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Seelisberg: An Appreciation

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Historically, it is the fate of interreligious statements to be dismissed by religious leaders, ignored by historians, and remain utterly unfamiliar to the average believer. However influential or renowned the participants may be, interreligious meetings and the statements that emerge from them usually have little or no institutional or doctrinal clout and are by their very nature bridges: first steps toward understanding, repair and reconciliation. The real work lies in where things go from there, and this depends upon whether the words of the statement have captured the spirit of the times, addressing not only the immediate concerns of the religious communities involved, but the greater human issues at stake. If by good fortune this is the case, the path ahead is nonetheless lengthy and contentious, for changing the actual doctrine, position, or liturgy of a religious body – let alone changing the hearts and minds of believers – can take decades.

This may explain why the 1947 Seelisberg “Address to the Churches” is so little known, although it spoke eloquently to its times and is certainly known among those committed to Jewish-Christian dialogue today. Seelisberg was a benchmark in the history of interreligious relations, both for what it said and for the context in which this occurred. It reflects the first attempt by Christians from different traditions to address the implications of the Shoah for the Christian faith, and its ten theses establish the framework for this in Christian teachings. The Seelisberg “Address” was Christians addressing other Christians. The crucial difference between the Seelisberg statement and other Christian statements at the time is that these were Christians who had worked with, spoken with, listened to, and acknowledged the anguish of their Jewish colleagues – and had come to the conclusion that Christianity had to change.

This difference is reflected in the opening sentence of the document: “We have recently witnessed an outburst of anti-Semitism which has led to the persecution and extermination of millions of Jews.” The document then goes on to explain that faithfulness to Christian teachings must include the “clear-sighted willingness to avoid any presentation and conception of the Christian message which would support anti-Semitism under whatever form.” The ten Seelisberg theses that follow are predicated upon that principle: the rejection of all interpretations and teachings of the Christian message that target the Jews or create enmity against them. In less than six hundred words, it establishes the parameters of post-Holocaust Christian belief, listing those elements of Christian belief and teaching that historically have been most directly responsible for fostering hatred of Jews: teachings about Christ’s passion, about understandings of salvation and scripture, about supersessionism, and conclusions drawn about the Jewish faith.

No other official statement of the early post-Holocaust era comes anywhere near that clarity, either in addressing anti-Semitism or in acknowledging the churches’ role in fostering hatred and violence against Jews. The Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt by the Evangelical Church of Germany in October 1945 did not mention the Jews explicitly at all, and while it acknowledged Christian guilt the declaration had an undertone of self-victimhood, claiming to have “struggled in the name of Jesus Christ against the spirit” of National Socialism. The Treysa “message to the congregations” in August 1945 did mention “the mistreatment and murder of the Jews and the sick” as part of a litany of Nazi misdeeds, but viewed the church’s guilt as the failure to preach the gospel, not the way in which the gospel had been preached. The 1947 Darmstadt “Statement Concerning the Political

Course of Our People” focused on the church’s political and ideological failures in conforming to Nazism. The 1948 Darmstadt “Message Concerning the Jewish Question” acknowledged that “retribution is being meted out to us for what we did to the Jews” and condemned ongoing anti-Semitism, and yet its theological conclusion was that the “Jewish problem” (those were the words used) could not be solved “as if it were a racial or national one” – drawing the theological conclusion that “the Jew” was “an erring brother destined for Christ” to be evangelized.¹ The 1948 “Christian Approach to the Jews” in the founding statement of the World Council of Churches, while it acknowledged the genocide of six million Jews, rejected anti-Semitism, and spoke of the need for a “special solidarity,” nonetheless reaffirmed the Christian mission to convert Jews.

