

ICCJ Rome Conference 2015
The 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*:
The Past, Present and Future of the Christian-Jewish Relationship

50° anniversario della Dichiarazione conciliare *Nostra Aetate*:
passato, presente e futuro delle relazioni ebraico-cristiane

CONCLUDING PLENARY

WEDNESDAY, JULY 1, 2015 - AUDITORIUM

Dr Clare Amos

Your Eminence, dear Dr Cunningham, dear participants,

I am honoured to have been invited to reflect at this point in our conference, and on this platform alongside my distinguished co-presenters, on the future of the Jewish-Christian relationship. When I was asked to speak at this point I was told that I was being asked to speak as an individual in my own right, although inevitably I will be drawing on my experience as the person responsible for interreligious dialogue with both Jews and Muslims at the World Council of Churches, and before that as Director of Theological Studies in the Anglican Communion Office. I am an Anglican Christian – we Anglicans are slightly sensitive when people try and pigeonhole us as Protestants – but it does mean that I am offering a slightly different Christian perspective from the Catholic voice which for obvious reasons, both location and topic, has been the dominant Christian voice at this meeting so far.

A couple of weeks ago I was participating in a summer school organised by my WCC colleague Peniel Rajkumar held in Cambodia for young Asian Christians. The summer school was intended to equip the young people to live with confidence in a multi-religious world. Among other topics I had been asked to speak to the group on the issue of antisemitism – one of the concerns to which I, and the World Council of Churches interreligious dialogue office, have devoted quite a bit of attention last year. I began by asking how many of the group had ever met a Jewish person. Out of 24 participants only 4 raised their hands. Now it is true of course that unless one is meeting in particular contexts whether or not a person is Jewish is not necessarily immediately obvious, so it is possible that more of the group had met – at least in a fleeting way – Jewish people without realising this. But given their home countries – places like Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Myanmar, Korea – I think it is very likely that only a small minority of the group had indeed met a Jewish person in the flesh.

So speaking about the future of the Jewish-Christian relationship this for me is a critical starting point. We need to realise the vast shift in Christianity – that increasingly its centre of gravity both in terms of demography and in terms of institutional power – is, or already has, moved to the Global South, to Asia, Africa and importantly, given we are here in Rome, also to Latin America. And it is vital that our Jewish dialogue partners also more fully realise this and appreciate its significance for our common future. Three or four years ago I was seeking to put together a group of Christians to represent the World Council of Churches for a dialogue meeting with an international Jewish organisation. When I shared my potential list, the Jewish co-organiser asked me why I had included people from Africa, Asia and the Middle East. I replied that without such voices the group could not be considered representative of the membership of the World Council of Churches. It was telling, I think that my Jewish counterpart had assumed that the World Council of Churches delegation for the meeting would come from Europe and

North America: because of its location in Switzerland it is sometimes wrongly viewed primarily as the mouthpiece of European and North American Protestantism.

So what does this geographical shift in the world Christian population mean for the future of the Jewish-Christian relationship? I am sure it has consequences – which may offer some challenges, perhaps necessary and important ones, both to European Christians such as myself, and to Jewish voices committed to dialogue with Christians.

For myself born in Britain in the decade after the end of the Second World War and growing up in the 1960s, engaging with Jewish, and Jewish-Christian realities has been part of the air I have breathed since my teens. These days children in Britain study the Holocaust as part of history lessons. We didn't – because it was somehow too close in time to be considered 'history' – but that horrific tragedy made a profound impact on how we looked at the world, though I suspect partly to reinforce our anti-German prejudices rather than to encourage us wrestle seriously with the longer history of Christian antisemitism. In my highly sought after selective school, among the Christian, Anglican, majority of pupils, there were a scattering of Jewish girls. I have to confess though that it wasn't until much later that I realised there was a quota for Jewish applicants. The school wanted Jewish pupils partly to show its liberalism – but not too many of them. And as someone who as my school years drew to a close felt called to study theology, my biblical studies both of Old and New Testament, have meant that the Jewishness of Jesus has always been an absolute given for me, and I am very comfortable to see the birth of the Jesus movement as being one manifestation of the convoluted world of late Second Temple Judaism, which then over a century or longer underwent a parting of the ways – with both Rabbinic Judaism and the Christian church becoming co-heirs. I first subscribed to Common Ground, the publication of the UK based Council of Christians and Jews before I ever went to university.

But for the increasing number of Christians in Africa and Asia these givens are not necessarily so apparent. European history – even the story of the Holocaust – is not part of the history they own as their own. Indeed in many cases their identity is forged out of a struggle against such history which is seen as reflecting the story of the colonial oppressors. Their Christian identity also needs to take into account their own majority religious and political context. To speak as I was doing about the unique significance of the Holocaust in the country of Cambodia which has notoriously known its own tale of killing fields felt quite a challenging experience.

