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STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

A peer-reviewed e-journal of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations

Published by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College

The 1947 Seelisberg Conference: The Foundation of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue

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Volume 2, Issue 2(2007): 34-53

<http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol2/iss2>

Sixty years ago, in the summer of 1947, the *International Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism* took place in the Swiss village of Seelisberg. Its aim, in the immediate aftermath of World War II, was directed at fighting the roots of the anti-Semitism still rampant in many countries despite the fall of National Socialist rule. Within this context, its objective was also to address Christian anti-Judaism and to seek to achieve a new relationship between Christianity and Judaism.

The final statement of the conference, including the now famous *Ten Points of Seelisberg*, which focused on Christianity's roots in Judaism, became one of the most important cornerstones of the Jewish-Christian dialogue. The sixty-five conference participants – prominent members of the Roman Catholic and Reformed churches, and of the European and American Jewish communities – were aware that the time was ripe, after the horror of the Shoah and its destruction of six million Jews, to face this dark side of religious history and European culture. They desired to put an end to a 1900 year history of distrust and enmity. They gathered with the hope that their contribution would impact religious communities worldwide. In a missive to the conference, read by Abbé Journet, Jacques Maritain, the French ambassador to the Vatican, said that there ought to be a battle against this “racial and anti-Semitic leprosy”¹ that is itself a deepest spiritual problem, one that attempts to eradicate Judaism, and ought to be of vital importance to Christianity. This view has continued to be verified over the past several decades.

Hence, the Seelisberg Conference has become an important reference point in the development of the Jewish-Christian dialogue and in the churches' renewed

¹ From the Conference Report by Hans Ornstein in: *Israelitisches Wochenblatt*, y. 47 No. 33/1947, 11.

understanding of their relationship with Judaism. However, academic research on anti-Semitism rarely makes reference to this conference. On the one hand, this might be understood from the fact that the conference set forth few theoretical statements, focusing instead on recognized practical solutions for fighting anti-Semitism. Its theoretical contributions lay instead in the realm of the Jewish-Christian relationship. Many of the socio-political research projects of the conference simply came to pass. On the other hand, interreligious dialogue came to occupy a different intellectual and social realm from sociological and socio-political research. From a historical viewpoint, Seelisberg came mainly to be perceived as an interreligious conference which tackled the Christian roots of anti-Semitism in depth.

This essay will focus on the historical context and the development of this 1947 conference. It will present and comment, as well, on the reports of its various commissions. It will conclude with perceptions, hopes and expectations expressed sixty years later at the July 2007 Colloquium in Switzerland, including the Declaration read and signed by Catholic, Protestant and Jewish officials on this occasion.

1. The Oxford Conference of 1946

The Seelisberg Conference with its focus on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity did not materialize out of nothing. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, individual Jewish and Christian thinkers had tried to formulate positively a new perception of this relationship which included the differences as well as the complementary self-understandings of the two faith communities. Among them we shall highlight the work of the Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, in his *Star of Redemption* (1921), the contributions of Martin Buber, and Leo Baeck's book *Das Evangelium als Urkunde der*

jüdischen Glaubensgeschichte (1938). In his autobiographic notes, Gerhart Riegner, who was associated with the Jewish World Council for more than sixty years, identifies Christians such as the Anglican James Parkes, the German Karl Theime, Paul Déman in France, and the Catholic theologian Malcolm Hay as precursors of the principles expressed at Seelisberg.²

On the socio-political level a primary basis for renewal in this relationship within the population at large was the formation of various Jewish-Christian associations. The first of these, the *National Council of Christians and Jews*, was founded in the United States in 1927,³ and was followed a short time later with a similar foundation in South Africa. The effort in both countries was to counter groups hostile to minorities for racial or religious reasons – such as the Ku Klux Klan in the USA who threatened both Catholics and Jews. National Socialism was merely the most extreme form of this heightening of racially- and religiously-motivated tension within national states during this inter-war period. In response to this social climate, Jewish-Christian working groups were established in England, Australia, Canada and Switzerland.

In 1944, while World War II was still being waged, the American Conference of Christians and Jews called for a gathering of representatives from the various international Christian-Jewish constituencies. It was not until August 1946

² Gerhart M. Riegner, *Ne jamais désespérer. Soixante années au service du peuple juif et des droits de l'homme* (Paris, 1998), 348-352.

³ The following historical information is referenced in the introduction of International Council of Christian and Jews, ed., *Reports and Recommendations of the Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism*, (London, Geneva, 1947), 1-4; and in Keller Zsolt, "Theologie und Politik – Beginn und Konkretisierung des christlich- jüdischen Dialogs in der Schweiz," in *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte*, 99 (2005): 157-159.

that this conference could take place in the English town of Oxford. This Oxford Conference had as its aim the definition of the fundamental rights and obligations of every human being, regardless of religion and race. Peace, justice and responsibility were the three key words that summed up its main focus. One of the Conference commission reports stated:

Each of the religious communities represented at the Conference – Jewish, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant – has suffered persecution or restriction of rights in varying degrees in different parts of the world. Hate is an evil that affects humanity as a whole. Each group in the Conference must withstand unswervingly attacks on other groups...Of all the various group tensions, that known as Anti-Semitism concerns the whole world and calls for special treatment. Recent history shows that an attack on Jewry is an attack on the fundamental principles of Judaism and Christianity on which our ordered human society depends. Accordingly it is advisable to deal with anti-Semitism as a special case requiring special treatment, though suggestions for dealing with anti-Semitism may be applicable to other types of group tensions.⁴

For the commission, anti-Semitism represented a special case of social unrest between various religious and ethnic groups, which threatened Jews, Christians and civil society each in its own way. So it was logical that the Oxford Conference demanded the convening of a separate emergency conference to specifically address anti-Semitism. Another demand expressed at the Oxford Conference was the founding of an international council of Christians and Jews, to provide an organization which would connect the Jewish-Christian efforts which were emerging in various

⁴ International Council of Christians and Jews, ed., 2.

countries. This emergency conference, as well as the founding of the Council, were to take place in Switzerland.

