

75 YEARS AFTER SEELISBERG - REFLECTION

BY

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THOUGHTS ON THE RELEVANCE OF THE SEELISBERG THESES FOR CHRISTIAN-JEWISH DIALOGUE TODAY IN SWITZERLAND AND ELSEWHERE

What is the starting point of the Christian-Jewish Working Group in Switzerland?

Our working group was founded in 1946 and representatives of the CJA Switzerland contributed significantly at that time to planning and holding the conference in Seelisberg in 1947. Before and during the Second World War, about 30,000 Jewish refugees from Europe found refuge and protection in Switzerland - *but about 30,000 Jewish refugees were turned away at the Swiss borders and handed over to the German border guards and thus to the Gestapo.*

Switzerland is home to the oldest German-speaking Jewish - not destroyed by the Shoah - libraries, art collections, theatres, male choirs, synagogues, communities and museums in Europe - *but it was not until 1996 that Parliament appointed the Independent International Commission of Historians to research the collaboration of political and industrial Switzerland with Nazi Germany. The results were published 20 years ago and have been the subject of controversial debate ever since*¹.

This ambivalent initial situation continues to influence the Christian-Jewish dialogue in Switzerland to this day. The culture of remembrance about the war period and the Shoah has so far been supported only by private initiatives, and only a few months ago Parliament approved a proposal for a Swiss Holocaust memorial that was also co-initiated by CJA Switzerland². Also on a personal level, anti-Jewish prejudices on the Christian side and fears of persecution on the Jewish side can unconsciously influence the Christian-Jewish dialogue. To put it in a nutshell, the question could be:

Christian - "Is this Jewish person really closer to God than I am?"

Jew - "Would this Christian person hide me in an emergency?"

¹ <https://www.uek.ch/en/>

² <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/proposal-for-an-official-swiss-holocaust-memorial-gets-a-boost/46461904>

What is the situation of the Jewish minority in Switzerland today?

Since archaeologists discovered a small bronze finger ring with an engraved menorah during excavations of Roman sites near Rheinfelden near Basel, the presence of Jewish families since Roman times on the territory of present-day Switzerland is considered certain³. However, the Jewish minority was subjected to the expulsions and persecutions common in Central Europe in the Middle Ages just as elsewhere, and it was not until 1874 that Jews were granted equal rights - *but soon afterwards, in the first referendum in 1893, the prohibition of the practice of shechita was introduced, which is still in force today (although Muslims are also affected by it today), and still some Jewish communities are not recognised in public law as religious communities with equal rights.*

So how can the Christian-Jewish dialogue be conducted on an equal footing when the Christians belong to the national churches whose pastors receive their salaries from cantonal tax revenues and whose real estate secures the financial future of the Christian communities, while the private Jewish communities can barely finance the security costs for guarding the synagogues?

I would like to see more creative, local solutions to this inequality - like in the canton of Bern, where the Reformed Church gives a pastorate to the Jewish community to finance the salary of the rabbi. And more state funding is needed to guarantee the guarding of Jewish synagogues, schools and community centres.

What are the challenges for Christian-Jewish dialogue today?

In an increasingly secularised Switzerland, where non-denominational people will soon be the largest group, religious freedom is more often questioned or even attacked and it becomes more difficult for religious minorities to practise their religion. Religious holidays and traditions such as kosher cooking or boy circumcision come under pressure, and discussions with non-religious people to defend religious freedom are costly. Jew is no longer a dirty word but there is less understanding and less tolerance for religious life - this affects the Jewish minority and the Christian-Jewish dialogue.

Finally, the anti-Semitism that has become more visible in the pandemic is shaping the Christian-Jewish dialogue. I find it untenable and it makes me angry - but Jewish parents in Switzerland urge their boys to wear the kippah on the street only under their hats and not in public because they fear attacks and violence.

³ <https://www.augustaraurica.ch/assets/content/files/publikationen/Forschungen-in-Augst/FiA36.pdf>

So - how do we encounter each other as Christians and Jews today?

Can I as a Christian recognise and reduce my philosemitic ideas and feelings? Can I see my Jewish friends and interlocutors as equally religious or not, equally doubtful or despairing or not - without imposing closeness to God (and my unspoken envy) on them?

Can we guarantee Jews in Switzerland and everywhere sufficient protection, security and equality that they feel safe in everyday life and can put aside fears of persecution?

We need to talk.

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