

**MEETING BETWEEN THE NCS AND THE NCC
JEWISH FEDERATION OF GREATER PHILADELPHIA
NOVEMBER 18-19, 2015**

Twenty-five delegates attended the fall meeting between the National Council of Synagogues and the National Council of Churches on November 18-19, 2015, at the building of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia. The topic was: "The Increasing Anti-Semitism and Anti-Christian Persecution Around the World." The two main presenters were Kenneth Jacobson, Associate National Director of the Anti-Defamation League, and Professor Elizabeth Prodromou of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese and Tufts University (who joined us via Skype as did several other participants including co-convenor Dr. Tony Kireopoulos). Rabbi David Straus of the Main Line Reform Temple, Wynnewood, PA, and Rev. Nicole Diroff of the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia served as moderators of the main session. Among the questions dealt with were: Is it happening again? Is this phenomenon different or is it a repeat of the past? What does the resurgence of anti-Semitism say about the nature of bigotry? Do Jews have a future in Europe, especially in France? What is the connection between anti-Zionism and the resurgence of anti-Semitism? Why is this issue/conversation important to your work and what are the issues as you perceive them? What has changed in our conversation on the subject and is there improvement? Why should we link the two versions of bigotry and are there commonalities or differences? What are we called upon to do about the problem?

Mr. Jacobson noted the differences between current European anti-Semitism and the previous phenomenon. Today's governments are unanimously opposed to anti-Semitism whereas in the '30s and '40s governments actively promoted such hatred. It is not helpful to compare the current situation to the Holocaust, he observed. Professor Prodromou invoked the term, "Christianophobia," and noted that states and governments foster political and legal discrimination against Christians as well as repression and coercion and on an associate level, encourage intolerance and prejudice. Christianity is, she suggested, the most persecuted religion around the world and that phenomenon cuts across developed and developing nations alike: it is a worldwide phenomenon.

Ken noted that anti-Semitic acts occur mostly in democratic societies whereas anti-Christian behavior is found in mostly non-democratic nations. Ironically, it is in Europe where human rights are endorsed that Jews feel most endangered. Elizabeth noted that democratic India suffers from widespread persecution of Christians. European secularism is often hostile to all religions. Christianophobia and anti-Semitism are often bellwethers of other anti-democratic developments (e.g., in Turkey). She urged that we share information on such developments. Ken noted we have come a long way in sharing such facts and in open discussion of prejudices he urged us to continue to talk about them—e.g., Islamic extremism. But he stressed that the number one target of hate crimes these days are Muslims and the most repressive nations are Muslim nations (e.g., Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, but also India). Anti-Semitism is different, though, because it emerges from 2,000 years of denigration of Judaism.

What are the potential or common responses we might project? Ken suggested we study the root causes while avoiding conflation with the extreme sins of the world. Elizabeth enumerated the two basic sources of such prejudicial behavior: 1) Lack of acceptance of the reality of pluralism; and 2) Societies with weak laws and inconsistent justice (e.g., persecution of the Orthodox Church under the Soviets).

What more can we do to combat this plague? Ken urged us to speak out and get our government to do the same. Elizabeth agreed. Ken wondered if Europe's Jews have a future. In France, the only hope is to integrate the Muslims into French society. If not, terrorism will increase and the far-right parties will gain. Elizabeth is most worried about the situation in Turkey and India. She fears the Christians in Turkey will disappear (there are only about 7,000 Christians left among the different churches). In India, we are witnessing rising numbers of attacks against Christians and a rising tide of Hindu nationalism. Ken noted that China, Burma and Russia have the worst records in treating minority religions. There is no silver bullet, unfortunately; we need long-term techniques. Elizabeth added that the basic ingredient is to accept the notion of religious pluralism. Christians in the US must give voice to their opposition to oppression especially prevalent among states with ancient Christian populations. Ken urged that we come to each other's aid and work together for a common cause. Several raised the issue of fear that we not speak out too loudly in protest lest we make things worse for the victims (e.g., the Copts in Egypt). Ken observed that we have been sensitive to such considerations—e.g., after the Iranian revolution when we were urged to be silent lest we endanger the Jewish community. But Elizabeth argued that we must start teaching the young to protest injustice and religious oppression. Ken added that we must also speak out against oppression of or violence against Muslims.

Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal, executive director of the NCS, and Rev. Jeffrey Kuan, president of the Claremont School of Theology in California/United Methodist Church, taught religious texts at the evening session that dealt with church-state relationships and the role of the individual vis-a-vis the government.

The roundtable discussion that followed the next day dealt with the impact of anti-Semitism and anti-Christian persecution on our movements and congregations. Rabbi David Straus noted that anti-Semitism had really not affected his congregation although the people, and especially the pre-school parents, are a bit more nervous lately. The Temple does not have a regular guard although the sanctuary is always locked these days. But on the High Holidays, the Temple does engage off-duty policemen and an EMT. The only racism the congregants detect currently is the tension between police and people of color. There has been little programming on the subject of religious bias but the congregants are involved with the matter of immigrants and refugees via HIAS.