Let us begin with a brief reference to the birth of the *International Council of Christians and Jews*.⁵ On July 21-27, 1948, a conference took place at Fribourg University to celebrate the founding of this International Council. It had been announced the previous year at the Seelisberg Conference that \$50,000 (US) was available for this purpose and that Ch. E. Hughes, co-founder of the American *National Council of Christians and Jews* was to be in charge. Despite the fact that the Seelisberg Conference had gone well, including these plans for the International Council, problems arose in Fribourg. The American association withdrew from its leadership function of this “worldwide fraternity” and the Vatican voiced its reservations regarding the danger of religious relativism. In the end, only an *International Consultative Committee* was formed. While this did not hinder additional *Councils of Christians and Jews* being formed at national levels, it was not until May, 1974 that the *International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ)* was actually created. This was largely due to the renewed involvement of the powerful American *National Council of Christians and Jews*, and the collaboration of the Vatican, of necessity, after the Second Vatican Council’s 1965 document, *Nostra Aetate*, had opened its doors to interreligious dialogue.

While the process of founding the ICCJ required years, the Oxford Conference’s second call for a conference to combat anti-Semitism was realized within one year.

⁵ W.W. Simpson and R. Weyl, *The Story of the International Council of Christians and Jews. A Brief History of the ICCJ, 1946-1995* (Heppenheim, 1995), 33f.

2. Assembled in the Grand Hotel Kulm in Seelisberg

The *International Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism* took place at Seelisberg in Central Switzerland from July 30 through August 5, 1947. Those invited included Christians and Jews who, due to their experience and knowledge, were capable of contributing to the theme in a substantive manner. In other words, the conference participants spoke in their own names, not as official representatives of their faith communities, even though they all held such titles. Given the importance placed on the international character of the conference, representation from all the European countries and the USA was ensured. As expected, the presidents of the national Jewish-Christian organizations were present, as were representatives of the World Council of Churches and the German Bishops’ Conference. Other participants included professors from the Universities of Sofia and Fribourg, the Chief Rabbis of Budapest and Bucharest, the representative of the Chief Rabbi of France, and Rabbi Dr. Taubes from Zurich. Jules Isaac, the French historian of Jewish descent, was a significant protagonist at the Conference. Willard E. Goslin, from the Reformed Church tradition and active in the American educational system, presided over the Conference. He was assisted by the British Jew, Neville Laski, and the Franciscan Friar, Calliste Lopinot. Dr. Pierre Visseur from Geneva and Rev. W.W. Simpson from London served as executive secretaries.⁶

The Conference commencement included the reading of messages of greeting, such as the welcome from the Swiss Union President and the communication from the Director

⁶ For a complete list of participants and conference commissions see the Addendum to this article on pages 50-53.

General of UNESCO. Then the specific agenda of the Conference was presented:

- First: an inventory of current anti-Semitism in various European countries and the disclosure of the reasons for its continuation and increase even after the war. All general theoretical dissertations were avoided, in favor of a solution-oriented process.
- Second: the development of practical measures to combat anti-Semitism at all levels of society, through short-term strategies or by long-term measures which would obstruct its re-emergence.
- Third: a contribution to the healing of the Jewish-Christian relationship was to be begun.⁷

English and French were the two official languages, the use of German having been denied due to the bitter aftertaste this language held for the Jews in the wake of the experience with National Socialism. This is but one example of the difficult ambiance within which the participants with differing religious and national backgrounds gathered around one table, so soon after the war, to address the delicate issue of anti-Semitism.

The first plenum then debated and discussed previously-prepared statements and reports on the situation of anti-Semitism and of refugees. On the evening of the second day the conference participants divided into five commissions whose work was brought back to the plenum at various times throughout the conference for input and critique. At the end of the conference each commission presented its final report to the entire conference for approval. The following

⁷ See *Israelitisches Wochenblatt*, y. 47 No. 33 (1947), 11.

two sections will address the work and the final reports of these commissions.

Commissions I, II, IV and V.⁸

Commission I focused on the fundamental aim of this Jewish-Christian gathering: to combat anti-Semitism. A clear enunciation of this is contained within the first of the eight paragraphs of the commission paper in the following formulation:

Anti-Semitism is a world-wide problem which we believe can be solved only by the co-operation of all men without distinction of race and creed... co-operation in this matter is based upon the complete independence and integrity of the religious faiths and practices of each religious group. The common aim has been to combat anti-Semitism as a sin against God and against humanity and as a danger to modern civilization – a danger to non-Jew and Jew alike, to the Christian and to the follower of the Jewish faith.⁹

This was a reaffirmation of the position which had been formulated in Oxford: anti-Semitism is a problem affecting the entire civilized world. It is characterized as a “sin against God and humanity”. While this terminology was to become the conventional formulation in religious documents about anti-Semitism, the commission also insisted that each community of belief retain its independence on this and on all matters relating to taking Judaism seriously as a people and as a nation.

⁸ The work of the various commissions is reported in *Israelitisches Wochenblatt*, 34 (1947) 9-11. Comments on the commission reports, which follow below, can be found in International Council of Christians and Jews, ed., 7-22.

⁹ International Council of Christians and Jews, ed., 7.

Paragraph six of the commission paper subsequently expresses the need to ensure equality for Jews with all peoples. This includes their right to establish themselves in Palestine, although on the eve of the creation of the state of Israel it gives expression to Zionism's political concerns without mentioning them directly. Full recognition of and reconciliation with the Jewish people would be realized only through a material remuneration which would include their social rehabilitation. For this, it would be necessary to address the anti-Semitism still rampant in the occupied territories under the communist regime in Eastern Europe. All racially or religiously motivated hatred should be punished by national and international law.

