

Masking our Differences: Purim in Cebu

The Yiddish term 'beshert' refers to that which is pre-destined, those incidents in life that can only be explained by Providence. The fact that the first Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue in December 2004 took place during Chanukah, the festival that celebrates the miracle of survival of the few against the many, seemed to be 'beshert'. Add to this the fact that the second in the series, in March 2006, took place during the partner festival, Purim, commemorating another victory of a minority threatened by extermination? Both festivals are joyous occasions when the right to be different and to have the freedom to live as Jews is celebrated – ideal times to gather people from different nations and different faith-groups in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

The Jewish representation in Yogyakarta had particular significance when Muslim Indonesia hosted the lighting of Chanukah candles and the recitation of Hebrew prayer. The two Jewish delegates, from Australia and New Zealand respectively, were honoured by the positive response of fellow delegates from across the region. The second Dialogue's location in the Philippines, a predominantly Catholic country, may have been less auspicious in terms of the symbolism, but for the Jewish representatives from Australia and New Zealand it presented different challenges and new opportunities.

We were accommodated in a luxury resort, well-sheltered from the poverty of some of the local population and removed from any political or inter-religious conflict that the Philippines is currently experiencing. The first meeting of the entire Australian delegation, consisting of the ten participants in the Yogyakarta Dialogue plus two Interfaith experts, former ECAJ president Jeremy Jones and Graeme Mundine from the National Council of Churches, was on our arrival in Cebu. Our team had the same sense of mission that characterized our approach to the first Dialogue and worked cooperatively and diligently.

The Australian delegation was particularly well resourced, with support from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Australian Embassy in Manila. Nominees and volunteers were found for a number of tasks. Jeremy Jones was nominated as Australia's representative on the Drafting Committee, where one representative of each of the 15 states represented worked on the Conference outcome document. Peta Pellach represented Australia, along with Sister Trish Madigan of the Catholic Church and Dr Ameer Ali of the Islamic community, on the Education Workshop. Cardinal George Pell and Wendie Wilkie of the Uniting Church co-chaired the workshop on Peace and Security, with John Henderson of the National Council of Churches working as that Workshop's rapporteur. Jeremy Jones and John Baldock, an Anglican priest from Melbourne, delivered the keynote papers on this subject. The other Australian delegates, representing Australia's Hindus, Buddhists and Orthodox Christian communities, participated in workshops on the Media and on Human Development.

Peta also joined Wendie Wilkie in drafting the Prayer for the Australian delegation to recite at the opening session of the Dialogue. As had been predicted, the Philippines resiled from the idea of reciting prayers on behalf of all delegates and requested that each

of the 15 countries represented recite a prayer of 3 minutes' duration. Wendie and Peta determined that all members of the Australian delegation would participate in the prayer, which was crafted to celebrate the natural richness of the Australian landscape and the privileges and freedoms its people enjoy.

Drawing on the diverse nature of our delegation, which reflects the diversity of the Australian population, part of the prayer was repeated in the languages represented. Graeme Mundine opened in his indigenous language, followed by Dr Bala, the Hindu delegate, in Tamil, the two Buddhist representatives in Vietnamese, Dr Ali in Arabic, Archbishop Baliozian in Armenian, Jeremy Jones and Peta Jones Pellach in Hebrew and then the remaining delegates in English. It was an impressive array of cultures and symbolized our mutual respect. MP Andrew Robb, the Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Multiculturalism who represented the Government in the absence of Foreign Minister, Mr Downer, congratulated the group on this display of the qualities that represent Australia.

Prior to the recitation of the prayer on the first morning, Jewish delegates had a major religious obligation to fulfill. Purim began with nightfall and reading the Megillah, both night and morning, is a duty that can usually be fulfilled by listening to a public reading in a Synagogue. This year, the Megillah that was a gift to Jeremy Jones from the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress when he completed his presidency of the ECAJ was given its first use. With an attentive, multifaith audience, Jeremy and Peta read the complex text, supporting each other through difficult passages. Ra'shanim (noise-makers), fancy-dress accessories and chocolates were provided so that listeners could participate in the sense of fun that the Megillah-reading generally inspires. The task was completed, with recitation of appropriate blessings, and the Jewish delegates felt greatly relieved at their accomplishment while Buddhist and Christian observers expressed gratitude for being permitted to participate, as they had done with vigorous noise-making at every mention of the name of the villain Haman.

The first evening dinner was for the Australian delegation alone. Held in an exclusive reception area, it involved minimal formality and was essentially an opportunity to become acquainted or re-acquainted with each other. Andrew Robb was a congenial participant in the dinner-time conversation which, despite the informality, touched on religious matters and issues of marginalisation in Australia past and present.

