

Theological Significance of the Rebirth of the State of Israel

Different Christian Attitudes

by Petra Heldt and Malcolm Lowe¹

The Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel, from its inception in 1966 until today, has constantly observed and evaluated developments in Christian attitudes toward Judaism in official statements by various Christian churches, starting with the Second Vatican Council. In view of the fortieth anniversary of the State of Israel in 1988, it is appropriate to consider how far those developments include any change of attitude in theology and church policy toward the State of Israel.

This question was part of the central theme of the Ecumenical Fraternity's research during the 1987-88 academic year. A twofold conclusion was indicated: on the lives of Christians living here, the impact of Israel is deep and challenging, shaping personal thinking, study and teaching; elsewhere, however, the very fact of Israel's existence can still be a stumbling block for current theological concepts as well as for many churches and their policies. The study of this subject continually uncovers theological insufficiencies in respect of the State of Israel, for which biased attitudes on the Middle East are not the only explanation.

1. This article is based on a lecture given to a seminar for Israeli tour guides at the Tanur Ecumenical Institute for Theological Research, Jerusalem, November 28, 1988. It was first published in pamphlet form by the American Jewish Committee in honor of the eightieth birthday of its Honorary President, Philip Hoffman, through a special grant from Ellen Falk Hirsch of Jerusalem. This initiative came from Dr. Ronald Kronish, Director of the Israel Office of the AJC, and Dr. M. Bernard Resnikoff, Emeritus Director and continuing Consultant on Interreligious Affairs at the Israel Office. Our thanks go also to Rev. Raphael Bonanno, OFM, Rev. Paul Hoffman and Rev. Dr. Thomas Hughson for comments and criticisms that were taken into account in this revised version. While the authors are grateful for discussions with various members of the Ecumenical Fraternity, the account given here is that of the authors alone and should not be construed in any sense as an expression of views by the Fraternity.

During the Second Vatican Council, in order to stress the need for a statement about the Catholic Church's attitude towards the Jewish People, Pope Paul VI quoted the view of the Protestant theologian Karl Barth that "the only really important question" in the ecumenical sphere is the Christian relationship with the Jewish People.² Two great visionaries thus discerned the narrow way the church needs to go. To this day, however, many Christians in both their churches as well as others, continue to see themselves as having indeed a relation to the Holy Land, but hardly one to the Jewish People let alone to the State of Israel. For many of them, forty years of the existence of modern Israel stand against nineteen hundred years of Christian attachment to the land that Jesus and His disciples engraved in believers' minds. Only slowly are Christians acknowledging that they also need to take into account the nineteen hundred years of Jewish aspirations to return.

Three Basic Theological Attitudes

In general, three basic Christian theological attitudes to the State of Israel are to be distinguished. Some Christians see in the State virtually no significance, or at any rate no theological significance. Others, at the opposite extreme, clearly see the hand of God in the State's creation and subsequent history. Still others take an intermediate position saying, for instance, that the return of the Jewish People to their biblical land testifies to God's faithfulness to His promises, but from a theological viewpoint this return does not necessarily have to take the form of a sovereign Jewish state.

1. The State of Israel Is of Nearly No Importance

The history of the non-Chalcedonian³ churches of the East in the Holy Land goes back to the third, fourth and fifth centuries. Accordingly, they consider themselves to be part of this land in their own right. The Syrian Orthodox Church, for instance, claims to be the successor of the ancient church of Antioch and to have been settled in the Holy Land longer than any other Christian community. The Coptic and Ethiopian churches seem to have enjoyed permanent presence in the Holy Land since the fourth century, while the Armenian Church has been present in Jerusalem since the fifth century.

