

OSCE Tolerance Implementation Meeting  
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Session I: Inter-cultural, inter-religious, and inter-ethnic dialogue in conflict  
prevention and post-conflict reconciliation

Presentation  
Rabbi Andrew Baker  
Director of International Jewish Affairs  
The American Jewish Committee

The Book of Genesis describes how God created the first human being, Adam, by forming him from the dust of the earth and breathing life into this shape. Our rabbinic teachers and commentators asked perhaps an obvious question—from where did this dust come? And one of the answers they give is that God took a bit of dust from each of the four corners of the earth to create Adam. In this way, they say, no people can make a special claim. Instead, we should learn from this that all of us around the world are equally connected and descended from this first human being, from this Biblical act of divine creation.

Two weeks ago I was in Poland and had the opportunity to be at Auschwitz on the occasion of the visit of Pope Benedict XVI. There was in this visit strong messages about dialogue and reconciliation, the topics of this plenary session.

The Pope presented himself that day as, “a son of the German people,” a description that underlined the special sensitivity of visiting Poland and visiting the ceremonial plaza at Birkenau, that part of Auschwitz that was the final destination of a million Jews who were murdered in its crematoria.

His words that day were important and have been much commented upon already. (The very fact that he chose to speak in Italian, rather than his native German, reflected a special sensitivity to being in Poland.) Of course, he spoke to a world-wide audience, but Holocaust survivors and Jewish leaders who were invited to be present with him were especially attentive.

Some were critical. He made no reference to present-day anti-Semitism. There was no clear enunciation of the numbers of Jews who died at this terrible place (although it did appear in a written program). He offered a formulation of the perpetrators (“a ring of criminals who seduced the people”) that seemed to excuse most of the German people at the time of the Holocaust. But there was still much, in symbolism and in words, that was powerful.

Defenders of his remarks—and Jewish leaders were also prominent among them—emphasized that this event should be seen as building on the work of his predecessor, John Paul II. The late Pontiff was a unique and remarkable voice

for Catholic-Jewish reconciliation, the first to visit a synagogue and to visit the State of Israel, someone who repeatedly condemned anti-Semitism and who spoke of Jews and Judaism—once the focus of doctrinal contempt by Christianity—as “elder brothers” in faith.

At Auschwitz, Pope Benedict described the Nazis’ efforts to exterminate the Jewish people as a threat to all Christians, for in so doing they sought to destroy the “taproot of Christianity.” Central to the brief service of scriptural readings and prayers, which was organized by the Church, was the chanting of *El Moleh Rahamim* and *Kaddish*, the Jewish prayers for the dead.

At the end of this ceremony, the Pope greeted a dozen people personally—led by Michael Schudrich, the Chief Rabbi of Poland, most of them were members of the small but reviving Jewish community.

This itself is a small miracle. At the outbreak of the war half the Jews of Europe lived on Polish soil; three million of them were murdered in the Holocaust. Most of those who survived left for Israel or America. Those who remained did not fare well under Communism, and anti-Jewish actions in 1968 forced many of them to emigrate. Today the Jews of Poland number only several thousand, perhaps twenty or thirty thousand at best have some direct family ties. But synagogues have been restored, Jewish schools have been established, and rabbis are again leading worship in several cities each week. Additionally, many non-Jewish Poles are interested in knowing more about the Jewish history of their country, and cultural festivals featuring *klezmer* music and films and lectures on Jewish topics draw tens of thousands.

I know those individual Jews who are today rebuilding Jewish life in a post-Holocaust, post-Communist Poland are doing so for many different and personal reasons, not least of which is the simple fact that it is the country of their birth and their upbringing. But collectively, they are a sign and a symbol of Polish-Jewish reconciliation.

A particular and sad irony of the weekend of the Pope’s visit to Poland was the fact that only the day before they met at Auschwitz, Rabbi Schudrich was attacked on the streets of Warsaw after leaving synagogue on Shabbat afternoon. Walking in the center of the city, he and two congregants were accosted by a lone assailant who first shouted, “Poland is for Poles,” before hitting the rabbi, dousing him with pepper spray, and running off.

What is unique, of course, is that we all know such an incident is not at all unique. It could have happened anywhere. It has, in fact, happened in many places within the OSCE region and to many victims, Jewish and non-Jewish. The fact that it happened to the Chief Rabbi of Poland, that it happened at the time of the Pope’s visit to Poland, that it happened even as the Pope was preparing his

own gestures toward Catholic-Jewish reconciliation, gave it special poignancy and brought it international attention.

It certainly offers a picture in stark contrasts of the challenges that we face. Each of our countries, each of our communities, has partners for dialogue and discussion and, where wounds are beginning to heal, for reconciliation. (It need not be only a Pope praying at Auschwitz.) But we also have many people—and in some places far too many—like that anonymous assailant. He shouted, “Poland for Poles,” but we know we can substitute virtually any nation state and hear those words, too.

The experience of Jews in pre-modern Europe was to live in isolation and under restrictions and still to be periodically banished from their countries of residence. Frequently, they were victims of physical attacks, which were often abetted by Church teaching and religious-based anti-Semitic charges of deicide and blood libel. (Thus one cannot underestimate the significance of the changes that have occurred in the Vatican during these last decades.) Today such hatred and prejudice is occasionally manifested in physical attacks, but more frequently in shouts and insults, in political rhetoric and publications. At times the Jewish State has become a new substitute, with efforts to demonize and delegitimize it, and even with calls for its annihilation.

Today the role of political leadership—the words and actions of local and national officials—is the critical one.

- To provide basic safety and security for all minorities and diverse members of society
- To enact and enforce legislation that forbids discrimination in all areas of day-to-day life
- Where constitutional principles allow, to enforce laws that prohibit the fostering of racial and ethnic hatred
- To prepare and train law enforcement officials to recognize the special nature of hate crimes and to respond accordingly (Special commendation must be given to the police training program now being undertaken by ODIHR.)
- To create the proper attitude and understanding in society that certain views and prejudices have no place

In some ways this last point is the most important and the most difficult to implement. It is surely the nature of political leaders to calculate the political implications of their actions and their speeches, to take into account the effects on certain voters and constituents, who may themselves harbor certain prejudices. Deferring to legislative measures or judicial action is not itself a substitute for strong and clear messages from those who hold positions of leadership. (By way of positive example, the attack on Rabbi Schudrich was followed quickly by public statements from the Prime Minister and the President.)

In our own research work, we have found troubling levels of anti-Jewish sentiments in many countries. Often intolerance toward Jews is accompanied by similar and even higher levels of intolerance toward other minorities. We have long-ago accepted the fact that anti-Semitism may never be permanently eradicated, but like a virus, to which it is often compared, it can be combated and controlled. As such, what is most important may not be the actual number of anti-Semites in any particular place, but the number of anti-anti-Semites, the number of those people who are prepared and willing to speak out and act against those manifestations of bigotry and intolerance.

Interreligious and interethnic dialogue can surely contribute to increased understanding and reconciliation among minorities. And we and the other non-governmental organizations who have come to Almaty are prepared to do our part. But it will only succeed and bear fruit if the respective governments, who are also gathered here, commit themselves to provide a safe and open environment, a public square that is genuinely respectful and protective of all its citizens, who despite our many differences are still all descended from a single, common ancestor.

[And as I am talking about the role of governments in the OSCE, it is worth recalling last December's Ministerial Meeting in Ljubljana. It was agreed that in 2006 the focus would be on implementation and this is the first of such meetings, but there was also strong support for following up on previous conferences in Cordoba, Berlin and elsewhere by meeting at a similarly high level in 2007. The problem of anti-Semitism, the problem of Islamophobia, and other, related problems of intolerance are still very much pressing concerns. They need to be addressed in a proper way, much as the Romanians have offered to host such a conference in Bucharest. And recognizing the importance of proper planning and preparation, I very much hope that OSCE member states will take the necessary steps to formalize this decision in the near future.]