The commission paper further highlights the various deeply-rooted grounds for anti-Semitism and its ramifications, with consequences penetrating all levels of society and cautions about the subtle danger of misusing them as a political weapon. It then directs attention to the other commission reports which deal with specific aspects of the fight against anti-Semitism.

Commission II's report opens with an emphatic appeal for a comprehensive educational approach, emphasizing that anti-Semitism and tensions among different social and ethnic groups on all levels of society can be overcome only through reliance on human moral values and the process of democratization. Here one clearly hears undertones of anxiety on behalf of the countries still under communist rule where the end of the war did not restore the freedoms of a democratic society. The commission calls upon UNESCO, along with state and local authorities, to help provide educators specialized in understanding the dynamics affecting the relationships between differing ethnic and religious groups, and capable of implementing effective group processes and dynamics. Networking centers which

would provide for the exchange of literature and the revision of problematic educational materials which denigrate other groups are considered a must. There is a comprehensive and inclusive focus on the education of children, students and grown-ups in the commission's statement that "[s]pecial emphasis should be put on emotional training, and development for attitudes. To this end, the democratizing of school life is an essential medium."¹⁰ The commission is not simply referring to the transmission of knowledge about other ethnic groups and communities of belief. It is calling for an all-encompassing approach to educating the whole person in a manner which will enable human beings to live together in a multicultural society.

In ten brief paragraphs Commission IV addresses civic and social duties, beginning with the acknowledgment that situations regarding the peaceful cohabitation of various groups differ greatly from country to country. It appeals to all Jews and Christians, but particularly to their religious leaders, to not only to be present for their own community but to also become involved in other associations, which might well be interreligious, to share in the responsibility for the well-being of the others and the entire society. The commission states: "It would help to allay prejudice by showing the general public that deep religious conviction naturally expresses itself not in antisocial behavior but in care for the welfare of others."¹¹ In this context the commission highlights the important role of mass media, indicating that its power be acknowledged and used effectively in the fight against anti-Semitism.

Given the impact of the significant number of war refugees in Europe, the commission formulated an actual change in

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

perspective on them, one still relevant today: “Refugees are too often regarded simply as a burden on the receiving country; but it is a social duty to lay emphasis on the new cultural contributions and industrial skills that strangers have often brought with them to the enrichment of their new countries.”¹² Migration-related problems themselves are perceived as a frequent cause of anti-Semitism, even if the migrating foreigners are not Jews. The commission here recognizes the irrational assumptions many make with regard to the social ‘other.’

While Commission IV dealt with issues relating to civil society and to non-governmental organizations, Commission V focused on governments, addressing them with four resolutions. Resolution I dealt with legal issues. Resolution II expanded on Commission I’s call for reparations. This it had established as a foundational principle, namely that all states were obligated to human rights and to compensate Jews for their losses during the war. Resolution III, directed specifically to the victorious allied powers, addressed anti-Semitism in the countries under communist rule in an effort to combat anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe through political pressure and information. The final resolution concerning the war refugees states:

No civilized person would deny to those who years ago were taken away from their homes against their will, the right to relief and to recuperation and the right to build up their own lives afresh. But owing to international conditions which do not come into the province of this Conference, the right to build up their lives afresh has been withheld from thousands of them for years. They cannot go to the countries where they want to live. The doors of Palestine are in effect closed to them.¹³

¹² Ibid., 18.

¹³ Ibid., 21.

Here, governments are called upon to make possible whatever imaginable, to assist war refugees in settling and building up their lives, where and how they desire.

In an additional resolution concerning human rights and the Palestinian problem, the Conference condemned any form of terrorism in Palestine and called for finding a “just solution” in the Middle East.

Commission III

Given the specific nature and purpose of this paper, further comment on the commissions and resolutions discussed above is not required. However, the work of Commission III, which contributed so significantly to the future Jewish-Christian dialogue, deserves more extensive elaboration.

The Role of the Churches

At the outset, the Conference regarded the work of Commission III as a particularly difficult task as well as one of great historic importance. All present were aware of the fact that, over the centuries, Christian anti-Judaism had established a culture of contempt against the Jews, serving as a precondition which enabled modern racist anti-Semitism to express itself without limitation. Hence, this commission – committed as it was to the fundamental improvement of the Jewish-Christian relationship – worked with special intent and care. Its paper’s opening statement therefore declared that, in the work of this commission, Catholics, Protestants and Jews aimed to work with candor and cordiality. For a number of the participants this was their first involvement in an ecumenical and interreligious working group.

After the initial meeting of the entire commission, where a first draft of the text had been presented, the Christian commission members withdrew and consulted about it among themselves.¹⁴ After reworking it, they again presented the draft to the entire commission. This version was then scrutinized by separate Catholic and Protestant groups to allow for further denomination-specific reconsideration. Another interdenominational Christian meeting discussed the text, before it was brought back to the full commission yet again. Only then was the document forwarded to the Conference plenum for acceptance, but with the understanding that only an abbreviated version of it would be published immediately after the Conference. A full version was to be sent to representatives of the various churches for acceptance prior to making it available to the press. Since the various church authorities voiced no substantial opposition to the text, offering only minor queries and additions, this procedure went through as planned.

Given the historical importance of this Commission III document and the fact that it is not easily accessible, it will be presented here in its entirety. First, the short version as accepted by the Conference:

Moved by the sufferings of the Jewish people, the Third Commission, in the course of a frank and cordial collaboration between Jewish and Christian members, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, were faced with the tragic fact that certain theologically inexact conceptions and certain misleading presentations of the Gospel of Love, while essentially opposed to the spirit of Christianity, contribute to the rise of anti-Semitism.

¹⁴ These details about how the Commission worked can be found in International Council of Christians and Jews, ed., 4f.

Having recognized this, the Christian members put forward certain proposals with regard to the content and form of Christian teaching, which should serve not only to combat anti-Semitism, but also to promote good relations between Jews and Christians.