All these indigenous churches, although distinguished by their own independent history and development, share certain common characteristics: life is devoted to holiness, devotion and tranquility. Through having this attitude of withdrawal from the affairs of this world, let alone mingling actively in politics, successive governments throughout history are regarded like kings: they are coming and going, be they the Muslim invaders, the Crusaders, the Mamelukes, the Turks or the British. With this understanding of life, their theological attitude is more or less indifferent to whatever political entity currently encompasses the Holy Land. Thus the State of Israel is of no special impor-

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2. Edward A. Synan, Foreword, in Helga Croner ed., *Stepping Stones to Further Jewish-Christian Relations*, (London and New York, 1977), p. XII.
 3. So-called because they did not accept the conclusions of the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

tance to them. They may be forced, on occasion, to take sides in the current political conflict, but this is merely a variant on their centuries-long struggle to maintain their presence.

Of course the national churches within Armenia and Ethiopia are by no means indifferent to political events. The Ethiopian Church, moreover, sees its origins in the incident of Philip and the eunuch of Candace (Acts 8:26–40) or even in its legend about King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. No theological conclusions, however, are drawn from the renewed presence of a Jewish majority in the Holy Land.

2. The State of Israel Is All-Important

This is the attitude, in particular, of the churches, church groups and Christian communities that identify with the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem. Some 90 million Christians in the world believe in various forms of Christian Zionism, which claims its roots in the Bible, can point to antecedents during the Middle Ages, and has been growing ever stronger in the last two centuries. Similar attitudes were influential in circles that were behind the Balfour Declaration to allow the existence of a Jewish National Home, and which later on helped this aspiration to evolve into the State of Israel. An example was Orde Charles Wingate, who organized and inspired the Haganah during the Arab revolt in 1936–38.

Today, as before, such Christians continue to be found in many countries and especially in the evangelical and charismatic wings of long-established churches. In the United States, where these wings have more readily split off, Christian Zionists are even more noticeable in the resulting new churches. These are Christians that recognize the State of Israel politically on the basis of a fundamental theological understanding. They assert, for example, that:

Jerusalem will be the messianic center from which the blessings of the Word of the Lord and world peace will proceed to the ends of the earth.... The message which God told the prophet to declare to all nations is that the gathering of Israel is the purpose and achievement of God. The Zionist movement is just His instrument, when acting according to His plans. An anti-Zionist who opposes the return and presence of the nation of Israel in the Middle East, does not oppose only the Zionist movement, but also the impelling power of the return of Israel: the Almighty God Himself.⁴

Contrary to the concept of Christian life in the non-Chalcedonian churches, these Christians are actively involved in shaping events in the Holy Land according to their perception of God's word. It is clear that in this conception the State of Israel is of the highest importance.

3. An Intermediate Position

Under this heading are included a variety of attitudes found in different churches, all of which distinguish between the return of the Jews and the creation of a state. Sometimes all theological significance is explicitly denied to the State of Israel, sometimes merely its creation is mentioned, but in either

4. Ulla Jaervilehto, "Whose Land: Can Christians Be Neutral or Non-Aligned?", in *Christian Zionism and Its Biblical Basis* (Jerusalem, 1985), p. 19.

case the return of the Jews is the paramount concept. This is the common denominator between, among others, the statements of various Catholic bodies and figures, the Netherlands Reformed Church and the Protestant Church of the Rheinland.

Since the churches in this third group have sought to elaborate fresh theological viewpoints rather than simply apply ready-made ones, it is with them that the bulk of this survey will be concerned. It is also primarily members of these churches that have been engaged in theological dialogue with Jews. The second group of churches readily urges Jews to return to the Land of Israel and seeks to help them to do so, but this hardly suffices to qualify as a theological dialogue.

It sometimes is not recognized that the churches under this third heading, both Catholic and Protestant, do form a genuine group. This is due to a tendency, especially in the current situation, to classify Christian stances in political rather than theological terms. In particular, if we were to divide churches or wings of churches merely into "Zionist" and "non-Zionist," i.e., according to their attitude to the Zionist political movement, there would be little to distinguish between the first group and the third. In fact, however, there is an all-important distinction between them: the third group ascribes definite theological significance to the massive return of the Jewish People to the Land of Israel, whereas for the first group this is a matter of indifference.

