



New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies

The Representative Organisation of NSW Jewry

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“Teaching faith not fundamentalism”

There are too many in Australia who manage to argue against discrimination based on race or ethnicity, whilst criticising certain cultures and religions. In recent times, Islam has been a target of such criticism. At other times it has been other faiths.

From a Jewish perspective the approach seems to misunderstand the role of faiths and cultures in weaving the beautiful quilt that is Australia’s multicultural society.

In a piece entitled: “*Is Islam the problem*” Andrew West argued in December 2004 that cultural and religious differences cause friction in society. West continued: “*But culture and religion are behavioural. They involve values. People can be born into a particular culture or religion but sooner or later they reach an age of reason where they can embrace or reject their precepts. And if people feel the embrace of culture that is antithetical to the prevailing social mores - in our case, I would hope, liberal enlightenment values – then we are entitled to judge, object, censure and even discriminate*”.

This, on one level is an essentially neo-Kantian approach to multicultural liberalism. West seeks to challenge those faith-based values that reject multicultural liberalism. He can be interpreted as saying that the expression of one person’s one culture is permissible only if it does not inhibit the expression of another person’s culture. In a civil, respectful society that much ought to be taken for granted.

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On another level, West can be interpreted as wanting to do more than restrict some extreme expressions of a particular faith or culture. He wants to reject certain cultures or faiths *holus bolus*. He appears to assume that children educated in a particular faith will reject it when reason dawns upon them. In doing so, West misunderstands the very essence of faith-based education.

Yet we must accept that political leaders and leading and indeed thoughtful journalists are openly asking what are the proper limits for expression of faith in our society.

Teachers of faith are often best equipped to articulate a commitment to human dignity. The challenge is to take that dignity and extend it to others who are of a different faith or culture. None of that requires any compromise of our essential articles of faith.

As I see it we all face an important choice. It is choice we face in how we conduct ourselves and it is a choice we face in how we teach our children to conduct themselves. How we tell our story can either strengthen Australia as a welcoming, cohesive liberal, multicultural society, or we can weaken the fabric of our society by promulgating views that fail to respect the goodness of those of a different faith.

Should certain religions and cultures not be permitted to flourish in Australia because they are shown to promote behaviours that harm or even undermine the fabric of our society? Or, as I contend, can we instead educate our sons and daughters to be both proud, upright proponents of their faith and also respectful – not merely tolerant – members of a liberal multicultural society?

Does a fair society need to impose inhibitions upon Jews, Christians or Muslims telling their stories to their children so that they might in turn tell them to their children and on to succeeding generations? Should our society inhibit religious choice?

When I sit and study with Christian friends, I seek to listen actively to how they understand their own texts, and their own parables. Whilst I necessarily view them through Jewish glasses, I know that to listen accurately, I must not impose my own gloss upon a faith that is not my own.

Similarly, many Christians and Jews read the Koran in English translation (or indeed in other translations) but miss the many layers of interpretations – Hadiths – contributed by centuries of Islamic learning. Respect

to our Islamic brothers and sisters requires that we question in order to learn and not with the intent to criticise.

Equally, when Muslims and Christians study Jewish texts, it is essential to understand that the texts are not words alone but rather the foundation stones for centuries of learning. I ask my friends not to impose their gloss upon a faith that is not their own.

Finally, in publishing our faith-based teachings we must be conscious not to undermine the dignity of others. There are teachings in what Christians call the New Testament, and certain Hadiths in Islam, that, taken literally, are very offensive to the Jewish community. Yet when suffused with a need to contribute to the development of interfaith respect, can be interpreted and developed without causing such offence.

That said, let me dismember a very common myth in understanding the Jewish people and their faith.

At the core of the Jewish faith is the idea of covenant. The covenant between the Jewish people and God is contractual. Far too often in Western parlance there is reference to the Jews as the “chosen people”. This according to Rabbis both reform and orthodox is in fact a mistranslation. We were in fact the “choosing people”. We entered voluntarily into a covenant with God to continue the act of creation; to make this world every day a better place than it was before.

It was of course Moses who was the messenger of the covenant.

Moses became the leader of the Jewish people not because he had a passion for Jewish survival. He had that in spades. Moses became the leader of the Jewish people because he understood that the Jew must be committed to justice and dignity for every human being.

We, as Jews, are commanded to keep choosing, between what we do and what we do not do, what we eat or do not eat, how we pray or indeed sometimes do not pray. Each act must be an active choice, targeted to making this world, the world of here and now, a better place for all of us. To abstain from active choice is to abstain from the act of creation.

