



## **ICCJ Consultation "Many Meanings of Mission"**

Liliane Apotheker | 01.05.2020

*The ICCJ Board convened in February 2020 in the ICCJ headquarters, the Martin-Buber-House in Heppenheim, for a two-day consultation on a provocative and essential theme: "The Many Meanings of Mission" - a report by ICCJ's First Vice President Liliane Apotheker.*

The word "Mission" arises regularly in official institutional documents as well as in Jewish Christian dialogue at both expert and grass root levels. Christians understand it differently than Jews. Christians see it as an integral part of their Christian faith. Jews react defensively to it; in fact, it is often the first topic they broach in dialogue. They still feel that Christians may not have entirely surrendered their desire to proselytize and convert them to Christianity, this despite the new path of mutual esteem that has replaced the rather contemptuous relationship of the past.

In order to explore the topic, Jewish and Christian experts, board members and ICCJ partners and liaisons were asked to present on internal mission (to their own communities), on mission to the world and on mission to each other as Jews and Christians.

### **The Sisters of Sion and the Transformation of their Mission**

The consultation was opened on the first evening by Margaret Shepherd, NDS and Katarzyna Kowalska, NDS. They told us about the deep change their religious order had undergone. The Sisters of Sion redefined their community's mission (or charism) to be strong activists in putting Nostra Aetate into practice. Key to that new mission is a fresh understanding of the permanent election of the Jewish people.

To „encounter real Jews makes a difference“, so does “to share the humanity of the neighbour“. Sister Katarzyna focused on the reasons why the younger generation would be joining the Sisters of Sion: the pursuit of social justice, reading Scripture with the Jewish people and work in response to the Shoah, all seem to play a key role. This commitment however is not mainstream yet in the entire Catholic community as apathy, ignorance and avoidance mechanisms are still present.

### **The World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Question of Christian Mission**

Rev. Dr David Marshall of the WCC (World Council of Churches) opened the consultation the following morning with a historical perspective. He observed that European colonialism and empire building was a factor in supporting Christian missionary activity. The WCC today has 350 member churches that represent many different approaches and histories regarding mission and Jewish-Christian relations. The term mission itself is seen nowadays as the mission of God that the Church is called to take up and there has been a clear trend from emphasis on conversionary missions to emphasis on dialogue. Interreligious dialogue is part of mission but not for the sake of converting anyone. Christians bear witness (a preferred term as it is free from colonial connotations) to their faith convictions and practices with their neighbours who live by other religious convictions and ideological persuasions. “True witness follows Jesus Christ in respecting and affirming the uniqueness and freedom of others“, Rev. Marshall quoted from a 1982 WCC statement, “Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation” (§41). Attempts to reverse colonialism that had been directed at people on the margins have initiated a new mission from the margins thus bringing about a shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity. Actions taken by Christians are meant to affirm life and

the credibility of the Gospel in the midst of the economic and social injustices of our world.

The complexity of the attitudes towards the Jewish People is revealed by many tensions within the numerous documents that Rev. Marshall presented. Mission to the Jews may have a specific salvific significance to some, whereas others believe in what one could call an eschatological postponement: at the end of time, Jews will turn to Christ. The Sigtuna report (1992) affirmed notably that “the Jewish people today are in continuation with biblical Israel”.

## **What Mission(s) do the Jewish Community and the Christian Community Have Toward Their Own Members?**

The first panel then explored what mission the Jewish and Christian communities have to their own members.

Prof. Dr Joseph Sievers stated a few major principles of evangelisation as understood in Catholicism today. God loves us and dialogue should be the respectful proclamation of that essential point. We are called to be witnesses of mutual love and preach the Gospel with deeds more than words. It is notably difficult to hold onto these immensely positive values in our extremely polarised world.

Dr Pavol Bargar, speaking with regard to evangelism among Protestant communities, recognised that Christianity is about crossing borders between religions but also between gender, ethnicity, social status etc. “Faith communities get people together beyond their own filter bubbles”.

Rabbi Samuel Sztainhendler drew from his experience as a community rabbi in Latin America. A sense of community is not built on unanimity; diversity is part of it. The rabbi has to walk in front, together with, and sometimes behind the community when he or she engages in teaching, healing, leading and performing religious services. The rabbi has to be welcoming to everybody, promote closeness in the congregation even when difficulties arise, build bridges, and engage in interfaith activities based on shared values. This mission within the community exists within the wider world, not separate from it. However, the purpose is never to make the world more Jewish, but rather to make it more human.

## **What Mission(s) do the Jewish Community and the Christian Community See Themselves as Having to the Whole World?**

The next panel was dedicated to exploring what missions the communities saw themselves as having to the world.

