



16 June 2012

## **Summary: Knox Inter-faith Network Event**

(Authored by Mark Herrmann and Peter Evans of the Knox Inter-faith Network)

### **An overview of the Golden Rule and an exploration of the role of faith in the Palestine-Israel peace process**

This illuminating, educational and thought provoking event was run on 22 April 2012 at the Ferntree Gully Uniting Church. It had a range of speakers providing a faith perspective (Jewish, Christian and Muslim) on the situation in the Middle East.

The central topic of an exploration of the role of faith was coupled with and grounded in an overview of the Golden Rule. The forum facilitator, Prof. Joe Camilleri (Director, Centre for Dialogue, La Trobe University), said, "It raises questions about how people, individually and as members of groups, should behave towards each other."

In his opening comments, Prof. Camilleri noted that the conflict in the Middle East has existed for some time, even prior to the creation of the state of Israel. There are political as well as faith dimensions. Many outside the conflict are pessimistic. Yet the implications are not just local but regional and global and therefore of concern to all thinking citizens. He added that the Golden Rule provides a good framework for considering such tough topics.

In Christian terms the Golden Rule is commonly said as, "Treat others as you would like them to treat you." In Islam this is stated similarly, as "Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself." This resonates with the Judaic statement that "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour." Although there are slight variations in expression, there is a commonality in the message. It exists in some form in all major faiths.

Dr Stewart Sharlow (from the Janssen Spirituality Centre for Inter-religious and Cross-cultural Relations) provided an overview of the Golden Rule across faiths. He expressed the view that, "As the world becomes more and more a single interacting community, the Golden Rule has the capacity to be the ethical cornerstone as the human family works together to build a peaceful, just and sustainable global society."

Dr Sharlow believes the Rule can be used in groups as small as a family or as large as global society, provided all seeking to use it are willing to open themselves to a process of change. Quoting the American poet Edwin Markham (1852-1940), Dr Sharlow challenged participants: "*We have committed the Golden Rule to memory; let us now commit it to life.*"



16 June 2012

With regard to the land Palestine/Israel mention was made of the Balfour Declaration (1917), which reads: “His Majesty’s [British] Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

Taken literally, it appears the first part was achieved, but the second part has not been, either in historical Palestine or in many countries around the world where Jews live. Of course, the time span from 1917 to 1948 included World War II, and the significant events and associated effects cannot be discounted.

Presenting the Jewish perspective, Rabbi Dr John Levi AM DD (Rabbi Emeritus of Temple Beth Israel) started with a simple exercise to emphasise the need for discussion to understand the meaning of texts and traditions. He wrote the following on a white board, noting that written Hebrew does not use vowels, and asked attendees to interpret it: “N TH BGNNG GD”. All could reinterpret this to, “In the beginning God” by inserting vowels.

Rabbi Dr Levi noted that sacred texts such as the Bible necessarily involve tradition, so they need to be discussed to provide understanding. He noted that there is no hierarchy in Judaism so there is no single source of all knowledge, so such discussion becomes vital.

With the intertwining of faith, tradition and nationality, he added importantly that the sense of a religion often becomes clearer when it is practised in a country where that religion is not the predominant religion.

Rabbi Dr Levi spoke historically about the predicament of the Jewish people. For centuries, they lived under Islamic rule and, later, particularly in Europe, had to learn to live with Christianity. With Jews being excluded from many European countries, together with a belief that acceptance was never going happen, the need for a Jewish state became clear according to Rabbi Dr Levi.

Dr Sr Mary Reaburn (a Sister of Our Lady of Sion and a lecturer at the Yarra Theological Union), the Christian speaker, and an Australian, spends about 6 months of the year in Australia and 6 months of the year in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, she lives in a house run by her order in the Muslim quarter, where Jews and Muslims as well as Christians, Israelis and Palestinians are employed.

Although not a Palestinian Christian herself, she felt it important to have a different voice bringing a particular dimension to what is otherwise a dichotomy between the two parties to the dispute. She noted that the Palestinian Christian population is a minority and declining. She added that there is no single Christian view about the challenges of Israel-Palestine.



