



Antisemitism, definitions and future cooperation

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This opportunity to speak on the topic of antisemitism takes me back to one of the earliest focuses of my work for international church-based organizations. I am a member of the Lutheran Church of Australia, and for 12 years from 1997 onwards served as Assistant General Secretary for International Affairs and Human Rights at the Lutheran World Federation. Early in that phase of my career, I was involved in a project gathering perspectives and experiences from dialogue and cooperation between Lutheran churches and Jewish communities in different national contexts around the world, since the 1984 LWF Assembly in Budapest.

That Assembly had been marked and inspired by the presence of Dr Gerhart Riegner, former General Secretary of the World Jewish Congress. It constituted a milestone in Jewish-Lutheran relations, and launched a process in which Lutheran churches around the world were challenged to confront the heritage and consequences of Martin Luther's anti-Jewish writings, through dialogue with Jewish counterparts in their respective national settings.

At the Budapest LWF Assembly, Dr Riegner had underlined the necessity of conducting conversations specifically between Lutherans and Jews in light of this specifically Lutheran heritage, and the way in which it had provided fertile ground for the genocidal ideology of National Socialism in Germany.

The culmination of this process was an international consultation of Lutheran and Jewish partners, convened in Dobogókő, near Budapest, on 9-13 September 2001. Among the many unforgettable shared experiences of that consultation was the shock, disbelief, grief and prayer in which we participants – Jewish and Christian – were united as we watched the news of the attacks in New York and Washington DC unfold in real time.

The focus around which the consultation was convened was 'Antisemitism and Anti-Judaism', noting that "while a renewed, virulent antisemitism is plaguing the world, a new, deeper awareness of anti-Judaism can be observed in theological research and church practice."

Let me pause here to make some semantic remarks about the term 'antisemitism'. In the article I contributed to a 2003 publication I co-edited following the Dobogókő consultation, I observed that in the discussion of issues as difficult and delicate as antisemitism and anti-Judaism, even a hyphen can have an unexpected significance. I

acknowledged that for my awareness of this fact I was indebted to Shmuel Almog's note "What's in a Hyphen?", published in the Summer 1989 issue of the newsletter of the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism.

As explained in that note, the hyphenated version of the term "anti-Semitism" is potentially misleading because it conveys the notion of opposition to or hatred of peoples belonging to the Semitic language group, which includes both Jews and Arabs. Indeed, I have latterly heard arguments – to my mind completely disingenuous arguments – based on that very interpretation of the hyphenated version of the term even from within the WCC's own constituency as well as from other quarters.

Consequently I have been affirmed in my preference for the non-hyphenated version, which better acknowledges the reality that both in its original invention by Wilhelm Marr in the 1870s and 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 a faith or against Jews as a community of faith. While the conceptual distinction might be important, in practice both attitudes tend to be inextricably combined in the individuals who hold them.

The article I wrote for the 2003 publication was entitled "Antisemitism and Anti-Judaism Today: A Human Rights Perspective". My key point was that both attitudes, or rather manifestations of those attitudes, constitute clear violations of fundamental principles of human rights. Antisemitic acts offend against the prohibition of racial discrimination and, in its most extreme manifestations, a whole swathe of human rights up to and including the right to life. Acts based upon an attitude of anti-Judaism offend against the principle of freedom of religion or belief.

The *Shoah* represented the most extreme imaginable expression of the denial of these rights as a political creed. And it was in large measure due to international revulsion at the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis against the Jews that the political will was found to codify international human rights law in its current form – the cornerstone of which is the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

In his contribution to the publication I co-edited, Dr Jean Halperin of the World Jewish Congress, quoted Louis Henkin in affirming that it was "beyond doubt the *Shoah* of the Jews in Europe that provided the drive to make international human rights law a reality." I don't think it is unrelated that my original predecessor in my current position – the founding Director of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), Dr O. Frederick Nolde – took up active and sustained engagement in the drafting of the UDHR as a first priority, in particular the drafting of what became Article 18 (on freedom of religion or belief).

As Dr Halperin noted, it is "the intrinsic concern shown by true believers for the sanctity of human life and dignity" that undergirds our support for the realization of all human rights for all people without discrimination. Halperin made an apposite reference to Emmanuel Levinas, quoting him as follows:

Monotheism is not an arithmetic of the divine. It is the gift, perhaps supernatural, of seeing the human being as absolutely similar to any other human being within the diversity of historical traditions that everyone continues. It teaches xenophilia and anti-racism.

The developments and discussions of which I was a part then on behalf of the Lutheran World Federation were, as I have subsequently become more clearly aware since taking

up my role at the World Council of Churches, part of a wider history of ecumenical engagement in confronting antisemitism and anti-Judaism. And the figure of Dr Riegner pops up at different pivotal points in that history, as an animating spirit and catalyst.