Vatican Viewpoints

The Holy See has carefully built up its relations with Israel over the years, while not making theological statements about the State of Israel. At meetings of the Fraternity, visiting Vatican officials have occasionally assured us that of course they see the return of such large numbers of Jews in the light of God's promises given in the biblical prophets, but that it would be quite another matter to attach any theological significance to the particular political institutions of the State of Israel. Similarly, they assert that while the Catholic Church does not find it opportune at present to have diplomatic relations with Israel, this by no means implies that the Vatican does not recognize its existence. This attitude was prudently defined for the first time by the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews in its recent "Notes on Preaching and Catechesis."⁵

The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is in itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law:

The permanence of Israel ... is an historic fact and a sign to be interpreted within God's design.⁶

Although the State of Israel is not understood here in the fullness of a Jewish self-understanding, and certainly not understood in the light of religion,

5. "Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews: Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church (June 1985)," reprinted in Helga Croner ed., *More Stepping Stones to Jewish-Christian Relations* (New York, 1985), pp. 220–232.

6. Ibid., p. 231.

many Catholic Christians work explicitly in the midst of the State of Israel in the most exemplary way due to the development of a growing Jewish–Christian dialogue. This, too, can underline the theological importance of the link between the Jewish People and its land.

The American Presbyterian Church

Like the Vatican “Notes,” the even more recent statement of the 199th General Assembly of the American Presbyterian Church⁷ distinguishes between the return of the Jewish People to the Land and giving theological significance to the State of Israel. As “no government at any time can ever be the full expression of God’s will,” so is the “State of Israel a geopolitical entity and is not to be validated theologically.”⁸ The statement then, however, defines “land” as “a biblical metaphor for sustainable life, prosperity, peace, and security,” which is affirmed to the Jewish People as much as to all peoples.⁹ This seems to hint that the Bible also promises some degree of social, political and economic organization to the Jews in their land, even if not necessarily all the trappings of a sovereign state.

Unlike the Vatican “Notes,” the statement of the American Presbyterian Church introduces an additional theological dimension by telling the Jews that a grave responsibility has fallen upon them together with their return to the Land:

We, whether Christian or Jew, who affirm the divine promise of land, however land is to be understood, dare not fail to uphold the divine right of the dispossessed ... we confess our complicity in the loss of land by Palestinians....¹⁰

We shall see that such pronouncements tend to typify Protestant documents, accompanied by admonishments to the Jews to heed the ever-relevant critique of the biblical prophets. The Vatican documents, by contrast, seem to address admonishments to Christians alone.

There is a certain inconsistency in the approach of the American Presbyterian Church’ statement, and this document reveals a crux from which other church documents have suffered. While the remarks just quoted would be seen by many as implying criticism of the State of Israel on theological grounds, it is simultaneously denied that any geopolitical state should be seen in a theological perspective. The attempt simultaneously to deny theological significance to the State of Israel, but also to criticize its actions in a language colored by typically Christian terminology, can easily invest current purely political viewpoints with an appearance of theological validation.

This is not to say that a specifically Christian ethical critique of political acts is impossible, rather that particular care is required not to fall into contradictions when addressing such criticisms to the State of Israel. Christians who

7. “A Theological Understanding of the Relationship between Christians and Jews: A Paper Commended to the Church for Study and Reflection by the 199th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1987.”

8. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 14f.

urge the Israeli government to obey the call of the biblical prophets, but who would not readily address their own governments in these theological terms, can hardly claim that they are treating the State of Israel as a secular institution like any other political state. Moreover, Christians cannot expect a very sympathetic hearing from Israeli Jews if they tell them to heed the “universalistic message” of their own prophets, but to dismiss as outmoded the conviction of those same prophets that God intended the Jewish People to remain sovereign in the Land of Israel.

