



Reforming, Rereading, Renewing: Martin Luther and 500 Years of Tradition and Reform in Judaism and Christianity

ICCJ 2017 Conference in Bonn, Germany

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A report by Dr Murray Watson, a conference participant from Canada and one of the more than 60 speakers and presenters at that conference in Bonn, Germany from July 2 to 5.

When Martin Luther launched his critique of medieval Catholicism 500 years ago in Wittenberg, Germany, he could not have imagined how the ripple effects of his actions would shake Christian Europe to its heart, causing a rupture in Christianity that has only recently begun to heal. But it was not only *Christians* who experienced the impact of Luther's actions. In his later writings, Luther had harsh words also for *Jews*, who were the targets of some of his more caustic words, because of their refusal to convert and integrate into Christian society. For those reasons, Luther's life and work have had powerful ramifications over the last five centuries, both *ecumenically* and *interreligiously*.

Luther's legacy—both its positive and negative aspects—was very much on the mind of the delegates to the International Council of Christians and Jews' 2017 conference, as they gathered in Bonn, Germany from July 2 to 5, to reflect, not only on Luther personally, but on larger questions around reform, re-reading and renewal in our two religious traditions. What is the appropriate role of tradition in religion? How does legitimate reform take place? How have Judaism and Christianity changed since Luther's time—and how are they continuing to change today?

A major part of that change has been in the realm of Jewish-Christian dialogue, and so it was appropriate that the 2017 conference also marked seventy years since the 1947 Seelisberg Conference, the first international gathering of Jews and Christians in the aftermath of the Shoah. Out of the historic Seelisberg gathering came the now-famous "Ten Points of Seelisberg," which pointed the way to a radically new Christian approach to Judaism. The ICCJ looks back at Seelisberg as a founding moment in its history—and so we reflected together on how far we have come since the summer of 1947.

The conference began on the afternoon of Sunday, July 2, with a keynote address by Rabbi Abraham Skorka, words of welcome from religious and civil dignitaries, and a beautiful programme of Jewish and Christian music, both traditional and contemporary. On Monday, July 3, we explored themes of tradition and reform, in both Judaism and Christianity, led by panels of distinguished religious leaders and scholars. The afternoon's workshops explored topics of reform and renewal, as well as focussing on Seelisberg, and on Luther's relations with Judaism. Before dinner, a plenary session invited us to think about what ingredients contributed to a successful religious reform.

On Tuesday (July 4th), we delved into questions around liturgy and prayer, and what roles tradition and reform played in those fields. The following workshops were dedicated to how the Reformation anniversary could be a time of recommitment to Jewish-Christian relations; exploring how seemingly contradictory biblical texts might be reconciled; Anglican approaches to the dialogue; the question of St. Paul and the challenges he raises for Jews and Christians; and the trajectory that has led from the Seelisberg points to the ICCJ's "Twelve Points of Berlin" and beyond. The afternoon was reserved for bus and walking tours of historic and cultural sites around Bonn and Cologne.

The conference's final day opened with a plenary based on Martin Luther's famous declaration,

“Here I stand; I can do not other”. Is this, in fact, the only possible approach to Jewish-Christian relations ... or are we able to imagine new and different futures for our dialogue, moving constructively beyond the events of our past? The morning’s workshop sessions developed a variety of related themes: similarities and differences between Jewish-Christian dialogue and ecumenical work; the value of study in Jerusalem as a resource for church renewal; the contexts and implications of the 1934 Barmen Declaration; themes of fear and resilience; and a sharing of dialogue experiences from the “Mediterranean Abrahamic Teams” project.

In the afternoon, the place of religions as a resource for conflict resolution provided the theme for the next plenary, followed by a concluding session, examining why, as Jews and Christians, we should take interest in the holidays and holy times of our religious neighbours. The conference concluded with a festive dinner in the dramatic setting of the Godesburg Castle, overlooking Bonn, where the outgoing ICCJ executive and the organizing team were warmly thanked and congratulated by the attendees, at the end of a highly successful and very stimulating 2017 conference.

This year’s conference brought together several hundred participants from more than two dozen countries around the world, and this year the ICCJ was very happy to welcome Cuba as its newest national member. The high calibre of the plenary and workshop sessions was matched by the energy of the conversations over coffee and meals. All over the world, the ICCJ’s members and supporters continue to promote creative and deeply-appreciated initiatives aimed at fostering inclusion, understanding, cooperation and relationship-building. While many members are also active in broader Abrahamic or interreligious groups, they also reaffirmed the central and unique importance of the Jewish-Christian relationship, and this conference was a reminder that, as Jews and Christians, there are still many, many important topics that we need to develop further in our dialogue.

Overall, our days at the Gustav Stresemann Institut were a time of learning and reflection, a time to make new friends and to renew old acquaintances. The 500th anniversary of the launch of the Reformation, and the 70th anniversary of Seelisberg, provided excellent launching-points for us to look backward with clarity, and to look forward with enthusiasm and hope. The ICCJ continues to be a dynamic and relevant organization, and the 2017 conference confirmed the importance of its work, and the strong commitment of its members. Thank you to all those who were involved in organizing this year’s event, and to the local team, who provided such a warm welcome and a fascinating conference programme for us all!

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