

75 YEARS AFTER SEELISBERG - REFLECTION

BY

EMMANUEL NATHAN*

POINTS FROM DOWN UNDER – THE FUTURE MEMORIES OF SEELISBERG

I must begin by acknowledging that my reflection, as a Catholic, on the Ten Points of Seelisberg is necessarily refracted through two other memories or developments. Chronologically, the first precedes my own living memory, but takes nothing away from its influence on my intellectual formation. I am referring of course to the Catholic document, *Nostra Aetate*, which was proclaimed at the end of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, nearly 20 years after Seelisberg. The other is my memory of, and participation in, the 2009 annual meeting of the ICCJ in Berlin, at which the Twelve Points of Berlin were issued, in direct recollection of, and as a way of marking 60 years since, the Ten Points of Seelisberg.

These further developments in time and context from Seelisberg, each having their own history and trajectory, nonetheless indicate the long journey that has been traversed since the Ten Points of Seelisberg were presented in 1947. Not only, then, is it important to understand the historical context out of which the Ten Points emerged, but also their continuing relevance and impact. For me, marking the 75th anniversary of Seelisberg is not just a question of historical memory, but also about 'future memory' (a *memoria futura*, as Cardinal Walter Kasper would say). Both aspects are important. Without the former, the historical context of Seelisberg's Ten Points is in danger of being forgotten, and we know only too well that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it (in the words of George Santayana). But it is the latter aspect that ensures that this memory has a future. Every time that the Ten Points of Seelisberg are intentionally reread, restudied, and remembered so to speak, they are given a new lease of life for the next generation.

But how aware are people at the grassroots of the Ten Points of Seelisberg or the advances in, and even necessity of, Jewish-Christian relations since the Second World War? Here I would like to reflect on, and extrapolate from, a recent initiative "Down Under". By this I don't just mean my Australian context, where I now live and work, but also 'down under' as a point of view that challenges an otherwise too academic environment where I usually operate. Earlier this year I helped organize a

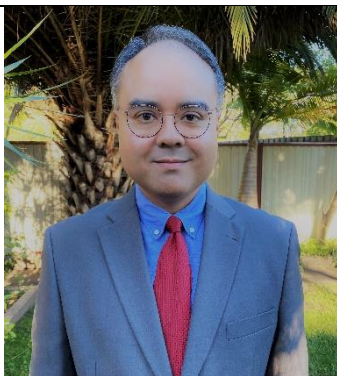
short online course for Catholic religious educators in Sydney. At its root was a concern from the Jewish community about antisemitic incidents in schools. None of the Catholic schools that participated in this short course were involved in such incidents, but they participated out of a firm resolve to future-proof their schools and educators against such occurrences. What this resulted in was something deeper and more fundamental: an opportunity for a new generation of Catholic religious educators in Sydney to (re)learn and internalize the lessons of *Nostra Aetate* (given the Catholic focus of this initiative).

The course was the result of a close collaboration between members of the Sydney Jewish community, Sydney Catholic schools, the Sydney Catholic archdiocese, and my institution. In doing so, we broadened our network beyond the usual circles of interfaith dialogue. By choosing education to combat antisemitism, we opted for a grassroots approach that could mirror larger initiatives which tackle antisemitism on a national scale. But we must also immediately acknowledge the limitations of such an approach when compared to these larger programs. Our narrow focus means that our impact will be important but small. In fact, of the schools invited to participate, there was modest, even though committed, take-up. We might even be honest in saying that we attracted those who were already committed to the cause. This therefore raises the question of how we can effectively reach new audiences. One of the speakers also mentioned to me that he was involved in a similar initiative nearly 20 years ago, and on one level it was disappointing to know that here we were, 20 years later, once more having to relearn the lessons of *Nostra Aetate*.

How does this all relate back to the 75th anniversary of the Ten Points of Seelisberg? First, it became very clear to me that a next iteration of such a course should in fact continue the historical mapping of *Nostra Aetate* in relation to its predecessors like the Ten Points of Seelisberg and later developments such as the Twelve Points of Berlin (and of course other documents by the Catholic Church since *Nostra Aetate*). Second, I was reminded of the passage in the *Haggadah* that Jews recite at the Passover seder: “*bekhol dor va’dor*”, in every generation, one is obligated to consider oneself as if having left Egypt personally. So too it rests on us, in each generation, to relearn the lessons of our predecessors in Jewish-Christian relations. To not do so puts us at very real risk of forgetting and, ultimately, repeating the mistakes of the past. But the *Haggadah* passage also appeals to that forward-looking dimension of memory; it is incumbent upon each generation to contextualize the lessons of the past for our own times. With such a predisposition, it is in fact not a disappointment to repeat such initiatives at least every few years. They are in fact a golden opportunity to remind and recommit ourselves to existing commitments in our religious traditions.

On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of Seelisberg I wonder, then, whether we might imagine what the Ten Points of Seelisberg might look like if recontextualized by an Australian audience? Just as Berlin did in 2009, what would the Points from Australia be in 2022? And, in doing so, would it not also be an opportunity to internalize these points from ‘down under’, starting from the grassroots? Rather than a top-down approach, might we attempt something bottom-up, one that engages an intergenerational conversation with what the younger generation is trying to articulate? Two pressing issues in Australia are addressing climate change and healing our relationship with Indigenous Australians. Might there not be an opportunity to translate the dynamics of Jewish-Christian dialogue in ways that could galvanize a further dialogue with such contemporary concerns? For example, how do Jews and Christians engage in dialogue on the concept and attitude of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world? How would this translate when applied to the healing of relationships between persons and with creation at large? Would we, in doing so, reach new audiences and engage one another’s stories in fresh and appealing ways? What, 75 years on, are the future memories of Seelisberg and Jewish-Christian relations more broadly for the next generation?

*** About the author:**



Dr Emmanuel Nathan (Australia) is a senior lecturer in biblical studies and comparative theology at the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy, Australian Catholic University in Sydney, he is also the Director of its newly established Research Centre for Studies of the Second Vatican Council, involved with the Australian Council of Christians and Jews, and the Sydney Roman Catholic Archdiocese Commission for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations. Since the beginning of 2020 he has been actively working with Sydney Catholic schools and representatives of the Jewish community to raise awareness on Catholic-Jewish relations and the merits of interreligious learning. Equally interested in theological responses to our ecological crises, he was named in 2020 the inaugural Monsignor Professor Denis Edwards Visiting Scholar to the Laudato Si’ Research Institute at Campion Hall, University of Oxford.