Major activities of the American Presbyterian Church within the borders of the State of Israel are unknown. Instead, it has long-established concerns in Lebanon, Syria and Egypt, yet also its proportion of Christian Zionists at home, a combination that presented the formulators of the statement with no easy task.

The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the mother church of the American Presbyterian Church, issued a “Common Statement on the Relations between Jews and Christians,” which was endorsed by the Jewish congregations of Scotland in May 1984. It states that “Zion is seen as an expression of the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy, a home for the dispersed, and a spiritual centre.” The church would encourage Jewish and Christian communities “to promote the welfare of all.” Since it recommends efforts for both Christians and Jews in “our present society,” it escapes the tendency in some other church declarations to give advice to the State of Israel without acknowledging the need of Christians to do the same in their own countries.¹¹

It is perhaps not coincidental that the Church of Scotland, unlike its American daughter, is one of the few Protestant churches to have a long record of Christian witness, in both educational and medical care, in the State of Israel and previously among the Jewish and Arab communities. All of its institutions, moreover, lie in the area that has been under Israeli rule from 1948. It thus also differs from other Protestant churches, notably the Anglicans and Lutherans, whose already existing institutions in the areas that fell to Israel in 1967 give them a genuine stake there.

The Netherlands Reformed Church

As early as 1970, this church pursued the question of the existence of the State of Israel in a statement of considerable length and detail, devoted solely to this one question.¹² It remains by far the fullest theological reflection about it issued by a major church. Special significance is given to the return of the Jewish People to its land:

It is a sign for us that it is God's will to be on earth together with man. Therefore we rejoice in this reunion of people and land.¹³

11. The text may be found in *Christian Jewish Relations* 17:3 (1984), 59–60.

12. Translated as: “Israel: People, Land and State. Suggestions for a Theological Evaluation. Statement Adopted by the Synod of the Reformed Church, Holland, 1970,” in *Stepping Stones* (op. cit.), pp. 91–107. For the background to this document, see Geert H. Cohen Stuart, “The Attitude of the Netherlands Reformed Church to *Israel: People, Land and State*,” in this volume.

13. Ibid., p. 103.

A clear theological meaning is given to this return in terms of “a confirmation of God’s lasting purpose with his people.”¹⁴ In following up this theological line to the State of Israel, however, the document declares that “God’s promise applies … not in the same way to the tie of people and the state.”¹⁵ Concerning the latter, “it is possible that in the future circumstances will be such … that they i.e., Israeli Jews can fulfill their vocation better if they are part of a larger whole.”¹⁶ But one “has also to accept that in the given circumstances the people should have a state of their own.”¹⁷ The State of Israel is understood as a social and political organization whose existence, from a theological viewpoint, could be dispensed with if circumstances were different.

The “place” of the State of Israel is determined as “given to Israel as dwelling place,” to “be themselves.” “But it is a matter of a dwelling place, not a sphere of power and control.” In this place, “the Jewish People are called to exercise justice in an exemplary way.” When “hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees live miserably, without rights, around the borders of Israel, it belongs to Israel’s vocation that it should know itself to be responsible for them.”¹⁸

The terms in which the State of Israel is discussed echo Protestant theological lines of old. Being the chosen people implies the requirement to live up to the fullness of the biblical word. This includes the role that the document gives to Jerusalem, “which ought to be a kind of experimental garden where various nations may live together in peace”¹⁹ — an expression of well-known messianic theologumena.

Inasmuch as the Netherlands Reformed document accords a certain theological significance to the State of Israel, albeit a conditional one, it escapes the inconsistency noted in the American Presbyterian document. At the same time, it too contains a tendency toward a political undertone, although less strongly emphasized, which runs contrary to the self-understanding of the State of Israel, let alone the rabbinic understanding of what it means to be the chosen people. Israeli political parties may differ over many issues, but an overwhelming majority would reject any suggestion that the existence of the State of Israel is merely a product of “the given circumstances” which might “in the future circumstances” merge into “a larger whole” — a concept uncomfortably reminiscent of the PLO’s stated aspiration of creating a united Palestine in which the present Israeli Jews would be a minority.

