

## What are we carrying into the neighbourhood?<sup>1</sup>

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Thank you to Bishop Michael Ingham, Dean Elliot, and all of you in this extraordinary Diocese of New Westminster, for the privilege of being here today. I stand here today, deeply grateful for the collegiality and the friendship of many members of this diocese, filled with profound admiration for the clarity of vision, the spirit of hospitality, and the deep faith that characterizes its leadership. I am here on my Sabbath day, which began at sunset yesterday, a holy period that ends at sunset tonight. In addition to his gracious invitation to learn with you today, the Bishop offered to speak last night instead of this morning, so that I might be able to join you today after having renewed my spirit at the end of a typically heavy work week, by spending a quiet and restful Sabbath eve at home with my spouse.

This is one of three exceptional Sabbath day ventures out into the neighbourhood that I have undertaken in the past year. The second was to accept an invitation from the Muslim community or *umma* to join hundreds of members of the *umma* as a guest at their splendid, community-wide celebration of the birthday of Prophet Muhammad. The third was to seek the advice and consent of a gathering of Aboriginal elders at VST for an Iona Pacific Centre healing initiative about which you will hear in the coming year. In each of these three exceptional instances, I had the pleasure and the privilege of visiting the neighbours – a venerable Sabbath tradition in itself. Admittedly, this is not the usual venue for a Sabbath visit by a Jew, let alone a rabbi. When I accepted VST's invitation to join its faculty and direct the new Iona Pacific Centre last spring, a false rumour circulated in my former Department at UBC that I was becoming an Anglican. I thought that I had finally put that rumour to rest. What will they think now?! My visits in the neighbourhood to churches and mosques (and to synagogues other than the one to which I belong, I might add) do not confuse me about my identity in the least. Moving out and about in the religious neighbourhood – and yes, also in the secular neighbourhood – teaches me, and yes, it also changes me, even as I remain very much a mainstream Jew. As my late colleague and friend, Rabbi Michael Signer, who taught at the University of Notre Dame, and who was one of a handful of American rabbis leading dialogue with the Vatican for decades, wrote, “Serious interreligious dialogue is not assimilation.” He taught that when Jews and Christians meet each other, we “should face each other with the idea that ... each community has found its unique way to live out the [biblical] message [...] We need to share these experiences and teachings with one another [...] We should enjoy the fact that we are different from one another.”<sup>3</sup>

We can only appreciate the beauty in our differences, the lessons about the other and about ourselves that we can only learn when we encounter the other, when we step out into the

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<sup>1</sup> This address was delivered on May 15, 2010 as the “Synod Partner” address to the 109<sup>th</sup> Session of the Synod of the Diocese of New Westminster of the Anglican Church of Canada held at Christ Church Cathedral in Vancouver, British Columbia. The theme of the Synod was “Moving into the Neighbourhood.”

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Signer, “What of the Future? A Jewish Response.” In Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel, and Michael A. Signer, eds. *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (Boulder, 2000), 372-3.

neighbourhood to meet the other. This is also when we discover how much we share in common, and we need each other more than we know in order to heal this broken world. The late Tikva Frymer-Kensky wrote that “Sometimes dialogue with a close sister can shed a transformative light on our own tradition.”<sup>4</sup> This means that we have to leave our comfort zones. Inter-religious encounter ushers us into a liminal space, and liminal space can be both illuminating and transformative. Remaining in our comfort zones we talk only to ourselves, which can be interesting, but not as much as we might think. And remaining in our cocoons reinforces the otherness of the other and of ourselves. “Radical alterity keeps us trapped in our interiority, whether that interiority is by choice or against our choice” as my partner, Dr. Frederick Fajardo, has observed, pointing out that “inter-subjectivity, as Merleau-Ponty has noted, is how we discover ourselves *through the other*.”

I sometimes reflect on a conversation that I had with my sister not long after our mother’s unexpected death 14 years ago. I was sharing a memory of a powerful lesson my mother had taught me many times about a particular value, and my sister stopped me, “When did she teach you that? Why didn’t she teach me that?” As the years have passed, I have come to realize that, although we grew up in the same family, only two years apart, nevertheless, in a mysterious way we each experienced our one mother in two radically different ways. And this has helped me to understand better my mother, my sister, and myself. It is not that different with your people and mine. Rabbinic tradition teaches that the one Torah was heard at Sinai in 600,000 different ways by the 600,000 witnesses. On the other hand, another rabbinic tradition teaches that the divine voice that revealed the entire Torah uttered a single compressed sound. Both an uncontrollable multiplicity and an incomprehensible unity, no human mind can fully grasp or contain the wisdom of the divine. It is continually unfolding.