These deal, among other points, with the need to emphasize the close bonds which exist between Judaism and Christianity, the need to present the Passion story in such a way as not to arouse animosity against the Jews, and to eliminate from Christian teaching and preaching the idea that the Jewish people are under a curse.

On their part, the Jewish members of the commission declare that they will seek to avoid in Jewish teaching anything which would prejudice good relations between Christians and Jews. Jews and Christians alike pledge themselves to promote mutual respect for that which is sacred to each religion.¹⁵

This text begins by stating that theologically imprecise and erroneous representations of the Gospel have contributed to anti-Semitism. The choice of the expression "Gospel of Love" serves to highlight this. Thus the commission makes the important point that it does not understand the Gospel to be in itself or constitutively anti-Jewish, as is occasionally claimed today, but rather, it becomes so only when inaccurately read and interpreted.

The Christian commission participants do take responsibility for the birth of anti-Semitism without, however, devaluing Christian teaching. Rather, for theological rectification, for combating anti-Semitism and for ameliorating the Jewish-Christian relationship, they propose three fundamental measures:

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

1. The antagonism between Judaism and Christianity – inscribed repeatedly through juxtaposed slogans as: Law-Gospel, God of Hatred-God of Love, justice-mercy, ritualistic-prophetic, etc. – should be vanquished by emphasizing the bond which unites the two religions. Part Two of the document will spell out what constitutes this bond.
2. Since medieval times the Passion texts and presentations on the crucifixion of Jesus have led acts of violence against Jews. The Gospel of John is especially prone to anti-Judaic interpretation, given the manner in which it presents a collective role for the Jews in Jesus' trial. Therefore, the commission requests the composition of a very careful interpretation which will not incite hatred against Jews.
3. The teaching of the rejection and condemnation of the Jews, which has been an integral theological component of Christian salvation history since the time of the early Church, is definitively denounced. Based on the "charge of deicide" taught since Melito of Sardis (circa 190 CE) the Jewish people were rejected by God, were deprived of their role in salvation history, or served only as a negative example for the Church which, through Christ, had become the true Israel. This "teaching of contempt," as Jules Isaac called it, served as the undisputed basis of higher theology's supersessionist approach to salvation history, while at the same time promoting a simplistic good vs. evil paradigm that was convenient for preachers and easily understood by the masses. Through this pragmatic declaration that the Jews should not be perceived as cursed, the Seelisberg Document explicitly rejected the teaching of supersessionism without, however, proposing an

alternative theological understanding of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

With similar precision and formality this brief first portion of the document then states that the Jews within the commission also commit themselves to refrain from whatever could undermine the good relations between the two faith communities, expressing as well their appreciation of the sacred in Christianity. What is striking in this general formulation is not merely its avoidance of any specific details, but also the fact that Christians are neither accused nor asked to apologize publicly for the harm inflicted to the Jewish people. Expressions and demands of this nature were to become part of later developments in the Jewish-Christian relationship.

The Ten Points of Seelisberg

When Commission III presented its document in the plenum, the conference participants listened intently and then, without any discussion, affirmed the document. This included also the second part which, as discussed above, was published only several months later, after having been submitted to the respective ecclesial authorities. This second part includes the famous *Ten Points of Seelisberg* which develop the three objectives outlined in the first part of the document. This second part begins by pointing to the catastrophe of the Shoah, recalling that this occurred in a Christian society. It goes on to state that anti-Semitism, in spite of the defeat of National Socialism, is continuing to poison Christians and all of humanity:

We have recently witnessed an outburst of anti-Semitism which has led to the persecution and extermination of millions of Jews living in a Christian environment. In spite

of the catastrophe which has overtaken both the persecuted and the persecutors, and which has revealed the extent of the Jewish problem in all its alarming gravity and urgency, anti-Semitism has lost none of its force, but threatens to extend to other regions, to poison the minds of Christians and to involve humanity more and more in a grave guilt with disastrous consequences.

The Christian Churches have indeed always affirmed the anti-Christian character of anti-Semitism, but it is shocking to discover that two thousand years of preaching of the Gospel of Love have not sufficed to prevent the manifestation among Christians, in various forms, of hatred and distrust towards the Jews.

This would have been impossible if all Christians had been true to the teaching of Jesus Christ on the mercy of God and love of one's neighbor. But this faithfulness should also involve clear-sighted willingness to avoid any presentation and conception of the Christian message which would support anti-Semitism under whatever form. We must recognize, unfortunately, that this vigilant willingness has often been lacking.

We therefore address ourselves to the churches to draw their attention to this alarming situation. We have the firm hope that they will be concerned to show to their members how to prevent any animosity towards the Jews which might arise from false, inadequate, or mistaken presentations or conceptions of the teaching and preaching of Christian doctrine, and how on the other hand to promote brotherly love towards the sorely-trying people of the old covenant.¹⁶

¹⁶ Ibid., 14.

Despite the fact that the churches explicitly and officially dissociated themselves from anti-Semitism, it was ascertained with horror that the hatred of Jews could not be eliminated from the preaching of the Gospel of love. Fidelity to the true Gospel was lacking, and above all, the active commitment needed to present the Christian message in a manner which avoided any expression of animosity towards the Jews. In order to prepare for this task, the commission had prepared ten teaching points.

The form and content of these points were greatly influenced by the initiative of Jules Isaac who had presented to the Conference the manuscript of his book on the roots of anti-Semitism, *Jesus and Israel*.¹⁷ He had worked on this manuscript in the underground since 1943, after having been dismissed from Paris by the Vichy Regime and after having lost his family members through the Gestapo deportations. The aim of his historical, exegetical work had been to clarify whether Jesus had rejected the Jewish people as a whole and whether the Jews had been collectively cursed for their rejection of Jesus as Messiah, as the churches were teaching.¹⁸ Isaac had summarized the results of his 500 pages of research into 18 theses¹⁹ which presented Jesus in the context of the vibrant Jewish environment of his time.

