

Pursuing the Dream – A Jewish-Christian Conversation by Dan Cohn-Sherbok
and Mary Grey. Foreword by Fr John Pawlikowski.
Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005.

Inter-faith dialogue between Jews and Christians at grass roots level is completely non-controversial in the 21st century. Council of Christians and Jews' groups flourish across the country and participants from the respective faith communities are comfortable in each other's company and happy to discuss issues of mutual interest or concern. Based on such groups alone it would be easy to believe that Jews and Christians now co-exist happily together without reservation, their troubled shared history and serious doctrinal divergence no barrier to proper human conversation.

Yet when the debate is between professionals, especially those engaged in a private dialogue (albeit one that has subsequently been published), and when the subjects under discussion between them are as difficult and controversial as they can find it is possible to see that very real bones of contention remain, even between those who share an enormous commonality of basic human feeling.

American born Reform rabbi and adopted Welsh academic Dan Cohn Sherbok and Roman Catholic theologian and academic Mary Grey embarked on an extended theological correspondence in June 2003 and ended it a year later; motivated by their shared awareness of the polarisation and conflict that are a feature of both contemporary world and society, their impetus was to see whether it would be possible to find resources within their faith traditions which would bring them closer together and provide them with the means of achieving much needed reconciliation.

Pursuing the Dream is a record of their correspondence and tracks their debates through a range of 'hot' topics: the book is divided into two parts, the first dealing with God, Jesus, the Bible, Authority and Tradition, and Sin, the second with War and Peace, the Environment, Gender, the Family and Community, Racism, Crime and Punishment and ending with What Have We Learned.

That there are points of agreement goes without saying, but it is truer to say that the dialogue is marked by a degree of divergence and disagreement which even seems to take its authors by surprise. Inevitably, each is informed by their personal and theological background, and while they are commendably honest in sharing the details with each other they are frequently prevented by them from bridging the divide between their respective positions.

In some ways Pursuing the Dream is an inspiring book, because the authors truly engage with each other and demonstrate how disagreement on doctrinal and inter-faith issues need not harm personal relations, but on another it is a salutary reminder of how two like-minded modern people of faith can still find huge barriers erected by their faith traditions, and further how far Jews and Christians still have to travel to reach a point when they can feel that the need for honest dialogue has been fully assuaged.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh