

Being Holy in an Unholy World

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I am very grateful to the Nominating Committee of the Seelisberg Award and honoured to be the 2023 recipient. I also feel privileged to follow in the footsteps of Professors Joe Sievers and AJ Levine. Many thanks, too, to my former student Pavol, now Professor Bargár, for his generous words.

When Gregor, Liliane and Annette informed me about the Award, they asked me to open the Salzburg conference and include some personal aspects of my life. It struck me that the wheel of my family's life had come full circle because, unbeknownst to most of you, my parents were born in Austria, spent their childhood in Vienna, before fleeing to the UK a few years after the *Anschluss*. In addition, 6 months ago I applied for and received Austrian citizenship.

As a child, I was aware of their – my – heritage but the subject wasn't discussed much at home. Like many Jewish families who experienced the inter-generational trauma of the Holocaust, there was a silence. Sometimes my mother would share experiences of her youth with my wife, Trisha who is also here today, rather than speak directly to me or my brothers. My mother expressed to me her fondness for Vienna on more than one occasion and that she remembered playing in the *Prater*, before joining one of nearly 10,000 Jewish children on the *kindertransport*.

My father also said very little about his childhood in Vienna but I will share one story, discovered in 2015, when I was asked to deliver a lecture at the University of Vienna to mark the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*. I mentioned my trip shortly before I left the UK and he said "why not meet my cousin in Vienna?" I never knew that the Kesslers still had family in Vienna, but a few days later, I arrived at Herr Dr Otto Ranzenhofer's office and we had coffee together.

Otto's father and grandparents escaped to Shanghai where they stayed for the duration of the war. His father met his mother in Shanghai at an English language school. They moved to Israel in 1948 but couldn't settle. They then returned to Vienna, to the same house they had lived in, previously. The landlord had promised to keep the house for them when they fled, and was as good as his word. The house remained empty during the war but is once again inhabited by a Ranzenhofer, connected to the Kessler family on my paternal grandmother's side.

Unfortunately, Otto is unable to travel from Vienna but a few years ago, my niece Sarah, with the encouragement of my mother undertook some family research and we privately published a book, called *Unbekannterweise*. This lovely German word is used for greeting someone you don't know personally, but have a connection to. For example, "*Grüßen Sie unbekannterweise von mir! Say hello from me, although we haven't met!*".

The book – and my work - is all about connections, bonds and friendships and partly explains the motivation for my own work, as well as why I established the Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations in 1998, which later became the Woolf Institute. I have brought two copies of *Unbekannterweise* with me – one for the University of Salzburg as a gift for their library and the second for Otto.

There may be time for more personal reflections later, but before I move onto the theme our conference, holiness, *I'd like to share the latest invention from Cambridge: a car powered not by petrol, but by faith. For the car to accelerate, you simply need to say "Thank God" and for it to slow down, "Amen". I showed the car to the Archbishop of Canterbury, who asked if he could take it for a drive. "Of course," I said. Archbishop Justin jumped into the car and said, "Thank God" and off it went. He was going up a hill a little slowly and said, "Thank God" again to speed up. On the other side, he said "Amen" to slow the car down, but nothing happened. "Amen" he said again, a little more anxiously, but the car continued to descend at an increasing velocity. As the car approached the edge of a cliff, the Archbishop shouted, "Amen", and the car screeched to a halt, with two wheels hanging over the edge. He then lent back and said, "Thank God"!*

It will not have escaped your notice that our conference is taking place during an unholy time. A time of intolerance and violence, of the proliferation of war, notably in Eastern Europe and the Middle East; of the rise of the far-Right, demonstrated by some of the results of the recent EU election, especially, but not only, in France; of the highest number of refugees the world has ever seen, more than 110 million people; with protest and counter-protest on our streets. My own country has provided deplorable demonstrations of the same tendency ahead of the General Election as adversaries are locked in deadly combat, each convinced they are wholly right and that the other is not merely wrong but must be ignominiously defeated. And don't get me started about the 'land of the free', where a former US president wilfully pursues a policy of division and discrimination.

The title, *Being Holy in an Unholy World*, is one attempt to reflect on this global epidemic, which respects no boundaries and subverts public life, both political and religious.

Imagine a critic asking: "How do you solve the problem that has led people to kill one another in the name of God since the birth of human civilization? At the end of the day, Judaism, Christianity and Islam all claim to be true. They conflict. Therefore they cannot all be true. At most, one is. If Christianity is true, Judaism is false. If Islam is true, both Christianity and Judaism are false. It follows that these religions are bound to conflict whenever their followers take their truth claims seriously."

