

On Antisemitism and Jewish-Christian Relations: A Response to Peter Prove

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Peter Prove, director of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches (WCC), published an essay in *Current Dialogue* entitled “Antisemitism, Definitions, and Future Cooperation.”¹ The essay is based on a paper originally presented at a session on antisemitism during a meeting held in Paris in June 2019 between the WCC and the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC)², of which I currently serve as Vice-Chair. I gave a presentation on the current state of global antisemitism in the same session.

Mr. Prove’s essay is, to a great extent, a defense, or perhaps better, an apologia, against charges that the WCC is antisemitic³ in its pronouncements and positions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and especially its rejection of the [definition of antisemitism](#) promulgated by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), a definition that been affirmed by an ever growing number of national governments, churches, municipalities, and NGOs.⁴ This rejection is a significant point of contention between the WCC and IJCIC. Prove’s explanation of the WCC’s position, as I will outline below, is not convincing; one hopes that this essay might lead the WCC to reconsider its stance.

Mr. Prove writes of his personal experience, first with the Lutheran World Federation and then with the WCC, of each organization’s efforts to come to grips with the history of antisemitism. And he also reminds the reader of the WCC’s repudiation of antisemitism “as sin against God and man” in a document called “Concerns of the churches - The Christian approach to the Jews”⁵ at its initial meeting in Amsterdam in 1948, stressing that the absence of the indefinite article “a” is of great significance, “raising an implication of archetypal sin.” The document was “... received by the assembly and commended to the churches for their serious consideration and appropriate action.”

¹ Peter Prove, “Antisemitism, Definitions, and Future Cooperation. *Current Dialogue* 71, no. 5 (December 2019) 665-673.

² IJCIC is the recognized representative of world Jewry in its dialogues with the Vatican, Ecumenical Patriarchate, and World Council of Churches. The consortium of 11 Jewish organizations was founded in 1970, in response to the dramatic, positive transformation of Christian attitudes toward Jews and Judaism, notably the Roman Catholic Church’s *Nostra Aetate*. IJCIC member organizations include American Jewish Committee (AJC), Anti-Defamation League (ADL), B'nai B'rith International (BBI), Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), Israeli Jewish Council on Interreligious Relations (IJCIR), Rabbinical Assembly (RA), Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (OU), United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ), and World Jewish Congress (WJC).

³ See, for example, https://www.ngo-monitor.org/ngos/world_council_of_churches/.

⁴ See for example, this far from exhaustive list: <https://www.ajc.org/adoption-of-the-working-definition>

⁵ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/1948-amsterdam/concerns-of-the-churches-the-christian-approach-to-the-jews>

To underscore the WCC's rejection of antisemitism, Prove references subsequent statements of the WCC's leadership, for example, that of WCC General Secretary Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit in response to the massacre of Jews worshipping at the synagogues meeting at the Tree of Life building in Pittsburgh in October of 2018. These statements are indeed praiseworthy, but as I will discuss in more detail below, other statements and positions of the WCC, especially regarding the State of Israel and the IHRA definition, suggest that the WCC has not fully grappled with the reality of antisemitism, and at times refers to its 1948 pronouncement on antisemitism as a strategy to deflect the charge that aspects of its advocacy on the part of the Palestinians do cross the line into antisemitism.⁶

Prove also discusses the problematics of whether antisemitism should be spelled with or without a hyphen, and comes down in favor of no hyphen, a conclusion with which I agree. This, however, is primarily a semantic, academic issue with limited relevance to the reality of anti-Jewish prejudice in the world today.

In his discussion of the hyphen, Prove makes a distinction between antisemitism and anti-Judaism, to wit:

... in its current usage, "antisemitism" is a new term intended to refer specifically to an ancient hatred -- hatred of Jews, as members of a community defined by race, ethnicity, religion, or any other characteristic, real or imagined. Anti-Judaism, on the other hand, refers more narrowly to an animus against Judaism as faith or against Jews as a community of faith. (2)

Prove correctly points out that "in practice both attitudes tend to be inextricably combined in the individuals who hold them." Thus, while historians might want to draw distinctions between the "anti-Judaism" of medieval Christianity and the antisemitism of Wilhelm Marr or the Nazis, practically speaking, today the terms are synonymous. In this regard, Prove's point about whether Jews are perceived as a race or a faith makes the Jews the central focus, rather than the antisemites. What distinguishes them is that one justifies its hatred through destructive theology and the other through pseudo-science.