Rabbi Dr Ulrike Offenbergl noted that increasingly Jewish people feel the urgency of fighting isolation. When they express their fear of rising antisemitism, they also see it as a symptom of a decrease in democratic culture and a surge of general racism. Jews have a role to play in global challenges. The community is a remedy against the sense of loneliness, but it should not prevent Jewish people from standing by the underdog, or fighting for social justice. As a matter of fact, justice is an integral part of Jewish liturgy. Judaism has a lot of internal frictions. It doesn't have an encompassing theology, but holds strong principles of faith. The mainstream is formed around the text but multi-voicedness is an inherent principle.

Rev. Barbara Rudolph noted that an extraordinary sense of trust was necessary to allow this conversation on a very difficult topic to even happen. She proceeded to describe what Christian witness (this word replaces “mission”) should be in a multicultural world by stating that Christians should never use (abuse) people's physical needs when they see them, as a means of proselytization. Christians should depart from sinful structures: a global imperial system is sinful because it excludes millions. The global market is also sinful. *Missio Dei* is first and foremost the

activity of God Godself. The focus should be on the entirety of creation, not just on humans, “not just saving the souls but transforming the world”. Mission should never be exercised with power. In a secular society the very word mission takes up new meaning. Though mission continues, it has changed a lot. Christians have to live a faithful discipleship, people of other faiths are partners and when one finds a role as partner for the other religions, one frees oneself from mission.

Rev. Dr Michael Trainor described four approaches:

- Transmission: an exclusivist approach that seeks to expand explicit confession of Christ as the only saviour;
- Adaptation: an inclusivist and pluralist Christology. The Church has to be purified in order to bring credible witness to the world. Its mission is to “signify the reality of God’s salvation operative throughout the world” (Mc Conville);
- Incarnation: God is engaged in the world’s history; mission then becomes the “proclamation of the saving power of Jesus Christ through a life of liberating witness”;
- Dialogue: “Recognising in humility the search for divine Truth”. The Other offers a reflection of that truth, and in dialogue we engage in a common search for what is good, true and moral.

The Other plays a key role as he or she offers clarity in the “Evangelization process”, here meaning to announce the Kingdom of God.

All four expressions have their contemporary realisations, and these are not limited to the Catholic Church.

## **What Mission(s) do the Jewish Community and the Christian Community Have (and not Have) to Each Other?**

The last panel of the day was dedicated to exploring what mission(s) do the Jewish community and the Christian community have (and not have) to each other?

Prof. Dr Phil Cunningham presented a number of excerpts from Catholic ecclesial texts of various origins that revealed the importance of bringing Jews and Christians in fraternal dialogue with each other, sharing biblical and theological studies. One excerpt quoted Pope Francis on his conversations with Rabbi Skorka: “Neither of us negotiated our own identity [...] and neither of us attempted to convert the other”.

Several other quotes conveyed that Jewish Catholic dialogue should never be used “as a means of proselytism or as a disguised invitation to baptism. “Christians are nonetheless called to bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews, although they should do so in a humble and sensitive manner, acknowledging that Jews are bearers of God’s Word, and particularly in view of the great tragedy of the Shoah” (“Gifts and Calling”, 12 Dec 2015).

Prof. Cunningham observed that all Christian churches are struggling with the question of how their defining belief in the universal saving significance of Christ coheres with the recent reaffirmation that Jews covenant with a saving God. Some Catholics speak of an “unfathomable mystery” (“Gifts and Calling” 36), others defer the resolution of the tension to the End of Days, and “the expectation that the Lord will bring about the hour when we will all be united (“Gifts and Calling” 37), while still others stress “that Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh in the world, [while] for Jews the Word of God is present above all in the Torah. Both faith traditions find their foundation in the One God, the God of the Covenant, who reveals himself through his Word”(Pope Francis to the ICCJ, 30 June 2015) .

Dr Martin Hauger admitted that the question of mission to the Jews is troublesome.

“The Shoah is there, one cannot ignore it, therefore there can be no mission to the Jews, but there must be repentance”. The 19th century had advocated mission to the Jews as an act of love. That changed after 1945. The EKD (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland) recognizes the lasting election of Israel. It holds that Jews and Christians each have their own calling and that a distinction must be made between mission to the nations and Jewish Christian dialogue. The eschatological question remains open.

