

International Interreligious Affairs, January 2009 highlights  
David Rosen

The only international event that I participated in during the month of January was the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. This is arguably the largest and highest level annual world gathering of international political leaders, global captains of industry and commerce, together with outstanding figures from academia and civil society.

I am involved in two aspects of the WEF's work – a Council of Religious Leaders designed to offer perspectives on religion and society as these impact upon a spectrum of issues, not least among them international politics; and one of the WEF's Global Agenda Councils to identify the issues that society has to face and ways and means to address these (I also served on the C-100, a Council to promote dialogue and cooperation between the Western and Islamic societies, which has now been disbanded and in effect replaced by the relevant GAC.)

In addition to participating in the private meetings of these councils; I was a panelist on the major Open Forum program of the Annual Meeting, on the subject of whether peace in the Middle East is possible. The Open Forum consists of some three or four events in the Davos program which are open to the general public as well as the WEF attendees on a first come first served basis and are held at the Davos Alpine high school main hall. This session was overflowing with more than a thousand people in attendance and was held immediately after the now infamous session at the Congress Center with Prime Minister Erdogan and President Shimon Peres. Accordingly, that session was shown first to the audience on short circuit TV to serve as the lead in to our session. Meant to be sharing the podium with prominent Palestinian businessman Abdulmalik Al Jaber, German Pastor Ulriche Wohlrab and myself, was the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Ali Babacan. However as Erdogan walked out of his session taking his entourage with him, Ali Babacan did not turn up for ours, which was probably just as well. Our session was moderated by a well known Swiss TV personality and as opposed to Erdogan and Moussa, Al Jaber was remarkably constructive and self critical (though obviously not without criticism of Israel, but expressed reasonably and responsibly.) And as opposed to the other session, the discourse here was respectful, sensitive for the other's concerns and the impact was evidently extremely positive.

However the major issue that has preoccupied us this month has been the ramifications of Pope Benedict XVI's decision to lift the excommunication ban on the Catholic breakaway movement founded by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, known as the Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX). Aside from the fact that Lefebvre broke with the Church over the changes brought by the Second Vatican Council which inter alia involved the radical change in Church teaching concerning Jews and Judaism, the most distressing aspect of this move on the part of the Pope, was the fact that one of the four bishops of SSPX, Richard Williamson, is a Holocaust denier whose outrageous rantings have been aired publicly on TV and on line. AJC's strong reaction, statement, and approach to the Vatican on this issue, received extensive coverage over the vast majority of the major networks and print media. Cardinal

Walter Kasper President of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews sent me a letter confirming that he has brought our concern and demands to the attention of the "highest level" in the Vatican and sought to assure us that Williamson's views do not in any way reflect those of the Pope and the Holy See which continue to be fully committed to combating anti-Semitism and pursuing the teachings emanating from *Nostra Aetate* and the Second Vatican Council.

The subsequent statement of Pope Benedict XVI reaffirming the Holy See's special fraternal positive relationship with the Jewish People; the unqualified condemnation of and opposition to anti-Semitism; and his emphasis on the importance of memory of the Shoah; went a long way to providing reassurance. However it was only after almost two weeks of cajoling from both within the Catholic Church and from without that eventually the Vatican Secretariat of State issued a full clarification explaining that a) the lifting of the excommunication was in no way an embrace of the SSPX, which would still have to accept all the teaching of the Second Vatican Council; b) that it condemns Williamson's opinions in the strongest terms and demands that he recant unequivocally and publicly; and c) that Pope Benedict XVI did not know about Williamson's opinions before the excommunication ban was lifted (implying that had he done so, he would not have proceeded as he did!) All this revealed a bureaucratic fiasco and a dysfunctional Roman Curia rather than, as widely misrepresented, an intentional insensitivity to Jewish concerns on the part of the Vatican, let alone any diminution in the latter's commitment to the bilateral relationship or in its struggle to combat anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism.

AJC continues to partner in Israel with the EL Qasemi Academy in Baka El Gharbiya (the only Muslim tertiary institute of higher learning recognized and credited by the Israeli educational authorities) and this month commenced its joint seminar series on women's community leadership and empowerment. This series is coordinated by AJC's Assistant Director of international Interreligious Affairs Avril Promislow together with Dalia Fadila, Acting Director of the Al Qasemi Academy and Dr. Esther Herzog of Beit Berl.

This first very successful seminar entitled "Women's self-concept in a complex reality" was held at the Al Qasemi Academy and attended by a diverse group of women, Christian, Jewish and Muslim, coming from a wide spectrum in terms of age, background and geography in Israeli society.

The next session on "Women in Religion", is to be held at the AJC's Bet Moses in Jerusalem on Wednesday February 18, 2009; to be followed by sessions on "Gender issues in Israeli politics" (February 26) and "Women at work" (March 3).