



## **Back from Lund. Impressions of the 2019 Conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews**

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*The International Council of Christians and Jews held its annual international conference in Lund, Sweden on June 30 - July 3, 2019. This year's theme was "Transformations Within and Between: How Does Our New Relationship Affect Christian and Jewish Self-Understandings?" ICCJ First Vice-President, Liliane Apotheker, has written her impressions of the conference, which follows below.*

Lund, a small university town in southern Sweden, has always been an important center of religious life in northern Europe. The majestic Romanesque cathedral in the heart of the city welcomed more than 160 participants this year for a beautiful opening session of the annual ICCJ conference. The theme chosen for this year tangibly demonstrates the progress in the rapprochement between Christians and Jews, which allows us to study new questions. So we asked ourselves, "Transformations Within and Between: How Does Our New Relationship Affect Christian and Jewish Self-Understandings?"

These transformations are palpable for all of us. In his introduction of the conference program, the President of the ICCJ, the Reverend Dr. Bo Sandahl, noted that while in the past Lund let Jews know that they were to be kept at a distance and were regarded contemptuously, this year the courtyard of the beautiful Lutheran cathedral hosted an evening of lighting of Hanukkah candles in the presence of the small Jewish community of Lund.

According to Wikipedia, Sweden's Jewish community now has about 15,000 people. Its history during the Second World War is quite well known. In the 1930s, the Jewish population was some 7,000, a number that was increased by the 900 Norwegian Jews who fled Nazism in their own country and by Sweden's unreserved welcome of 8,000 Jews from Denmark in 1943.

Today, many antisemitic incidents caused by the far right and small groups of radicalized Muslims are of great concern to Swedish Jewish citizens. Nearby Malmo is often referred to as being both one of the most multi-ethnic cities in Europe but also the scene of rare demonstrations of violence against the Jewish community.

In the same city of Malmo, a rabbi and an imam together founded an association called Amanah, which they describe as a project of "Jewish and Muslim Trust and Faith." Rabbi Moshe David Hacohen and Imam Salahuddin Barakat have created a Beit Midrash/Madrassa-style study platform that allows the education, exchange and sharing of values of the two Jewish and Muslim communities. Together they led a workshop on "One Abraham: Two Traditions, Which Son?" during our conference. Without being naive and seeing it as the solution to all the problems of coexistence, we must salute the courage and determination of these two men in a context that is far from simple.

### **The first plenary sessions**

The first conference plenaries set the stage for both Jews and Christians: has our self-understanding been changed by the dialogue between us? Do Jews think of themselves differently since this new relationship was established and developed? Do they continue to see Christians only as Noahides? Can our theological concepts about the other be translated in such a way to make them understandable to those of the other religion?

Some movements in Judaism, such as the Reconstructionist movement, have abolished the idea of the Election of Israel, for example, and yet for Christians in dialogue with Judaism this concept is fundamental. Each new theological reflection leads to subtle changes in the dialogue between us and requires a deeper conversation. Dialogue is a path, not a completed work, even if there are many accomplishments.

Is it essential to have a very strong identity to enter into dialogue and to get to know each other better? This is a vital point and has been of concern to the actors and thinkers in the dialogue for a long while. One might think that in the case of a strongly asserted identity the dialogue is perceived as less destabilizing, less threatening, but is one really open to the other and to the depth of their spirituality if one is anchored in one's own tradition in an absolute way?

This essential question remains open in my opinion. I do not see how a universal norm could be established, and, if we did, we would significantly limit the number of people in the dialogue. But it is essential to enlarge the number of participants.

The two speakers during the first plenary session, Joshua Ahrens and Rebecca Lillian, rabbis both, a man and a woman, an Orthodox and a liberal, agreed that Christianity also has a special status for Judaism despite the asymmetry in our relationship. Therefore, we must continue to get to know each other better. It's all about this learning. During this learning we are also exploring the realm of possibilities by sometimes daring to approach limits that cannot be exceeded if we are to preserve the integrity of our respective religions. It is not a question of venturing beyond one's personal comfort zone, but of doing so within the framework of what is possible for the individual.

The second session was devoted to Christians, Bishop Michael Ipgrave and Professor Philip Cunningham: two men, an Anglican and a Catholic. The female perspective was regrettably absent from this plenary, regrettably because that viewpoint says something about human dignity and reflects the lived experience of women who are now agents of religious reality. Rebecca Lillian convinced me when she said that feminism liberates men as much as women, and so the female voice was missing for me in this plenary. Nevertheless, it was with humility and honesty that Michael Ipgrave spoke about the dangers of a naively universalist Christian vision. He also addressed the thorny issue of mission, without which, according to him, Christians do not know how to understand themselves and which they consider indispensable. But he added that it is lived in a very differentiated way within his Church and that mission is not necessarily directed towards Jews, with whom there would be instead a common mission, arising from the Covenant, with the goal of perfecting the world. This question of mission, to which Jews are very sensitive, is also at the very heart of Christian self-understanding and may be touching on an impassable boundary of the dialogue. The new understanding of this subject is influenced by the consequences of true encounter with the other. Michel Ipgrave also announced the publication in the coming year of an official document by the Anglican Church on its relations with Jews.

Professor Phil Cunningham maintained that the recent Christian affirmation that God's Covenant with the Jewish people is irrevocable has produced a decisive transformation for Christianity. The shock waves caused by this fact still trouble the Christian world at different levels. The dialogue must develop and become a deepening of common study so that we become partners who share perspectives and life experiences. Even in the absence of a Jewish community, Christians must bear in mind the virtual presence of this partner so that the new relationship becomes enacted as a concrete reality.