Rev. Patrick Morrow presented the perspectives of the Church of England, adding that within his church polity authority is dispersed. The Church of England has recently published a document called “God’s Unfailing Word” with an afterword by Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis. This ground-breaking document calls for an ongoing commitment to dialogue with the Jewish people, recognising unequivocally that centuries of Christian anti- Judaism, which had attributed collective guilt to the Jewish people for the death of Christ, had contributed to the bitter saga of Jewish persecution. In his afterword, the UK’s chief Rabbi took the Anglican Church to task for not making a clear commitment to not supporting conversionary missions towards the Jews. However, the document does urge Anglicans to “think carefully about mission and evangelism in the case of their Jewish neighbours”.

Rabbi Dr David Sandmel noted that unsurprisingly there is no Hebrew word for mission. The closest approximation would be “mitzvah” or “mitzvot”, in particular all those deeds that describe how to be in a relationship. Today that would mean the need to be in partnership, to be together with others. Rabbi Sandmel also recounted his recent experience of dialogue in Zimbabwe, a country where there is no Jewish population and little knowledge of the transformation of the relationship between Christian and Jews. This raised the question of bringing new people to our conferences and consultations, including immigrants.

Two wrap-up sessions concluded the consultation. Some powerful points were made by speakers and participants; here are a few:

- Prof. Dr Joseph Sievers pointed out that there has always been “Catholic speak”, “Jewish speak”, “Anglican speak”, “Lutheran speak”, etc. These languages or particular “in-house” ways of speaking were always separate but now they encounter each other. How are their words heard and understood today amid such interaction?
- Prof. Dr Phil Cunningham listed a number of precepts that Catholics should observe when theologizing about Jews and Judaism. They included not doing any theology concerning Judaism without working with Jewish colleagues; not hinting to the slightest degree that Jews were cursed by God for the crucifixion or rejection of Jesus; being suspicious of any theology that is self- serving; remembering that Christians are not competent to adjudicate who is Jewish; and that Christian speech and tonality should be the same among Christians as when Jews are present.
- Rev. Dr Bo Sandahl deplored that in the “Missio Dei” tradition the Mosaic covenant was left out. In Creation theology the movement was from the Creation of the world to the coming of Christ, omitting the whole story of God’s interactions with Israel. Reciprocity and partnership are vital principles and Jewish Christian dialogue should become our common mission.
- Dr Debbie Weissman expressed the need for Jewish scholars to explore further the relationship that Jews had with Christians in antiquity. She referred to new research that stresses the fact that Rabbinic Judaism developed in the context of an Eastern Christian presence.
- Prof. Dr Gregor Maria Hoff recognised the difference between institutional texts and communities of faith where religion is lived and performed. He pleaded for “a new grammar of how to perform the Sign of God in a society of different presences”.

## Concluding Thoughts

The consultation was very rich and thought provoking, so rich that it calls for further study and

action. The theme touched on Jewish and Christian self-understanding, exploring their respective boundaries. Nothing matters more to Jewish people than to remain Jewish. Christians consider bearing witness to the life and death of Jesus Christ as the essence of their faith including in a context of encounter and dialogue. As Phil Cunningham remarked, citing Michael McGarry, God does not want a world without Jews.

The consultation raised our awareness of the use of certain words; their use might appear simple, but they are in fact very complex. Seeing God's likeness in the face of the other should compel us to "do theology" together and explore the meanings of the words we use.

One of the questions that emerged was whether religious communities embrace history or not. Some churches like the Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion, and the EKD clearly do. Except for more mystical traditions, Judaism has always been deeply rooted in Israel's historical experiences.

The Shoah has changed Christian attitude towards the Jewish people. Some of these churches even seek to undo the past and teach the transformation of the relationship between Christian and Jews in countries that have been previously Christianised into a 19th century replacement theology. Many countries do not have a Jewish population, but they nonetheless operate with a supersessionist theology.

Clearly a new conception of mission needs to be explored. Common ground can be found in shared values like social justice and peace. Mitzva and Tikkun Olam are commonly used by Jews for this, but these words cannot and should not replace the word mission despite its somewhat painful connotations. Perhaps the word mission should be reclaimed and associated with humility, responsibility and vulnerability thus leaving behind the use of power. Hubris should be replaced by an honest appraisal of the past. Mission can and should be replaced by dialogue, dialogue implies that the Other, every "Other", is a partner not an object.

Several voices during the consultation stated that ICCJ is a unique organisation where Jews and Christians can approach controversial and even conflicting themes together. These encounters allow us to build trust and to bring new partners to the endeavour. If dialogue is to become our new mission, we need to find ways to share this with the wider world. It seems urgent to venture into new geographical territories with the help of partners and to see our new mission/mitzva as an effort to become a blessing for one another and for the world.

Editorial remarks

Source: [ICCJ](#).