

75 YEARS AFTER SEELISBERG - REFLECTION

BY

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REFLECTIONS ON THE SEELISBERG CONFERENCE AND ITS 10 POINTS

I assumed I knew almost everything about the Seelisberg conference and the 10 points, issued by its Third Commission (“The Task of the Churches”) but after reading and re-reading the ICCJ’s exhaustive summary of the conference, its reports and recommendations, that assumption has collapsed. It has left troubling questions in its wake.

The **Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism** should have taken place in 1933, the year Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany. But it took place in 1947, two years after the Nazi war machine had been defeated and war-shredded Europe awoke to the reality that one half of its pre-war Jewish population — in numbers, one third of the entire Jewish population of the world — had been deliberately and brutally murdered during the war.

The scale of this devastation is hard to imagine. Ancient communities of piety and scholarship were erased overnight. Entire cities consisting of identical barracks were built for the sole purpose of killing human beings — but first dehumanizing them, replacing their names with tattooed numbers, their clothes with striped pajamas, jamming them onto wooden shelves filled with lice and fleas, performing grotesque medical experiments on children, starving them to slow and excruciating death — all for the end of wiping the Jewish people from the face of the earth and utterly destroying any trace of its religion and culture, its contribution to European civilization. Why an “Emergency” conference on Anti-Semitism in **1947?**

The answer, confirmed in a conference report, still shocks: it noted “the evil of antisemitism” and its **“persistence and growth in post-war Europe.”** (*Emphasis mine*) Hatred of Jews did not end with the military victory; it grew. Some survivors who returned to their former communities in Eastern Europe were killed in pogroms; others found a cold welcome. Still others languished in DP camps desperately awaiting a chance to go to North or South America or to join their co-religionists in Palestine — frustrated by British policy reinforced by Arab hostility. That the themes which led to

the near extinction of the Jewish people could continue and spread after the defeat of Nazi Germany was sufficient reason for convening this meeting.

The conference organized itself into several “commissions” or workshops (roughly: sociological, educational, governmental and religious) each examining an aspect of antisemitism and suggesting ways of combatting it. The “religious” workshop required special attention and emphasis. The most critical of the commissions, but also the most sensitive, it acknowledged the two-millennial hostility to Jews and Judaism in Christian teaching, preaching and policies, and its recommendations rubbed against venerable theological and doctrinal positions and interpretations of scripture. What the French historian, Jules Isaac, brilliantly summarized as “the teaching of contempt” came to dominate Christian attitudes, with notable exceptions and despite countervailing tendencies. Seldom racial and never genocidal, it nevertheless provided a nourishing seedbed for the centuries of expulsions and pogroms that culminated in the Shoah.

Seelisberg’s ten points — condensed from Isaac’s 18 points — seem almost timid by today’s standards. They call upon Christians to remember simple facts derived from the New Testament: that Jesus himself, the first disciples, the apostles and the first martyrs were Jews, specifically to “avoid the superstitious notion that the Jewish people is reprobate, accursed reserved for a destiny of suffering.” But these points challenged a developing and ultimately prevailing narrative — also supported by selected scriptural texts and Patristic literature — that moved the responsibility for Jesus’ death from the Romans to the entire Jewish people, who were thereby rejected and cursed by God, condemned to loss of nation and to justified suffering. (Isaac noted as a historian that at the time of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, more than half of the Jewish people were living in the diaspora and had never heard of Jesus, but the fact did not affect the narrative.)

When I came to the American Jewish Committee in late 1959, I was asked to familiarize myself with self-studies of then-contemporary Protestant and Catholic religion textbooks. In these materials I found ample evidence of the teaching of contempt: statements asserting that the Jewish people as a whole rejected their promised Messiah, were guilty of his suffering and death on the cross, had been rejected and cursed by God, and their subsequent sufferings and loss of nationhood were providential punishment for their sins. One such comment, claiming that the Jews had no homeland, no flag, no symbols of nationhood, was written 14 years after the establishment of the modern State of Israel. I described it at the time as “Reality trumped by Theology.” But to this day I wonder if some unbalanced attacks on Israeli actions and policies are fed by a similar theology.

In retrospect, the Seelisberg Conference made a major contribution to the struggle against antisemitism on many levels. But its Address to the Churches, incorporating the 10 points and calling for profound changes in Christian teaching and preaching, had little impact at the time. Perhaps the saddest comment came from a Wikipedia article I consulted. Quoting from a footnoted source, Wikipedia noted that the Address to the Churches was unique in that it was formulated by a mixed group of Jewish and Christian theologians, that it specified a number of Christian doctrines that lent support to anti-Jewish hostility, but that, “despite its sophistication” it “remained little known and produced no immediate impact.” It took the Second Vatican Council and the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* to spread the message world-wide. It took the Jewish-Christian dialogue and the work of the ICCJ and its member organizations to build mutual trust and mutual respect. The work is ongoing, the need is great.

Although *Nostra Aetate* was adopted by the Council by an overwhelming affirmative vote and has, in effect, reversed a negative and hostile portrait of Jews and Judaism, there were deep pockets of resistance to its message. At the time, I predicted it would be implemented least where it was needed the most, and that seems to be the case. On February 12 of this year, Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Saliba declared on Iranian TV that the Jews “killed Jesus Christ and the prophets that were sent to them,” and the Vatican was mistaken in “absolving” them of the crime.

We have come a very long way together, but we have a long way to go. Let us tread the thorny path in friendship and cooperation.

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