As Secretary General of the World Jewish Congress, Riegner was working in Geneva during the Second World War doing his best to rescue Jews from Hitler. I am told that in the WCC-information and its future General Secretary Willem Visser 't Hooft, he found much more help than from the International Red Cross. Riegner and Visser 't Hooft wrote joint letters and memoranda to the British and American governments and to William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury. It was "a unique case", said Riegner, "in the history of Jewish Christian relations".

No doubt that history of personal relationship and engagement, as well of course as the historical moment, deeply informed deliberations at the founding Assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam in August 1948, just a few months after the State of Israel declared its independence. A fairly substantial report entitled "The Christian Approach to the Jews" was "received by the Assembly and commended to the churches for their serious consideration and appropriate action." That report contains the famous and oft-quoted declaration which has had considerable influence in the WCC constituency and in the wider Christian world:

We call upon all the churches we represent to denounce anti-semitism, no matter what its origin, as absolutely irreconcilable with the profession and practice of the Christian faith. Anti-Semitism is sin against God and man.

"Absolutely irreconcilable with the profession and practice of the Christian faith". And not just a sin, but "sin against God and man", raising an implication of archetypal sin.

Now, my former colleague Dr Clare Amos has observed that this declaration is made in a document the key thrust of which has to do with Christian mission to the Jews, and which states that "For many the continued existence of a Jewish people which does not acknowledge Christ is a divine mystery" and affirms proclamation to the Jews "The Messiah for Whom you wait has come. The promise has been fulfilled by the coming of Jesus Christ."

For my part, I am grateful that, as Clare notes, "the focus on mission to the Jews and potential conversion of Jews to Christianity found in the 1948 WCC Assembly documents has over the years been quietly dropped". But I have to say that the categorical denunciation of antisemitism expressed in that documentation still impresses. It is a very rare case in which the ecumenical movement expresses itself in such terms, rising to the highest and most unequivocal level of condemnation that could conceivably be mustered in our circles. It has informed the perspectives of many in the WCC membership and beyond. And it has often been reiterated in statements and reactions by WCC leaders regarding specific antisemitic attacks and incidents.

One of the most recent occasions on which this condemnation tragically had to be quoted was in response to the October 2018 attack on the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, the deadliest attack on Jews in the history of the USA. In his message issued immediately after that attack, WCC General Secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit stated that "The WCC denounces all violence based on religion, ethnicity, race or any other dimension of a person's identity or belonging, and this attack upon a Jewish community in a place of prayer and during a moment of celebration of their religious identity is an appalling violation of our shared humanity."

From his work with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), Rabbi David Sandmel has noted that this attack fell within a year in which ADL recorded the third highest number of antisemitic incidents in the four decades since it has been tracking such incidents. Whilst the 2018 total was 5% lower than in 2017, it was 48% higher than 2016 and 99% higher than in 2015. The ADL 2018 Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents that Rabbi Sandmel references focuses specifically on antisemitism. But as Rabbi Sandmel observes, “for all of us who envision a society in which all can ‘sit under their vine and under their fig tree with none to make them afraid’, the implications are much broader.”

Indeed. Inasmuch as the 2001 consultation in which I took part observed a “renewed, virulent antisemitism”, it seems that this sin against God and humanity does have the characteristics of an ineradicable virus, emerging again and again in fresh epidemics. The observation is by now surely trite, that we are presently living in a period in which a wave of populist movements around the world has given licence to and emboldened latent prejudices and hatreds against ‘the other’, greatly increasing the vulnerability of minorities of all kinds, including Jews. In this context, international human rights norms once thought settled and secure are now challenged by majoritarian nationalist politics which proclaim the rights and privileges of some, while denying the rights of others.

It is a new ‘normalization of hatred’, in which antisemitism – among many other old prejudices and discriminatory attitudes – is demonstrably on the rise again.

Unfortunately, the World Council of Churches has itself not infrequently been accused of promoting antisemitism. Indeed, such accusations have been increasing in frequency and intensity in recent years. They have particularly focused on the WCC’s policy positions and activities pertaining to the situation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories – most especially the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme for Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), which has been described in a recent NGO Monitor publication as the “World Council of Churches’ Training Camp for Anti-Israel Advocacy”.

In the face of this sustained negative profiling, even longstanding Jewish partners of the WCC have had their confidence in the relationship tested and shaken. But as is often the way with crises, this crisis has also proved to be an opportunity. It has impelled us to present an account of relevant WCC policy positions and activities directly to Jewish partners ourselves, rather than continuing to let NGO Monitor present WCC to you. And ironically the increasing closeness of exchange and encounter provoked by this crisis has served to greatly enhance the quality of our relationship, with IJCIC, with Rabbis for Human Rights, and with others. Not necessarily because of new agreement on major contentious issues, but simply because we are talking.