¹⁷ Cf., Jules Isaac, *Jesus and Israel* (Paris, 1948). Cf. Eugene J. Fisher, "Catholic Teaching on Jews and Judaism: An Evolution in Process" in Mary C. Boys, ed., *Seeing Judaism Anew: Christianity's Sacred Obligation* (New York, 2005), 252f.

¹⁸ Jules Isaac, *Genèse de l'Antisemitisme* (Paris 1956), 14. This book is Isaac's defense against theological and historical critics of his book *Jesus and Israel*.

¹⁹ These theses are reprinted in: Dorothee Recker, *Die Wegbereiter der Judenerklärung des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils. Johannes XXIII., Kardinal Bea und Prälat Österreicher – eine Darstellung ihrer theologischen Entwicklung* (Paderborn, 2007), 402-405. Recker presents the work of Jules Isaac on pp. 400-420.

The influence of his work is evident in the following ten points which the Commission III document recommends:

Nothing would seem more calculated to contribute to this happy result than the emphasizing of the following points:

1. Remember that One God speaks to all through the Old and the New Testaments.
2. Remember that Jesus was born of a Jewish mother of the seed of David and the people of Israel, and that His everlasting love and forgiveness embrace His own people and the whole world.
3. Remember that the first disciples, the apostles, and the first martyrs were Jews.
4. Remember that the fundamental commandment of Christianity, to love God and one's neighbor, proclaimed already in the Old Testament and confirmed by Jesus, is binding upon both Christians and Jews in all human relationships, without any exception.
5. Avoid disparaging biblical or post-biblical Judaism with the object of extolling Christianity.
6. Avoid using the word *Jews* in the exclusive sense of the enemies of Jesus, and the words *the enemies of Jesus* to designate the whole Jewish people.
7. Avoid presenting the Passion in such a way as to bring the odium of the killing of Jesus upon Jews alone. In fact, it was not all the Jews who demanded the death of Jesus. It is not the Jews alone who are responsible, for the Cross which saves us all reveals that it is for the sins of us all that Christ died. Remind all Christian parents and teachers of the grave responsibility which they

assume, particularly when they present the Passion story in a crude manner. By so doing they run the risk of implanting an aversion in the conscious or sub-conscious minds of their children or hearers, intentionally or unintentionally. Psychologically speaking, in the case of simple minds, moved by a passionate love and compassion for the crucified Savior, the horror which they feel quite naturally towards the persecutors of Jesus will easily be turned into an indiscriminating hatred of the Jews of all times, including those of our own day.

8. Avoid referring to the scriptural curses, or the cry of a raging mob: *His blood be upon us and upon our children*, without remembering that this cry should not count against the infinitely more weighty words of the Lord: *Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they do*.
9. Avoid promoting the superstitious notion that the Jewish people is reprobate, accursed, reserved for a destiny of suffering.
10. Avoid speaking of the Jews as if the first members of the Church had not been Jews.

We make the following practical suggestions:

The introduction or development in school instruction and elsewhere, at each stage, of a more sympathetic and more profound study of biblical and post-biblical history of the Jewish people, as well as of the Jewish problem. In particular the promotion of the spread of this knowledge by publications adapted to all classes of Christian people. To ensure the correction of anything in Christian publications and above all in educational handbooks which would be in conflict with the above principles.

Our common endeavors are inspired by the spirit of the words of St. Paul in Romans xi, 28-29: *They are beloved for the fathers' sake. For the gifts and the calling of God are without repentance.*²⁰

The first four points start with "Remember that" and recall central facts of the Christian story of salvation, which underline, above all, the unity and continuity between the Old and the New Testaments. The first thesis highlights that the same God is the narrator of both the New and the Old Testaments. By referring to this historical reality, it provides a unifying context bracketing the differences in the Jewish and Christian understandings of God especially around issues of the Trinity. The Jewish descent of Jesus (here in thesis two, but set in parallel with the Jewishness of Mary, the apostles and the earliest Christian martyrs in thesis three) is expanded with the affirmation that God's love and mercy continue for the Jewish people and for the entire world. The difficult, theological question regarding how the Old Sinai Covenant and the New Covenant of the Church are related is circumvented through the assertion that God's love for the Jewish people continues. Thus the document sets forth positive alternatives to replace the belief that the Jews have been cursed by God, while at the same time avoiding the need to become embroiled in problematic, complex theological issues. This reveals how astutely the commission proceeded to accomplish its objective to provide a solution-oriented foundation paper for the faith communities without attempting to develop a comprehensive theological document.

Point four's commentary on the dual commandment of love of God and love of neighbor, common to both Jews and Christians, demonstrates not only another deep similarity between the two faith communities but also includes a call to

unconditional love for all people. In this way the commission skillfully addresses the more comprehensive goal of the conference: to promote justice for all people, to acknowledge common human rights, and to overcome all ethnic and religious animosity.

The following six points begin with the admonition to "avoid," although the first in this group (§5) follows the content of the preceding four which focus on the ties which unite Jews and Christians. What has been expressed positively in the first four points, is now declared in a negative manner: Formulating Christian identity over against biblical and post-biblical Judaism contradicts the common tie expressed in theses one to four. The end of the document calls Christians to a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of Jewish history, including the Old Testament. Only if Judaism is perceived in this manner, will it cease being perceived solely as the precursor of Christianity.

Theses six to eight address the need for a responsible treatment of the Passion narratives, responding to the second aim of the Conference. Just as Christianity is not to be set in opposition to Judaism, so the Jews collectively are not to be set in opposition to Jesus. During Jesus' lifetime Jews were not collectively as a people opposed to Jesus; such an opposition should not be constructed between Jesus Christ and Jewish history either. Over the last several decades exegetical research has taken this caveat and hermeneutical guideline seriously. Today, the confrontations presented in the Gospels between Jesus and the Pharisees are understood as intra-Jewish confrontations, or as a sociological reflex in the early Christian community's attempt to establish and demarcate its own identity.²¹

²⁰ Ibid., 14ff.

