

75 YEARS AFTER SEELISBERG - REFLECTION

BY

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TO REMEMBER & TO AVOID: TEN LESSONS FOR TODAY

Seventy-five years after Seelisberg the world remains awash in antisemitism, racism, and xenophobia. With this essay series, we are building a memory culture around Seelisberg that directly challenges bias and bigotry. Yet, as Barbara U. Meyer astutely observed, there is an over-estimation of the political powers of memory culture.¹ Thus, we must ask ourselves what are the moral and political aims of such a project? Who are we speaking to, and how are we reaching that audience? Thinking with our forebearers from Seelisberg – what should we remember and what should we avoid today?

Audience: Who is the audience for the religious ideas that need to be revisited and revised when confronting religious and racial intolerance today?

In increasingly interreligious (and secularized) European and American societies religious beliefs and ideas extend beyond congregational walls and into popular discourse. Thus, the audience for theological and religious re-thinking must seek out diverse religious institutional partners, as well as reach those who are no longer officially affiliated with a religious or spiritual community. The audiences consuming theological antisemitism today are broader than the Christian pew-sitters that the Seelisberg conference addressed. Our approaches to the question of disarming this hatred require us to consider the needs of this multireligious, multiracial audience, which includes those of no faith as well (e.g., the Nones and the Dones - *Editorial note: "Nones" - indicate they have no religious affiliation; "Dones" – may identify as Christians but have given up on church attendance and denominational affiliation.*)

Approach: Antisemitism and other forms of racial and religious intolerance in Europe & the U.S.

In Europe and the United States, the work of dismantling antisemitism is intimately linked to dismantling anti-black and anti-brown racism, Islamophobia and other forms of hatred. These

¹ Barbara U. Meyer. Jesus the Jew in Christian Memory: Theological and Philosophical Explorations (Cambridge UP, 2020) p. 28.

hatreds should not be seen as competing, but as interdependent forms of animus. Of course, each hatred frequently needs to be addressed independently, as each has nuanced genealogies and particular applications that demand individual responses. At the same time, we must also work collectively and collaboratively, with an awareness of where these hatreds overlap and how they fuel one another. We need to recognize that in interpreting religious texts and traditions, religious communities have often been complicit in violence, oppression and murder of supposed “others” and “outsiders.” Working towards a collective religious re-thinking around religious and racial bigotry is surely a group effort for everyone committed to human flourishing. The Seelisberg conference also recognized the need to address antisemitism specifically, while acknowledging antisemitism as part of a larger constellation of troubles for humanity.² This awareness and orientation to the work should not be forgotten.

Medium: The Power of 10

Wisely, the original authors of the Ten Theses of Seelisberg knew that lists are powerful and timeless tools of communication. And as they sought to speak to European Christian churches shaped by the story of Moses, Mount Sinai, and the Ten Commandments – the drafters of Seelisberg had a compelling framework within which to work. As we commemorate Seelisberg, I suggest that ICCJ, and like-minded organizations, continue to embrace a practice of interreligious list-making and adopt this timeless tool for our new social media age. Lists are the powerful bedrocks of shareable Twitter threads, Instagram stories and TikTok videos. Lists can spark important conversations, and importantly lists can be amended and revised as they are shared, reshared, and reshaped.

In my own work, I am turning from primarily historical and descriptive projects to more constructive ones that aim to combine an appreciation and analysis of the past, with some actionable suggestions in the present. To that end, I’ve put together “Ten Lessons for Today,” inspired by Seelisberg, that incorporate the methods and observations outlined above. Importantly, I welcome suggestions for improvement and to have my own blind spots identified. Indeed, I offer this list in a spirit of humility and collaboration -- I hope that it might be amended and revised, as it is shared, reshared, and reshaped.

² “Whilst the Conference recognizes that the problem of antisemitism is but one of the many problems of mutual relationships between members of different faiths, creeds and races which at present trouble mankind, it recognizes also that antisemitism has become especially dangerous because of its exploitation as a political weapon” (Seelisberg, Commission 1, Principle 3).

“Ten Lessons for Today”:

1. **Remember that antisemitism is a sin and an injustice.** Indeed, all religious and racial prejudices are sins and injustices. These prejudices are pervasive, pernicious, and often interconnected, and involve both social sins and personal sins.
2. **Remember that religious diversity is part of human history.** Living with religious difference has been, and will continue to be, part of the human condition.³ We must continue the search for better theological and political frameworks that not just help us to live with religious difference, but that allow us to thrive and flourish together.
3. **Remember the stories and histories of interreligious cooperation and creativity.** Even as we reckon with our failings, there are both hope and instruction in examples of interreligious flourishing and friendship.
4. **Remember to hold onto hope, and to avoid despair.** The work of dismantling antisemitism, as well as other religious and racial prejudices, will not be done alone, nor will it be done in one lifetime.⁴ The enormity of the tasks could overwhelm those committed to this sacred but challenging work. But because these prejudices are interconnected, each small effort that succeeds is of ultimate value.
5. **Avoid dehumanization in all its forms.** Each and every person is made in the image and likeness of God; if a policy, practice, or profession of belief involves removing the humanity and value of another person or human community, it should be rejected.
6. **Avoid promoting false narratives and lies about your neighbors of other faiths, as well as no faith.** Avoid stories grounded in lies, generalizations, and half-truths, or that truck in superstitions or fears. Avoid making broad statements that speak in generalizations about peoples and communities.
7. **Avoid disparaging a religious community that is not yours in order to exalt your own religious community.** The flourishing of your religious community is not threatened by the flourishing of other religious communities; likewise the negation of another religious community does not lead to the affirmation of yours.
8. **Avoid the good religion / bad religion trap.** We must reject this false binary and reckon with both the pains and the possibilities of building healthy and sustainable interreligious societies. Religious people, religious institutions, and religious ideas shape policies and

³ Qur’an 5:48: If Allah had willed, He would have made you one community, but His will is to test you with what He has given each of you. So compete with one another in doing good. To Allah you will all return, then He will inform you of the truth regarding your differences.

⁴ Pirkei Avot 3: It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.

politics in ways that can cause harm and suffering, and in ways that can cause flourishing and growth.

9. **Avoid flawed interpretations of religious texts responsible for antisemitism and other prejudices.** We must reject readings and teachings of sacred texts that foster prejudice within our interpretive religious communities. Words create worlds⁵ – thus interpretative religious communities must take responsibility for hermeneutically-rooted prejudices that have morphed into political and social forms and work to correct the broken worlds they are responsible for building.
10. **Avoid denying or minimizing the dangerous reality of antisemitism and religious and racial prejudices.** Individual lack of direct experience or knowledge of religious and racial prejudice does not mean that it is not real. Be willing to listen and learn from others.

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⁵ Susannah Heschel on her father Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: “Words, he often wrote, are themselves sacred, God’s tool for creating the universe, and our tools for bringing holiness - or evil - into the world. He used to remind us that the Holocaust did not begin with the building of crematoria, and Hitler did not come to power with tanks and guns; it all began with uttering evil words, with defamation, with language and propaganda. Words create worlds, he used to tell me when I was a child. They must be used very carefully. Some words, once having been uttered gain eternity and can never be withdrawn. The Book of Proverbs reminds us, he wrote, that death and life are in the power of the tongue.” (Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, p. viii).