75 YEARS AFTER SEELISBERG - REFLECTION

BY

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"NO CIVILIZED PERSON WOULD DENY 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."

SEELISBERG CONFERENCE

The Seelisberg Conference was not an academic gathering brought together at a time of stability, in which curious theologians voluntarily gathered for the irenic pursuit of knowledge and free exchange of ideas. Rather, it was self-described as an *emergency* meeting, summoned in the haunting shadow of European Christianity's widespread acquiescence to the Nazi regime.

However much the meeting can, and should, be a role model for Jewish-Christian relations, the character of its summoning leaves something wanting. "Emergency" medical procedures that address fresh and deep wounds do not provide for long-term healing. They are temporary place holders in hopes of permanent solutions, not substitutes thereof.

As the Seelisberg participants recognized, the "emergency" situation that presented itself most fully under the Third Reich was ongoing. The European and North American Protestant and Catholic Christians who gathered knew that their historic theologies had been incapable of stymying antisemitism (there were no representatives from Eastern Christian traditions or countries outside of Europe and North America). They applied theological bandages (namely, the famous Ten Points); they applied bandages of governmental and social advocacy on behalf of Jews. They stressed cooperation with the United Nations and the importance of "human rights." More specifically, they demanded that "Jews, particularly European Jews," be allowed to immigrate to Palestine. Clearly directed at the British Mandate authorities at the time, what they did not at all acknowledge were those already living in Palestine.

This was a troubled beginning to what would become an unfortunate, and regularly overlooked, stain in the early decades of Jewish-Christian relations: virulently anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian sentiments.

Nonetheless, in more recent years, the field has, generally, backtracked somewhat. It has started, so to speak, to peel back the bandage so hurriedly placed on fresh wounds. It is thankfully rarer to find participants in mainstream Jewish-Christian relations who speak of Arabs in the way that many of the founders and mentors once did.

Yet, something of Seelisberg's theologically and politically Western context and, to be honest, limitation still survives. While the field no longer holds to Seelisberg's complete and deeply unnerving oversight of local inhabitants, it all too often shares the same, subtle assumption of Seelisberg: that the land-issue is a generally Jewish issue, beside which Christians stand as outsiders looking in.

This, to a certain degree, is understandable. On the one hand, there is no doubt that "the land" is a central tenet for Jews in a way largely unparalleled in Christian circles. And, on the other hand, the field of Jewish-Christian relations is, once again, primarily Western Christian in its makeup. It is not largely populated by residents from the State of Palestine nor Eastern Christian traditions with millennia-old roots in the land.

These latter groups are often overlooked in the field, and if we are to move beyond the temporary fix afforded to us by Seelisberg—one which entirely overlooked the wounds then opening in British Palestine—we must move beyond the tendency to cast Christians as outside commentators, of varying quality, on what is ultimately a Jewish matter. Like Seelisberg, too many proponents of *rapprochement* between Jews and Christians fail to appreciate fully that for local Christians, "the land" is not an outsider-looking-in question, but one of insiders with historic and deep ties. It is one thing to start a "Jewish-Christian dialogue" with an acknowledgement of Jewish covenantal ties and concerns about the "safety" or "importance" of the State of Israel and then "acknowledge" the need for "justice" for others. But to start the dialogue with concern about the "safety" and "land" of local non-Jews and churches who have lived there without self-determination for centuries (and continue to do so now) and then "acknowledge" Jewish ties and concerns is another. Both are valid options, but both lead to different kinds of conversations.

While the field no longer neglects the local peoples entirely, as Seelisberg and subsequent decades of Jewish-Christian relations once did, it still tends to characterize the conversation primarily as a Jewish-European/American Christian one at which other locals serve as little more than guests. The

genuine concerns of the heads and peoples of local churches rarely appear in Jewish-Christian relations except to spotlight their theological missteps or criticize their achievements. In many cases the criticisms are warranted, but when they come from scholars and dialogue participants who decry the local statements as bowing to "political manipulation" or as exuding an "outdated theology," but who themselves are generally unfamiliar with *daily* life for Christians, Muslims, and others under an increasingly and worryingly emphatic *Jewish* State, the criticisms are less appealing and, ultimately, less effective.

An emergency procedure is rarely meant to be the final cure. If one leaves a bandage on for too long, the wound only grows worse, and the longer it remains, the more painful it will be to remove. Nonetheless, only after removing the initial bandage, however difficult that might be, can the proper care be administered so as to ensure that the wound heals in a healthy and lasting way. For participants in Jewish-Christian relations to further the healing process that so much of the world needs, they must not characterize local inhabitants chiefly as guests with "important" concerns for "justice"; rather, they must recognize them as equal partners with longtime and continually threatened ties to their historic land and home.

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