## **Nationalism and Antisemitism**

The afternoon was devoted to a roundtable on Nationalism, a threat to all of us and to dialogue. Hannah Bendcowsky painted a picture of the dangers of religious nationalism in Israel, where a Christian minority exists within a Jewish majority. This unprecedented reality poses a challenge to

both history and theology.

Mary Boys described the resurgence of white nationalism in the United States, which is characterized by hatred of people of color, immigrants, and of also Jews, who suffered two deadly attacks on synagogues in 2019. To fight effectively against this, we would have to accept that antisemitism is everyone's business, including within anti-racist movements that sometimes tend to trivialize antisemitism or simply dismiss it.

Jesper Svartvik described anti-Semitism in Sweden. He said it was due to a clash between some views of the right and the left, radical Islamism, and the Christian anti-Judaism that still persists in a post-Christian world. The far right is very active and accuses "global Judaism" of conspiring against the "Aryan race." Within the greater Muslim community, the hatred of Israel often manifests itself as hatred of Jews. The political class is slow to react to this. Christian and post-Christian discourse is permeated with anti-Jewish stereotypes: "eye for an eye" is more readily attributed to Jewish sources than "The Lord is my shepherd," for instance. For Jesper Svartvik, antisemitism is more heresy than sin: if Jesus is of the same essence as the Father, to claim that Christianity is better than Judaism is heresy.

The normalization of hate speech resulting from the resurgence of nationalism is a very worrying phenomenon that at the moment nothing seems to be able to stem. Social networks spread this hatred at an incredible rate, often in the name of the right to freedom of speech. Fabricated images of Israeli soldiers in Nazi uniforms and the outright rejection of the memory of the Holocaust are very common on the web. Tuesday morning continued the exploration of this volatile subject with a new analysis of American antisemitism today and in the past by Professor Alan Berger and by Johannes Heuman, a researcher who looked at the political and historical aspects of a particular hatred of Jews present in left-wing movements.

The ubiquity of the problem is frightening, the poverty of our means to combat this flood is just as frightening. The authorities react in most countries, to be sure, but this cancer has persisted for years without treatment and today it has metastasized.

## **A few workshops**

Numerous workshops were interspersed throughout the conference, further deepening the topics already discussed. These included a workshop on feminist theology and another on the links between exaggerated philosemitism and antisemitism, in which I participated. Other workshops examined antisemitism in various countries, the Seelisberg and Berlin statements, aspects of liturgy, a 2018 essay by emeritus Pope Benedict, the Assyrian diaspora, local interreligious initiatives, and joint text study. (The texts of the plenary presentations and descriptions of all the workshops can be found at [HERE](#).)

Tours of sites in the region provided some welcome breathing space on Tuesday afternoon. We, of course, visited the immense and splendid Lund cathedral and saw its 7-branched Menorah surrounded by Christian iconography, reminiscent of a time when the theology of substitution prevailed. I was seized by the presence of this powerful symbol representing the temple and its role in Judaism. This seemingly innocent appropriation, the guide told us, was a natural representation given the Jewish origin of Christianity (!), but it must acquire a new meaning for the very many faithful and also tourists who see this Menorah.

I hope that our presence in Lund will leave a mark on people's minds and that perhaps a written explanation will be offered to visitors describing the origin and real significance of this Menorah.

On the last day of the conference, the Abrahamic Forum presented an important multi-voice roundtable. Interreligious dialogue was proposed as a moral task for all of us. The Muslim world is

diverse and little known. It is accused of being extremist, unquestioning of its sources, and not open to dialogue with others, when in fact such texts exist as the Declaration of Marrakech (2016), which advocates citizenship and is inspired by the Charter of Medina. Personal relationships allow for local initiatives. The idea that it is necessary to practice dialogue in an unconditional and gracious way, as one prays, as one fasts, as one practices one's religion was the very compelling conclusion of this roundtable.

I attended the workshop on feminism that was presented by several renowned theologians, Mary Boys, Helene Egnell and Deborah Weissman. They explained how feminism had influenced their own theologies. By exploring what the female figures of the Bible say to us, we acquire new perspectives and another level discourse about God. Both are liberating for men and for women because this discourse dethrones exclusively male representations of God, and perhaps even simplistic representations. Some feminist theologies of liberation objected to what they saw as a patriarchal culture that was imputed to Judaism only and blamed on Judaism. To criticize patriarchy together, men and women, is unquestionably a common project that could bring all religions together.

I also led a liturgy workshop with Phil Cunningham. Together we explored what was possible within our respective traditions in terms of having each other in mind when we pray. This virtual or real presence can no longer and should no longer be ignored.

## **The Conclusion**

The last plenary session was exceptional in that all the conference participants gave their impressions for the future of their commitment and our common commitment to interreligious relations.

There was a long list of these impressions, so I recall here only some words that were spoken without commenting them:

- There is joy and energy in renewing commitments; in dialogue but also in studying together.
- There was an absence of Orthodox Christians and also of part of the Southern Hemisphere, especially Asia and Africa. However, nationals from the Southern Hemisphere have been present in some of our communities; how can we involve them in our meetings?
- The opportunity to form personal relationships is invaluable; the conferences allow us to organize new initiatives.
- There is a need to undertake a form of dialogue within each of us in order to explore specific concepts such as justice, peace, reconciliation and then to study them together and so see the face of God in the face of the other.
- Mutual trust is essential to any examination of a new understanding of oneself, which was the subject of this conference. It also involves learning about the boundaries that are visibly shifting, feeling confirmed in our path and our actions, and taking joint steps first at the local level.
- The ultimate goal is to achieve total respect for the other beyond our differences.

I gladly conclude this report with these points and add all my thanks to the organizers: Bo Sandahl, president of the ICCJ, Peter Borenstein co-organizer of the meeting and Anette Adelman, ICCJ General Secretary.