"I, for my part," my critic continues, "take this as sufficient evidence that all three are false. For how could the God of all humanity command his followers to deny the full and equal humanity of those who conceive the Almighty differently? I would rather live with the uncertainty of doubt than the certainty of faith, for it is that very certainty that leads people, convinced of their righteousness, to commit unspeakable crimes."

Jewish-Christian dialogue, in particular, and interfaith dialogue in general, are one response to the challenges posed by our critic. Dialogue is good news in a world fractured by abrasiveness and aggressiveness. It is one way to be holy in the face of an unholy combination of religious fundamentalism, nationalistic chauvinism and political demagoguery. Why? Because dialogue means being genuinely open to and tolerant of different points of view.

Yet, how should we respond to fanatics, grounded in their fundamentalisms, who are the cause of today's intolerance and violence? You know the type: people who have the unshakeable conviction that in their sacred text, or in the economic theories of socialism or capitalism, in the political

ideologies of Left and Right, possess the whole truth and nothing but the truth, with the reassuring consequence that their side is always right and the opposing argument invariably (and inevitably) wrong.

The symptoms are clear to see: self-righteousness and arrogance; intransigence and refusal to compromise: a tendency to lecture rather than to listen, to brandish slogans rather than engage in thought, to distrust the democratic process of rational persuasion or to despise those who dare to disagree, to demonise them as heretics or to ridicule them; to resort to verbal abuse and sometimes physical aggression.

Aggressive chauvinism has grown in the religious sphere as much as anywhere else. In the assertive nationalist Hinduism of India and the consequent marginalisation of Indian Muslims and Christians; in the shrill Christian nationalism of central and Eastern Europe, not to ignore the USA; among the Muslim radicals who express hatred of Christians and Jews. And in my faith too, in the threats posed by Jewish religious extremists, especially in Israel, who spew anti-Islamic and anti-Christian hatred as well as denigrate Palestinians and Arabs more widely.

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These hardliners are convinced that they possess the truth while you're sunk in error; they may try to persuade you, but if you refuse to be persuaded, they may compel or even conquer you, imposing their view by force in the name of religious truth.

What can we do under these circumstances? Is there an alternative to megaphone monologue? Do we simply conclude that they have different perspectives on reality? Is that it?

To start, if a few more of us were willing to stand up and speak out, we'd be better able to withstand the dogmatists and fundamentalists growling on TikTok or in their twitter feed. There aren't that many of them – they just happen to be loud.

What else can we do to fulfil the command “to be holy because I the Lord your God am holy (Lev 19:2)”? We can, indeed must, dialogue. Over the years, I have learnt the value of saying, “tell me your story” and then staying quiet. This prompts many to say how the world looks to them. I can then say how the world looks to me. I have found that it is possible to have a dialogue and through that dialogue understand different views, bridge the distance between our perspectives and see the world for the way it is: an irreducible multiplicity of perspectives.

I have realised, from family and friends, students and colleagues, doubters and my opponents, that we must face the future together. For without togetherness I very much doubt we could have achieved what we have and more importantly, what we might yet set out to do.

One of the great successes of Jewish-Christian dialogue is the recognition that we have learnt to make space for one another. Jewish-Christian dialogue is opposed to a self-assurance which affects the ability to take seriously alternative opinions and makes the search for mutual understanding more difficult. Genuine dialogue requires taking the 'Other' as seriously as one demands to be taken oneself, as the Vatican Guidelines to *Nostra Aetate* outlined; or as Bishop Krister Stendahl taught, “don't compare your best to their worst”. When one side is wholly depicted as responsible for a conflict, the ears of the 'Other' close. Too often, advocating commitment for the wellbeing of one can equate to a blanket condemnation of the 'Other'.

Nowhere is this more evident than in discussions today about Israel and Palestine – awwhether they take place in synagogues, churches and mosques, on college campuses or during marches. Speakers tend to be advocates of one side or another, pursuing a strictly partisan agenda. The atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel on 7th October and the extreme severity of the Israeli military response in Gaza have brought huge pressures on our communities today, with a 12-fold increase in antisemitism and 4-fold increase in Islamophobia in the UK alone.

In response to the present grim situation, I have been facilitating quiet meetings between Muslims and Jews, sometimes hosted by (or including), Christians. They have provided an opportunity for participants to share with one another how events in Israel and Gaza are affecting them and their communities. I wanted to tackle the prevalence of mutual incomprehension, and sometimes antipathy, as well as a reluctance to engage in different narratives. There is also a deep reluctance to acknowledge the existence of prejudice against the 'Other' within each community - a strand of antisemitism among some Muslims and of Islamophobia among some Jews.