Father Thomas Zain of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese noted that the main headquarters of his church is in Damascus, Syria. Obviously, that church is in serious danger and the effects are felt here as well. Many parishioners have relatives there so their lives have been seriously impacted. About 2,000 refugees from Syria have come to the USA including some 50 or so Christians. He implored us not to single out Christians alone to be allowed to enter our country. While public attention is focused these days on the Syrian situation, he also noted other risks to Christians throughout the region and how this affects his church.

Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg, rabbi emeritus of Congregation Adas Israel in Washington, DC, had a different story to relate. He personally had never experienced anti-Semitism, perhaps because we live in a segregated world. But Jews certainly feel an indirect threat to their existence. Since Adas Israel is in the nation's capital and is close to the Israeli embassy, special security measures were called for, such as bullet-proof glass in the sanctuary, barriers at the entrances, trained dogs—especially in the aftermath of September 11. In his opinion, synagogues have been doing little to confront the latest challenges; there have been no mass rallies. There is some fear of the dangers of terrorists slipping in among immigrants. He urged moral leadership to raise our consciousness and recognize our responsibilities. European rabbis are trying in

London, Paris and Germany to improve relations and reduce tensions, working with Muslim communities. But European Jews are afraid to wear *kipot* (skullcaps) or Star of David pins in public and Jewish Day Schools live in fear of terror attacks. All synagogues in Europe are at risk these days as anti-Israel sentiments have morphed in blatant anti-Semitism. This sense of greater threats has caused Jews there and here to close ranks even more.

Rev. Nicole Diroff described the work of Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia which was created after September 11 and whose slogan is: "Dare to Understand." They countered anti-Muslim ads on buses. They have developed programs with teenagers and all clergy and are now attempting to do the same in the corporate world. There has not yet been much conversation about anti-Semitism and they have detected a rise in anti-Muslim attitudes in the wake of persecution of Christians. They have invited Muslim speakers on the subject and were gratified at the many emails from Muslims denouncing the horrors that have taken place in Paris so recently. They are trying to change attitudes on the corporate level and the Council of Religious leaders is playing an important role in this effort. "Walking the Walk" is a program for teenagers encouraging the study of other faith groups and developing collaboration between them. She stressed that we must try to serve as the moral and spiritual voice of the community and express solidarity against all forms of bigotry.

In response to these presentations, Ms. Kathryn Lohre (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) stated that the rise in anti-Semitism has not gone unnoticed in Protestant circles and she reminded us that her national body had reiterated the 1994 Statement rejecting Martin Luther's anti-Semitism. Many folks have urged American Protestants to speak out more boldly against what is happening and she stressed the deep concern over the fate of Christians in Palestine and Jordan. Mr. Jim Winkler, General Secretary of the NCC, urged us to issue more public statements because people do take note of them and are sensitized to the issues. We are more concerned about persecution of Jews, no doubt as a result of the Holocaust. But we need to be equally sensitive to the plight of Christians who are so terribly persecuted these days. Tony Klreopoulos (via the telephone) urged us to be more outspoken, despite understandable caution in ecumenical circles, upon taking the advice of fellow Christians in the region so as not to inflame tensions against them, e.g., in regard to the dreadful treatment of Christians in the Middle East. Rabbi David Sandmel, Director of Interfaith Relations of the ADL, noted the increase of anti-Zionism which is really anti-Judaism on the college campuses. E.g., in 2014-2015, 105 campuses organized such anti-Israel programs. He also called for better reporting of hate crimes in the USA where 60% have been directed against African Americans but small numbers targeted Jews. Jeff Wohlberg noted the increase of bigotry spread on the Internet. Several reflected on how their own communities (e.g., St.Louis, Rhode Island) reacted to hate crimes that have occurred.

Jeff Wohlberg suggested that Israel is an important issue but it should not divide us and keep us from the necessary dialogue. Kathryn Lohre urged us to talk about Israel and Palestine and not shun that topic. She also lamented the lack of diversity at our table (viz., lack of women, young people, people of color). Jim Winkler urged us to continue to fight for legislation against gun violence and do battle with the NRA especially regarding elections to Congress.

As to the future, all agreed that we hold another webinar in the spring. The following possible topics for future discussion were enumerated:

1. College campuses—demographics and ministry.
2. Interfaith prayer services.
3. Better understanding of the Pew study of American religions.
4. The meaning of "faith formation."

5. The election year—what issues are significant?
6. Mental illness and gun violence.
7. Topics to discuss with Evangelicals.
8. Mass incarceration and recidivism and integration of felons in society.

All urged us to select a fall date and at a suitable location. And all urged we invite more young folks as well as women colleagues and people of color.