The Netherlands Reformed Church long ago created the post of a minister officially representing it in Israel, including the responsibility of pursuing Jewish–Christian dialogue in the Israeli context. One of these ministers, Rev. Dr. Jacobus Schoneveld, was for years the Executive Secretary of the Ecumenical Fraternity, while his successor, Rev. Dr. Geert Cohen Stuart, is its current President. This also seems to have been the only church to have sent the President

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., p. 105.

19. Ibid., p. 106.

of the State of Israel a message of congratulations on the fortieth anniversary of Israel's independence.

Protestant Churches in Germany

The first comprehensive statement by the ruling body of a German Protestant church on the question of the relationship of Christians and Jews came in 1980 from the Synod of the Rheinland Church, the largest Protestant church in Germany.²⁰ It, too, distinguishes theologically between the return of the Jewish People and the State of Israel. While the former is affirmed theologically as such, it is merely the creation of the State that appears in a theological perspective.

...the continuing existence of the Jewish People, its return to the Land of Promise, and also the creation of the State of Israel, are signs of the faithfulness of God toward His people.²¹

Thus, like the Vatican and American Presbyterian documents, no theological significance is ascribed to the particular character of the State, let alone seeing it as an instrument of God's will, yet unlike in those documents it is not denied all theological significance. However, since merely the **creation** of the State is mentioned, and this event seems to be seen in the context of the return, the difference is less a matter of substance than of more adequate formulation.

The Rheinland document bases itself on the *Study* by the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany — the roof organization of the individual Protestant churches — from 1975.²² It also refers to the *Study* in respect of the State. As for the *Study* itself, it had emphasized the difference between the political function of the State of Israel as a "modern secular state, organized as a parliamentary democracy," and a state that has religious meaning for many Jews, understanding themselves as "within the context of the chosen people's history." It then affirms that:

It is the task of the State of Israel to guarantee the existence of this people in the country of their forefathers. This implication has meaning for Christians as well. After all the injustice inflicted upon the Jews — particularly by Germans — Christians are obliged to recognize and support the internationally valid United Nations Resolution of 1948 which is intended to enable Jews to live a secure life in a state of their own.... Neither should the Palestinian Arabs alone have to bear the consequences of the conflict, nor should only Israel be held responsible for the situation. For that reason, even those not directly involved must participate in efforts to procure a durable peace in the Middle East.²³

20. Translated as: "Toward Renovation of the Relationship of Christians and Jews: The Synod of the Protestant Church of the Rheinland, 1980," in *More Stepping Stones* (op. cit.), pp. 207-9.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

22. Translated as: "Christians and Jews: A Study by the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, 1975," in *Stepping Stones* (op. cit.), pp. 133-149. (In German, "Evangelical" is simply a synonym of "Protestant" and does not have the special connotations that it has in English usage.)

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 144f.

It should be noted that the *Study*, in accordance with its own distinction quoted above, carefully avoids drawing Christian theological implications when speaking about the political entity of the State. The same distinction was adopted by the Rheinland Synod, which went only as far as it could affirm a theological knowledge of things, avoiding both political proposals and the admonishments to the Jews that are found even in the Netherlands Reformed statement.

