



(Translated) Speech at the closing dinner of the ICCJ Annual Conference in Berlin, on Wednesday, 8 July 2009

31/08/2009 | Minister of State Hermann Gröhe

Dr Weissmann,

Rabbi Brandt,

Participants in the ICCJ Annual Conference,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me to address you here this evening at the end of your Annual Conference. It was a very special conference. It will probably go down as a new milestone in the history of the Christian-Jewish dialogue. Because with the twelve Berlin Theses you have renewed the foundation for your work.

The predecessors of the Berlin Theses – if I may put it that way – the Seelisberg Theses of 1947 were coloured by the immediate impressions of the horror of the Holocaust. They marked the beginning of a much-needed clean-up of church teaching. They began with theological statements which revealed anti-Judaism in all its absurdity.

That one and the same God speaks to each and every one of us through both the Old and New Testaments, that Jesus and his first disciples were Jews, that the Passion story and the role of the Jews involved must be considered in a very differentiated manner – all of this, all the Seelisberg points, are largely a matter of consensus in the Christian world today.

But there is no doubt that there are, regrettably, some Christian tendencies which remain immune to this consensus. That is why the Berlin Theses pick up on the themes from Seelisberg. But they go much further.

The Berlin Theses recognize what has been achieved. They are explicitly directed at both Christian and Jewish communities. They set forth specific tasks and goals for the years and perhaps even decades ahead. And they broaden the outlook away from just the Christian- Jewish dialogue to include also the dialogue with Muslims.

I believe this is all right and proper. And I am very grateful for your work. You have laid solid foundations for the future of the Christian-Jewish dialogue. I am certain of that.

And what does the future of the Christian-Jewish dialogue look like? That is the question you have asked me to answer briefly this evening. I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you: I don't know.

Who is there who can give precise information about the future? Even the prophets generally used images and metaphors for their prophecies.

On a very topical note, I call to mind the current crisis on the financial markets. It is true that isolated voices had long warned of the imminent collapse of the credit and fiscal economy. But no-

one really foresaw the full extent of the crisis. It took us by surprise and caused certain goals and plans to be put on the back burner. Other things became the priorities.

It is impossible to say exactly how the future will look. It's like in rowing. We look in the direction we have come. There's no way of looking ahead. There may be some individuals who, like the cox, are looking forwards. But their judgement alone hardly carries us onwards. The strength to put one's back into it and row steadily towards the future comes mainly from two other sources.

One of these is experience, fundamental attitude, wisdom. Rowers, too, take their bearings from distinctive places they have already passed. By the way, it is worth noting that religious buildings – in Germany, mainly churches – are particularly prominent and visible from a distance. They can offer support and orientation.

The second source of the energy which allows us to row on ahead is hope and aspirations. One usually has an idea of where one is actually headed.

Of course I also have hopes and aspirations when it comes to the Christian-Jewish dialogue: I want it to continue to play a part in reducing discrimination and prejudice.

I want it to remain a basis from which controversial issues and problems can be discussed objectively. That this is necessary can be seen again and again.

If I go further and think about interfaith dialogue as a whole, then this is what I want it to achieve:

Firstly: No-one should be able to use religion to legitimize violence.

Secondly: I want the dialogue across religious and cultural divides to prevent conflicts or resolve existing conflicts. Disputes are part of life. But disputes cannot be allowed to injure body or soul.

Thirdly: I want the idea of freedom in responsibility, of brotherliness and charity to be spread more widely.

And all of this could be summed up in one goal: to live in peace with each other.

You have pointed the way over the past few decades. To go back to the image of the rower: your stroke has taken us a good way on. The methods of Christian-Jewish dialogue are interpersonal contacts and face-to-face talks – entirely in keeping with Martin Buber's ideals. For he was convinced that the main precondition for the emergence of a true dialogue is that everyone must accept the other just as he is. According to Martin Buber, the person across from you must always be regarded as a "thou", and never as an "it".

The church, too, has been guilty of this over the centuries: it has talked about Jews, taught about Jews and passed judgement over Jews instead of talking and learning with them.

The way to good coexistence is via dialogue. And half of a good conversation consists of listening. This requires a willingness to understand. This requires an ability to put oneself in the position of another. And it requires an ability to think through all the various arguments. Listening is an art.

People in a conversation must also know what they are talking about. They should be clear about their own position. In the words of Martin Buber again: "In order to be able to go out to another person, one has to have been, one needs to be, with oneself."

Religion is one of the most controversial topics for a discussion. It touches people in their very innermost soul. Ultimately every question aims at how the partners see themselves. This poses

challenges for interfaith dialogue.

This very point, however, shows at the same time the importance of interfaith dialogue. Precisely because religion defines a person so strongly, incorrect theological statements can have a terrible effect. That was and is the problem of anti-Judaism. But it is also true of Islamic teaching on Christians and Jews.

And there is yet another aspect which makes interfaith dialogue such a delicate subject. There are limits to the dialogue which must be accepted. In the end, questions of the interlocutor's religion remain open. Because only through faith itself does the whole dimension open up.

No-one outside Judaism can entirely understand it. No-one outside Christianity can entirely understand it. And no-one outside Islam can entirely understand it.

It may sometimes be difficult to accept these limits. But it is also a way to prevent everything from being mixed up in one pot. Hiding aspects of faith or simply ignoring differences, trying as it were to manufacture agreement, brings new dangers. It can blind us to the key issues and hinder a solution. The differences that exist must be accepted, not swept under the carpet.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have tremendous respect for the task you set yourselves. You have achieved much in the past few decades. Notwithstanding the remaining challenges, this can be felt in the relationship between Christianity and Judaism today. Your Berlin Theses are proof of this.

Your Theses bear the name of the city from which the persecution and murder of the Jews of Europe was organized by the Nazi regime. This is a special obligation and a special honour. Our country has changed. But it has not forgotten. The recollection of the horrific acts of the Nazi regime and the horrors of the Shoa are firmly embedded in our memory. This is reflected in the numerous places of remembrance. This afternoon you were at the memorial for the murdered Jews of Europe. This is just one example.

The image of the rowing boat has made it clear already: to some extent we judge everything that comes upon us on the basis of our history and our experience. Together with our fundamental values and convictions, they are the compass for new destinations. So the past and our attitudes to it also determine our future.

The recollection of the Shoa and its victims creates a high degree of sensitivity to the fact that freedom and democracy are always at risk. Remembrance can shield against arrogance. But it also demands commitment – commitment to a peaceful coexistence. Our country is very much aware of that.

This is largely thanks to the endeavours of the German Coordination Council and its Societies for Christian-Jewish Cooperation. The fact that you chose Berlin for your Annual Conference, ladies and gentlemen, is a gratifying expression of thanks to your largest member. Yesterday, indeed, you all celebrated together the 60th anniversary of the German Coordination Council. And I can only echo Federal Chancellor Merkel's words of praise for the work of the Societies for Christian-Jewish Cooperation.

I am grateful that such close attention is being paid to Germany and its transformation. Just recently, US President Obama provoked quite a reaction with his speech in Buchenwald and his respect for the way Germany has dealt with its past. Words like these encourage many people here in Germany to continue in their commitment.

Ladies and gentlemen, after the rain, the grass will grow, after wine, conversation will flow! May I ask you to raise your glasses and join me in a toast to the past few days in Berlin, and to all your

many achievements over the past few decades. And, looking to the future now, I'll stay with the watersports image and say this: carry on full speed ahead!

The German original version of this speech held at the ICCJ-Conference in Berlin 2009 could be found here:

Rede von Staatsminister Hermann Gröhe (LINK!!)