A rabbinic midrash teaches that the divine writing of Torah was not dried black ink on a stiff white backdrop, but rather, it was “black fire on white fire.”<sup>5</sup> The midrash tantalizingly further suggests that concealed against the white backdrop is another set of letters, white letters formed of white fire. Rabbinic tradition understood the black fire and the white fire as a text alive with new readings apprehended differently in different ages. And perhaps today we can think of our shared first testament in this sense as well. For each community, the black fire and white fire is animated and it animates. For your community these two fundamental dimensions of the text are the two testaments, as well as teachings of subsequent generations of Christians to this very day. For my community these two fundamental dimensions of the text are the Hebrew Scriptures and the Rabbinic Oral Tradition: Midrash and Talmud and Kabbalah and so on down to this very day. Similarly, perhaps we might see these two dimensions in Islam as the Qur’an that Muslims understand to have been revealed through Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad, and subsequent Islamic discernment. In every age faithful readers will experience these texts in new ways, as texts are always alive with new possibilities.

I dwell on the issue of our textualities, because we peoples of the book have a lot of work to do with what we read, and with how we read. I am not only referring to those of our own co-religionists whose reading practices and conclusions alarm or repel us. As we move into the

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<sup>4</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “What of the Future? A Jewish Response.” In Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel, and Michael A. Signer, eds. *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (Boulder, 2000), 371.

<sup>5</sup> *Midrash Tanhuma*, Genesis 1.

neighbourhood, we will find that a great many people believe that our scriptures and, therefore, our religious traditions as a whole, are intellectually moribund, spiritually empty, and politically toxic. People who wander into our services or pick up a Bible in the bookstore will not necessarily recognize that we have moved well beyond the fierce internal and external polemics at the surfaces of our Scriptures. They likely will not be aware, for example, that “texts of terror,”<sup>6</sup> such as the story of Jephthah’s daughter in Judges 11, was utterly and radically reread by the classical rabbis as a tragedy about invalid vows made by ignorant fathers. They gave the daughter an eloquent voice with which to fight for her life, as she vainly tried to teach her father that their God prohibited human sacrifices. The rabbis taught that this was a story about a man born of a prostituted mother and cast out as a boy by his own family, whose name in Hebrew *yiftah* suggests a terrible opening, here not only a mouth or a doorway but a trans-generational tear in the fabric of a family that in the end claimed the life of an only child. In other words, while I abhor the ending, this terrifying tale is not necessarily *only* a “text of terror” in a world in which fathers continue to murder their daughters. It can also be a call to intervene. I use the example of this particularly terrifying text, because many young people in the neighbourhood believe that religions breed hatred, rooted in our scriptures, and we have to become better acquainted with recent scholarship in biblical narrative and, if we are going to be taken seriously as teachers of ethical religious traditions from the downtown to the college campus.

And in our family of the monotheistic traditions, too, there is a trans-generational tear, a wound whose scab we continue to pick when we objectify the other. And we all do this. Moreover, it is a wound that I believe can be healed somewhat if we can visit each other in the neighbourhood with open minds, as well as walk together around the neighbourhood. As I thought about venturing out of my delicious Sabbath reveries – the Sabbath phenomenon that Rabbi Heschel famously called a “cathedral in time”<sup>7</sup> – to visit this Cathedral today, I reflected on Boren and Roxburgh’s important notion of reimagining mission as venturing out of the box and into the neighbourhood. Naturally, I wondered what I would bring along for such a journey and what I should leave at home. My grandfather taught me to pack my suitcase before a trip and then to take out half of what I had packed. What to leave behind is always the hardest part. What we must leave behind when we move out into the neighbourhood will differ for each of us, but all of us need to find ways to break free of antithetical binary thinking about others that associates “the problem” in ourselves with the ideology or ideologies of an Other. This can be a challenge for all of us, including my own community and myself, particularly as vestiges of this antithetical binary thinking are all over our lexicons and our liturgies. We all carry ghostly baggage when we venture forth into the neighbourhood, whether we know it or not. Even Boren and Roxburgh do so, with all due respect. Now, I wish to emphasize that I found what I read of their work on the theme of this synod to be very exciting. Even as I applaud their approach, however, I need to address something embedded in their narrative in *Introducing the Missional Church*, which gives me pause. It is not central to their argument. I believe that it is entirely inadvertent. It reflects a longstanding view of Christian origins, which is no longer widely held among academic researchers. But it is there nonetheless, and I need to talk about it.

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<sup>6</sup> The formulation “texts of terror” is Phyllis Trible’s. See *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (1984).

<sup>7</sup> See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (1951, 2005).

