

75 YEARS AFTER SEELISBERG - REFLECTION

BY

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SEELISBERG AND THE SINGULAR NATURE OF ANTISEMITISM

As the 21-page report on the proceedings of the 1947 Seelisberg “Emergency Conference” shows, the meeting was not planned to address the role of the churches during the Nazi era, issue a specifically religious or theological statement, or even work toward reconciliation. Its focus was antisemitism.

One of its primary organizers was the Reverend Everett Clinchy, director of the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ) in the United States. Clinchy hoped for a European-wide initiative to eradicate antisemitism. It would involve educators, civic, social, business and political leaders as well as church leaders: a network of Christians, Jews “and all men [sic] of good will in civic and community service” who would rebuild a European civil society devoid of “racial and religious intolerance.” This would entail the development of educational and training materials as well as social and governmental reforms “for removing the causes, and remedying the effects of antisemitism.”

His vision was to replicate what the NCCJ had been doing in the United States. During the 1930s, the NCCJ had maintained a careful balancing act, an attempt at inclusion and common ground that tried to do justice to all concerns. It was a strategic decision intended to build a big tent, but it meant that the NCCJ avoided addressing antisemitism as a singular problem—a tactic that led many American Jewish leaders to be quite critical of the organization. NCCJ statements about the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany, for example, gave equal time to the persecution of Catholic clergy in Spain. During the years of Nazi terror this was true of many international church statements that condemned antisemitism but treated Nazi anti-Jewish measures as part of a larger war on religion. At a time when European Jews were in mortal peril, their plight was viewed as secondary, as part of a bigger problem.

After the war, Clinchy traveled throughout Europe and became a firsthand witness to continuing and widespread antisemitism. In a lengthy 1948 report to NCCJ supporters and funders he reported on

his interviews with “473 individuals in 27 cities” and documented multiple cases of antisemitic violence. Jewish survivors returning from DP camps to their original homes were attacked. In some places there was even debate about whether these Jewish survivors, rendered stateless by the Nazis, should be repatriated in their home countries as full citizens or remain noncitizens with special status.

These realities shifted the conversation among Christians and Jews. In 1946 the delegates to the ICCJ’s Oxford conference condemned the many forms of persecution against all religious groups (and linked the persecution of Christians and Jews), but they nonetheless concluded: “of all the various group tensions, that known as antisemitism concerns the whole world and calls for special treatment...it is advisable to deal with antisemitism as a special case requiring special treatment, though suggestions for dealing with antisemitism may be applicable to other types of group tensions.” They were acknowledging, finally, the unique particularity of antisemitism.

Christian history and theology are at the heart of that particularity. That’s the message of the Seelisberg report’s section on “The Task of the Churches,” which opens: “We have recently witnessed an outburst of antisemitism which has led to the persecution and extermination of millions of Jews living in a Christian environment.” The section concludes with what we now call “The Ten Points of Seelisberg,” which addressed the Christian theological underpinnings of antisemitism.

That short statement is what the Seelisberg conference is known for—if it is known at all. Although the Ten Points strengthened the foundation for Christian post-Holocaust theology, the work of the ICCJ, and significant statements like *Nostra Aetate*, all these areas of engagement remain minority enterprises. With the growth in scholarship about the rise of National Socialism and the Holocaust, however, came a deeper understanding of the particularity of antisemitism. Today, Holocaust scholars and historians recognize that the history of Christian antisemitism is a seminal element in this history. It remains a factor in the continued presence and power of antisemitism.

Ironically, the resistance in some quarters to viewing antisemitism as a significant problem in its own right (not merely as a symptom of other things) has transferred over to how people view the Holocaust. We have become all too familiar with careless analogies, the trivialization of Jewish suffering in the Holocaust, and the vulnerability of Jewish communities everywhere. All these things reflect the terrible reality of ongoing antisemitism.

Finding common ground remains an essential strategy for fighting such hatred and building a consensus about protecting all minorities. In my own country of the United States, American Jews have been leaders in that endeavor for a very long time. Yet, one truth has shaped interreligious

encounters from the beginning: to truly understand ourselves, we must acknowledge and engage the “other.” That means recognizing the specific nature of the hatred and violence that targets them. Only then can we recognize—and repent for, and change—our own role in that.

For non-Jews, understanding the particularity of antisemitism holds a mirror up to our own history, our assumptions, and our prejudices. Although written 75 years ago, the Ten Points still provoke a serious Christian rethinking of our tradition and what it means to live out our faith in the modern world in a manner that does not violate the rights, integrity, and security of others. That offers multiple possibilities—but at the very least, it summons Christians to join in the fight against antisemitism in all its forms in the world today.

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