This line of thinking concerning the State of Israel was taken up again by the Commission of the League of Reformed Churches.²⁴ It praised the faithfulness of God who had chosen His people Israel, which always remembered this throughout history, leading finally to the creation of the State of Israel.²⁵

The Provincial Synod of the Protestant Church in Berlin-Brandenburg (West Berlin) also took the line of the *Study* in its own statement.²⁶ It, too, did not express theological perceptions of the State of Israel but rather political ones, coupled with the practical hint to Christians to avoid judging too quickly the complex political situation in the Middle East. It should be noted that this church, like the Rheinland Church, is a united Protestant church, that is both of them combine Lutheran and Reformed elements under one roof, with the Reformed influence being particularly evident in the Rheinland Church (its head is termed a “Moderator,” for example). Purely Lutheran churches have been much more reticent on the subject of Israel. Thus the statement of the World Mission of the Lutheran World Federation at Logumkloster in Denmark (1964), while excellent on the subject on Christian complicity in antisemitism, said nothing about Israel at all.²⁷ Subsequent LWF statements limit themselves to calls for “peace and justice” in the Middle East.

The situation among Lutherans is honestly put in the statement of the General Convention of the American Lutheran Church of 1974. Having noted that “in Jewish opinion” Israel is “a symbol of resurrection” and thus “more than another nation,” it continues:

There are also some Lutherans who find a religious significance in the State of Israel, seeing in recent events a fulfillment of biblical promises. Other Lutherans espouse not a “theology of the land,” but a “theology of the poor,” with special reference to the plight of the Palestinian refugees. Still other Lutherans endorse what might be called a “theology of human survival,” believing that the validity of the State of Israel rests on juridical and moral grounds. It seems clear that there is no consensus among Lutherans with respect to the relation between the “chosen people” and the territory comprising the present State of Israel....²⁸

24. “Leitsätze zum Thema ‘Wir und die Juden — Israel und die Kirche.’ Erarbeitet und vorgelegt von der in der Hauptversammlung 1982 in Aurich eingesetzten Kommission des Reformierten Bundes,” reprinted in *Handreichung Nr. 39 der Evangelischen Kirche im Rheinland* (Düsseldorf, 2nd ed., 1985), pp. 128–133.

25. Ibid., p. 132.

26. “Beschluss ‘Orientierungspunkte zum Thema ‘Christen und Juden’” der Provinzialsynode der Evangelischen Kirche in Berlin-Brandenburg (Berlin-West) vom 20. Mai 1984,” reprinted in *Handreichung* (op. cit.), pp. 124–8.

27. See *Stepping Stones* (op. cit.), pp. 85–6.

28. “The American Lutheran Church and the Jewish Community,” reprinted in *More Stepping Stones* (op. cit.), pp. 177–184; quotations from pp. 183–4. (There the date of

As anyone familiar with the language of such declarations knows, the formula “some ... others ... still others...,” commonly signifies unbridged fundamental differences. Lutherans are also very much divided on the issue of mission to Jews. In the State of Israel today, the greater part of overt organized mission to Jews is conducted and sponsored by Lutheran churches.

Challenges to the Evolution of Christian Attitudes

It will be seen from the preceding discussion that Christian attitudes on these issues have shown a clear measure of evolution, despite the frequent distinction made between the return of the Jewish People and the State of Israel. On the whole, the churches in the third group distinguished above have held firmly to the basic theological viewpoints elaborated in their statements just quoted, even though recent events have prompted some of them to make sharper criticisms of Israel in the political context. However, it is precisely theological awkwardness and political ambiguities in respect of the State of Israel, as revealed in some of the documents quoted, that have made it easier for individual Christians — and even whole groups — to challenge the direction of that evolution.

Three such challenges are described below, taken from a range of churches. In spite of their obvious differences, they have one argument in common regarding Israel: history. By referring to their own deep historical involvement in this land, in no case is any theological importance acknowledged in the return of the Jewish People, nor of course any theological significance ascribed to the State of Israel.

Franciscan Conservatives

The Franciscan Order, as the Custodian of Latin holy places, did its best to defend Latin interests in the Holy Land from the fourteenth century till the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem was again constituted in 1847. For five centuries, full responsibility for the local Latin presence, established since at least the time of Jerome in the fourth century, rested with this order. During that period there had continued to be cardinals in Rome bearing the nominal title of “Patriarch of Jerusalem,” but without any practical involvement on the spot.

