

# THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS AND THE UNIVERSITY OF FRIBOURG

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## **THE ICCJ AT FRIBOURG 1948<sup>1</sup>**

From 21 to 28 July 1948 the ICCJ met for the first time at the University of Fribourg.<sup>2</sup> The Chronicle speaks of around 130 participants from 17 countries. The location was chosen not only because of the international reputation of its university, but also because of its favourable position on the railway axis between Lausanne and Bern and its bridge function between the cultures. The participants were lodged mainly in the international seminary Salesianum, in rooms without running water. These were in every respect different times: postwar times, times of need, but also times of upheaval and of creativity in Jewish-Christian encounter. The conference received words of greeting from Swiss federal president Celio, minister Petitpierre, from the Bishop of Fribourg, François Charrière, and from John Foster Dulles, then chief of the US delegation at the United Nations gathering in Paris. At the opening, the Rector of the university, Oskar Vasella, spoke, as did Jules Bovet in the name of the canton, and Everett R. Clinchy, president of the ICCJ. The president of the conference was Henri N. MacCracken,

president of Vassar College in the State of New York, who unwillingly provided a bit of humour at the opening session. After his speech, in which he spoke of a "historic hour", he sat down and the chair broke under his weight.<sup>3</sup> The conference languages were English and French.

### **THE WAYS OF DIALOGUE BEFORE FRIBOURG 1948**

The Fribourg conference of 1948 constitutes with the Oxford conference of 1946 and the Seelisberg conference of 1947 a founding event of the ICCJ. Here we cannot set forth the complicated history of the ICCJ origins in detail. Suffice to say that the London conference of Jews and Christians of 1928 was a motivator to found a "society of Jews and Christians", which would pursue the following two goals:

1. To overcome religious misunderstandings and to promote good will and collaboration between Jews and Christians, while maintaining mutual respect for differences in faith and life.
2. To oppose religious intolerance.<sup>4</sup>

In the same year 1928, the "National Conference of Christians and Jews" was founded in the USA. Similar councils of Christians and Jews also arose in a few other countries. The next development is marked by the experience of the Second World War. Under Hitler's bombs Christians and Jews drew closer together in the "British Council of Christians and Jews"; and they were pushed by the American association to institutionalize the collaboration by the holding of international conferences. Thus in 1946 the first international conference in Oxford took place. It concentrated primarily on the themes "Freedom, Justice and Responsibility" and came out with two resolutions, which would be important for the future: "to create an international umbrella organization of Christian-Jewish councils of the whole world, as well as to convoke an emergency conference for dealing with anti-Semitism in Europe."<sup>5</sup>

### **THE SEELISBERG CONFERENCE 1947**

That both goals could be realized in Switzerland, certainly speaks for the hospitality and for the businesslike culture of this country, but had to do not least with the fact that after the Oxford conference the intended international umbrella organization was already present with a secretariat office in Geneva.

The emergency conference for dealing with anti-Semitism took place in Seelisberg (Canton Uri) 30 July to 5 August 1947. From Fribourg came two participants: the Dominican Jean de Menasce, a Jew from Egypt who converted to Christianity, who was also Professor for missiology and comparative religions in our theological faculty; the Reverend Charles Journet, later Cardinal, but at the time rector of the Diocesan Seminary and Professor of Systematic Theology there. Both were close associates of the philosopher Jacques Maritain. Père de Menasce sympathized with Zionism; he opened Maritain's eyes in the 1920s for the salvation historical significance of Israel. Journet shared with Maritain the wish for a renewal of the Catholic Church. Maritain, at the time French ambassador to the Holy See, could not come to Seelisberg, but sent a message to the secretary of the conference, the pastor Pierre Visseur, entitled "Against Anti-Semitism".<sup>6</sup> He mentioned the six million murdered Jews and emphasized that this brutal hatred was also directed against Jesus Christ himself, because he was a Jew. Maritain viewed the founding of a Hebrew state in Palestine as "necessary and legitimate", but in his short communication he was not able to go into the social and political implications; he was further convinced that Christians had a great deal of work to do, of inner purification and reflection, if they wanted to overcome religious anti-Semitism. Christians should consider that Jesus was born of a Jewish virgin, that he himself was a Jew "par excellence de nature," that the apostles and first martyrs were Jews, that many absurd expressions such as "race of God-killers" and "perfidia iudaica" should disappear from Catholic word usage... Not least because of the strong impression his message left in Seelisberg, Maritain was elected as "honorary president of the International Council". In the history of Jewish-Christian dialogue the Seelisberg conference is referred to primarily because of the Ten Theses, which are primarily directed to Christians. In research it is emphasized that with these theses a lasting foundation stone for theological dialogue between Jews and Christians has been laid, "even if since then the relation between Church and Synagogue would be seen in some respects in a more complex and differentiated way."<sup>7</sup>