The morning opening addresses by host President Gloria Arroyo, New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark and senior representatives from Australia and Indonesia made all the appropriate and expected comments and observations. The national reports on progress since the Yogyakarta Dialogue provided some unexpected and welcome information. It appears that the Dialogue has had a significant impact in a number of countries. We learnt that the New Guinea national response to the Tsunami which followed on the heels of the Indonesian Dialogue was led by their inter-faith delegation. Minister Dame Carole Kidu, leader of the Delegation on both occasions, noted that without the Dialogue, the religious leaders would not have had contact with each other

and would not have thought of coordinating their relief efforts. This was a significant shift for the country.

Progress in Thailand and Singapore also indicated that the Australian emphasis on working with youth and young adults had been successfully adopted in other settings. Particularly in Thailand, youth camps are now a feature of the intense effort to bridge differences between Buddhist and Muslim youth. In Indonesia, Australia's presentation featured the Journey of Promise and Youth Encounters programs. These provided inspiration for other nations. Indonesia's report, focusing on the building of the Yogya Centre for Interfaith Education indicated that that nation had taken its responsibilities in the field of Interfaith cooperation very seriously and was looking to even greater regional cooperation in the future.

Australia's report had four main components: the vast number of interfaith activities on a national scale; the Islamic Reference Group and other attempts to limit marginalization of the Muslim community; the commemorations of the 40th anniversary of Nostra Aetate and resultant improvements in Jewish-Christian dialogue ; ongoing emphasis on education and working with youth. John Henderson, Secretary General of the National Council of Churches, led the report with input from John Baldock, Ameer Ali, Cardinal George Pell and Peta Jones Pellach respectively.

The majority of the Dialogue time was allocated to workshops on four specific areas, each workshop chaired by one of the four sponsoring nations. Australia chaired the workshop on Peace and Security, and Wendie Wilkie and Cardinal Pell were nominated to co-chair. Jeremy Jones presented one of the discussion papers, taking a leading role in determining the direction of the workshop's deliberations. As Australia's representative on the Drafting Committee, he also had significant input as to the way the workshop was reported and the resolutions that emanated from it.

The Education workshop was chaired by the Philippines and when the original chairperson was called away, his co-chair found herself out of her depth in managing the deliberations of a diverse, vocal and sometimes passionate gathering. The Australian delegation, along with our New Zealand counterparts, proved resourceful in such a situation and frequently resolved issues, including taking a major role in drafting the resolutions and outcomes of the Workshop proceedings. Peta and a New Zealand colleague re-vamped the various proposals from the delegations and drafted the Workshop recommendations, responding to the written submissions from each delegation as well as to the discussion as it unfolded.

There were some tense moments in the final session of the Education workshop when representatives of one country, who had missed the first six hours of deliberation, joined the group. Demanding that participants be explicit in their understanding of the term 'Interfaith Education', the delegates criticized the general nature of the language used. It was Australian delegates (Peta in particular) who took the lead in explaining that general language had been consciously chosen to allow consensus among all countries represented. It was appropriate and, indeed, important to allow a broad interpretation so

that each country could find a level of implementation relevant to its particular situation. The immoderate language and attitude of some delegates was intimidatory but, with the strong support of Australia and New Zealand, the Philippines' chairperson was able to maintain the decorum of the discussion.

A second issue arose over the issue of Women. Sister Trish Madigan and Peta Jones Pellach teamed with New Zealand's Hindu delegate, a female academic, to press for recognition of the role of women in values education. In fact, the first suggestion to include a special mention of women came from Dr Ali, who noted that the first education children received was from their mothers and that values of peace and respect for the other could be instilled from early childhood, if mothers were empowered in this educational goal. This observation led to discussion around the predominance of women in teaching and the comparatively small number of women in delegations to the Dialogue and even in the Education Workshop.

When it came to drafting the recommendations from the Workshop, the original proposal was to include a mention of the contribution of women to education. Some Asian Muslim delegates objected, saying it was not necessary. A compromise from the New Zealand Muslim (male) delegate was that the contribution of women **and** men be noted. This was a satisfactory result as it allowed the role of women to at least be noted in the Dialogue's official reporting. Women were, as in Indonesia, severely underrepresented at the Dialogue, with some delegations not including any women at all.

In the Peace and Security workshop, a similar dynamic was present. Some delegates wanted explicit condemnations of acts of terrorism while others wanted a focus on "root causes" of terrorism. Jeremy Jones succeeded in removing reference to so-called "root causes" and any thing else which could have been perceived as justifying the murder of civilians. Some delegates also wanted to remove and implication that religion had any relationship to terrorism, claiming that to make and linkage was to "defame Islam".

During this workshop the extent of inter-communal violence in many different contexts was highlighted. Muslim and Christian in the Phillipines and Indonesia, Christian and Hindu in Fiji, Buddhist and Muslim in Thailand, were a sample of the serious problems the workshop addressed.