History and the Holocaust have created a lopsidedness to Jewish-Christian relationships in the western world. As has been observed at this meeting the focus tends to be far more on Christian attitudes and behaviour towards Jews, rather than vice versa. We have talked at this meeting about *Nostra Aetate's* repudiation of the infamous weighing down of the corporate Jewish community with the charge of deicide. It sometimes seems to me that in the decades since *Nostra Aetate* what has happened is that the corporate Christian community has in turn been weighed down with the charge of the history of antisemitism culminating in the Holocaust, even if in part that charge is self-inflicted by Christians upon themselves. This has provided a bedrock of Jewish-Christian relationships In Our Age. I am proud of the powerful language that the World Council of Churches used at its first Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 in repudiating antisemitism, 'Antisemitism is sin against God and man.' It is believed that this statement influenced voices in the Vatican, and so could be described even as a precursor to *Nostra Aetate*. I have sometimes wondered about the exact wording of that historic WCC statement: Antisemitism is sin against God and man, not Antisemitism is a sin against God and man. Why the omission of this 'a'? Perhaps it was due to the problems of a multilingual group working on a common statement, but I prefer to think that what my WCC forbears were seeking to suggest was that somehow antisemitism

was taking us close to the very nature and essence of sin, it somehow encapsulated the sharpness of the fracturing of our relationship with God and our human brothers and sisters.

But though I, as a western European Christian am prepared to bear my share of the corporate historic burden of Christian antisemitism, that is not a burden which I am willing to inflict upon my Christian brothers and sisters from Asia and Africa, nor is it one that many of them would be willing to bear. A way forward needs to be found, if the Jewish-Christian relationship is to thrive among a Christianity in which the voices of the global south become more prominent for some different questions to be addressed, or perhaps some old questions to be addressed in a different way. When I travel for my work in sub-Saharan Africa what sort of views do I find expressed among the Christian churches there? I am of course speaking primarily from a non-Catholic perspective: the centralizing focus of Catholic Christianity may lead to a different picture. But in the churches I visit I enter a world in which what Christians call the Old Testament is immensely alive – it is not viewed as part of the past, it is seen as vivid and real today. There is no von Harnackian view of its redundancy. Yet I also enter a world in which often historical-critical study of the Bible is not used or trusted – a fact of relevance to this discussion, because I do think that the new perspectives on Jesus or Paul that are so much part of the western rapprochement in Jewish-Christian relations depend on a broad acceptance of historical-critical methodology. I enter a world full of what I call a naïve supersessionism – not malevolent as supersessionism has often been through the history of the Christian west – but a strange mixture of philosemitism and fundamentalism which seems to collapse two thousand years of Christian history – or indeed Jewish history, because for many of the Christians I am thinking about there is not a real sense that Judaism today is different and developed from Judaism at the time of Jesus. Judaism is somehow critiqued and cherished in the same breath.

How should those of us involved in Jewish-Christian relations respond to these aspects of global Christianity? Of course it is easier to open up the questions than to provide the answers. It is I think something at which an international body such as ICCJ needs to give attention: perhaps the 3-fold pattern of dialogue, education, and social action mentioned by my friend Jane Clements provides a hint. Such a hint is also given in some of the 12 points of Berlin, a document which I don't think there has been quite enough attention given to here as we think about the future, for it manages to offer some challenges to both Jews and Christians in ways that feel very constructive.

And that leads me on to one final point which rather like an elephant has been trundling around the room unspoken over these last 3 days. When I was in Benin a month ago, I visited a number of churches there. I was fascinated by their names: one was called Bethany, another Shiloh, another Nazareth, and the biggest of all was called Jerusalem. I was interested by the obvious link to the Holy Land that was being constructed in that West African country. I asked my guide what did he and the members of his church think about the situation in Israel and Palestine. The answer was clear: Israel was the fulfilment of prophecy. That is not something that the majority of Christians in Asia and Africa would state nor is it that I myself would feel able to say – certainly not in that stark way, though I would reaffirm personally the comment made at the first World Council of Churches Assembly that the reality of Israel as a political entity is also a moral and spiritual question that touches a nerve centre of the world's religious life. In this reflection on the future of the Jewish-Christian relationship I would be lacking in integrity if I did not also say that many of us who love the Jewish people feel deeply afraid both for them, and for our relationship at the present time, given the apparent current hardening of attitudes within the State of Israel. If our relationship is to be real and strong we have to find a way of talking about this in a way that does not turn into two shrill and competing monologues. Here again the 12 points of Berlin have helpful things to say with its exhortations to Jews to differentiate between fair minded criticism of Israel



and antisemitism, and to offer encouragement to the State of Israel as it works to fulfil the ideals reflected in its founding documents. And for my part I am glad to seek to fulfil the call the Berlin document proffers to Christians, Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.