

75 YEARS AFTER SEELISBERG - REFLECTION

BY

WALTER HOMOLKA*

THE TEN POINTS OF SEELISBERG

Point 2: Remember that Jesus was born of a Jewish mother of the seed of David and the people of Israel, and that His everlasting love and forgiveness embrace His own people and the whole world.

Point 5: Avoid disparaging biblical or post-biblical Judaism with the object of extolling Christianity.

The *Ten Points of Seelisberg* (1947) stand at the beginning of a fundamental insight. Christian-Jewish dialogue can be constructive only if Judaism is not absorbed into Christianity and Christianity is not absorbed into Judaism. Both are independent religions with their own very different and religiously internal, highly pluralist perspectives, not only with regard to their own religious identity, but also with regard to the relationship to the other religion.

It had taken the Shoah to initiate such a profound change in Christian theology, which led to statements such as the *Ten Points of Seelisberg*. They have an echo up until today as is evident in the criteria proposed by the Roman Catholic theologian Helmut Hoping (b. 1956): Christian theology should recognize the fact that Jesus was a Jew and derive the necessary theological conclusions from this insight, Christology should take into consideration the messianic hopes of the people of Israel, and finally, Christians need to accept the insight that the chosenness and mission of the Jewish people are everlasting (Einführung in die Christologie, 147).

The dominant Christian tactic had been for a long time to simply ignore their Jewish contemporaries. According to the Christian scholarly consensus of the nineteenth-century Judaism was dead or dying, awaiting its burial, an expectation attributed to Jesus and his followers.

With Seelisberg a new perspective started to gain major ground. The insight grew that there is good reason for both traditions to consider their own histories and to learn to respect each other's traditions. It was the Protestant theologian Christoph Schwöbel (1955 – 2021) who declared in 1995 that Christology is in a "state of crisis."

The ills which plague present-day Christology have been with it for the last 250 years and their effects are today no less painful than they were when they were first felt in the days of Reimarus and Lessing.... to a large extent Christological reflection has, more or less openly, assumed the character of crisis-management where the deeper causes of the crisis are ignored in order to contain its most threatening immediate effects.... What seems no longer possible in modern Christology is to present an integrated picture of Jesus Christ's past and his presence for the church and the cosmos.¹

Seelisberg was one of the remarkable crossroads for Christian theologians; from this point on for them the insight began to dawn that real rapprochement will require Christian theology to define its own position between two poles: the substitution model of the "old" and the "new" covenant and the participation model where Christians receive admission to the covenant of the Jewish people through Jesus.

However, even before Seelisberg the German Jewish theologian and scholar Schalom Ben-Chorin came to a brave conclusion. He showed quite courageously his appreciation of Jesus's *Wirkungsgeschichte* in both Judaism *and* Christianity in his essay "Die Christusfrage an den Juden" of 1941 (The Question of Christ for the Jews). He admonishes Jews against refuting and "trivializing the gospels of Jesus Christ," a trivialization that he felt was in fact a "blasphemy" given the Jewish perspective from which they were written. He continues:

[In first-century Palestine] there stood a highly developed Judaism—with a complex systematic theology, an even more complex and intricate system of canonical law as well as an age-old set of religious traditions—face to face with a young community with hardly any written books but only the belief in the Good News of the one who was crucified and resurrected for them. They struggle for a brief moment for rule over the known world. It fell to the Christians, and the Jewish Orthodoxy cannot deny this. But Israel did not disappear from the earth in the wake of the Christian ascent to power. No Christian orthodoxy can deny this ... that Israel *and* the Church can [both] survive in the world, can only mean that God wishes to ask questions of Israel through the Church and that that very same, true, and living God wishes to ask questions of the Church through Israel. And this means they must ask questions of each other—for God's sake.²

¹ Christoph Schwöbel, "Christology and Trinitarian Thought," in *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 113, 117.

² In Walter Homolka, *Ein Leben für den Dialog*, Gütersloh 1999, 34 – 37.

Sixty years after Schalom Ben-Chorin and more than fifty years after Seelisberg over two hundred rabbis and Jewish intellectuals acknowledged the universal contribution of Christianity in the *Dabru Emet* proclamation in 2001; first published in the *New York Times*, they argued that it is

time for Jews to learn about the efforts of Christians to honour Judaism. We believe it is time for Jews to reflect on what Judaism may now say about Christianity.... Jews can respect Christians' faithfulness to their revelation just as we expect Christians to respect our faithfulness to our revelation.

In an important development, recognizing the steps taken by the Roman Catholic church in particular, Orthodox rabbis from the United States, Israel, and Europe recently confirmed, in a declaration concerning Christianity, the necessity and importance of a partnership between Jews and Christians. This declaration highlights theological and ethical commonalities without blurring the boundaries or negating lasting differences.³

This mutual acceptance of Judaism and Christianity as valid religions cleared the path for a more constructive theological dialogue. Therefore, the *Points of Seelisberg* have ignited a gradual process based on the awareness that there is a need for continued revision and changes in Christian as well as Jewish theologies. The task for Christian theologians will be to create a Christology free of the heavily caricatured Judaism hitherto intrinsic to Christian identity formation and doctrine. What is now needed are concrete steps toward remodeling Christological doctrine. The historical Jesuses, Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Jew, Yeshua ben Josef, and the Christ of Faith as proclaimed by Christian churches, all contain both the scars of dispute but also the seeds of a new beginning.

*** About the author:**



Walter Homolka B.D., M.Phil., PhD (King's College London), PhD (University of Wales Trinity St. David), D.H.L. (HUC-JIR New York), Dr h.c. (JTS-University of Jewish Studies Budapest), Rabbi. (Germany)

Since 2003 Rector of the Abraham Geiger College at the University of Potsdam, since 2014 Professor of Modern Jewish Thought and Interreligious Dialogue at the School of Jewish Theology Potsdam. Chairman of the Leo Baeck Foundation with its project „Dialogue Perspectives“ and director of the Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich Scholarship Fund.

³ CJUC, “Orthodox Rabbinic Statement on Christianity,” December 3, 2015.