

75 YEARS AFTER SEELISBERG - REFLECTION

BY

*PETER COLWELL**

FROM SEELISBERG TO JERUSALEM: THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

The Seelisberg Conference and Recommendations first appeared in 1947, a year before the creation of the State of Israel. Re-visiting the document 75 years on, it is a striking observation to make that a Jewish-Christian document attempting to address antisemitism did not, and probably could not, foresee the radical change that Judaism was about to embrace on the eve of the creation of a Jewish State. Indeed, there are only two references to the Levant in the whole document, the first states:

In dealing with antisemitism, it is necessary to consider at least two practical issues: (a) the guarantee of equality of Jews with all people living in any state in regard to all political legal and economic rights, including their freedom to develop their own religious and cultural life; and (b) the right of Jews, particularly European Jews, to find homes elsewhere, including Palestine. [p.8]

The second reference merely notes that Palestine was not at that point a viable option for most Jews, mainly since Palestine was still part of the British Mandate, and the British attitudes to the settlement of Jews in this land was ambivalent and at times hostile.

But this small reference in the Seelisberg document, bringing together as it does, the questions of self-determination and the right of settlement in Palestine, raises important questions for Jewish-Christian relations as we reflect on this ground-breaking document, 75 years later. The first important consideration is the fulfilment of those words in ways that few would have predicted in 1947. In particular, the right to settle in Palestine and for Jews to be seen as having equal rights in terms of self-determination, even though it can sometimes seem that there are voices that wish that question to remain an open one. But – and here is the controversial point – this self-determination and the right of settlement has come about in spite of Christian Europe and not because of it. That may be overstating the matter, but it is at least true to say that it was Jewish determination to succeed in the land despite all the challenges and opposition that have led to this point whereby the

modern State of Israel is critical to the self-understanding of most Jews today and this involves a rejection of the ways in which Christianity and Islam have othered Judaism. One of Israel's influential scholars of the 20th century, Rabbi David Hartman, amply illustrates this point:

Israel's return to history as a political community constitutes a proclamation to the world that Judaism and the Jewish people cannot be reduced to a spiritual abstraction. When Judaism manifests itself as the way of life of a particular historical people, as it can do in Israel today, it is a permanent obstacle to any theological view that perceives Judaism as the superseded forerunner of the universalist conceptions of Christian and Islamic monotheism.¹

Hartman also suggests that the creation of Israel was the final refutation of the Christian myth of Jewish punishment and perpetual wandering that has been the cornerstone of the worst manifestations of antisemitism in Europe.

Therefore, one of the most important ways that the Seelisberg aspirations have been taken forward - that is addressing the "othering" of Jews that led to antisemitism - has been through an emphasis upon Jews as a people (not merely a religion, as many Christians often misunderstand it to be) who find their own place in the world through a "return to history" in this ancient land. Another important Israeli figure of the last century, Jacqueline Kahanoff, suggests that Zionism represents a post-Christian and post-Islamic Judaism.²

This brings us to the second consideration, one which takes us far beyond the thinking of Seelisberg, but we would be doing the matter a grave injustice if it were not set out, at least in brief terms. Judaism's relocation in its ancient lands to the East has brought it into dialogue, conversation and conflict with its Eastern neighbours. Here we see a new complexity in the Jewish-Christian encounter. First of all, Jews of European descent find themselves in a nation which includes Jews from lands of the East – Mizrahi Jews from places such as Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Iran, forced to leave those countries with only Israel as a place they could call home. Theirs has been a different experience of antisemitism to that experienced in Europe. But then there are the Christian communities of the Holy Land who have held an unbroken presence in this land since the first century of the Common Era. As well as the newer arrivals of colonial Lutheran and Anglican outposts, there are the ancient churches of Eastern Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches which have largely been absent from the dialogue between Jews and Christians, but who rightly stake a claim to having a voice in this dialogue, however difficult that may be.

¹ David Hartman, [A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism](#), Jewish Lights, 2012, p.304

² See David Ohana, [The Origins of Israeli Mythology: Neither Canaanites nor Crusaders](#), Cambridge, 2012

But something has occurred in this Eastern context which is rarely commented upon, other than by Palestinian Christians themselves, that of a changed power dynamic: in Europe Jews will continue to experience vulnerability when antisemitism continues to be a dangerous phenomenon, but in Israel and Palestine it is Christian communities that feel powerless and vulnerable, caught as they are between a majority Jewish State on the one hand, and an Islamic (and sometimes overtly Islamist) polity on the other. Palestinian theologian Mitri Raheb has written of a “displacement theo-politics” and this is compounded by the influence of largely North American Christian Zionists who seek to delegitimize indigenous Arab Christianity.³

Herein lies one of the most important challenges in taking forward the inheritance of the Seelisberg Conference of 1947. Recent controversies, particularly on the political left, have illustrated how deeply rooted antisemitism is, and often the conflict in Israel-Palestine has been instrumentalized by those who still see Jews in the world as a problem to be addressed. Yet the driving zeal that we find in the Seelisberg document, that of justice and equality, is one that must be at the heart of the Jewish-Christian encounter 75 years later, but they are true for all - Jew, Christian and Muslim, Israeli and Palestinian.

*** About the author:**



Peter Colwell (UK) is Deputy General Secretary of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland where he takes the lead on interfaith matters. He is an ordained minister of the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom and is due to submit his PhD thesis on Jewish Christian relations in the Holy Land later this year.

³ Mitri Raheb: “Displacement Theopolitics: A Century of Interplay between Theology and Politics in Palestine”, in Raheb (ed), The Invention of History: A Century of Interplay between Theology and Politics. Bethlehem, Diyar Publisher 2011, p15ff