75 Years after Seelisberg - Defining Antisemitism

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Part of a series of reflections initiated by the ICCJ on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Seelisberg Conference (July 30 through August 5 in 1947), known mainly for its "Ten Points" and also marking the founding of the ICCJ. For more information see here.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) is asking Christian churches to endorse its working definition on antisemitism, which defines antisemitism as “a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews” and “its rhetorical and physical manifestation are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”[1] The working definition does not explain or examine the roots of these perceptions, but provides examples of their manifestation, most prominently, against the “state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity.” As a definition developed by “policymakers, scholars, educators and museum professionals,” the definition is concerned foremost with Israel-related antisemitism and remains reticent about the theological roots and manifestations of anti-Judaism.

Does the IHRA definition provide a better definition and more tools for national and international church bodies in the fight against antisemitism than the “Ten Points of Seelisberg,” which were written in 1946?[2] In Seelisberg, people (mostly men) of faith gathered to define and combat antisemitism. They brought deep knowledge of the Jewish and the Christian religious traditions and convened to create a theological framework to address and involve the churches. Billed as an “Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism,” the “Ten Points” list core anti-Jewish doctrines and biblical interpretations, such as the hierarchized God of the New Testament over the God of the Old Testament, the false juxtaposition of the commandment for neighborly love over against the law of talion of an eye-for-an-eye, the deliberate obfuscation of the Jewishness of Jesus, the apostles, as well as many of the conflicts in the New Testament. The *Teaching of Contempt* as Jules Isaac, one of the main authors of Seelisberg, aptly summarized this tradition of distorted interpretations creates and sustains negative perceptions of Jews.[3] Without the biblical and theological framework, the origins of contemporary misperceptions of Jews and Judaism cannot be explained. But secular scholars’ lack of theological competence and discomfort with religion creates a tendency to emphasize rupture and discontinuity between the modern ideology of racist political antisemitism and its “religious,” medieval predecessor. Secularization is understood as defining feature of modernity, which turns religion into (pre)history. But this is a mistake, as religion remains central to framing and fighting modern antisemitism, including Israel-related antisemitism.

Antisemitism is more and in essence different from racial and religious prejudice. It cannot be remedied by appeals to more tolerance, greater diversity, or inclusion alone. It is a “sin against God and humanity” in the deep sense of this theological concept. When the WCC called antisemitism a “sin” and “irreconcilable with the profession and practice of the Christian faith” in its founding document in Amsterdam in 1948, it was probably unprepared to accept the full implications of this statement.[4] As a “sin” and a “heresy” antisemitism goes to the core of theological truth, because it points to a fundamental distortion of the image of God and of the Self. Theodor W. Adorno, using the language of Freud and of psychoanalysis, explains antisemitism as a perversion of the Christian belief in substitutionary atonement in his *Elements of Anti-Semitism*:

> “In the image of the Jew which the racial nationalists hold up before the world they express

> their own essence. Their craving is for exclusive ownership, appropriation, unlimited power, and at any price. The Jew, burdened with his tormentor's guilt, mocked as their lord, they nail to the cross, endlessly repeating a sacrifice in whose power they are unable to believe."[5]

Jews are not only turned into idols of enmity, but into redemptive sacrifices, whose suffering atones for inadequacy and disbelief. As in a reversed playhouse mirror, the distorted image of Jew reflects the viewer back in a renewed, redeemed, and purified state. Their affliction pays the wages of sin of a fallen world. This is the very definition of sin, characterized as the state of being bent back into oneself, incurvatus in se, which defines the inability to love God and the neighbor. It is also the very definition of heresy, as the Jews are turned into redemptive sacrifices whose suffering falsely promises the creation of national unity, the establishment of social justice, and the protection of world peace (as Adolf Hitler famously did in his speech before the Reichstag on January 30, 1939).

Anti-Zionism suffers from idolatry as the Jewish state takes on the sins of racism and colonialism. The characterization of Israel as a colonial or apartheid state unifies members of white mainline churches in the global North with Christians from the global South. Representatives of white privileged churches establish their anti-colonialist and anti-racist credentials without having to do the hard work of accounting for their own institutional and national complicity in colonial missions. For representatives of BiPoC (*Editorial note: Black, Indigenous, and People of Color*) global South churches, anti-Zionism provides a concrete enemy and clear "solutions" amidst a sense of powerlessness against the systemic forces of racism and colonialism. The idol replaces active engagement with the multidimensional reality of oppression and injustice that characterize the world we live in. Sin lurks in the harm done to Israelis and diasporic Jews as well as the distorted self-image of what it means to be and act as Christian in the world.

It is impossible to fight antisemitism, on this view, without theological and political self-reflection and analysis. The power of Jew-hatred derives not primarily from error and the distorted representation of the Jewish Other but from the deformation in the self that continually generates new projections. As an idol of enmity, the perception of the Jews is ever shifting but always uniting disparate political camps and bridging ideological contradictions in the desire for redemption.

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[1] https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism [January 26, 2022]
[2] The International Council of Christians and Jews, *Reports and Recommendations of the Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism* (Geneva, 1947).
[3] Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: The Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston) 1964.
[4]https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-reiterates-standpoints-against-antisemitism
[5] Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments,* edited Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, transl. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 137-138.

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