### **THE WORK OF THE FRIBOURG CONFERENCE 1948**

During the conference in Fribourg 1948, the second desideratum of the Oxford conference was translated into action: the International Council of Christians and Jews was formally set up. This occurred in a session "of the representatives of the American National Conference of Christians and

Jews, which existed since 1928 and had more than 16,000 members, the British Council of Christians and Jews, to which a considerable number of prominent personalities of the intellectual, social and political life of Great Britain belonged, and the Christian-Jewish Working Group of Switzerland.”<sup>8</sup>

The work of the Fribourg Conference took place in three commissions: In the “Educational Commission” the program of an “intercultural education” was planned; in it understanding and good will for people of other races, other religions and other nationalities should be awakened and the significance of foreign contributions to one’s own culture should be communicated. In the “Civil Commission” it was discussed how the national councils and the International Council of Christians and Jews could promote different measures for enlightenment as well as for increased international exchanges, as for example, the children who belonged to ethnic or religious minorities could meet together in summer camps with other children. In the “Religious Commission”, the meaning of the spirit of Seelisberg for Church and Synagogue as well as religious freedom were dealt with. A few speeches in the plenary meeting, dealing with the spiritual and ethical bases of our culture, aroused particular interest.

Thus Everett R. Clinchy, in his opening address, emphasized the shaping influence which the culture of the “Jewish-Christian” tradition had on the rest of the world in the last centuries, going out from the West: on the Russian, the Islamic, the Hindu and Far Eastern cultures, and they for their part should be challenged by this double tradition. One could say that all these cultures failed in their duty to practice a universal, intercultural brotherhood . This will not happen “either automatically or as a natural event;” but it can be result of a new intercultural education, an education for justice, for friendship, for understanding and for collaboration among the religious cultures of the world.<sup>9</sup>

Charles Journet and Jules Isaac spoke from the Catholic and the Jewish viewpoints respectively about the bases of our culture in view of the dangers threatening it. Journet saw in the opening to God and to his Kingdom, as occurred in the Old Testament in Isaiah, and as Jesus preached it, the motor of world history. We have to thank the message of the Kingdom of God not only for the idea of progress in history, but also the regarding of justice as a transcendental and not simply a profane virtue, as well as the dignity of man. Journet thought that this culture was threatened by atheism, hatred, cruelty and violence well up in human

hearts.<sup>10</sup> Jules Isaac asked himself two questions: “What in our culture is worth saving? What can we do to save our culture?” He responds by making reference to the spiritual foundations of our culture: justice, freedom, human dignity, the quest for truth, i.e. everything that makes up the grandeur, dignity and nobility of the human spirit. Isaac finds it above all in the Greek, Judeo-Christian and Roman tradition that essentially shaped the West. Yet as a path to our culture’s salvation, he also seeks contact with the spiritual elites of Islam, India and the Far East, especially elites that seek to work towards spiritual peace: “We have to open wide our doors and windows ... that is the way to salvation.”<sup>11</sup>

Looking back, we can marvel at the present-day relevance of certain proposals and discussions at the 1948 Fribourg Conference, those which emphasized inter-cultural, fraternal and ethical-spiritual cooperation among the world’s cultures.

The conference concluded with several statements, recommendations and greetings which allow us to determine that an atmosphere friendly to both Zionism and Ecumenism ruled the day. In his lecture, Jules Isaac had already described the Israelis who had constructed the Jewish state as *David redivivus*, who once again confronted Goliath and the Philistines on the battlefield. In an explanation of their prayer for peace in Palestine, the Christian members of the religious commission spoke about a peace “that is built upon justice ... and which allows all Jews, Christians and Muslims to live in harmony and mutual understanding.” At the same time, they greeted – not lastly from the standpoint of the struggle against anti-Semitism and in the hope that, through its new establishment in the land of the Bible, Israel would find a new spiritual strength to fulfil its vocation – the “restoration” of the Jewish state in Palestine. In a special statement, the Jewish members of the religious commission emphasized that they sought the same. Also worth mentioning is the greeting that the commission’s Christian members sent to the 1948 Conference of Churches in Amsterdam, which was the foundation of the World Council of Churches. The greeting asks for a discussion of anti-Semitism.