It was not easy persuading people to meet, but the convening power of the Woolf Institute, and a recognition of my own work across faith boundaries, helped. At these meetings, participants were quick to realise that both communities were suffering. Listening to a Muslim women saying she was fearful walking the streets of London wearing a hijab brought her Jewish neighbour to tears; a Muslim sitting next to a Jew was shocked to hear how his Jewish neighbour had taken down his mezuzah from the front door for fear of being targeted. “There is no calculator of pain” one rabbi said, bringing nods from both imams and rabbis in the room.

It is striking how many emotions Jews and Muslims share: worry, fear and anger, and especially concern about the negative impact of social media. The subject of personal security is commonly raised – “Since October 7th, I have only travelled on the London Underground if my *kippa* (skullcap) is covered by a hat”, said one man. The Muslims either side of him sighed in sympathy, familiar with being targeted because of being dressed differently. By the end of the discussion, both groups expressed a desire to keep the channels of dialogue open and to remain in touch with one another.

Relationships and working together are at the heart of the matter.

This reminds me of the story of a London yeshiva which decided to field a crew of rowers in a regatta. Unfortunately, they lost race after race. They practiced for hours every day, but never managed to come in any better than last. The Principal finally decided to send one of them to spy on the Cambridge University team. So he travelled to Cambridge and hid in the bulrushes off the River Cam, from where he carefully watched the Cambridge team as they practiced. He returned to the yeshiva and said, "I have figured out their secret. They have eight people rowing and only one shouting."

Sometimes in Cambridge, my philosophical and scientific minded colleagues and friends tease me, saying **they** seek to answer the Big Questions: what is knowledge? What is truth? What is really there? They tell me that a statement and its opposite cannot both be true. Either there is or is not a table in this room. Either Napoleon was or was not forced to retreat from Moscow. Either the universe did or did not have a beginning in time.

This works well for facts and descriptions. It does not work at all well for what Viktor Frankl called “humanity’s search for meaning.” Meaning is not to be found in scientific facts, pure reason or physical description. Even Richard Dawkins noted in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), that scientific facts entail nothing about how we should or should not act ‘We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators’, he wrote.

Meaning is found not in impersonal systems but in personal stories; not in nature but in narrative – the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, where we came from, what is our place in the universe, and what, therefore, we are called on to do. That is why the Bible, the supreme example of our search for meaning, is written in the form of narrative. Unlike philosophy, narrative celebrates the concrete, not the abstract; the particular, not the universal; the open future made by human choice, not the closed, predictable future of scientific law and historical inevitability.

Dialogue does not operate on the either/or of truth and falsity. It allows for multiple points of view. It is open – essentially, not accidentally – to more than one interpretation, more than one level of interpretation. Nor does the validity of one story exclude another. Stories do more than reflect facts about the world, they provide interpretations.

What is true of texts is true of relationships. Relationships are multi-faceted in a way physical facts are not. I either am or am not (slightly) grey-haired, short-sighted, and bespectacled. But I am, simultaneously, a child of my parents, the father of my children, the husband of my wife. I have friends, colleagues, neighbours and co-religionists. I am a citizen of England, the United Kingdom and Europe as well as belonging to humanity as a whole. Each of these relationships involves reciprocal obligations. These obligations can conflict. Should I accept a speaking invitation or spend the evening with my family? I am torn between my responsibilities as a leader in interfaith dialogue and my duties as a father and husband. But there is no principled incompatibility between these loyalties. The truth of one does not entail the falsity of others.

Objective facts about a person are one thing; the relationships that make each of us who we are, are another. In dialogue, one does not exclude the other. To the contrary, both are required to build a composite picture. Engaging in dialogue is part of what makes us human, hence different, unique, unsubstutable. This is what led Jews and later, Muslims, to say that “a single life is like a universe.”

Hence the profound difference between thinking if my faith is true and conflicts with yours, then yours is false. If I and my fellow believers have a relationship with God, that does not entail you do not. I have my stories, rituals, memories, prayers, celebrations, laws and customs; you have yours. That is what makes me, me and you, you. It is what differentiates cultures, heritages, civilizations. The truth of one does not entail the falsity of the other. Indeed the very words “true” and “false” seem out of place here, as if we were using words from one domain to describe phenomena belonging to another. Dialogical language speaks not of brute facts but of systems of meaning, modes of belonging, ways in which groups relate themselves to the universe, its Author, and to one another.

The scientific question is: What can I know about the world? The dialogical question is: How shall I act and expect others to act if we are to achieve together what none of us can do alone?

‘We are standing at a crossroads’, someone wrote to me recently. “What kind of society do we want? Will we be tribal and separate from one another, or an integrated, inclusive, welcoming society?...The crucial questions facing religion today are not points of detail but matters of fundamental attitude – in particular, how do we get on peaceably together and how do we live with difference?’