How, then, did it happen that the Seelisberg meeting came up with this remarkably frank document that was the forerunner of other statements, like *Nostra Aetate*, that came so much later? The answer – and herein is the essence of the Seelisberg document – lies in who they were and what they had just experienced during the Holocaust. The unique feature of Seelisberg is that it was the product of conversation between Christians and Jews – really a Christian reply to the Jewish challenge in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust. At the same time, the minutes and report of the meeting make clear that those who attended Seelisberg understood their mission in a much larger context. The agenda of the 1947 Seelisberg meeting

¹ For translations of the three statements mentioned above, see Matthew Hockenos, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004): Treysa Conference “Message to the Congregations” (August, 1945), App. 3, 185-186; Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt (Council of the Evangelical Church of Germany, October, 1945), App. 4, 187; “Message Concerning the Jewish Question” (Council of Brethren of the Evangelical Church, Darmstadt, April 8, 1945), App. 7, 195-197.

was the defense of human rights, particularly in light of the resurgence of anti-Semitic violence in many parts of Europe at the time. The church declarations made at Stuttgart, Treysa, and elsewhere were the product of internal Christian conversations that, however heartfelt and sincere they might have been, did not address directly the anguish and continued fears of the Jewish community or acknowledge Christian responsibility for that anguish. In addressing the past, the other church declarations sought to put it behind them, to close the door. In contrast, implicit in the words of the Seelisberg statement is an openness – perhaps in reality the awareness that the door to the past could not be so easily closed. Only in Seelisberg did Christians submit their thinking to Jewish colleagues for critique. Only in Seelisberg was the starting point a Jewish critique of Christianity, the study paper written by the French historian and humanist Jules Isaac, “The Rectification necessary in Christian Teachings: Eighteen Points.”

Thus, the Seelisberg document was utterly different in tone and substance. Sixty-five participants from nineteen different countries had gathered there for an “international emergency conference on anti-Semitism.” The gathering in Seelisberg included Jews, Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, ordained clergy, laity, religious community leaders, educators, and social activists.² Few of them are well-known today, yet their own stories illustrate why the outcome of the Seelisberg conference was so personally important to them. Most of the Jewish participants in Seelisberg had experienced anti-Semitism directly and painfully. Jules Isaac had just lost his wife, daughter, and a son-in-law in the Holocaust. Erich Bickel and Ernst-Ludwig Ehrlich had fled Nazi Germany for Switzerland. Rabbi Dr. Zwi Chaim Taubes of Zurich had fled from the Ukraine.

² For a complete list of participants and conference commissions see the Addendum to the Rutishauser article on pages 50-53.

Professor Selig Brodetsky belonged to a British Jewish family who fled Russian pogroms in the late nineteenth century. The family of Rabbi Jacob Kaplan had fled to France after Lithuanian pogroms in the nineteenth century. Rabbi Alexandre Safran from Romania had intervened with the Antonescu government to save Jews during the Holocaust.

In turn, many of the Christians involved with Seelisberg were people who were already engaged in reformulating Christian teachings and fighting anti-Semitism; in some cases they had been involved in trying to rescue the European Jews. The French Catholic thinker Jacques Maritain, who was unable to attend Seelisberg but nonetheless sent word of his support, and Gertrud Luckner, a German Catholic who had spent two years imprisoned in the Ravensbruck concentration camp for helping Jews, served as consultants to Jules Isaac as he prepared his study paper for discussion at Seelisberg. Adolf Freudenberg was a German diplomat who fled Nazi Germany in 1938 because of his Jewish wife and became the refugee officer for the ecumenical offices in Geneva, meeting weekly with Gerhart Riegner of the World Jewish Congress and trying desperately to get international Protestant support for Jewish refugees. The French Franciscan Friar Calliste Lopinot ministered to Jews imprisoned at the internment camp in

Ferramonte and had pleaded with church authorities in Rome to intervene and speak out. Reverend Everett Clinchy, president of the National Conference of Christians and Jews in the United States, had worked closely with Rabbi Morris Lazaron in creating networks of Jewish-Christian understanding throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Father Paul Demann, Dr. E. L. Allen of King's College, and British Methodist Rev. William Wynn Simpson had all written works about Judaism in an attempt to foster a new appreciation and understanding of the Judaic faith among Christians.

With a few exceptions, the names of those who attended Seelisberg do not appear in histories of the churches during the Nazi era, the Holocaust, or even standard ecumenical histories. Like interreligious statements, the individuals who formulate them all too often seem to end up on the outskirts of their respective religious bodies and, therefore, of history itself. Yet their lives and work are worth remembering, particularly as lessons for how remarkable moments in interreligious understanding were achieved. This is certainly true regarding the Seelisberg participants who, in an impossible and painful time, in mutual respect and humility, with a commitment toward strengthening the foundation for human rights, took a hard and honest look at the historical ramifications of Christian teachings about Jews.