Since 1847, the basic division of competences has been, with few exceptions, that the Franciscan Custody is responsible for the Holy Places while the Patriarchate is responsible for the Latin parishes. There were, however, frictions from time to time. Also, some of the post-1847 patriarchs were actually taken from the Franciscan Order.

The recent appointment of the first Arab patriarch would seem to presage the definitive ending of Franciscan responsibility for the Latin communities. Nevertheless, although for more than a century the friars no longer have had overall responsibility for Latin interests in the Holy Land, the sense of being

publication is given as 1979.) An example of the “theology of human survival” is provided by the excerpt just quoted from the German Protestant *Study*.

the primary guardians of an ancient heritage is still alive among the more conservative representatives of this order.

Greek Orthodox Conservatives

Although the Greek Orthodox have been members of the World Council of Churches for a considerable number of years, the Jerusalem Patriarchate has tended in the meantime to become more rather than less conservative in its attitudes. It is very conscious of its origins in the Byzantine Empire, having been created in the year 451. Whereas other long-established Eastern churches participate in some ecumenical activities with Western Christians, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate has ceased to take part as such. Being one of the largest landowners in Jerusalem, it has many practical dealings with the State of Israel, but dialogue between Greek Orthodox and Jews, as indeed between them and other Christians, takes place in other lands.

“Palestinian Theology”

This is a recent development, basically from Western theological antecedents, combining Liberal Protestant “universalism” with Catholic “liberation theology.” It is too early to characterize it as a whole since it is more a mass of different personal opinions than a uniform outlook. In all its forms, however, it certainly does not regard the return of the Jewish People to the Promised Land as a positive sign of God’s faithfulness, let alone give the State of Israel any theological significance — often it does not even recognize it politically.

Rosemary Ruether has become an eager protagonist of Palestinian theology, such that her exposition can serve as a representative example although she is an American Catholic. She argues that in ancient times “the Philistines and Phoenicians” occupied the coastal plains of Palestine which “were never ancient Hebrew territory,” and asks: “Can one take seriously the claim that God gives any racial-ethnic group specific land? Is this not nationalist ideology?”²⁹

Since this is what the Christian Old Testament claims only too clearly, she calls for the development of a biblical hermeneutic “that will question the promised-land ideology, both in its ancient biblical form and in its application to modern Israel,” since many Arab Christians “are deeply troubled by such use of Hebrew scripture to buttress the modern state of Israel, so much so that it has become unusable as scripture for them.”³⁰ Evidently a prior political understanding is dominant here, which orders theology to adapt itself to the Procrustean bed.

By contrast Canon Naim Ateek, who is a native Arab Christian and an Israeli citizen, takes a less radical line in his writings on Palestinian theology, although he personally lost his home during Israel’s War of Independence. Rather than pretend that the Old Testament contains no promises to the Children of Israel, he sees in it the election of a particular people, turning into the

29. Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Zionism and the Ideological Manipulation of Christian Groups,” *American Arab Affairs* 22 (1987), p. 66.

30. Ibid.

universal election of all peoples in the New Testament. He begins the discussion of the Promised Land with the nature of God who is not confined to this land. The universalistic concept of God is higher than the nationalistic one. The whole earth is the Lord's, the whole earth should be holy, he is a God of justice who has mercy with the poor and oppressed, in this land and in all lands.³¹

According to this view, the uniqueness of God's covenant with ancient Israel was thus only a temporary phase. Since the coming of Christ, every people can have a covenant with God, including the Palestinian people. As for the State of Israel, whose existence Ateek sees as a firmly established reality, it equally has no distinct status from other states, from a theological viewpoint. Rather, we should today see the demands of the Palestinians in the context of God's universal concern for justice.

