
Vienna Overview

Introduction

The ICCJ Executive Board 2015 winter meeting was hosted by the Coordinating Committee for Christian-Jewish Cooperation (Koordinierungsausschuss für christlich-jüdische Zusammenarbeit). There was also a consultation with participants from several European national member organizations on recent religious tensions in Europe. The following countries were represented in the programs that occurred from 27-29 January: Australia, Austria, Chile, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Slovakia, United Kingdom, and the United States. We welcomed guests from the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the American Jewish Committee (USA), the Protestant Church of the Rhineland (Germany), and the World Council of Churches (Switzerland), and the consultation benefited from valuable input from:

- European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
- Center for Humanistic Education at the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum
- The Muslim Jewish Conference
- Anti-Defamation League
- Jewish Community of Vienna

In addition, the meeting occurred during the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp. ICCJ President Philip Cunningham gave several media interviews and spoke for the ICCJ during the Vienna Holocaust Commemoration Ceremony at the Heldenplatz (see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mox1mVs_3EY).

What Was the Purpose of the Consultation?

The group asked: In the context of majorities and minorities encountering both prejudice and acceptance, are antisemitism and other forms of religiously-based hostility growing in Europe?

What Was Learned?

- During our time in Vienna, the ICCJ met many gifted people from religious, governmental, and educational organizations who are deeply committed to intergroup harmony and human rights. Such dedicated people are causes for genuine hope.
- Whatever the causes, in times of stress religiously-related prejudices surface both within and among religious traditions. Thus, while antisemitism and Islamophobia are distinct they are also intertwined.
- Prejudices are often expressed through stereotyping. Certain traits or behaviors are attributed to entire groups of people based on the actions of a few. Even those committed to interreligious friendship are susceptible to using stereotypes. A related phenomenon is measuring others according to an artificial construct of how they are imagined to be, which may have little basis in reality or in the other's self-understanding.
- Stereotyping can be countered by a self-critical awareness as individuals and groups and by encountering the other according to the other's self-understanding.

- Because of the complex array of relevant factors and the difficulties in obtaining measurable data, the question of whether events in recent years represent an actual increase instead of a more highly visible persistence of antisemitic episodes remains an open one.
- Anecdotal evidence is insufficient. It should be kept in mind that the media tends to highlight conflict and extreme viewpoints and also can be selective about which events it chooses to report and how they are reported. Furthermore, incidents of antipathy are inconsistently reported to authorities.
- However, it is clear that anxiety and feelings of vulnerability are currently widespread across religious lines and among majorities as well as minorities.
- Specific social, historical, demographic, governmental, and cultural factors vary greatly from country to country not just across continents but within Europe itself.
- The themes of historical Christian anti-Judaism have mutated into new varieties in secularized societies.
- Today almost all organized religious bodies and national governments reject prejudice. This is in great contrast to Europe in the first half of the 20th century in which the state itself often provided social sanction for intergroup hostility: ranging from negative speech, to legal discrimination, to tolerating or encouraging violence, to exile or even genocide. However, individuals or parties do invoke prejudices for their own ends.

What Should the ICCJ Family Do?

- There was general agreement that our defining mission to promote understanding and mutual enrichment between Christians and Jews, accompanied by a similar openness to Islam, must not be disrupted or sidetracked by the violence and tensions in the world. Indeed, the promotion of genuine dialogue is needed today more than ever.
- Everyone should work to become more conscious of the many different factors that impact intergroup and interreligious relations, factors that affect all of us.
- A profound religious response to the verbal and physical violence of our times is needed. This should happen both within religious traditions and interreligiously.
 - What elements of our traditions can promote humility, openness, and inclusivism and counteract temptations toward absolutism or fundamentalism?
 - What do our distinctive experiences of God say to today's social circumstances? What can we learn from each other?
- The interreligious context enables the sharing of feelings of vulnerability and fear, which can help to alleviate them. As one participant observed, thanks to the progress of the past decades we now can personally feel the hurts suffered by the religious other because we are no longer strangers but friends. This suggests that nurturing friendships across religious and ethnic lines should be a priority.