Simply put, it seems to me that Boren and Roxburgh compare the box constraining the spirit of the church today to what they describe as a Temple-centric box that constrained the imagination of the Jerusalem Church. And they equate that Temple-centric box with “Judaism.” Thus, the box, out of which the spirit moving the early Church needed to break free, and the analogous box, out of which they suggest the spirit is calling the present-day church to break free, is in their narrative a vestige of “Judaism.” I respectfully suggest that this set of analogies – to be sure, inadvertently! – wanders close to an old ghost of early and medieval, internal and external, religious polemics.<sup>8</sup> Like the early Church, albeit with important differences, the rabbis and many, many other kinds of Jews broke free, whether they wanted to do so or not, of the constraints of a Temple-centric religious system. The Romans crushed overt resistance, and the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. in the aftermath of what historians refer to as the “First Revolt” was a dramatic example of the futility of such military resistance. In the aftermath, a scholarly lay leadership we now call “the rabbis” promoted their own replacement theology: they presented themselves as the rightful post-Temple leadership. Their movement began in villages and towns, spreading slowly in the generations after the Temple was destroyed. But for the period before 70 C.E., there is abundant evidence of criticism towards, and alienation from, the Roman-approved, Temple-based priestly establishment all over the ideological and cultural landscape of the first century, and both movements – what in time became Christianity and what in time became Rabbinic Judaism – drew on biblical and other sources.

The New Testament is replete with antithetical assumptions and formulations about those other Jews – the non-Jesus following Jews (a very diverse lot) and the differently Jesus-following Jews (likewise a very diverse lot), perhaps the two most salient *internal* sets of Others. Likewise, rabbinic literature contains antithetical assumptions and formulations about *its* internal and external Others. Historians of Judaism and Christianity increasingly believe that tagging one’s internal rivals with the label of the external other – in other words, on the one hand, Christians calling their internal Christian rivals over the years “Judaizers” or “heretics,” and at an early stage, I suggest, “Pharisees,” “scribes,” and “lawyers” – and on the other hand, Jews calling *their* internal Jewish rivals over the years “sectarians,” “assimilationists,” and so on, played an enormously important role in framing how each religion eventually came to understand both itself *and* the other. The rivalry between these two successors to biblical culture was framed in antithetical, binary terms: the Other is the (negative) opposite of what we are, and we are the (positive) opposite of what they are. This is a vastly under-appreciated factor in the messy process whereby differences in approach *within* a variegated faith community get entangled with differences in identities *between* one faith community and another.<sup>9</sup>

Medieval art historian Jerilynn Dodd notes that as Christian armies in what is today Spain swept south into the Muslim domains, churches whose architecture looked Islamic to them were rebuilt to look like northern peninsular churches, rather than like the architecturally (and culturally) hybridized churches that the northern invaders – who promoted a myth of

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<sup>8</sup> The image of (Christian) Spirit trapped in a (Jewish) box is close to the spirit/letter binary integral to the venerable “teaching of contempt.”

<sup>9</sup> On this process of the mutual production of orthodoxies and heresies, see Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (1999), and *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (2006). For a discussion of how this process continues to play itself out in recent times, see Robert A. Daum, “Crossing Cruci-fictional Boundaries: Transgressive Tropes in Chaim Potok’s *My Names is Asher Lev*,” in Paul C. Burns, ed., *Jesus in Twentieth Century Literature, Art, and Movies* (2007), 155-174.

“reconquest” – discovered to their dismay. Likewise, when Berber armies of the Maghreb swept across the Gibraltar Strait, initially to buttress the Andalusian Islamic kingdoms’ defenses against the northern (Christian) armies, these self-styled Islamic “purists” rebuilt the hybridized Andalusian mosques that they found, stripping them of what they judged to be un-Islamic features, rebuilding them in the style of what they considered to be purely Islamic mosques, like the ones they knew back home in the Maghreb.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, legislation was passed in pre-modern Spain prohibiting Jewish men from shaving their beards – thereby conspiring with facial hair neo-traditionalists in the Jewish community. The problem for both of these groups was the hybridity and fluidity of Iberian Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Jewish men had to be bearded in order to look like “authentic” Jews. This constructed, recognizable difference was meant to function in the same way that churches and mosques had to look radically different from each other.<sup>11</sup> At the borders of religious identity, liminal space can be disconcerting. In the liminal space of inter-religious and inter-cultural encounter, we can nurture the best in each other and discover the best in ourselves. Or not.