Indeed, the distinction between the two is based in part on the Western, Christian idea of "religion," a concept that is foreign to Judaism. As Daniel Boyarin has pointed out, there is no word for "Judaism" in classical Jewish texts; to speak of the Jews as an "ism" cannot be supported by the evidence.⁷ Defining Judaism as a religion reveals a lot about Christian self-understanding and the projection of that understanding onto Jews, but entirely ignores how most Jews throughout history have understood themselves.

It is only in the modern era, under the domination of majority Christian societies, that some Jews began to view themselves as a "religion" as it came to be defined, and

⁶ For Tveit's statement, see <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/wcc-expresses-sympathies-and-condemnation-in-wake-of-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting>; for an example of deflection, see, for example <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/wcc-reiterates-standpoints-against-antisemitism>.

⁷ Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*. Rutgers University Press, 2018.

then primarily as a strategy to gain the rights and privileges offered them by “enlightened” societies. The bankruptcy of this move was painfully exposed during the Shoah and Jews who pay attention to such nuances today reject “religion” as the defining characteristic of what we call “Judaism”. What unites the vast diversity of Jews today is not “religion” or “faith” (though this is, of course, essential to many Jews) but rather an amalgam of familial peoplehood, history, language(s), Torah, faith, culture, land, and so on. The individual Jew does not need to subscribe to all of these (and many do not) to consider themselves a Jew or to be considered as such by most other Jews.

This misunderstanding of the Jewish people and their self-understanding(s) is an ongoing challenge in Jewish-Christian relations. One of the fundamental principles of interreligious dialogue is to allow the “other” to define themselves, something the WCC itself affirmed in 1982.⁸ As long as the WCC and other Christians continue to define Jews in Christian terms, it will be difficult if not impossible for them to understand and relate to Jews as Jews see themselves, a *sine qua non* for true interreligious understanding (and in this regard the term “interreligious” is itself similarly flawed). So, therefore, when Prove, in his final paragraph states, “We are all, I think, religious believers,” he mischaracterizes IJCIC as an organization and the Jewish people as a whole.

I now want to turn my attention to what I think is the central point of Prove’s essay, namely, his defense of the WCC’s rejection of the IHRA definition of antisemitism. IHRA defines antisemitism as:

... a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.

Prove writes that “the WCC would actually welcome a sufficiently precise and sufficiently widely accepted definition of antisemitism to clearly identify instances of condemnable hatred of Jews as Jews...” This is a particularly puzzling sentence, since earlier in this essay, as cited above, Prove himself offers a definition of anti-Judaism and antisemitism which, though expressed in different terms, is not substantially different from the IHRA definition (and which, as Prove himself points out, is “a non-legally binding working definition.”)

In light of the growing list of those who accept the IHRA definition,⁹ one must ask what Prove would consider “sufficiently widely accepted.” In what follows, however,

⁸ “Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish-Christian Dialogue” “For these reasons there is special urgency for Christians to listen, through study and dialogue, to ways in which Jews understand their history and their traditions, their faith and their obedience “in their own terms”. Furthermore, a mutual listening to how each is perceived by the other may be a step towards understanding the hurts, overcoming the fears, and correcting the misunderstandings that have thrived on isolation.

<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/interreligious-trust-and-respect/ecumenical-considerations-on-jewish-christian-dialogue>

⁹ See supra, n. 3.

we find what I believe to be the real problem for Prove and the WCC: the concern that adopting the IHRA definition would somehow limit the WCC's ability to express

... legitimate, even if vociferous criticism of specific policies and actions of the government of Israel [that] can be distinguished from the 'sin' of antisemitism. That is a major problem for those of us who wish to join in confronting the resurgent threat of antisemitism, but who are a strongly critical of the occupation of the Palestinian territories and of practices in that context. (5)

This too is puzzling, since many other organizations and individuals, including but certainly not limited to Jewish and Israeli organizations that define themselves as Zionists and supporters of Israel, are able to level the harshest criticism at the policies of the government of Israel without provoking charges of antisemitism. Indeed, being Zionist and a supporter of Israel does not preclude support of Palestinian rights and the establishment of a Palestinian state; the two are not mutually exclusive. Nor are Gentile individuals or organizations, including Christian ones, precluded from criticizing policies of the Israeli government, as long the criticism is factual, fair, and expressed in terms that rely neither on anti-Jewish stereotypes nor on the tropes of classic Christian anti-Judaism.

