

75 YEARS AFTER SEELISBERG - REFLECTION

BY

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TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS: EXAMINING THE NEED FOR A NEW CONTEXT IN DIALOGUE

The German philosopher Hegel has, it must be said, largely gone out of fashion. However, the Hegelian dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis retains much to recommend it. And so it is when one considers the Seelisberg Conference of 1947, and the 'Ten Points' which emerged, and ponders on what has developed from it.

All conferences and documents have a context. That of Seelisberg was the imperative to address anti-Semitism and specifically Christian anti-Judaism, which had created the mindset from which the terrible events of the Shoah had unfolded. We may see this as the thesis. Seelisberg saw the birth of an era of reflection, introspection and dedication which led to the development of productive dialogue between Christians and Jews at the highest level. In that respect, the circumstances of its birth are hardly irrelevant; nevertheless, what has grown up is positive affirmation of the integrity of Judaism in mainstream Christian thought.

Today rabbis regularly engage in exegesis with Christian counterparts, and writings abound on the topic of addressing 'casual anti-Judaism' in Christian preaching and teaching. Scholars have studied life and thought in the first century of the Common Era, examined texts and explored creatively New Testament narratives. We have had 'Jesus the Jew', Dabru Emet, countless church statements and, of course, *Nostra Aetate*: the antithesis.

So much to celebrate, so many breakthroughs achieved. And yet, and yet. While official church documents may formally renounce doctrines of supersessionism, not every Christian within those churches has understood this and consciously done the same. Many churches still persist in using liturgy and hymnody which perpetuate anti-Judaic stereotypes, arguing that the words are not taken seriously.

In 1947 the task was essentially a Christian one: to root out all that was rotten in the practice of Christian faith. It required Jews to be generous-hearted and to support Christian attempts to do this. It could be argued that neither community has wholly succeeded. This is not to say that some incredibly valuable theology and scriptural exegesis have not come out of post-Shoah studies.

Jews have looked at the Leviathan of the Church moving so slowly on these issues as to appear totally static. It is not unheard of, even in dialogue, for disheartened Jews to say ‘Christianity cannot eradicate its Anti-Semitism because it is, at root, Anti-Semitic.’ Christian theology is immensely intricate. It is dense, mysterious and full of paradoxes. Theologians, bishops and preachers wrestle continuously with it, so it is no surprise that the individual must work her own path through the morass. Inevitably, it becomes a case of ‘two steps forward and one step back’, until even the steps forward appear to promise nothing of substance.

Christians, on the other hand, began to look at Judaism first of all from a prism of guilt, of a debt owed, of an almost overwhelming task to accomplish. These approaches have dominated Christian Jewish relations since Seelisberg, but they place Christianity always on the back foot and trying to catch up. But both modern rabbinic Judaism and contemporary Christianity have just as many intricacies as each other. And the danger of believing one to be in a subservient role to the other – and Jews have not always been innocent of this either – is that one is always looking to the other for handouts. One partner is the receiver and the other the giver.

This has led in the past to a belief that the aim of Jewish Christian dialogue is only to help Christians appreciate Judaism, to learn of our own roots and from the wonderful way in which Jews approach texts. That is really important, of course – and immensely enriching. However, there is more hesitancy when one asks ‘what will help Jews appreciate Christianity and how can one learn anything positive from Christian approaches to texts?’ Perhaps this will lead us to the next phase: the synthesis.

Research students learn early on that they must give consideration to reflexivity, continually interrogating their own judgement and preconceptions, in order not to influence their research, while recognising that they may not always succeed. In dialogue, both partners must do the same. Not only are Judaism and Christianity two distinctive faith traditions, but we speak different languages; we share terminology but understand concepts differently. There are cultural differences, too, which cannot be underestimated. However, this does not mean that we have nothing in common; the imperative to love God and our neighbour means understanding, in our different ways, our shared biblical imperative for social justice. While stressing our covenant experience together,

we often forget this. For further progress to be made, we need to set ourselves different parameters; what do we really want or expect out of the encounter? What could be of real benefit to others in today's wounded world?

Perhaps Christians must ask one more thing of their Jewish partners: that they set aside any immediate hope of moving Christian theology. That is a task that Christians must do for themselves and it can be achieved only by gradual Christian recognition that the difficult elements are no longer serviceable. Whenever Christians engage with Jews, they find that the relationship becomes more important than the dogma – and that, ironically, is the very essence of Christianity itself. And Jews need to ask of their Christian partners that they come to the dialogue neither as triumphalist nor penitent, but with the understanding that they have something to offer. We are not yet at that synthesis, but continued goodwill will take us there.

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