In our schools every child learns how to make choices that contribute positively to the ongoing act of creation started by God and continued by human-kind.

Making choices is an act of freedom, something the Jewish people prize most highly. But with freedom comes responsibility. And responsibility is both individual and collective; necessarily based on responsibilities covenanted with God.

The Jewish God is not however an exclusive God. The covenant between the Jewish people and God is not designed as the only path to salvation or indeed the only path to acts of goodness. As a choosing people we invite others to make good choices too.

Judaism is unique among monotheisms because what we say is: “chassidi umot olam yaysh lahem chelek el’olam haba” which means: “you don’t have to be Jewish to get to heaven”.

We strongly believe that God is bigger than any one religion. In pursuing this article of faith, we act in a manner that is utterly consistent with liberal multi-culturalism. A liberal multi-culturalism is one in which each faith respects the other, and does not consider itself to have an exclusive path to goodness or salvation.

Exclusivism is an essentially illiberal concept. Exclusiveness is a claim that a particular faith or culture is the only path by which man can succeed before God. It incorporates a relative denial of the rightness or equivalent goodness of the other. Exclusivism stresses the inequality of man. A liberal multi-cultural society however, and here Andrew West would agree, requires a belief in the equality of man.

The Jews, having been welcomed in to Egypt in Joseph’s time, were cruelly abused in later years and enslaved. No one stood up for them, and their disadvantages multiplied. Egypt became a sick society, and as we all know, eventually God redeemed the Jews from Egypt. God teaches the Jews not only to stand up for themselves, but also to oppose wrongful discrimination and vilification. It is not easy, nor is it an automatic human response. One who has been abused must draw upon significant inner strength to stand up and be counted for the aid of another. Active choice is needed. So it is for a collective identity, a people. The Jewish people covenant with God to stand up and be counted not only for themselves, but for the strangers in their midst.

According to Rabbinic sources harsh or derogatory speech touches on self-image and self-respect in a way that other wrongs do not. Hate speech is all about power and not at all about truth. Hate should not be visited upon the stranger, nor should the stranger visit hate upon his or her host.

A stranger, in particular, is sensitive to his or her status within society. He or she is an outsider. Strangers do not share with the native born a memory, a past, a sense of belonging. They are conscious of their vulnerability. Therefore we must be especially careful not to wound them by reminding them that they are not "one of us."

As [Rabbi Marla Feldman](#), Director of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism wrote last year: *"Though he demurs when called, doubting that anyone would listen to him, at the end of the day Moses summons his courage and chokes down his fear in order to Speak Truth to Power. Over and over Moses stands before Pharaoh, facing the greatest power on earth, to demand nothing less than freedom for his people."*

With that freedom comes reciprocal obligation. And from a Jewish perspective there is no such thing as freedom of hate speech. Today, hate speech has been not only socially acceptable, but the social norm in some parts of the Arab Muslim world. In a global village hate speech travels instantly and infects even societies that disavow such hatreds. Muslims committed to living in peace with their Jewish neighbours need to take responsibility and stop such hate speech. And, yes, we recognise that the obligation is reciprocal.

Action and speech which seeks to undermine society must result first in counselling its purveyor to stop. If that does not correct the wrong behaviour, the strangers may be cast out. This is the warning that must be given to extremists of all hues. And while there are fundamentalists of all faiths, in Australia, the public eye has specifically focussed on Islamic fundamentalism because it is seen - wrongly in a majority but not all cases - as failing to speak up against violence and racial and religious hatred.

Thus, we as Jewish community enter the current debate about the nature of our liberal multicultural society, and say that behaviours which work to undermine our social fabric may properly be counselled against and indeed must be stopped. Exclusivism should be firmly discouraged. But we as Jews do not confuse

dignified, respectful differences of belief as challenging the fabric of our society. Those migrants, strangers, who peacefully espouse a different faith we must make welcome.

Where Andrew West would reject certain cultures or faiths because they appear to him to be antithetical to the prevailing social mores, an important question remains begging. He and other critics must first define what those social mores are. If they reject anything that is not Anglo-Celtic in origin, then what is proposed is exclusivist and illiberal. Human dignity and respect will not be the beneficiaries of the policy they prescribe. If what is to be preserved is an inclusive society, which respects the dignity of difference and requires all who participate in it to do likewise, then we, as a Jewish community, are in full support.

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