Naim Ateek's approach is certainly more conciliatory than that of other Palestinian theologians, and has clearer roots in some earlier Liberal Protestant trends. It shares, however, the weaknesses of those trends, this time regarding the New Testament — it is simply not correct that the universal supersedes the particular, whether in the teaching of Jesus or of Paul. Much of Paul's wrestling with theological issues, especially in the celebrated chapters Romans 9–11, come from his perception that no new divine dispensation, even one open to all peoples, can remove God's special connection to His people Israel and His irrevocable gifts and call (Romans 11:29).

The most aggressive book of "Palestinian theology," which includes some unintended comical features, was recently published by a Greek Catholic Israeli Arab, Dr. Geries Khoury. It argues that the Incarnation of Christ was the "*intifada* in heaven" which preceded the "*intifada* on earth," that is the Palestinian uprising that began in December 1987.³²

On the cover of Khoury's book is a picture of a Catholic church in Bethlehem, evidently chosen because a Palestinian flag can be seen hoisted above the cross on the church tower. Closer inspection reveals, however, that the entire tower and much of the rest of the church is covered with Muslim fundamentalist slogans such as "Islamic Jihad!" and "Allah is the greatest!" Presumably this Catholic theologian did not wittingly chose a Catholic church desecrated by Muslims to exemplify his Palestinian theology. It is as if a Jew in the period of the Weimar republic had written a halakhic treatise in praise of German nationalism, illustrating it with a synagogue desecrated by the self-styled *Deutsche Christen* (a movement of Nazi sympathizers within the German Protestant churches). To put it differently, if a Jew had composed a paean of praise for the United States, extolling its toleration for minorities, but illustrating it with a synagogue desecrated by the Ku Klux Klan, one would suppose that the book was just an expression of a macabre sense of humor.

31. Canon Naim Ateek, "An Arab-Israeli's Theological Reflections on the State of Israel after 40 Years," a lecture given to the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel, on February 25, 1988, found elsewhere in this volume.

32. *The Intifada of Heaven and Earth* (Nazareth, 1989), in Arabic with an English summary. The exact translation of the Arabic title is: "The *Intifada* in Heaven and the *Intifada* on Earth."

Although some hundreds of readers acquired the book before it was reported to have been impounded by the Israeli authorities, all seem either to have overlooked the real character of the cover picture or to have disregarded it. This whole incident illustrates the manner in which the pressure of Islam, however much denied, plays its role in the thinking of Arab Christian communities.

Conclusion

On the fortieth anniversary of Israel's independence, as we noted, it seems that only one major church sent a message of congratulations to the President of Israel. Hesitations over particular policies of Israel's government cannot be the explanation, since greetings were sent even by states that have disagreements with Israel, including Egypt. Rather, it reflects the slow rate of change of Christian attitudes — and in many quarters the absence of change — regarding the very idea of renewed Jewish sovereignty in the biblical homeland. Christians have not yet appreciated the depth of the challenge that was expressed so eloquently by Helmut Gollwitzer fully thirty years ago:

Israel's homecoming creates so many new possibilities in the relationship between the Church and Israel, that we can hardly be alert enough and grateful enough. We shall therefore have to realize that whatever hits Israel must also pierce the very heart of the Church. "Whosoever toucheth ye toucheth the apple of my eye" (Zech. 2:12b): this is not only the Word of God to all believers; it was said first to this people, and it concerns them first and foremost. Together with them it concerns us, the wild branches of the heathen (Rom. 11:24).³³

It may be that critics, including even the later Gollwitzer, would hasten to warn against a facile application of such a statement to the complexities of the current political situation of Israel. But this is not the point. It is rather that Gollwitzer's words were inspired by a warmth of heart, a breadth of vision, an openness to surprisingly new theological perspectives that are still too often missing in Christian discussions of recent Jewish history.

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33. Helmut Gollwitzer, "What Is the Theological Implication?", *Christian News from Israel* 12:1–2 (1958), p. 38.