

75 YEARS AFTER SEELISBERG - REFLECTION

BY

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DO WE HAVE A DECALOGUE FOR DIALOGUE IN BOX 9906753?

In his speech at the 5th World Holocaust Forum, held in Jerusalem in January 2020, Professor Yehuda Bauer discussed various reasons for the outbreak of the Second World War.

Nazi Antisemitism Not Merely Propaganda

After pointing out that the German industrial production in the mid-30's had reached the pre-crisis level, and that unemployment had almost been eradicated, Bauer quoted a memorandum written by Adolf Hitler, sent to his Number 2, Hermann Göring, in August 1936:

Since the beginning of the French Revolution, the world has been drifting with increasing speed towards a new conflict, whose most extreme solution is named Bolshevism, but whose content and aim is only the removal of those strata of society which gave the leadership to humanity up to the present, and their replacement by international Jewry. [...] I wish only to record my conviction that this crisis cannot and will not fail to arrive, and that Germany has a duty to make its existence secure by all possible means. [...] For a victory of Bolshevism over Germany would not lead to a Versailles treaty, but to the final destruction, even the extermination of the German people [*Ausrottung des deutschen Volkes*].

Bauer called attention to the fact that Hitler's memorandum was not propaganda: it was not written in order to incite the people, it was not even intended for publication. This was an instruction from the dictator to his Number 2, stating that war was inevitable, and that their true enemies are the Jews who wish to subject all of humanity to international Jewry.

Bauer also pointed out the similarities between the line of thought in this memorandum and the famous speech by the *Führer* to the *Reichstag* on January 30, 1939:

Today I will once more be a prophet: If the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the bolshevization of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe [*Die Vernichtung der jüdischen Rasse in Europa*].

In his speech Bauer ascertained that the antisemitism of the leaders of the Third *Reich* was a deeply held belief that should not be ignored by historians, politicians, church leaders *et alii* today. It was antisemitism that triggered the Nazi leadership to think that it had to act swiftly and resolutely in order to prevent the annihilation of the German people by world Jewry. Bauer convincingly argued that the Second World War was the result, at least in large measure, of antisemitism. In other words, opposing antisemitism – in all its forms, wherever it surfaces – is a peacekeeping operation.

The Context of the Seelisberg Points

When the sixty-five participants from nineteen different countries who met in Seelisberg in August 1947 formulated their Ten Points they ushered a new era in Jewish-Christian relations. Many denominational, ecumenical, and interreligious documents would follow, written by those who took over the baton from the Seelisbergians who ran the first race. These documents have undeniably deepened the discussion, but we must not forget that the Seelisbergians were convening only two years after the end of a war that was instigated by men who were obsessed with antisemitic rage. (The fact that the document uses the expression “the Jewish problem” is, at least for me, an indication of the extent to which the antisemitic discourse was ubiquitous at that time, even among those who were appalled by antisemitism and who, therefore, wished to further Jewish-Christian relations.)

Given that this was the context, it is only natural that the Points of Seelisberg focused on the issue of antisemitism, and they did so in a masterly way, by presenting their message in the form of a *dialogue decalogue* (before Leonard Swidler created his). The ten recommendations fall into two categories, one of which focuses on *the problem of de-Judaization of the earliest Christian movement*. The Points point out that Jesus of Nazareth, his mother Mary, the first disciples, the apostles, the first martyrs, and the first members of the Church were Jews. In other words, the first step away from anti-Jewish theology is *die Heimholung Jesu* (Editorial note: *Heimholung* = *homecoming*), because to present Jesus in a non-Jewish way is theologically problematical. To present him in an anti-Jewish way – as if the core of his mission were to point to the insufficiency of then contemporary Judaism – is even more troubling. The recommendation of James Parkes still stands: “Good theology cannot be built on bad history.”

The second category of recommendations in this decalogue for dialogue is *the refutation of the deicide charge and punitive supersessionism*, i.e., that Jews are reprobate, accursed, and reserved for a destiny of suffering. The fact that four (Points 6–9) out of ten points address this issue informs us

about the extent of this devastating theology during the Second World War and the decades – or should we say centuries? – leading up to the war.

Rediscovering the Decalogue

How well-known are the Ten Points of Seelisberg today? I can only speak about the situation in my native Sweden, especially Church of Sweden, the largest Lutheran denomination with some six million members. I fear that the Points are almost never read and discussed outside of the small circle of friends of the Jewish-Christian dialogue. Sermons, articles, and books intended for a wide audience more often than not present second temple Judaism as the theological contrast of Jesus, not as his historical context. As a matter of fact, ancient Judaism seems to be a theological library that one visits primarily in order to find faults that Jesus fortunately fixed.

Hence, there is a need to rediscover the insights of the decalogue for dialogue, in Sweden and elsewhere. I am reminded of the ending of *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The archaeologist and Marion Ravenwood have found the Ark of the covenant: they brought it to the U.S., and thus saved it from those who wanted to exploit it for anti-Jewish purposes. But, most remarkably, professional archaeologists are not allowed to analyze the Ark. Instead it is put in a wooden box – marked with “TOP SECRET ARMY INTEL 9906753 DO NOT OPEN!” – and taken to the enormous Hangar 51 in Nevada. When the archaeologists demand to see it, study it, and spread information about it, they are met with utter disinterest. Major Eaton dispassionately informs them that “We have top men working on it right now.” “Who?” Jones asks, and Eaton responds “Top ... men.” Indiana walks away and says to Marion: “Fools. Bureaucratic fools! [...] They don’t know what they’ve got there.”

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