



ICCJ Bonn Conference 2017

Reforming, Rereading, Renewing:

Martin Luther and 500 Years of Tradition and Reform in Judaism and Christianity

Reformieren, interpretieren, revidieren:

Martin Luther und 500 Jahre Tradition und Reform in Judentum und Christentum

TUESDAY, JULY 4, 2017 - AT THE "GUSTAV STRESEMANN INSTITUT", BONN

WORKSHOP B5

(BY THE ICCJ'S THEOLOGY COMMITTEE)

Recommitting and Refocusing: Seelisberg, Berlin, and Beyond

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Shorter Abstract

The workshop reviewed theologically the formative texts of the ICCJ, the Ten Points of Seelisberg (1947) and the Twelve Points of Berlin (2009). In particular, attention was paid to contemporary concerns for diversity and inclusiveness. Of the many issues coming under those heads, the workshop focused on feminism/womanism, Global South theologies, and globalisation. Unsurprisingly, issues that were not mentioned in the earlier (Seelisberg) document are referred to in the later (Berlin) document. But it emerged that there is ample scope for more and better reflection, as Jewish-Christian dialogues grows in scope and trust.

A. On Feminism, Womanism and the "Other"¹

A Jewish Israeli perspective.

Many of our interreligious documents and concerns relate to attitudes towards the "other". The Seelisberg statement (1947) was essentially directed at Christians and their attitudes towards the Jewish "other". Seelisberg itself does not mention women or gender; it was a very specific document at a specific point in history, many years before gender became such an important category in our discourse.

One of the stated purposes of the Berlin Document (2009) was not only to update the Seelisberg statement, but also to begin to deal with Jewish attitudes towards the Christian "other". The Berlin document exhorts us (number 10, and third bullet point):

To promote interreligious friendship and cooperation as well as social justice in the global society...

by striving for equal rights for all people, regardless of their religion, gender or sexual orientation.

¹ By Dr Debbie Weissman

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It seems to me that, with regard to these issues, there are two opposing trends in our religious groups. On the one hand, there are the hard-liners: opposing ordination for women, reacting negatively to settings in which women are leaders. Years ago, Cynthia Ozick and Judith Plaskow debated whether “the” question is theological or sociological.² It is, of course, a combination of the two.

On the other hand, among the more liberal groups, that have accepted women’s ordination for a long time, for a while the “new frontier” was sexual orientation—gay and lesbian ministers and rabbis. That, too, is less of an issue today. LGBT became LGBTQ or even LGBTQIA —and some churches or movements have transgendered clergy.

I recently was asked to review Nelly Las’s book, *Jewish Voices in Feminism: Transnational Perspectives* (published in English by the University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, for the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem). The French original came out in 2011, while the English translation appeared in 2015. Las deals with both feminism and womanism, the latter a movement for women who themselves have been oppressed by feminists.

Las writes (p. 159):

French feminism, with its solid footing in secularism, does not have anything similar to the English-speaking countries’ new interpretations of Christian theology nor postmodern Biblical exegesis...The writings of Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, and Luce Irigaray which have theological connotations are read and studied more widely outside France than in France.

She notes that there are Dutch, German and some Scandinavian feminist theologians, but not many from France or Spain.

Perhaps my biggest problem with Las’s book is at the end, when she writes (p. 242), that feminism makes religious women less open to interreligious dialogue, that “‘religious feminism’ is more divisive than unifying for women.” As this has not been my experience at all, for the past 29 years of extensive and intensive dialogue, I would question this conclusion.

On Global South theologies³

A perspective from a Protestant theologian coming from a post-communist European context.

This contribution takes seriously the fact that *Ten Points of Seelisberg* (1947) does not deal with Global South theologies, and therefore will focus more on the Berlin document and indeed on aspects lying “beyond”.

The Berlin document, or *A Time for Recommitment* (2009), deals with this issue explicitly (point 3, and bullet point 4), when it calls on Christians

to develop theological understandings of Judaism that affirm its distinctive integrity...

by ensuring that *emerging theological movements from Asia, Africa and Latin America*, and feminist, liberationist or other approaches integrate an accurate understanding of Judaism and Christian-Jewish relations into their theological formulations [emphasis added].