Unlike in Indonesia, faith-based 'caucus' meetings did take place – informally, rather than as part of the official program. The Jewish 'caucus' of Paul Morris (New Zealand), Peta and Jeremy met and noted a number of matters. We expressed the view that, wherever possible, the appropriate people to present information about particular faiths were adherents of those faiths themselves. We noted that Judaism has the concept of justice as a central platform and that we were impelled, as people of faith, to pursue an agenda of social justice. Even more important in our hierarchy of values is the value given to human life. As Jews, we wished to emphasise the sacred duty to protect human life and, as a consequence, reject all terrorism and other forms of violence that could contravene that duty.

A meeting convened by New Zealand to examine the possibilities of holding the next Dialogue in that country resolved that inclusion of Youth in interfaith activities was a priority and that that topic would form part of the proceedings. Other proposals included a more academic symposium preceding the official dialogue and continuing to examine and question the relationship between religion and State and established religion and indigenous cultures.

As in Indonesia, the need to overcome terrorism was highlighted in the opening addresses and formed part of the deliberations drafting the Conference Declaration. It was appropriately noted that education against religious intolerance cannot take place successfully in a setting where discrimination is practiced. Education does not exist in a vacuum. Unlike in Indonesia, the inclusion of condemnation of violence and the need for religious leadership to promote peaceful forms of conflict resolution did not become a contentious issue.

One matter gave rise to heated debate and divided delegates. Due to the recent cartoon controversy as well as more general matters, one of the workshops was on the Media and its potential role in promoting interfaith harmony. From that workshop, one of the proposals for inclusion in the Cebu Declaration was to support 'Freedom and responsibility of the media'. In the final session, where the wording of the Declaration was reviewed by the entire group, a Muslim representative suggested that this clause be rewritten to emphasise Responsibility, rather than Freedom. Peta Pellach spoke against the amendment, insisting that Responsibility only exists within a framework of Freedom. The leader of one delegation shouted 'It is a matter of principle', arguing that Islam does not believe in Freedom as a value. The Philippine chair of the session suggested that the amendment be put to a vote. Although this was not an ideal solution, the end result was satisfactory from the viewpoint of most of the Australian delegates with the amendment failing by just four votes in a room of more than 140 delegates.

The title of this report, 'Masking our Differences', refers, in part, to this vote. Not only did it put the Muslim delegates in an awkward position, with most of them (although not Australia's Muslim delegate) feeling compelled to vote for the amendment, but it revealed that not all of Australia's delegates felt strongly enough about the principle of Freedom of the Press to vote in this setting. One member of the delegation defiantly abstained, to the shock of most of the team.

There was a second incident involving an Australian delegate which is cause for concern. When discussing the issue of the underlying causes of religious hatred, a suggestion was made that there is always an underlying social or economic cause for hatred. Peta Pellach made the counter-suggestion that there is also sometimes irrational hatred not based on any reality but couched in deep-seated prejudice. When asked for an example, she said Mediaeval Antisemitism was such a hatred. The response from a fellow Australian came as a shock. "But the Jews were the money-lenders so there really was a reason".

It is important to note that this individual has had a long involvement in Jewish-Christian dialogue. We have clearly not been successful in conveying our message, which is the universal message, that religious tolerance, much less respect, has to be taught. There is religious intolerance that springs not from any oppression or genuine grievance but that stems from ignorance and from that suspicion of difference that seems inherent in human nature and needs to be overcome. Until such prejudices are acknowledged, they cannot be fought. Until they are banished, we are simply masking our differences rather than embracing them.

Notwithstanding the above, the Cebu Dialogue was, overall, a positive encounter for the Jewish delegates. Both Jeremy and Peta established warm relationships with other delegates; in Peta's case, particularly with other women. Jeremy Jones, who was the only delegate wearing a kippa, was bombarded with questions on all matters of Judaism, Jewish history, Jewish demography and culture, by delegates from Cambodia, Papua-New Guinea, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, East Timor, The Phillipines, Fiji and Brunei.

Peta was honoured to represent the Australian delegation at the Press Conference which concluded the Dialogue. She was one of just two women and certainly the single Jewish representative involved in the event. Again, her presence was highly symbolic.

There is no doubt that the visible presence of Jewish delegates is important. Many delegates expressed their genuine pleasure at meeting, for the first time, Jewish people. Many had serious theological questions to explore with their first Jewish colleagues; others were curious about the kosher food with which we were provided or about other life-style issues. There was no outward hostility, with even the Muslim delegate who had led the debate on freedom of the media and on alleged root-causes of terrorism taking the time to approach Jewish delegates to discuss the religious basis for his ideology. Even during the heated debates on the media, terrorism, causes of racism and global development, neither Jews nor Israel were demonized.

Our region is relatively free of the prejudice against Jews that is felt in Europe (partly due to the absence of a free press in most places); indeed, Jews are accepted as a 'quaint' minority about which little is known, but one which has played and continues to play a leading role in forging dialogues and promoting human rights and dignity.

Peta Jones Pellach
Jeremy Jones

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