16 June 2012

With a group of Palestinian women (Muslim and Christian) and Israeli women (mostly Jewish) meeting to share their traditions and concerns, she emphasised the role that women can play in the promotion of peace. (This reminds us of EM Forster (1879-1970), who said, “I am sure that if the mothers of various nations could meet, there would be no more wars.”) Peace is possible if people meet each other, understand each other and grow in respect.

Dr Reaburn continued by referring to the complexities of the political situation. Christian Europe, in its non-respect of Jewish communities within Europe, created the situation which contributed to the holocaust (Shoah). This contributed to the establishment of the state of Israel and the inherent problem of how Palestinians and Israelis share the land.

However, in her experience, grass roots movements are acting. Rabbis for Human Rights are working with settlers to promote peace and Women in Black are protesting regarding some occupation of the West Bank. She concluded powerfully that, “We have to believe peace is possible ... some time!” and asked all present to pray for peace.

Mehmet Ozalp (from the Islamic Studies Research Academy), the Muslim speaker, opened by stating that Islam not only teaches the Golden Rule but it is the cornerstone of how Muslims should behave in all things. This should apply to dealings with people, animals and the environment.

While it goes against our own basic animal instincts, Muslims are exhorted by the teachings of Muhammad (PBUH) and the Qur’an to go through the transformation to try to see things from the others’ point of view. This ties consideration of others to oneself.

Mr Ozalp spoke about a tendency for people to make exclusions to the Golden Rule, by making it conditional. He said that we cannot exclude others from its application because of a different faith or race or because it is in our national interest (he highlighted our treatment of asylum seekers as an example) or because they are our enemies. The Golden Rule can serve in diplomatic relations and in conflicts regarding the treatment of civilians and POWs.

He felt the biggest fear of the Israeli people is what the Palestinians will do if some resolution changes the balance of power. The challenge Mr Ozalp stated is “how to treat others when you are in a position of strength or when you move to it from one of weakness – don’t retaliate or seek retribution.” The Qur’an challenges people not to retaliate.

A late addition to the panel of speakers, Palestinian Taimor Hazou (a previous secretary of the Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria), was more political, but no less judicious in his presentation. He opened by noting the similarity of the Jewish, Arabic and Syriac words for peace: Shalom, Salaam and Schlomo.



16 June 2012

He indicated toughness is needed for any minority living in a heterogeneous society. There exist stereotypes of the minority. “The conflict in the Middle East is a negative cycle of violence, imbued in a sense of fear, mistrust and ignorance. The expansion of the Jewish settlements is justified on the basis of fear. The entry to Israel of Jewish people was traded off without any recognition of the indigenous ownership or presence.”

He echoed Mr Ozalp in stating he believes there is fear in Israel of the consequence of a ‘Muslim success’. Mr Hazou concluded by asking whether a cycle of light can be built instead of a cycle of revenge. He pondered whether the Jewish experience with the Shoah might give them some empathy with the current Palestinian experience. He felt that it needs the intervention of the international community. Mr Hazou pondered further whether Australia, largely removed (with some exceptions) from both experiences, might play a role.

At the beginning of the afternoon forum, Prof. Camilleri had posed a number of questions:

- Is religion or faith of importance in helping to explain the conflict, in accounting for its intensity, long duration and intractability?
- In understanding the role of religion do we come closer to comprehending the nature of the conflict and the difficulties that stand in the way of resolution?
- Is religion part of the problem?
- Does religion have a positive contribution to make towards a long-term resolution?
- Is this significant only for people of faith in the area or a challenge for all people of faith?

Sadly, the facilitated discussion after the speakers had insufficient time to seriously consider these and other important questions. It left us feeling like we had only made it to half-time.

Suggestions of what Australians could do were raised during the discussion but not debated at length due to time limitations. These included:

- Becoming better informed, possibly by going to visit Israel and meeting people there rather than relying on media reports.
- Investigating the history of the Australian armed forces (Diggers) in Palestine.
- Praying for peace.
- Helping to promote a “UN of religions” along the lines of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, held in Melbourne in December 2009 and to be held in Brussels in 2014.

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Note:

This summary and the views contained are those of the authors based on their notes from the 22 April 2012 event. They are presented attempting full accuracy but do not claim to represent the views of the presenters with full accuracy, nor the views of their faith communities or the views of the Knox Inter-faith Network.