Roxburgh is not wrong to suggest that the Jerusalem Church was “shaped by the assumptions of Judaism.” But I would prefer him to say that the Jerusalem Church was shaped by *some* notions held by *some* Jews of what a non-monolithic, highly diverse Judaism was. It may not have been entirely coherent with the Judaism(s) of the Galilee or the Golan or Alexandria or Mesopotamia or of Jewish communities in cities dotting the Mediterranean coast who apparently sat out of the First Revolt, rising (catastrophically, as it turned out) only under Trajan 45 years after the destruction of the Temple. And it was not altogether the Judaism of the early rabbinic movement. Both Rabbinic Judaism *and* Christianity as we know them are post-Temple phenomena. *Both* traditions took shape slowly in late antiquity, growing out of antecedent religious cultures and forming interactively in the context of one another.<sup>12</sup> Both early Christianity or Christianities and varieties of early Rabbinic Judaism evolved alongside “Judaeo-Christian” alternatives, which they eventually eclipsed only over the course of several centuries in the context of multiple factors within and beyond the geography and culture of Second Temple-era Jerusalem and its environs. Both religions continued to develop in the middle ages and subsequently. Early and continuing intra-cultural polemics became inter-religious polemics.<sup>13</sup>

Breaking out of boxes is a great thing, but let’s please not make the box out of which the spirit of the church was seeking to break free in the first century, or the box out of which the spirit of the church is seeking to break free today, a Jewish thing. I know that this is not even remotely what the leaders of this diocese have in mind, and they have said nothing to suggest otherwise! And I think that Roxburgh’s approach sounds great. But Roxburgh’s association of

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<sup>10</sup> Jerrilyn D. Dodds, “Spaces.” In María Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin, Michael Sells, eds., *The Literature of Al-Andalus* (2000), 83-95.

<sup>11</sup> In this process in the middle ages and early modernity, see David Nirenberg, “Spanish ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity’ in an Age of Mass Conversion,” and Ram Ben-Shalom, “The Social Context of Apostasy among Fifteenth-Century Spanish Jewry: Dynamics of a New Religious Borderland,” in Jeremy Cohen and Moshe Rosman, eds., *Rethinking European Jewish History* (2009), 149 – 198.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Boyarin even goes as far as to say that the concept of “religion” as we now understand it was only conceived in late antiquity. Thus, to say that the religion of Christianity emerged out of the religion of Judaism may be conceptually anachronistic in several ways.

<sup>13</sup> This process worked (and continues to work) in the other direction as well.

the negative metaphor of Temple-centric box with “Judaism” *inadvertently* conjures old ghosts for this Jew. I have taken time to parse and complicate Roxburgh’s narrative because I love much of what he says, and I cherish this diocese’s renewed sense of mission. I respectfully – very respectfully – ask that, when you re-imagine your mission into the neighbourhood, you keep in mind, as all of us must do, that we all travel with ghostly baggage seen and unseen. These are the vestiges of sibling rivalry that can, in spite of our noblest intentions, manifest as a ‘narcissism of small differences.’ I say this because my own community faces similar ghosts in our own tradition. Some Jews will not set foot in Reform synagogues, and in some communities – albeit not here in Vancouver, to my knowledge – their rabbis are called “rabbis” with scare-quotes. Muslims with whom other Muslims disagree are sometimes tagged as un-Islamic. As Christians, some of you may have been stung by being labelled “un-Christian” or “un-Anglican.”

We can learn together how to nurture pluralism within our own traditions and between religious communities. This is difficult work, which I believe we can do better together, as each of our traditions contains texts and teachings that may be helpful to the others in the struggle against extremisms and cynicism. As we journey into the neighbourhood, which we all must do in this century filled, like all previous centuries, with alarm and with promise, we have to bear in mind that we will be meeting people who are not quite what we might have imagined. As we move towards deep inter-subjectivity, we have to prepare to be surprised to discover both the ways in which we are not the same, and the ways in which we are the same. We have to be prepared to learn from each other, and to teach each other. We have to be prepared to learn together to see beyond the edge of a horizon that we cannot presently imagine. We do have to step out of the box, but it is not someone else’s box. It is our own box. And truly thinking outside of our respective boxes is far more difficult than we may realize.

The late poet, and one of my teachers, T. Carmi, who translated Shakespeare for the Israeli stage, wrote a poem entitled “The Gate.” It describes that moment at the end of the High Holy Days, when the giant gates to the Temple were being closed by the priests. The sun was setting and the penitential prayers of the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, were concluding. In the theological imagination the gates of Heaven are thrown wide open for forgiveness during the High Holy Days, when one’s heart stirs with thoughts of turning back towards God and others. Now, at the end of the day, all these gates are closing, although in Jewish tradition there is always an opening through which genuine penitents might return to God’s always open embrace.

“The Gate”<sup>14</sup>

*The day is fading.  
The gate is swinging shut.  
Oh, what a terrible cry!  
Can't you hear it?  
Open it! Open it!  
Someone is trapped in the gate.*

May God help us all to find our way.

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<sup>14</sup> T. Carmi, “The Gate.” In *At the Stone of Losses*, trans. Grace Schulman (1983).