

## **75 YEARS AFTER SEELISBERG - REFLECTION**

*BY*

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### ***ADDRESS FROM THE CHURCHES***

When our predecessors came together at Seelisberg 75 years ago, a new chapter in the history of Jewish-Christian relationships began to be written. It was a groundbreaking point and the challenges ahead were immense. Looking back at this interreligious odyssey, I ask myself: Could this experience be useful when facing other challenges of today's societies? What do we have to offer to the world outside of interreligious dialogue?

*Address to the Churches* is the name of the document which presented the *Ten Theses of Seelisberg*. Probably the strongest insight of the Conference was the idea that Christian Churches, sometimes unintentionally and even unknowingly, had paved the way for antisemitism and the *Shoah* with some problematic and inaccurate concepts woven into their preaching and their teaching. That's why the Churches needed to be *addressed* urgently and why they had to be the main focus of the initial efforts. But now, 75 years later, what can our societies learn from the experience of these Churches that have been seriously working in dialogue? What could an *address from the Churches* be?

Contemporary societies have more than a few issues that show us our difficulties in dialogue. "The different" seem to be having quite a hard time understanding each other and interacting peacefully, whether those differences are due to generation, gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic status, apart from, of course, religion. The conversation seems to be turning more polarized and aggressive everywhere. How could these new grounds be fertilized with the experience not only of the Churches but —in the words of the Berlin Conference which broadened the addressee— of all the Christian and Jewish communities that have been tirelessly building a new way of relating to each other.

I'm only taking my first steps in the road of interreligious dialogue. Most of what I know comes from hearing those more experienced than myself retelling how these achievements were forged. The following are just a few of the lessons that I think can be extracted from the stories that were passed on to me by others.

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First of all, I would mention the importance of examining what one is saying about the other in the light of what unintended consequences it may imply to said group. This examination must include what is said as well as what isn't said about the other, because silence can be just as meaningful as words. When confronted with the problematic implications of their own speech, many will react defensively, arguing that it wasn't what they meant, or what they were focusing on. Though that may be a good starting point, it should never be a justification to leave things unchanged.

Another lesson could be to begin on the path of finding those things that make us realize we are the same, that allow us to see each other as brothers and sisters, but also not stopping there and taking a step further into recognizing and celebrating our differences. Without the first, the second might be hard to achieve, but alone in itself, it might be impoverishing and shallow. It's important to understand that constructing an "other" is an anthropological need to be able to construct a "self". But this must be dealt with carefully, learning to avoid "disparaging" the other while "extolling" oneself, to put it in Seelisberg's words. In this matter, being mindful of the way "the other" conceives of themselves in their own words, instead of paraphrasing it to one's own categories, is always helpful.

An important idea to incorporate is that sometimes specific problems require specific initiatives. Broad and generalist assertions might just not be enough. The Seelisberg report states that the catastrophic spread of antisemitism among Christians "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 neighbour", and that "it is shocking to discover that two thousand years of preaching of the Gospel of Love have not sufficed to prevent" this. In circumstances like these, doubling efforts to preach about the need to love all neighbours in a generic way surely would not have had the intended and needed effect of reducing antisemitic tendencies. While general truths continue to be valid and meaningful, sometimes working with one of their more specific implications is needed.

A hard fact: in order to deal with these complex issues, we must roll up our sleeves and do some serious studying. How much of the tensions between Christians and Jews were lessened just by the findings and progress in historical research? How much of the animosity was built just upon plain ignorance? The accurate contextualization of Jesus as a first-century Jew was in itself a game-changer. How much of our "common sense" about some others is in fact based on similar inaccuracies? Scholarly contributions can be of tremendous importance. But this implies other challenges, like integrating the silenced points of view of History, and also learning to handle complexity. When encountering reality in a profound way, not much is black or white. And when

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facing statements that we find problematic, instead of just discarding or censoring them, we can always raise a call to go deeper and denaturalize their simplifications.

Though zealously and passionately, the work done to advance dialogue also required —and still requires! — tremendous amounts of patience. Being some of the most tradition-oriented institutions there are, the pace of religious organizations to contemplate change is often slow. While never an excuse to stop pressing forward, acceptance of what the other is and isn't capable of delivering just yet is also a needed part of respect for the other. Long-term results require long-term commitments. Cancelling the other at the first sight of something you don't agree with and burning the bridges doesn't lead to the deep changes needed.

Patience is also important for accepting that we might not have all of the answers yet. There is no way that our predecessors at Seelisberg could have had an answer to all of the complexities and conflicts their vision implied, nor to the new ones that would surely arise on the way. But they were gravely moved by the horrors they had just witnessed in the *Shoah*, so they committed anyway to what needed to be done. This final lesson from them is the one that strikes me most deeply: even when the road ahead seems uncertain, let's not be afraid to let empathy and compassion for those who are suffering pave the way.

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