This is a very valid point as the work of theologians, such as Amy-Jill Levine, clearly shows.⁴ Indeed, so many prejudices, stereotypes and deep-seated assumptions vis-à-vis the religious “other” still need to

² Recorded in Susannah Heschel, *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, (Schocken Books, New York, 1983)

³ By Dr Pavol Bargár

be deconstructed. However, there is still much more to be considered on this issue; hence the emphasis on the “beyond” aspect.

Global South theologies have brought a major shift in theological method. Several points can be at least briefly mentioned here. First, these theologies are inductive rather than deductive, unlike most of “traditional” theologies. Second, whereas traditional theologies opted for philosophy as their main conversation partner, Global South theologies converse primarily with social sciences. Third, they are by and large grassroots initiatives, instead of representing themselves as “the business of the elites.” Fourth, they denounce the universalising tendencies of the older Western theologies, while trying to be consciously sensitive to their respective contexts. Moreover, they pay much attention to the economic, social, political, and cultural particularities of these contexts. Fifth, Global South theologies seek what can be called “engaged theologising,” rather than aspiring for the status of detached/pure/ “objective” science. Sixth, this kind of theologising most often takes place in a community; unlike in many older theologies, the theologian is not perceived as a “lone hero,” working in the solitude of his or her study. Seventh, and finally, Global South theologies usually sprout from the mycelium of non-formal manifestations of education, as the traditional educational settings of a university or a theological seminary are too often not available.

All of the above, I would argue, are important insights also for Jewish-Christian dialogue and cooperation in an increasingly globalised and pluralistic world, where the traditional forms of theologising prove to be irrelevant and/or inadequate.

There are also some specific themes brought up by Global South theologies that can be of significance to Jewish-Christian relations. First is the long historical experience of living as a minority. This reality has its religious, cultural, and ethnic aspects, and is especially characteristic of Asian theologies. Of course, this experience strongly resonates not only with the experience of many Jews, but increasingly also with that of many Global North Christians. Second, there is the theme of traditional culture and wisdom, especially dear to African theologies. However, this theme opens some issues regarding the relationship between religion and culture in general. Third, one needs to mention the theme of economic situations and the problem of poverty. Although typically elaborated by Latin American theologians, it is in fact a topic pursued in many other Global South contexts. It brings up, among other things, the question of publicly/politically engaged faith/theology. Fourth, there is also the theme of ecological concern. It is especially theologies originating in the Pacific that are very sensitive to the issues of the creation/environment.

3. On Globalisation⁵

A perspective from a Catholic theologian living in the Southern hemisphere, in the Pacific-Asian region.

We are an interconnected world. Sport, the internet, international companies, politics, economics—all these realities remind us that what we do and how we act is not confined to a local corner of our world. Globalisation, an interconnectedness that transcends geography, culture and religious determination, is also a theological reality. The ICCJ is one tangible expression of this global interconnectedness, as people of faith seek ways of peace and unity through interfaith dialogue. One Catholic theologian describes

⁴ Amy-Jill Levine, “Lilies of the Field and Wandering Jews: Biblical Scholarship, Women’s Roles, and Social Location.” in I. R. Kitzberger (ed.), *Transformative Encounters. Jesus and Women Reviewed* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999), pp. 329-352; and Amy-Jill Levine, “The Disease of Post-Colonial New Testament Studies and the Hermeneutics of Healing,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, 1 (2004), 91-99.

⁵ By Rev. Dr Michael Trainor

religious globalisation in four “global flows”: liberation, feminism, ecology and human rights.⁶ We see these at work in the ICCJ and the two documents that have shaped the Council, the Seelisberg Document (1947) and the Berlin Document, *A Time for Recommitment* (2009).