#### **CHAIM WEIZMANN, DOCTOR AND DOCTOR HONORIS CAUSA OF FRIBOURG UNIVERSITY**

That the Fribourg Conference marked the university with a Zion-friendly atmosphere was also (and not lastly) the result of the fact that Chaim

Weizmann was elected the first president of the State of Israel on September 12, 1949. Weizmann had graduated from Fribourg with a doctorate *summa cum laude* in 1899. On the golden anniversary of the doctorate's attainment, he was solemnly received at the University for a renewal of the degree. A commemorative plaque in the entrance hall of the main building of the university still marks the occasion. In the Rector's report for the academic year 1948–1949, Oskar Vasella wrote that this anniversary celebration represents "a singular event in the annals of our university's history, exceptional for the participation of many high ecclesiastical and civil authorities, the representative of the State of Israel in Switzerland, and also through an active participation of the Jewish community in Fribourg. It was a very harmonious and, for the university, a very honourable occasion. The high human qualities of the honoured personality, who spoke movingly about his own time of study in Fribourg, contributed greatly to the occasion. Let us hope" – so still the words of Rector Vasella – "that the expectations of the President, who offered a politically significant explanation of the holy places in Palestine, will be fulfilled, and let us rejoice that our university had the opportunity, to prove before the eyes of a wider public our spirit of human understanding and loyal solidarity with former students of other faiths."<sup>12</sup>

### **CRITICS AND OPPOSITION TO THE FRIBOURG CONFERENCE**

But not everyone agreed with the convergence of the Fribourg Conference with the goals of Zionism and Ecumenism. On July 25, 1948, Journet wrote to Maritain: "Here in Fribourg, there is a second session of the International Council of Christians and Jews which met last year at Seelisberg. I don't really understand the purpose of this conference, which sends 'Messages to the Churches.' Yesterday, a discussion on a greeting rejoicing in the establishment of the state of Israel took place. A Protestant took the floor to say that this was a purely political matter. A Rabbi protested, saying that it was a mystical matter, that Israel was held mystically to the Holy Land, as was already noted at the first Zionist conferences, and that he believed himself to be speaking on behalf of all Jews."<sup>13</sup> On August 13, 1948, a worried Maritain responded: "It's necessary to speak with Visseur [Dr. Pierre Visseur, the Council's Secretary]. The members of the Conference of Christians and Jews have good intentions, but they are diplomatically inept."<sup>14</sup> Journet and Maritain feared, that the conference's

religious-political statements might discredit it in certain religious circles, which is precisely what happened. Henceforth, the Roman Catholic Church was very careful to avoid all religious-political statements in relation to the State of Israel which might especially offend Muslims in general and Palestinian Christians in particular. Even the history of the emergence of the Conciliar decree *Nostra aetate* is shaped by this state of affairs.<sup>15</sup> On December 20, 1949, in an "Instruction on the Ecumenical Movement", Pius XII allowed the Holy Office to conjure up the danger of indifferentism. In 1950, Rome also described the ICCJ as an "indifferentist Organization" that ignored or minimized the differences in faith and morals, not least because of its programs for "inter-cultural fraternity."<sup>16</sup>

### **A SECOND ICCJ-CONFERENCE AT FRIBOURG UNIVERSITY 1987**

In 1987, forty years after the Seelisberg theses, another conference of the ICCJ took place at the University of Fribourg, this time with about 200 participants.<sup>17</sup> The theme was the overcoming of condemnations as an educational challenge. Yet the conference will be especially remembered for its lively discussions of the construction of a Carmelite monastery at Auschwitz, the beatification of Edith Stein and John Paul II's reception of the Austrian President Kurt Waldheim.

### **ENCOURAGING THE JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE**

As we can see, during the six decades after the 1947 Seelisberg and 1948 Fribourg Conferences, Jewish-Christian relations have remained a very sensitive matter. Since then, undeniable advances have been achieved on the theological and inter-religious plane that allows us to work today on a renewed basis. Yet many prejudices and hostile perceptions – not only between Christians and Jews, but also generally in our world – remain in the popular imagination and in various fundamentalisms on all sides. The ICCJ will therefore still have much work to do, and not only the ICCJ. I hope that the reflections of these three days and the work on the Berlin theses 2009 here at our university will be a decisive contribution to make progress in this very important field. I wish you all that our exchanges will really be fruitful, following the tradition of the former Fribourg conferences.

