

Opening address

by **Dr. Deborah Weissman**,
ICCJ President.

Merhaba.

It is a great personal occasion for me to speak here in Istanbul this evening at the opening of our conference. This is my third time in Istanbul—actually, my third time in this beautiful hotel-- but my fourth time in Turkey, having been in Antalya, as well. I mentioned last year in Berlin that my late father had been a high school pupil there. Well, that is true, but my father was born in Istanbul, as were his parents, my grand-parents. So I have close family roots in this amazing city.

We are Ashkenazi Jews and my father's first language was Yiddish. They left for Vienna when he was three, so he didn't know much Turkish. But my grandmother, who lived with us and basically raised my sister and me while my mother was out working, spoke Turkish well, together with a smattering of other languages she picked up in the streets of this city: a little Greek, a little Armenian and a little Ladino. She prepared for us certain Turkish foods and we grew up listening to the music of this region.

This city under three names has been an important force on the world scene: Byzantium, Constantinople, Istanbul. I haven't been able to locate the original source, but our dear advisor Ruth Weyl recently drew my attention to an interesting quotation from the English Romantic poet Lord Byron's writings in the early 19th century. He called Istanbul the most Eastern city of the Western and the most Western city of the Eastern, worlds. This year, Istanbul is a European capital of culture, but it indeed has been a Eurasian cultural capital for more than two and a half millennia. The city has played an important role in Jewish history. Twice when Jews were persecuted in other lands, Turkey took them in—after the expulsion from Spain, in the 15th and 16th centuries, including the famous Jewish woman, Dona Gracia Mendes, and during the Shoah, the Holocaust, in the 20th. It has certainly played a central role in Christian history, particularly as a center of Eastern Christianity. But we have come here even more for its leading role in a third great religious culture, that of Islam.

The International Council of Christians and Jews is meeting—I believe for the first time in our history—in a predominantly Muslim country. We are doing so in order to raise for ourselves some important questions about bilateral and trilateral inter-religious dialogue. Muslims have on many occasions in the past been welcome participants in our conferences, but this is the first time that we have held the conference in a predominantly Muslim setting, with a theme chosen from the verses of the Qur'an, and much emphasis in our discussions on what might be called "trialogue." Let me make it clear from the outset that we have no intention of abandoning the specific dialogue between Christians and Jews, crucially important for many reasons; but we do wish to explore ways of involving Muslims on various levels of activity, in recognition of our common spiritual heritage as descendants of Abraham and our common concerns in the contemporary world.

One of these concerns is the hijacking of our respective faiths by violent extremists. In this context, I would like to quote from the poet William Butler Yeats, writing more than 90 years ago, lines that are no less relevant today. It is interesting that Yeats also wrote an important poem about Byzantium but these lines are from a poem called "The Second Coming:"

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; ...
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

As Jews, Christians and Muslims, we must work to insure that people like us remain passionate and intense in our convictions and our commitments to nonviolence, open dialogue and mutual respect. I was recently on a panel with Professor Mohammed Dajani of Al-Kuds University. I don't know if he is the author of this statement or if he was quoting someone else: "In times of radicalism and extremism, being moderate is revolutionary."

Another prerequisite for dialogue, as we have found, is the ability to look critically at one's own history and traditions, while at the same time, maintaining one's identity and commitments. It isn't easy and can be a tough balancing act. I believe it was the late and much lamented Swedish Bishop Krister Stendahl who coined the phrase "holy envy." In addition to the beautiful traditions we cherish in our own faiths, what is it about the faith of the Other of which we may be envious? What can we learn from our encounter with the Other? What can we take back to our own communities? This week, I hope we will be learning much about Judaism, Christianity and Islam, against the backdrop of contemporary Turkish society.

The strength of a democracy depends in large part on the ability of the majority culture to absorb and integrate its minorities, while allowing them freedom of religion, freedom of expression and the maintenance of their own cultural identity. Some of our discussions at this conference will focus on exploring the nexus among religion, politics and society. We will deal with antisemitism and Islamophobia, Muslim minorities in Europe, women's issues and social justice. A well-known joke says that the text of a Jewish telegram is: "Start worrying; details to follow." Frankly, I am worried that if the euro continues to drop and more European economies go under, there will be a resurgence of racism and xenophobia on the Continent. The main victims will be both Muslims and Jews. Of course, there will be wonderful Christian friends standing with us in solidarity, but will there be enough to stem the dangerous tide?

As you know, the motto of our conference is taken from the Qur'an: "O humankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another." As a commentary on this quotation, I would like to bring some words of my friend and colleague, Yehezkel Landau, of the Hartford Seminary. Yehezkel has been deeply involved in Jewish-Muslim dialogue. He has written recently in a piece that appeared in the Web journal, *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*: "...we might be able to see God's agency in history—Creation, Revelation, and especially Redemption—as pluriform. That is, we could acknowledge that the One God has created different peoples and faith communities, instructing them in different languages and calling them to unique paths of consecrating service. If we could affirm that these separate paths all promote the messianic redemption, we could broaden our notion of redemption—the fruit of God's intentionality within history—into an inclusive vision of justice, peace, and reconciliation. We should be able to affirm God's Oneness while celebrating cultural and spiritual diversity within the Divine plan."

This may be the first time that an ICCJ conference has been organized in a country in which we do not have a local member organization. I am saying this for two reasons: first, because I hope that perhaps one of the side-benefits of our being here now may be to help stimulate local efforts at dialogue. Secondly, because we didn't have a local organization, most of the burden for organizing the conference fell on our General-Secy. Rev. Dick Pruiksma. He deserves a tremendous round of applause... In addition, I would also like to thank the following people for their special efforts—perhaps I can ask you now to save your applause until the end of the list--: Conference Chair , ICCJ First Vice-President Rabbi Ehud Bandel; ICCJ Secretary and Office Manager Barbara Fruth; the very helpful management and staff of the Kalyon Hotel; all of the many people both here and abroad who gave us valuable suggestions about planning the program; the individuals, institutions and foundations who helped us develop the financial resources to fund it and I'm happy to say they include Jews, Christians and Muslims; all of the presenters, who have come from far and wide; and ,of course, last but most assuredly not least, all of you who have come to participate in the conference.

The truth is, I don't know how our predecessors organized conferences before the age of computers, e-mail and Skype. I wish us all a stimulating, productive and enjoyable conference. Tessekur.