²¹ See for example Walter Dietrich, Martin Georg und Ulrico Luz, eds., *Antijudaismus – christliche Erblast* (Stuttgart, 1999).

The seventh thesis addresses the question of guilt for the crucifixion of Jesus, and calls theological versus historical viewpoints into consciousness. The theology of expiation through the Cross is based on the spiritual conviction that all people throughout history by their sins brought Jesus to the cross. At the historical level this document makes the correction that not all Jews collectively can be held accountable. That it makes no mention of the participation of the Romans is startling in this context. However, suggestions that were rejected at the conference illustrate the struggles over the formulation of this passage. For example, the Rumanian Rabbi Alexandre Safran reports that his Jewish colleague, Jules Isaac, had agreed to include the positive formulation that some Jews “killed God.” He was, however, dissuaded, in a private conversation, since collective Jewish responsibility could easily have been deduced from this acknowledgment.²²

Further historical research is needed more adequately to reconstruct the discussions of this meeting. At this point let us draw attention again to the practical and pastoral concerns of the entire document. These become manifest, if one is speaking of the psychological and unconscious effects of telling and hearing the Passion narrative. Simple solidarity with Jesus the victim can reflexively provoke animosity toward the Jews. This principle applies more widely, as the social-psychological aspects of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism should also be taken into consideration.

Thesis eight, which is almost identical to a passage in Jules Isaac’s book *Jesus and Israel*,²³ juxtaposes the Jewish blood cry as recounted in Mt 25:27, “His Blood be upon us and upon our children,” with the words of Jesus in

²² Alexandre Safran, *Den Flammen entrissen. Die jüdischen Gemeinden in Rumänien 1939-1947 Erinnerungen* (Tübingen, Basel, 1989) 221-224.

²³ Cf. *Freiburger Rundbrief*, XVI/XVII (1964/65): 57.

Lk 23:34, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” The thesis accords greater weight to the words of Jesus. Whether one agrees with this evaluation or not, or how one thinks these two verses should be brought into relationship with each other, shall remain undecided here. What is important is that the blood cry, like any other verse, should not be taken out of context.

These points relating to aspects of the Passion narrative have already highlighted several reasons why Christians have perceived Jews as accursed. To further help overcome this, following the third proposal of the first part of the document, the ninth thesis again explicitly refutes as superstition the conception that the Jews are an accursed people destined to suffer. The label “superstition” is appropriate, because it indicates that the conception is a perversion of what the Bible teaches, namely that Israel is to be seen as a chosen people. (cf., Ex 19:5; Is 44:1f; 49:7)

The tenth thesis reiterates negatively what had already been recalled positively in the third point, namely that the early Church in essence consisted of Jews. In contrast to the third thesis, it considers not only the Apostles and the first great Christian witnesses, but also the primordial Church as a community. Nevertheless, this last point readily leaves the impression that it is a superfluous repetition. In content it belongs to the first four points. Appearing as a tenth point, it stands in isolation. Obviously, the decision to have Ten Points was a deliberate choice to lend weight and authority to the entire document, in parallel to the Ten Commandments of Sinai.

The document ends with the appeal that its contents be spread as widely as possible – relating to Commission II’s work on education – and concludes with a citation from the Letter to the Romans which provides the biblical foundation

and the exegetical springboard for the work of the entire commission: Notwithstanding the coming of Christ and the establishment of the New Covenant through Him, the Old Covenant is not revoked and consequently the Jewish people's divine calling endures throughout history. (Rm 9-11). Some twenty years later, these same chapters from Romans would also become determinative for the Second Vatican Council's document, *Nostra Aetate* and its rethinking of the Jewish-Christian relationship.²⁴

3. Sixty Years Later

Looking back at the Seelisberg Conference from the vantage point of the present day, it is remarkable to note with what farsightedness and socio-political realism the participants were able to lay a foundation for the Jewish-Christian dialogue and for the fight against anti-Semitism. These two efforts were still very integrated at Seelisberg but became increasingly differentiated during the developments of the 1950's. This has led to the fact that in western society, dialogue between Jews and Christians has taken on a less political and much more interreligious character, in spite of an increasing focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, in both realms, the Seelisberg Conference had prophetic significance, since not only have many of its recommendations in the social, educational and legal domains been fulfilled or are in various stages of development, but also in the interreligious realm, the major churches have affirmed the positive relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Today it has become commonplace to speak about a Judeo-Christian tradition, something that was inconceivable in 1947.

Regarding the evolution of the Jewish-Christian dialogue, it is significant to note that the Commission III

²⁴ Cf., *Nostra Aetate*, §4.

recommendations were fully integrated into the Vatican Council II document, *Nostra Aetate*, attributing to them, from the Roman Catholic side, the authority of a Church Council. Similar things can be said about many documents of the Reformed churches that radically revise their relationship with Jews and Judaism.²⁵ The deicide charge and the teaching of contempt are no longer a part of mainstream Christian theology; they are now largely a vestige of history. However, since Seelisberg, the critical voice has at times attacked so harshly that valid elements of Christian faith have been held as anti-Jewish or, from the Jewish perspective, as a relapse into paganism.²⁶ A theory of the inherent anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John or in the Christology of the early Church has also at times been advanced, something that had no role in the thinking of the Seelisberg participants. But, since Seelisberg, innumerable theological topics relevant to Jewish-Christian dialogue have been studied from both Jewish and Christian perspectives, considering their similarities and differences. The concept of Messiah, the meaning of chosenness, the concepts sin, expiation and sacrifice, the liturgy, the significance of law and Gospel, are only a few examples.²⁷ While the Seelisberg Conference did not focus on these questions, it was its vision that first opened up these problematic fields.