- 1| *Materials for the historical chapter of this opening conference were prepared by Mariano Delgado. See also: Mariano Delgado, Konferenz des Internationalen Rates der Christen und Juden an der Universität Fribourg 60 Jahre nach dessen Gründung, in: Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft 93 (2009) no 1.*
- 2| *See the chronicle of the conference and other informations: Qu'est-ce que le Conseil international de chrétiens et de juifs?, in: L'Amitié judéo-chrétienne, no 1 (September 1948) 13; Le Congrès de l'association internationale des chrétiens et de juifs à Fribourg (21–28 Juillet 1948), in: L'Amitié judéo-chrétienne, no 2 (January 1949) 12–13; Die christlich-jüdische Konferenz von Freiburg, in: Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ), 11 August 1948, 7; Christlich-jüdische Konferenz, in: Freiburger Nachrichten, no 171, 27 July 1948, 3; Fin du Congrès judéo-chrétien, in: Le Fribourgeois, no 114 (1948) 3; Le Conseil international de chrétiens et juifs, in : La Liberté [Fribourg], 30 July 1948, 4.*
- 3| *See: William W. Simpson – Ruth Weyl, The International Council of Christians and Jews. A Brief History. Heppenheim 1988, 28.*
- 4| *See ibidem 15.*
- 5| *See: Archiv für Zeitgeschichte (AfZ), NL Jean Nordmann, CJA, Ornstein an Nordmann, [24.] Juni 1948 (ohne Signatur: Dossier 294); see also Simpson – Weyl 24.*
- 6| *Jacques Maritain: Contre l'Antisémitisme, in: Nova et Vetera 22 (1946–47) 312–317 (Maritain wrote this text on 28 July 1947 at Rome), also published in: Jacques Maritain, Le mystère d'Israël et autres essais. Nouv. éd. augmentée. Ed. par le Cercle d'Études Jacques et Raïssa Maritain. Paris 1990, 221–231.*
- 7| *See: Christian M. Rutishauser, Jüdisch-christliche Arbeit von 1947–2007: was feiern – warum wir feiern!, in: 60 Jahre Seelisberger Thesen. Der Grundstein jüdisch-christlicher Begegnung ist gelegt! Bern – Fribourg – Zürich 2007, 14–19, here 17.*
- 8| *Die christlich-jüdische Konferenz von Freiburg, in: NZZ, 11 August 1948, 7.*
- 9| *See the opening speech in: AfZ [see above note 5].*
- 10| *The text is published in: Charles Journet: Chrétiens et juifs, in: Nova et Vetera 24 (1949) 238–244; La Liberté, 31 July 1948, 2.*
- 11| *See AfZ [see above note 5].*
- 12| *See: Universitas Friburgensis Helvetiorum, Bericht über das Studienjahr 1948–49. Erstattet vom derzeitigen Rektor Oskar Vasella. Freiburg/Schweiz 1949, 16–17.*
- 13| *See: Jacques Maritain, Correspondance, vol. 3, 1940–1949, ed. Fondation du Cardinal Journet. Fribourg 1998, 663–671, here 664.*
- 14| *Ibidem 669.*
- 15| *See: Benedict T. Viviano, L'histoire de „Nostra aetate“, la Déclaration sur les relations de l'Église avec les religions non chrétiennes, in: Mariano Delgado – Benedict T. Viviano (edd.), Le dialogue interreligieux. Avec la collab. de Patrizia Conforti. Fribourg 2007, 11–20.*
- 16| *See: Simpson – Weyl 29.*
- 17| *See ibidem 63–64.*

## BUMPS, FORKS AND DETOURS ON THE ROAD TO GOD'S KINGDOM

Marc Saperstein

During my rabbinical studies at the New York School of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion I once had a teacher who told us, “If you are ever asked months in advance to provide a title for a sermon, and you don't have the vaguest notion of what you will want to be speaking on so long before the actual date, you can always give the title, “For Such a Time as This”. When asked for a title a month and a half ago, I was tempted to go along with his advice. Instead I came up with a somewhat more colourful one, without really knowing what I was going to say. You will need to judge its appropriateness for what follows.

My actual remit was to present what I consider to be the most pressing issues and theological challenges for Jewish-Christian dialogue today. My response to this will be a bit quirky, as I will not be speaking about such issues as Israel, intermarriage, or the beatification of Popes Pius IX or Pius XII. Rather, I would like to share my perspective as a non-professional in dialogue, as a historian and not a theologian, on three general issues concerning our approach to inter-religious communication.