And there are points of major contention, particularly concerning the policies and practices of normalizing occupation and continuing military control of the Palestinian territories since 1967, to which the WCC remains fundamentally and resolutely opposed.

Most recently, a new point of contention appears to have arisen over the definition of the term “antisemitism” itself – or rather, the definition proposed by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) in 2015, the endorsement of which is

increasingly promoted as a kind of antisemitism litmus test. But I am afraid to say we in the WCC have grave reservations about this proposed definition.

The IHRA proposal consists of a core definition and a series of examples to serve as illustrations and to “guide the IHRA in its work”. The core definition, presented by the IHRA as a “non-legally binding working definition”, reads as follows:

Antisemitism is 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.

Now please understand, 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, and to protect legitimate criticism of the actions of individuals, groups or indeed of the government of Israel from being falsely characterized as antisemitic. Regrettably, the IHRA definition is simply too vague and too conditional and all-inclusive to achieve this. In particular, it fails in the essential purpose of a definition, to set bounds to one thing and to distinguish it from others. It fails to provide a basis on which legitimate, even if vociferous, criticism of specific policies and actions of the government of Israel 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 also strongly critical of the occupation of the Palestinian territories and of practices in that context.

Moreover, while they are not part of the definition itself, some of the given examples actually increase our concern at the potential misuse of the vagueness of the definition to attack free speech and political opposition.

For instance, the example given of “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g. by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor” becomes especially problematic in the context of responding to the recently enacted Basic Law: “Israel, the Nation State of the Jewish People”, which defines Israel exclusively as the nation state of the Jewish people, while failing to provide any constitutional guarantees for the rights of Palestinians and others living in the country (and which of course is highly controversial in Israel itself).

This leads me to what I think is the true core issue – the universality and equality of human rights. All human rights – including rights to life, freedom from torture, equality before the law, freedom of movement, a nationality, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, to take part in the government of one’s country, to work and to just and favourable conditions of work, to health, to education, and yes to self-determination... for all, regardless of race, religion, gender or any of the other usual criteria for discrimination. Because if human rights are not upheld as universal and equal for all,

then they can only be secured for any of us so long as power, privilege and influence favours our particular group.

In this respect, a recent public policy statement by the WCC Executive Committee – on “Ecumenical Accompaniment for a Just Peace in Palestine and Israel” – is germane.

We seek peace in the land of Christ’s birth, a peace that is founded on justice, rather than on violence, bloodshed and exclusion by one against the other, or the perpetual imposition of military occupation and control of an entire people.

Just as we affirm the right of the State of Israel to exist and Jewish people’s right to self-determination, so do we assert the equal right of Palestinian people to the realization of their rights to self-determination in a viable state on the territories occupied since 1967, and with Jerusalem as a shared city for two peoples and three faiths. Just as we categorically denounce antisemitism as sin against God and humanity, so do we reject discrimination, marginalization, collective punishment and violence against Palestinian people on the basis of ethnicity, race or religion also as sin against God and humanity.

We call for an approach to the situation in Israel and Palestine that does not reduce it to a competition of binary opposites, in which one must choose one side or the other, but that recognizes and affirms the common humanity and equal God-given dignity and rights of all people of the region.

As the World Council of Churches, we are bound to respond to the experiences and suffering of Palestinians, including our own Palestinian Christian constituency, according to the principle of equality of human rights for all – as Emmanuel Levinas said, “seeing the human being as absolutely similar to any other human being” – and which inspired our engagement and support for the articulation of the UDHR and international human rights law.

We are all I think religious believers who recognize the God-given dignity of every human being, and who align closely with the principles as modern international human rights law, impelled by our respective experiences of “barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind” – as the UDHR would have it, in the gender-specific usage of the time. And I think it is our calling in this particular time to insist on the universality and inalienability of human rights in order to confront the normalization of hatred that predisposes to further barbarous acts against anyone and everyone on whom such hatred is focused.

As much as my lawyerly self aspires to a clear and effective definition of antisemitism, I am not sure that our energies and passions are best spent in laboring mightily for such a definition. Better that we work together in confronting hatred in the real world contexts in which people experience it, and in addressing the many unprecedented challenges facing the world – our common home – today, and in which political short-termism is in desperate need of correction by the much longer-term ethical and moral perspectives of religion.

The practical experience of cooperation in these efforts, and the message that it sends to our constituencies and to the wider world, might well prove to be one of the best antidotes to the divisions between our respective communities.