²⁵ Many of these documents can be found in Rolf Rendtorff und Hans Hermann Henrix, eds., *Die Kirchen und das Judentum. Dokumente von 1945-1985* (Paderborn München, 1988), and in Hans Hermann Henrix und Wolfgang Kraus, eds., *Die Kirchen und das Judentum. Dokumente von 1985 bis 2000, 2* (Paderborn, 2000).

²⁶ See for example Jean-Francois Lyotard und Eberhard Gruber, *Ein Bindestrich. Zwischen "Jüdischem" und "Christlichen"* (Düsseldorf, 1995).

²⁷ Two Jewish-Christian dictionaries should be mentioned here: Clemens Thoma und Jakob J. Petuchowski, *Lexikon der jüdisch-christlichen Begegnung. Hintergründe-Klärungen-Perspektiven* (Freiburg, Basel, Wien, 1994); Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborn, eds., *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations* (Cambridge, 2005).

Also deserving attention in this context is the fundamental transformation in the definition of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity itself. The Seelisberg document still presents Christianity as emerging from Judaism and the Old Testament, i.e., that Judaism is the “mother religion” of Christianity as suggested by the olive tree metaphor in Rm 11. However, recent historical research suggests instead another metaphor of Judaism and Christianity as sibling religions, both as legitimate outgrowths or branches from Biblical Judaism.²⁸ Though Judaism is certainly more ancient than Christianity, its present, continuing valid form was shaped largely during the Talmudic period, contemporaneously with and influenced by Christianity. Both faith communities arose within this complex process of differentiation over against each other.²⁹ In such a situation of mutual self-referencing and differentiation, to imagine Jews to be the “parent” of Christians is to magnify complexity, to minimize the points of symmetry, and hence also to increase conflict. The siblings metaphor serves as a more appropriate explanation, incorporating as well centuries-old prototypical precedents such as the classical pair of brothers, Jacob and Esau – the juxtaposition through which rabbinical tradition viewed the two religions – and the Christian example of the merciful father with his two sons (cf., Lk 15) similarly interpreted as

Jews and Christians. That the two siblings will walk towards the future reconciled is only to be hoped for.

This spirit of reconciliation and unity pervaded the celebration of the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Seelisberg Conference on July 6-8, 2007. A Jewish-Christian scholarly colloquium was hosted at the Lassalle-Haus in Bad Schönbrunn near Zug in Central Switzerland.³⁰ These Seelisberg anniversary festivities included the reading of a new joint declaration on Seelisberg itself. Though bearing a national character – since it was proclaimed and signed by the Swiss Bishops’ Conference, the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches and the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities – the statement can be understood as representative of many communities in the western world. Following is the text of the new ten-point 2007 Seelisberg declaration:

The occasion of the 60th anniversary of the “Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism” held in Seelisberg in 1947 provides us with an opportunity to look back at the successful pioneering phase of Jewish-Christian cooperation in Switzerland. The attitudes of the Reformed Churches and the Roman Catholic Church toward Judaism have changed fundamentally, from a relationship of ambivalence and mistrust or even enmity to one of coexistence and brotherly and sisterly cooperation. Anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism have been reduced strongly in our country through a variety of religious, educational, social, and political initiatives.

In light of the current major changes within our increasingly pluralistic and complex society as a whole, we are confronted with the appearance of regressive and reactionary currents. The signers thus commit themselves now and in the future:

²⁸ See Alan F Segal., *Rebecca’s Children. Judaism and Christianity in the Roman Worlds* (Cambridge, MA, London, 1986).

²⁹ A few examples, among many, addressing this include: Hershel Shanks, ed., *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: A Parallel History of their Origins and Early Development* (Washington, D.C., 1992); James D.G. Dunn, ed., *Jews and Christians: The parting of the ways A.D. 70 to 135 – Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*, 66 (Tübingen, 1992); Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Israel Yuval, *Zwei Völker in deinem Leib. Gegenseitige Wahrnehmung von Juden und Christen in Spätantike und Mittelalter* (Göttingen, 2007).

³⁰ The Proceedings are published by and may be obtained from Lassalle-Haus: Christian M Rutishauser, *Impulse für die Zukunft des jüdisch-christlichen Dialogs. Zum 60. Jahrestag der Seelisberg-Thesen* (Edlibach/Zug, 2007). www.lassalle-haus.org

- to combat every form of discrimination based on ethnic background or beliefs;
- to work ceaselessly on the sensitive relationship between Jewish congregations and Christian churches;
- to seek out and promote mutual understanding and theological dialogue;
- and to draw on the best of one's own religious traditions for an existence in peace and justice within Swiss society.

We call upon all members of our churches and religious societies to bear responsibility in this regard within their congregations and in the public arena, and to introduce their own initiatives to this end. We also call upon all public figures, whether they are active in political, economic, or social fields of endeavor, but also each and every member of society to actively work toward these goals. The Jews and Christians of our country are faced with the following challenges, which they can only tackle with combined forces:

- The lasting integration of an historical understanding of the Shoah into the consciousness of all members of society;
- An objective and constructive reaction to events in the Middle East, especially those in Israel/Palestine;
- The integration of the Muslims who live together with us in our society;
- The public and political presence of religious groups for the benefit of the entire populace;
- Effective assistance in the light of new social injustices;
- The advancement of concrete measures for the protection of our earth, which has been placed in our hands, and of God's creation.

We would all like to encourage all members of society to join together in this work at all levels. We hope and trust that God, may His name be praised, allows these efforts to bear fruit.³¹

³¹ The Swiss Federation of Jewish communities, Swiss Bishops' Conference, Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, eds., *60 Jahre Seelisberger Thesen. Der Grundstein jüdisch-christlicher Begegnung ist gelegt!* (Bern, Fribourg, Zürich, 2007) 4f.