There is an “incipient” globalisation theme in the Seelisberg document primarily addressed to Christians. The theme appears in its preamble with the acknowledgement of “racial hatred” and the encouragement for Christians to check their speech about Jews that reflects animosity or antisemitism and to promote love “towards the sorely-tried people of the old covenant”. These themes become more explicit in the document’s four “remembrances” (One God, Jesus’ Jewish heritage, the Jewishness of Jesus’ followers, the fundamental commandment of love) and six “avoidances” (avoid exalting Christianity at the expense of distorting Judaism, naming Jews as Jesus’ enemies, blaming Jews for the death of Jesus, literalising the Gospel of Matthew’s curse of the Jewish people, cursing Jews destined for suffering, forgetting that the first Jesus-followers were Jews).

Overall, the Seelisberg Document addresses all Christians. It is global, intended for the Christian world. It invites a new frame of reference beyond the particular, local and religiously introverted.

A more explicit global awareness and engagement is reflected in the later (2009) *A Time for Recommitment*. One would expect this development, given the social, cultural and historical events that had transpired in the sixty-two intervening years. The Berlin Document expands its address to include the Jewish communities. It is explicitly global as it addresses “both Christian and Jewish communities around the world”. Its global, outward, “other”-looking echo is clear in 10 of its 12 points.

While space prevents a thorough study of these points, suffice it to mention that it appeals to Christians to combat racism and antisemitism (point 1), encourage dialogue (point 2) and affirm Judaism’s distinctiveness (point 4). *A Time for Recommitment* encourages Jews to see the reformation that has happened in Christian understanding regarding Judaism (points 5 and 6), and to work together for a “just and peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict” (point 8). As the Berlin Document addresses both communities it encourages both to enhance interreligious and intercultural education (point 9), promote friendship and cooperation in social justice in the global society (point 10), continue dialogue with political and economic bodies (point 11), and commit to environmental stewardship (point 12). Perhaps it is this last point which will eventually become the most globally pressing issue with which religious and political bodies will have to engage.

In summary, a recognition of human limitation, historical and theological stereotyping of the “other”, and an encouragement to encounter the “other” while recognising our need for openness, even conversion, undergird the Seelisberg and Berlin Documents. A word of caution needs to be sounded as we engage the global perspectives in interreligious discourse and dialogue: we need to be aware of the temptation to make Western, Northern-hemispheric, Euro-American-centric, usually Christian theology normative and universal for the South and other religious traditions. We need to recognise the cultural perspectives of our local context, see these as important and contributing, but not determinative in interfaith dialogue. We must highlight the gifts that our perspectives offer, including their limitations and biases.

The Lutheran theologian J. Paul Rajashaker offers a helpful reminder as we consider the impact of globalisation on interreligious discourse:

⁶ Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity; Theology between the Global and the Local* (Orbis Books, New York, 1997), pp. 15-27.

We have entered into an era where people are opting for multiple belonging, acquiring multiple identities, hybrid identities or “in-between” identities in an ever-increasing manner. The emerging multi-cultural consciousness and inter-religious sensitivity has already begun to impact on theology and theological education.⁷

Conclusion⁸

One can see a trajectory from the Seelisberg (1947) to the Berlin (2009) documents. Most obviously, the later document addresses Jews explicitly as well as Christians, and calls Jews as well as Christians to a journey of self-searching. It also begins to refer to issues which have in the interim become pressing in the fields of politics and social sciences, at both academic and popular (grassroots) levels. The workshop - while of course it could not offer anything like an adequate survey of where we are with all of the concerns involved - sought, by focusing on the three specifics of feminism/womanism, Global South theologies, and globalisation, to note how celebrating diversity and inclusiveness is very much part of the contemporary task of Jewish-Christian rapprochement, and tentatively to point to some ways to advance. Within our respective communities, there are forces which push us in this direction and others which pull us back. This reminds us that interfaith dialogue always requires intrafaith dialogue too. That these issues are being aired can be said to be a measure of growing mutual trust, for which we can be profoundly grateful.

⁷ J. Paul Rajashaker, “Theological Education in an Era of Globalization: Some Critical Issues,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*:(2015) available at https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/1069#_ednref3

⁸ By Rev. Patrick Morrow (Anglican from Britain).