

There are many ways to “apologise” without apologising. Cardinal Pell, when attempting to “clarify” his remarks in which he claimed that the Jewish people were intellectually inferior, seems to have mastered them all.

The first is to blame someone else, as in “I was being regularly interrupted and distracted by the chairman”. Our sympathy is aroused, as we imagine how shocking it must have been, to take part in a flagship TV debate and yet to find oneself interrupted and even distracted! Yet the reference to the Jewish cerebral capabilities was not a one-time throwaway line uttered whilst being thrown off course; it was a reasoned argument, revisited at least five times over the course of two minutes.

The next is the non-withdrawing withdrawal. The Cardinal told us in his clarification that “historically” or “culturally” (inferior) may have been “more appropriate” than “intellectually”. Here was the perfect opportunity for Pell, thirty-six hours after the debate, without that troublesome Chairman, to say “I was wrong, and the word was a mistake”. But he didn’t. His original words were not mistaken, only less “appropriate” than others, and then he added for good measure that the People of the Book were “culturally” inferior as well as intellectually.

Obfuscation is another excellent ploy. When “clarifying”, the Catholic Church’s senior representative in Australia explained that Jews were shepherds “*at the time of Abraham*”. Apart from the fact that Abraham was actually an owner of flocks on an industrial scale rather than a practicing shepherd, and without asking why his world-changing discovery of monotheism should be eclipsed by his supposed pastoralism when assessing his intellectual capabilities, this detail is utterly irrelevant. Pell’s controversial remarks were in answer to a question about “2000 years ago” – the time of Jesus and *not the time of Abraham*. In case one might think that the Cardinal was confused (that distracting chairman again!), he specifically concurred that Jesus was a member of the nation at the time he was describing.

So it may (or may not) be that Jews were shepherds at the time of Abraham. But by the time to which Pell referred when he called them “intellectually inferior”, they had discovered God, received and learnt the Torah, written the Bible, established the Davidic empire, built the Temple (twice) together with countless other magnificent edifices, and successfully fought against the might of the Greeks to re-establish political independence. How did they find the time with all that shepherding?

And finally, the classic trick is to use the word “sorry” but at the same time deflect any personal blame, as in “I am sorry that these points...did not come out as I would have preferred”. You see it wasn’t my fault; it was those pesky points that came out in such a non-preferred way.

So although we read that “Cardinal apologises” in *The Age*, or “Pell apologises” in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, he actually issued a non-apology. And if he’s clever enough to have a doctorate from Oxford, then he knows the difference.

I do not begrudge Pell his dismissive view of Judaism. He is a Christian, and Christianity is predicated on the failure of Judaism, on the “Old” Testament being superseded by the “New” and

on God's everlasting covenant with His people being cancelled and replaced with belief in Jesus as a saviour.

But what is unacceptable is his inaccurate denial of the achievements of the Jewish people and their contribution to the world. Ethical monotheism; "love your neighbour as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18, long before Mark 12:31); an incorporeal God who speaks through both nature and history, and many more foundations of modern thought are dismissed. As Pell declared; "we don't need to exaggerate (the Jews') contribution in their early days."

It is this falsehood that needs an admission of error, a withdrawal and an apology. Not a "clarification".

The Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ), whilst expressing "serious concern", welcomed Pell's statement that "he did not intend any offence", but missed the point. No-one imagines that he intended to offend (or, that if he did, he would ever admit it) and such a confirmation is therefore too trivial to welcome. ECAJ also hailed his "expression of continuing friendship with the Jewish community and esteem for the Jewish faith". Just how insulting and contemptuous can a Church leader be and yet still have a "continuing friendship", in the eyes of the ECAJ?

The NSW Board of Deputies looks forward to the ECAJ's ongoing dialogue with the Cardinal. If the ECAJ has so little self-respect that it wishes to debase itself by engaging in such dialogue in the absence of an unequivocal apology and retraction then that is its choice. But please, not in my name.