

75 YEARS AFTER SEELISBERG - REFLECTION

BY

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EVERY ANNIVERSARY HAS ITS OWN CHALLENGE

Seelisberg is in the Alps, where the founding myths of Switzerland are located. The liberation struggle of the Confederates with the figure of Wilhelm Tell, to whom Friedrich Schiller dedicated a play and Gioachino Rossini an opera, occurred at the foot of Seelisberg. In the period of the Second World War, this landscape, and the stories about it, were particularly revered in Switzerland. National consciousness was to be strengthened and resistance against Nazi Germany was to be encouraged. As late as the 1980s, all school classes were taken to these sites of celebrated Swiss neutrality. I remember quite well. But in these years, no one told anyone about the Seelisberg Conference.

In 2001 I became program director at *Lassalle-Haus Bad Schönbrunn*, a Jesuit center for spirituality and interreligious dialogue, only 20 miles from Seelisberg. When it became time to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Seelisberg Conference, it was clear to me that I had to organize an event and make it more widely known. Since only the 10 Points of Seelisberg were known to me as well, I began to do research, especially since an overall account was not yet available in German. I delved into its prehistory, into the international civil rights movements that had been formed since the late 1920s in the United States and England against racism and antisemitism. I took note of how alert contemporaries, intellectuals, and public figures from Judaism and Christian denominations allied across religious lines to fight against a racial ideology to which they attributed antisemitism. I studied the 1944 Oxford Conference and the work of the five commissions of the Seelisberg Conference: I: Basic Objectives of Jewish-Christian Cooperation; II: Measures in Education; III: Tasks of the Churches; IV: Commitments to Civil Society; V: Resolutions to Governments. I realized that the 10 points from the Commission of the Churches were embedded in a civil society program.¹ The Jewish-

¹ Rutishauser Christian, The 1947 Seelisberg Conference. The Foundation of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue, in: SCJR Vol. 2 Iss. 2 2007, 34-53.

Christian dialogue and the secular fight against antisemitism differentiated themselves only later. In the meantime, this history has been well researched and presented.²

Therefore, I decided that the commemorative event in 2007 should include a socio-political update, as well as a contribution to the current Jewish-Christian interfaith dialogue. For the first concern, the *Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities*, the *Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches* as well as the *Swiss Bishops' Conference*, could be won over. On Sunday, July 8, the ceremony marking 60 years of the Seelisberg Conference took place in Seelisberg itself. Since the hotel, where the Conference was held in 1947, had been a center of transcendental meditation since the 1970s, it was necessary to draw on the public infrastructure of Seelisberg. Thus, the political community could easily be involved. The ceremony was not only about looking into the past. 10 new points were signed by the three organizers, among them Bishop Kurt Koch, later Cardinal, who still heads the *Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism*: First, four commitments express the will to continue the Jewish-Christian dialogue in depth and to make it fruitful for civil society. Then, six appeals follow to political representatives and all citizens of the country to anchor the Shoah permanently in the public culture of remembrance, to ensure justice in Israel/Palestine, to do justice to the Muslim minority in society today, and so on.³

In addition to the ceremony, a two-day conference took place at Lassalle-Haus. It focused on Jewish-Christian interfaith questions. For my part, I spoke of the current challenges of Jewish-Christian dialogue, including the fact that Jews and Christians are each other's "sacrament of the other". It is essential to build a dialogical identity. Prof. Daniel Boyarin from Berkeley, who has already made a name for himself with his studies on the *parting of the ways* of rabbinic Judaism and the early Christian church, presented his latest research on the biblical book of Daniel. He interpreted the biblical-Jewish patterns of thought about the invisible God who shows himself to His people as patterns to which the later teachings of the Church about Christ and the Trinity could tie in. And Prof. Othmar Keel of the University of Fribourg presented his dialogue concept of "vertical ecumenism." The dialogue ought to be a dialogue of integration along the lines of displacement, since Judaism displaced the pagan culture of Canaan, Christianity displaced Judaism, Islam displaced the two

² Ahrens Jehoschua, *Gemeinsam gegen Antisemitismus - Die Konferenz von Seelisberg (1947) revisited. Die Entstehung des institutionellen jüdisch-christlichen Dialogs in der Schweiz und in Kontinentaleuropa*, Forum Christen und Juden 19, LIT-Verlag: Münster 2020.

³ *60 Jahre Seelisberger Thesen. Der Grundstein jüdisch-christlicher Begegnung ist gelegt!*, edited by Schweizerische Bischofskonferenz, Schweizerischer Evangelischen Kirchenbund und Schweizerischer Israelitischer Gemeindebund, Bern Fribourg Zürich 2007, 4f.

predecessor religions, and finally secular society is about to displace the monotheistic traditions today.⁴

Every anniversary looks back and remembers. It also has to maintain and to refresh. 75 years after Seelisberg I notice with concern that the memory of the Shoah is partly played off against the memory of colonial crimes today. Adopting the perspective of post-colonial studies, many public voices are demanding the restitution of cultural assets, the end of discrimination against blacks, worldwide gender justice, recognition of genocides, such as the one committed against the Herreros by German colonial rule in Namibia between 1904 and 1907. Societies and states that want to belong to the global world community must not only participate in commemorating the Shoah – the UN declared January 27th to be the international Holocaust Remembrance Day – but they also face postcolonial historical research. In recent months, one could follow heated debates in journals on how colonialism and the antisemitism of the fascists are related. Can the different regimes of injustice be compared? Does the memory of the victims of the Shoah obscure the view of earlier genocides? Or has the remembrance of the murder of the Jews sharpened the perception of other injustices? Different groups of victims fight for public recognition. Their suffering is weighed and played off against each other.

In the spirit of dialogic identity- building and shaping the future, people argue about what should not be an alternative. The fight against antisemitism must go hand in hand with the fight against every injustice against minorities and against the old and new forms of racism. Jews as well as Christians must make their spiritual-existential as well as theological contribution, because they both represent, although in a different manner, universal traditions.

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⁴ Rutishauser Christian (ed.), *Impulse für die Zukunft des jüdisch-christlichen Dialogs. Zum 60. Jahrestag der Seelisberg Thesen*, Eigendruck Lassalle-Haus: Edlibach 2007.