

A RELIGIOUS LEADER AT HIS BEST

The Pope, Hiroshima and the Holocaust

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LAST month, Pope Francis paid a visit to Asia, stopping in Thailand and Japan. While in Japan he focused on the toll of human suffering during the 20th century, especially the destruction wrought by atomic weapons. Japan was the only country upon which these weapons have been used, and more recently the country suffered one of the worst nuclear disasters (brought on by a tsunami) to befall humanity. The Pope issued a strong call questioning the morality of these weapons, demanding that we prioritise human life and the good of the world.

As rabbi of the Jewish Community of Japan, and chair of the Assembly of Rabbis and Cantors of Australia, New Zealand and Asia, I was fortunate to be present, as part of a delegation of faith leaders in Japan, for the joint service of prayer in Hiroshima. Held at the memorial (and indeed close to the sight of the hypocentre) of the atomic blast that destroyed the city and killed over 70,000 people instantly, and another 70,000 within a year, several thousand people, younger and older, joined the Pope to dedicate themselves to peace, and the elimination of weapons of mass destruction.

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The 84-year-old pontiff had a busy schedule, with morning events and a mass in Nagasaki, followed by the service in Hiroshima in the early evening. He appeared tired when he greeted each of the faith leaders, though he had a firm grasp as he shook our hands, and exchanged pleasant words with each of us – I thanked him for coming to Japan with a message of peace, and greeted him on behalf of the Jews of Japan and of the Asia-Pacific region. Yet, he came to life when he moved on to greet the very elderly survivors of the Hiroshima blast. He was visibly touched by their warm welcome, their painful memories and spent minutes with each, embracing them and sharing their tears.



Pope Francis lighting a candle at Hiroshima Memorial Park last month.

Photo: The Yomiuri Shimbun via AP Images

After a minute of prayer, we were addressed by a survivor and by the Pope. The elderly woman called to mind the horrors of the day, and the suffering and destruction that was wrought. She must have been very young in 1945, caught in horrors caused by the supposed responsible adults of her time (both those whose decisions led to war, and those who decided to drop not one but two nuclear bombs). The Pope fully engaged and energetically also focused on the horrors of nuclear war, calling on the nations of the world to eliminate the nuclear arsenals that threaten global human survival. He stressed that these weapons are immoral, in possession, dissemination and use. As he talked, we could all visualise the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, the remains of the building under the hypocentre of the blast, which loomed in the distance.

Today in the early years of the 21st century there are two vanishing groups of survivors, who bear testament to existential dangers that faced humanity not only in the past, but also in the present and future. The survivors of the Holocaust are a global reminder of man's inhumanity to man. The Jewish people and the Roma faced genocide at the hands of the Nazis. Tragically, these were not the first attempted genocides, nor the last.

From the near destruction of indigenous peoples and the Armenian genocide to the recent attempted elimination of the Rohingya, mass murder of an entire ethnic group has continued to be part of the human lexicon of action. "Never again" must mean an end to all forms of genocide.

As the Pope reminded us yet again, the survivors of Hiroshima also bear witness to inhumanity, as entire cities of people young and old were destroyed in seconds by the horrific power of the atomic bomb. Tens of thousands also died soon after, suffering the horrors of radiation poisoning. From then to now the threat of nuclear destruction looms over all of us, not only by the nuclear powers, who calculate the equations of deterrence, but also by rogue nations and groups, who seek these weapons as a wedge in their equations of terror. These weapons are, as the Pope reminded us, indeed immoral, and their use should be unthinkable. "Never again", here too, is a clarion call to ban the use and indeed the very existence of these weapons of mass destruction.

I have often struggled with the appropriate role that a religious leader should play in political discourse, especially while also embracing the ideal of a separation

between church and state. There are delicate balances which need to shape both politicians and religious leaders. Religion and politics can be a dangerous mix, especially when politicians attempt to impose a particular religion upon a diverse polity, which in all likelihood may not all share that particular vision of the world.

There is also a tendency for religions to views their truths as absolute, and therefore to elevate the particular to the universal, thus justifying attempts to impose them on everyone, rather than just on adherents of a particular faith.

The Pope's words and actions in Nagasaki, Hiroshima and Tokyo, however, exemplified the religious leader at his or her best. Taking on the existential issue of human survival, he challenged norms of international relations, and the balance of terror, crying from the wilderness for nuclear disarmament; a message to which I also ascribe. I believe that the Pope knew that his was a voice from the outside, but that it would be complicit not to speak out. It is up to the rest of us to choose, or indeed not to choose, to listen.

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