

75 YEARS AFTER SEELISBERG - REFLECTION

BY

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THE CONSCIENCE OF SEELISBERG

As a Roman Catholic living in Canada, it is impossible for me to write this piece without referring to a historic event that took place in the Vatican a few days ago. On April 1, 2022, Pope Francis offered a long-awaited apology to Indigenous, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples for the role played by members of the Catholic Church in Canada's Residential School System. From the 1880s into the closing decades of the 20th century, this system separated Indigenous, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children from their families with the goal of assimilating them into the mainstream white Canadian society. In addition to the devastating effects of such forced cultural assimilation, residential schools became venues for ongoing emotional, psychological, and physical abuse, a reality that continues to affect Canada generations later.

But why open an essay commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Seelisberg Conference with this detour onto Pope Francis' apology to Indigenous Peoples? Because, simply put, the legacy of Seelisberg is a legacy *for* the world, helping to charter a historical path within which institutional church apologies—needed in so many contexts—are indeed possible. That is why I would like to explore the ways in which Seelisberg is meaningful to the world beyond its purview and, in doing so, how the group of Jews and Christians who gathered in this small Swiss town 75 years ago helped to develop a radically new understanding of institutional responsibility, communal reconciliation, and cross-generational healing. In order to understand the way in which Seelisberg speaks to the world beyond Jewish-Christian relations, I must first reflect on a phenomenon that I would like to call the “conscience of Seelisberg.” I argue that this animating principle not only underscores the documents produced in the context of this original gathering but has become the *modus operandi* of the International Council of Christian and Jews (ICCJ). What, then, is the “conscience of Seelisberg”?

As I read the “Reports and Recommendations of the Emergency Conference on Antisemitism,” I was struck by the number of times that the authors affirm the importance of political and social values that can preserve the integrity of humanity. While the referent of antisemitism in the wake of the

Holocaust is always present as a central concern to be addressed, the authors never lose sight of the vital aspirational objective to uphold “the fundamental principles of the democratic way of life” (10). My argument here is that the conscience of Seelisberg, while heavily informed by the catastrophe of the Holocaust, was not simply the conscience of members of two religious traditions attempting to overcome historical harms. Instead, it was an expression of the conscience of humanity devising an all-encompassing restorative path toward a world in which every human is made whole. This is the same path that will eventually allow institutional churches to become conscious of the harms they have inflicted, as well as to offer official apologies for the evil they have perpetrated historically. Perhaps it is too extreme to locate the cause for this massive institutional shift in Seelisberg, but it is not at all unreasonable to argue that this gathering, its textual outcomes, and the bonds of friendship and collaboration it generated, are the markers of a historic moment of transition in which institutionally inflicted harms could not go unaddressed any longer.

It is precisely because I am Roman Catholic living in Canada that I am called to identify and name the events that set the Catholic Church on a course that would eventually enable its leadership to reflect critically on the church’s participation in systems of oppression, segregation, and marginalization. Seelisberg is one of those decisive historical events. This meeting of representatives of Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic communities modelled a practice that would become a cornerstone in the way in which diverse faith traditions dialogue and cooperate with each other—and with the world—in the second half of the 20th century. We therefore continue to learn from the convictions outlined in Seelisberg about interfaith cooperation, inviting us to a “new approach that emphasizes human values, and individual rights, with their corresponding duties and responsibilities for citizenship” (10). The world for which they advocated was a world of justice for all, where perpetrators and accomplices would acknowledge and repair their wrongdoings, and where those who had been wronged, oppressed, and disposed would have the “right to build their own lives afresh” (21).

The irony of writing this message in “such a time like this” (Esther 4:14) is not lost on me. The humanitarian crisis unleashed by Russia’s invasion of the Ukraine brings about so many memories of previous human-induced catastrophes. What is perhaps most ironic is the repeated warnings that the international community has had about crises like the one we are currently experiencing. The document produced in Seelisberg is only one example of the efforts made by non-governmental coalitions and minority groups to tell the world about the corrosive effects of hatred on our fragile human ecosystem. I am struck by the accuracy with which the participants in Seelisberg describe not their world (the post-World War II world) but our own world (the post-Black-Lives Matter, #MeToo, COVID world of 2022). The kind of hatred addressed and described by the document continues to

shape many communities, and the kind of hoped-for citizens required to overcome such divisions and hostilities is still under development.

As I flipped through the pages of the Seelisberg documents, the word “re-educate” became progressively more salient—perhaps in virtue of its renewed relevance in contemporary thought. I firmly believe that those gathered in Seelisberg were especially aware of our need to undo and redo, to unlearn and relearn, and to unbind and bring together. We have journeyed together and haven’t always succeeded in cooperating. We have learned about one another and have yet much to relearn from each other. We have gathered before, and sadly, we have not always accomplished greater unity. Indeed, for 75 years, we have been told in no uncertain terms that the dehumanization of a person or a group is not isolatable; that hatred, when cultivated, grows beyond the borders of its intended target; that bridges of collaboration and dialogue need to be constantly built and re-built. Our recommitment to the conscience of Seelisberg should be a call for us to ensure that no group, no community, no individual is deprived of their humanity again. In closing this reflection, I would like to return to Pope Francis’ apology to the Indigenous Peoples, as he summarizes such a call to attend to every human person in a brief reference to the Hebrew Scriptures:

“Your experiences have made me ponder anew those ever timely questions that the Creator addresses to humankind in the first pages of the Bible. After the first sin, he asks: ‘Where are you?’ (Gen 3:9). Then, a few pages later, he asks another question, inseparable from the first: ‘Where is your brother?’ (Gen 4:9). Where are you? Where is your brother? These are the questions we should never stop asking. They are essential questions raised by our conscience, lest we ever forget that we are here on this earth as guardians of the sacredness of life...” (Pope Francis, “Audience with Representatives of Indigenous Peoples in Canada”).

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