Living peaceably together and living with difference at a time of increasing intolerance are holy tasks that require practical action.

A few years ago, in 2016, the Woolf Institute published a study called *Trust in Crisis*, which showed how dialogue can be strengthened through local practice, particularly during times of stress. At a time of crisis in Europe (2011-15 was a time of austerity due to the financial crash and high levels of migration from war torn countries such as Syria) researchers found examples of fruitful interfaith dialogue and trust among local faith communities working side-by-side, supplying food banks or supporting refugee resettlement.

Grassroots initiatives to address needs created by crisis led to reinvigorated practices of citizenship and produced solidarity. We found that citizens place more trust in the ability of local initiatives than in the state promises of equality and provision. Local initiatives respond to crisis in ways the centralised state cannot, often doing so across religious, national and ethnic lines.

Research showed that local groups are often more in tune with realities on the ground, delivering services that have been reduced or eliminated during times of austerity. Coordination and communication between faith communities, civil society actors and local authorities benefit the larger community, while also providing a tangible form of support to minority groups. The Berlin city government, for example, created a full-time position responsible for the Dialogue of Religions, coordinating activities among local faith groups. The Mayors of London and Manchester have a history of consulting with faith communities. Such initiatives allow better communication and harness communal power to tackle intolerance and violence.

‘Crisis’ is a word once again being used to describe the contemporary social and economic challenges, including concern about the influx of refugees, which is stoking long-standing debates around migration, minority communities and integration. General “neighbourliness” has the power to forge meaningful bonds in communities across lines of difference.

This is what researchers from the UK Commission on the Integration of Refugees were told last year by a refugee who was living in a high-rise tower and didn’t know any of her neighbours. How did she build connections, she was asked and this is what she said:

“It began by leaving food outside our door. During Ramadan I shared some food and sweets outside my door and then two of my neighbours began to leave food out their door as well. One was Muslim and one was not. And then we all started talking and became friends. It was 6 years ago and we’re still in touch and they’re always telling me to come back and visit”.

This is one example, out of many, how dialogue can practically help overcome those who generate noise but not hope.

If this is difficult, which it is, it can be said another way. My wife, Trisha, and I have three children. Indeed, the reason we are leaving this conference early is because our son, Asher, is getting married later this week. We love them equally and unconditionally. They are very different from one another. They have different strengths, skills, interests, temperaments and emotional needs. If we favoured one at the cost of the others, we would have failed as parents. Still more would we have failed if, having loved our firstborn, we then withdrew that affection on the birth of our subsequent children, transferring it each time to the youngest. Such behaviour would have damaged them all deeply, creating rivalries, insecurities and a sense of rejection.

If that is true of human parents, how much more is it true of God. Can I really believe that God, having set his love on, and made a covenant with, the children of Israel, then rejected them when they continued to honour that covenant, choosing not to follow the new faith, Christianity? Can I believe that the God of love, in loving Christians, thereby abandoned Jews? Can I make sense of the idea that, six centuries after the birth of Christianity and twenty-six after the journey of Abraham, God revealed that Jews and Christians had been mistaken all along and that their religious destiny was

other than they had believed it to be? I can perfectly well understand that first Ptolemy, then Copernicus, then Newton – perhaps even Einstein - were shown to be wrong in their scientific beliefs and that if religion is like science, it is open to such refutations. But to think of religion on the model of science is to think that God is a concept. The Bible (and Qur'an) remind us that God is a parent.

My message to you this afternoon is to take a risk at this unsettled time and engage in dialogue; to begin a journey to a distant destination knowing that there will be hazards along the way; knowing that our strength is not a reliance on certainty, but living with uncertainty. What is genuine dialogue if not itself a profound expression of faith and the meaningfulness of human life? To ask is to believe that somewhere there is an answer. Far from Judaism, Christianity (and also Islam) excluding dialogue, dialogue testifies to our faith – that the world is not random, the universe not impervious to our understanding, life is not blind chance. When faith suppresses dialogue, it dies; when it accepts superficial answers, it begins to wither. Jewish-Christian dialogue is not opposed to uncertainty. What it is opposed to is the shallow certainty that we understand all there is.

Our faith, as Jews, Christians and Muslims is not a sense of invulnerability. It is the knowledge that we are utterly vulnerable, but that it is precisely in our vulnerability that we reach out, and learn to dialogue with one another, to understand our worries and doubts. We learn to share, and in sharing, discover how to be holy in an unholy world.

Thank you again for your kindness in awarding me the Seelisberg Prize and to the Austrians present here this evening, *Ich kehre als Engländer zurück, bleibe aber in gewisser Weise Oesterreicher* – I return as an Englishman but in some ways I remain Austrian.