Holocaust Memorial Day

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In 1947, in the town of Seelisberg in Switzerland, several dozen Christians gathered for what was called an "Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism." With the aid of a number of Jewish participants, most prominently the French historian Jules Isaac, they composed a groundbreaking statement. It was entitled, "An Address to the Churches," more commonly known as "The Ten Points of Seelisberg."

Dismayed by the realization that perennial anti-Jewish Christian teachings had contributed to the climate that made the Holocaust possible, they were determined "to avoid any presentation and conception of the Christian message which would support antisemitism under whatever form." They sought to create a new and positive relationship between Jews and Christians.

Their efforts gave birth to the organization that I am honored to serve as president, The International Council of Christians and Jews. It could be said that from its inception, the ICCJ has always been guided by the vision of Martin Buber, whose home in Heppenheim, Germany today serves as its headquarters. In the aftermath of the horrible atrocity of the Shoah, Buber wrote, "despite everything, . . . the peoples in this hour can enter into genuine dialogue with each other."

Which brings us to a pivotal question on this solemn occasion. The past cannot be changed. No matter how horrible, no matter how much we might desire to, it is beyond our ability to alter. "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us," in the words of J.R.R. Tolkien. Therefore, how can we in 2015, in a time when violence and terrorism swirl around us, best remember – and honor – the millions of men, women, and children slaughtered by the Nazi regime of death? What are we to do?

Surely, there are many principled responses. Among them is the mission and the work of the International Council of Christians and Jews. I speak specifically as a Christian because I am convinced that the unspeakable evil of the Holocaust demands nothing less than a deep-seated and profound religious response.

As Pope Saint John Paul II wrote, "For Christians the heavy burden of guilt for the murder of the Jewish people must be an enduring call to repentance; thereby we can overcome every form of anti-Semitism and establish a new relationship with our kindred nation of the Old Covenant. Guilt should not oppress and lead to self-agonizing thoughts, but must always be the point of departure for [a penitential change of heart]."

Thanks to pioneers like those gathered nearly seventy years ago in Seelisberg, today the time that has been given to us is unprecedented in religious history. Diatribe has been superseded by dialogue. Bishops and church ministers learn at yeshivas and synagogues; rabbis celebrate the installation of new popes; university professors collaborate in intensive research and publication across religious lines, and all around the world Jews and Christians dialogue in living rooms and in each other's houses of worship. This has never happened before!

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I believe it is the responsibility of our generations in whatever nation we dwell to fully explore the wonderful possibilities these opportunities present. But there is much work to do. The habits of centuries are not unlearned in a few decades.

Nonetheless, if after something like 1800 years Christians and Jews can take major strides in turning around their relationship from one of hostility and estrangement to the beginnings of friendship and solidarity, then this is a beacon of hope for many other (and shorter-lived) interreligious conflicts that beset our planet.

Turning suspicion into friendship is the mission of the International Council of Christians and Jews and its national member organizations in over thirty countries. Today it also involves developing enriching relationships with the followers of Islam through our International Abrahamic Forum. It seems to us that such efforts are a very fitting way to give tribute to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. We invite everyone to undertake similar ventures.

With sincere thanks for the privilege of offering these remarks at today's commemoration, we pledge to pursue this vision of interreligious respect and enrichment in the years ahead. Thank you!

Dr. Philip A. Cunningham is president of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ).

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