To support his critique, Prove specifically points to one of the examples the IHRA definition offers: "Denying the Jewish people the right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor," and refers to Israel's controversial Nation State law,¹⁰ which, he claims, fails to provide "any constitutional guarantees for the rights of Palestinians and others living in the country."¹¹

Prove himself cites a WCC document that states that "...we affirm the right of the State of Israel to exist and Jewish people's right to self-determination."

Now, however, he also wants the WCC to say that the critic in the IHRA example, who is "denying to Jewish people the right to self-determination", is not antisemitic. He cannot have it both ways. Is the real issue, then, not self-determination itself, but the imagined critic's further claim, "that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor?"

The United Nations, to its great shame, said as much in 1975, when it defined Zionism as racism. To its credit, the UN repudiated that definition in 1991. And the WCC itself, in its "Concluding statement issued by the World Council of Churches delegation" to the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban, South Africa in 2001 said the following:

There are some statements in the NGO Forum document which are outside the WCC's policy framework, and which the WCC cannot support, such as:

¹⁰ <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/24241>

¹¹ This is a speculative claim.

equating Zionism with racism, describing Israel as an apartheid state, and the call for a general boycott of Israeli goods. (Emphasis added)¹²

Prove never speaks of Zionism in his essay, but his argument seems to suggest that saying “Zionism is racism” is not antisemitic in the eyes of the WCC. This is as troubling as it is inescapable. Zionism, in any of its many historical garbs, is always essentially about the Jews’ right to self-determination. The WCC presumably does not see that right as racist, since it affirms it and, as noted above, rejects the equation of Zionism with racism. There must therefore be, in the WCC’s eyes, something else intrinsic to the very notion of a Jewish state that can be called racist without being antisemitic. I would ask: what is it? Absent any convincing response, Prove appears to align the WCC with the imagined critic in decrying *Jewish* self-determination – but no other – as racist. That would be antisemitic.

It is this very point, together with the WCC’s repeated highlighting of statements by people who deny the legitimacy of Israel,¹³ that leads many Jews and Jewish organizations to the conclusion that the WCC is at least hostile to Israel if not antisemitic. To dispel this belief, it would help for the WCC to state unambiguously that it supports Zionism as the right of the Jewish people to self-determination in a sovereign state in their ancestral homeland. I have cited several WCC documents that contain all the elements of such a position. This would in no way curtail the WCC’s right to criticize specific policies of the Jewish state or even specific expressions of Zionism.

In the final analysis, the WCC’s rejection of the IHRA definition is unconvincing and inconsistent. Furthermore, it suggests that the WCC has neither fully grappled with the implications of its 1948 statement nor truly come to understand Jews as we understand ourselves. I note that the Reference Group to the WCC’s Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace (to which I am an interfaith observer) commended to the WCC Central Committee to engage “in critical reflections on key terminology, including ... antisemitism [and] Zionism.” Until it does that critical reflection, relations with world Jewry, with the State of Israel, and with IJCIC will continue to be fraught.

¹² <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/international-affairs/united-nation-relations/world-conferences/world-conference-against-racism-racial-discrimination-xenophobia-and-related-intolerance-durban-south-africa-26-august-aug-7-september-2001>

¹³ See <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/webinar-on-middle-east-racism-never-lose-hope> and <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/wcc-expresses-profound-sorrow-and-prayers-for-archbishop-atallah-hanna>. See as well this response to the latter: <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/ijcic-deeply-disappointed-by-wcc-statement-on-archbishop-atallah-hanna-300997609.html>. The WCC subsequently updated the original webpage with the following: “Correction: Archbishop Hanna has after his recovery informed the WCC that the poisoning was not intentional.”