Together, these look back over the achievements of the Jewish-Christian dialogue, designating the past several decades as a pioneering phase. The brochure for the festivities that the three signatories also published, says that the foundation for dialogue has been laid. They consider it their duty to build on this foundation and strengthen this relationship through their commitment to the four points outlined in their joint declaration. It is important to note that, like the 1947 Conference documents, this new Seelisberg statement also integrates the religious and the socio-political orientations. This is appropriate, given the current religious resurgence in public and political discourse. At the same time, it addresses the regressive tendencies that accompany the current social revolutions. These will be challenged by people committed to their being Jews and Christians.

The second part of the document, in six points, calls on the representatives of politics and business, as well as all citizens, to work together on the Jewish-Christian question, anti-Semitism, as well as the wider social problem of hatred of the stranger. The first three points address the lessons of the Shoah, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the increasing Muslim presence in the west. In this, they refer to the sources and provocations of socio-political conflict which the three monotheistic religions inscribe in the globalized world. The declaration also emphasizes their contribution to world society, especially in the realm of social justice and ecological responsibility. That Jews and Christians should be credible to outsiders for their altruistic contributions to the world had already been formulated at Seelisberg in 1947.

(An Addendum listing the 1947 Seelisberg Conference Participants and Commissions is found on the following pages.)

ADDENDUM
1947 SEELISBERG CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS AND COMMISSIONS



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CONFERENCE OFFICERS:

Chairmen: Dr. W. E. Goslin, Minneapolis and New York, USA
Neville Laski, K.C., London, Great Britain
Rev. Fr. Calliste Lopinot, OFM, Cap., Rome, Italy

Secretaries: Rev. W.W. Simpson, London, Great Britain
Dr. Pierre Visseur, Geneva, Switzerland

*MEMBERSHIP OF COMMISSIONS:*1. *THE PRINCIPAL OBJECTIVES OF JEWISH-CHRISTIAN COOPERATION
IN RELATION TO THE COMBATING OF ANTI-SEMITISM*

Chairman: Rev. R. Clephane Macanna, Edinburgh, Scotland
Vice-Chairman: Prof. S. Brodetsky, London, Great Britain
Secretary: Dr. S. Flowerman, New York, USA
 Dr. Thomas Berman, Prague, Czechoslovakia
 Dr. Everett R. Clinchy, New York, USA
 Dr. Georg Guggenheim, Zurich, Switzerland
 Mr. Josue Jehouda, Geneva, Switzerland
 Rabbi Dr. Alexander Safran, Bucharest, Rumania

2. *EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY IN SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES*

Chairman: Prof. Dr. H. Thirring, Vienna, Austria
Vice-Chairman: Dr. Willard Goslin, Minneapolis and New York, USA
Secretary: Rabbi Julian Feibelman, USA
 Dr. A. Brodersen, UNESCO, Paris, France
 Dr. Julius Gorecki, Warsaw, Poland
 Prof. Wilhelm Neuss, Bonn am Rhein, Germany
 Prof. Paul Reiwald, Geneva, Switzerland
 Dr. Hilda Taba, New York, USA
 Rabbi Georges Vadnai, Marseilles, France

3. *THE TASK OF THE CHURCHES*

Chairman: Rev. Fr. Calliste Lopinot, OFM, Cap., Rome, Italy
Vice-Chairman: Bishop Miroslav Novak, Prague, Czechoslovakia
Secretary: Rev. Dr. E. L. Allen, Northumberland, Great Britain
 Prof. Dr. E. Bickel, Zurich, Switzerland
 Mlle. Madeleine Davy, Paris, France
 Rev. Fr. Paul Demann, Louvain, Belgium

Pastor A. Freudenberg, Geneva, Switzerland
 Prof. Jules Isaac, Aix en Provence, France
 Abbé Journet, Fribourg, Switzerland
 Rabbi J. Kaplan, Paris, France
 Rev. Fr. De Menasce, Fribourg, Switzerland
 Dr. A. Newlin, Geneva, Switzerland
 Rabbi W. Rosenblum, New York, USA
 Rev. Robert Smith, Prague, Czechoslovakia
 Rabbi Dr. Zwi Chaim Taubes, Zurich, Switzerland

4. *WORK IN THE FIELD OF CIVIC AND SOCIAL SERVICE*

Chairman: Mr. Percy Bartlett, London, Great Britain
Vice-Chairman: Frau Prof. Clara Ragaz, Zurich, Switzerland
Secretary: Mr. Ernest Levi, Luxembourg
 Dr. E. Broczyner, Vienna, Austria
 Mr. Alfred Cohen, Salonika, Greece
 Mrs. Stella Counselbaum, Chicago, USA
 Rev. Fr. R. Graham, New York, USA
 Miss Esther Heiberg, Copenhagen, Denmark
 Rabbi Dr. Fabian Herskovits, Budapest, Hungary
 Dr. Radlauer, Berlin, Germany
 Dr. William Warner, New York, USA

5. *RELATIONS WITH GOVERNMENTS*

Chairman: Kontorchef F.T.B. Friis, Gentofte, Denmark
Vice-Chairman: Dr. Stirling W. Brown, Berlin, Germany
Secretary: Mr. A. G. Brotman, London, Great Britain
 Prof. Francesco Carnelutti, Milan and Rome, Italy
 Mr. I. M. Isakov, Bulgaria
 Rev. Maurice Jaffe, London, Great Britain

Mrs. Orfinger Karlin, Brussels, Belgium
Frau Dr. Gertrude Kurz, Berne, Switzerland
Dr. Ernest Meyer, London, Great Britain
Prof. Jaques Natan, Sofia, Bulgaria
Mrs. E. Rothfeld, London, Great Britain
Mme. J. Tumova, Prague, Czechoslovakia

ADDITIONAL PARTICIPANTS:

Mr. Laszlo Hamori, Geneva, Switzerland
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Mr. Tom Griessemer, Geneva, Switzerland
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³² We are grateful to the International Council of Christians and Jews and to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum for providing this list of participants.