understand and address anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia, and systemic discrimination. The feeling of community was enhanced by the fact that all the participants from outside Boston were housed on the Simmons University residential campus, ate almost all meals together, and travelled together to wherever the day's events were being held. One of the many things that made the conference special was how open people were to conversation. I found it wonderful that so many people I spoke to knew Sholem Asch, the early-twentieth century Yiddish author and had even read some of his works that I explore in my thesis when they were younger.

The key word in the conference titled 'Negotiating Multiple Identities: Implications for Interreligious Relation' was intersectionality, not just that of our identities but also that of the systems of oppression. Since oppressive structures are interconnected, so are our struggles for liberation. The wonderful plenary sessions made me realise how intersectionality is a lens that can highlight what the system wants to render invisible and can therefore help humanise narratives by acknowledging the diverseness of human existence and experience. I found the first one on 'The Concept of Intersectionality: Promises and Problems of Jewish-Christian Dialogue' particularly engaging, especially the parallels drawn between Judaism and Queerness by Rev. Dr Brandon Crowley as well as his observations on Jesus' own intersectionality. It introduced me to the ideas of Evelyn Beck who is a Jewish feminist lesbian about the need to rethink the categories we have created which exclude those that do not fit. I found the conversations around identities of resistance and identities of repentance and the need to transcend the victim-perpetrator binarism very enlightening. It was also interesting that the importance of intra-religious dialogue was discussed. Interreligious dialogue often takes place between likeminded people from different communities who see difference as a good thing but how do we approach those within our communities who do not agree with us.

Among the workshops I opted for—I wish I could do them all—I found Katharina von Kellenbach's one on 'Decoding and Disrupting Anti-Semitic and Racist Imagery' fascinating. As someone whose dissertation explores how ideas of Jewish-Christian reconciliation can be imparted through popular literature, her emphasis on the need to create new stories through new images so as to not repeat the mistakes of the past really made an impact on me. The discussions among the workshop participants were equally stimulating on many of the pertinent questions in Jewish-Christian relations. The other workshop which I felt was very relevant and well-executed was John Munayer's on 'The Forgotten Partner:

Palestinian Christians in Jewish-Christian Dialogue.’ The articles that John had us read in groups gave rise to spirited discussions on whether Christians could play a mediating role in the Israel-Palestine conflict especially amidst a certain Islamicisation of the Palestinian liberation movement. It was a difficult but necessary conversation around the ways in which communities can reveal each other’s limitations and join together to speak truth to power as well as the pitfalls of over-emphasis on Theology instead of addressing other pressing issues. This was also brought up during a plenary session where the speaker advocated the need to address power imbalances before discussing Theology. John stating that where minorities do not have legal rights, dialogue becomes existential has really stayed with me. With regard to my own work on Jewish-Christian relations, the conference made me realise how important it was to view my subject through the lens of intersectionality instead of limiting it to an entirely theological one.

The events of the conference took place in some of the most impressive campuses across Boston including the Hebrew College, Boston College, Simmons University, and Boston University’s Howard Thurman Centre. During our visit to the BU Thurman Centre, we were shown a fascinating documentary about the life and legacy of Rev. Howard Thurman about whom I knew shamefully little. I found the film and the discussions that followed very inspiring. That same afternoon, the participants were taken on field trips to various local sites. I was looking forward to the walking tour of Jewish Boston which is the trip I had signed up for. Unfortunately, I dropped my mobile phone on the stone floor of the old Howard Thurman centre and broke the screen. My phone was completely inoperable. Rebecca Cohen, who works as the program and research specialist in the US Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, came to my rescue. We had been interacting since the inaugural dinner and she accompanied me to various mobile phone shops around the city to look for a cheap replacement. She even lent me her phone so that I could use Google maps and find my way to a certain repair shop when she had a Zoom meeting to attend. I am very grateful to her for helping me out.

That is another thing that was wonderful about the conference. What was being discussed in the sessions and workshops was not simply done in academic abstraction. People embodied it in their interpersonal interactions. Michael Korn from the Association of Friends and Sponsors of the Martin Buber House regularly checked on me to see if I was comfortable or needed anything. At the inaugural reception, he found me standing by myself, perhaps looking a little lost, and he came up to me and introduced me to some people including Dr Jutta Hausmann. I was incredibly touched by his kindness. I breakfasted the first two days with Judith Banki. It was such a privilege to sit and chat with the doyen of Jewish-Christian dialogue as she told Celia, one of the sisters of Sion, and me stories from her life. On the morning of the third day, Rabbi Dr Peter Borenstein, with whom I had had many conversations by then including on how to split bagels in perfect halves without a bread knife and his impeccable sartorial style, found me eating breakfast by myself with my headphones on. He immediately asked me to join his table where he was having a conversation with a few other participants. I did not want to intrude and therefore declined his offer at which he came up to me and asked what I was listening to. I told him I was listening to a *qawwali* which is a Sufi devotional song that originated in the Indian subcontinent. Throughout the conference we had discussed how listening is a radical act, a discipline, and a practice. Rabbi Borenstein listened intently as I explained to him how a *qawwali* often expresses love for the Ineffable one through love for the Sufi master. As he smiled and nodded back to his table, I understood that without saying anything he had acknowledged another person’s way of communing with the divine. Phil Cunningham helped make up for me missing the tour of Jewish Boston by giving me a little tour of Boston history using Google maps on his phone while we sat

together on a bus ride. I am certain I am missing out many such small kindnesses and encounters that filled me with immense gratitude. I must, however, mention Rebecca, Martín, Georgina, John, and Kasia who were wonderful company. As we sat on the last evening sharing a drink in the pub near the Simmons University residential campus, it did not seem that most of us had known each for only three days.

The conference was undoubtedly intellectually stimulating with fantastic speakers, thought-provoking workshops, and engaged participation. The only criticism that was raised during the conference was that it was too US/Eurocentric. What really made the conference an enriching experience was the human connection and interaction it engendered. And for that, I would very much like to be a part of future ICCJ events. I cannot thank the Association of Friends and Sponsors of the Martin Buber House enough for making my participation in the Boston conference possible.