

Christians Between Arabs and Jews

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That theology is more interesting than politics is one impression gained in talking to Christians from abroad during a six-month stay in Jerusalem during the first part of 1979. Their political opinions, like those of other inhabitants of this city, are for the most part too passionately partisan and polarized to carry much weight. Pro-Israelis and pro-Palestinians tend to cancel each other, at least for someone like myself who has been trying to talk to both sides. One longs for other viewpoints that might restore balance and perspective. In Jerusalem masses of information are available, but there are few political ideas that transcend the present fronts.

In theology the situation is more complex. The Palestinian problem raises fundamental questions about who and what Christians are. It could scarcely be otherwise when Arab Christians and Muslims are ranged against Israeli Jews in a struggle for what all three faiths regard as *terra sancta*. When geography is added to other tensions between peoples and religions, the mixture becomes uniquely explosive, but also potentially illuminating. Quite possibly what is now happening in this part of the world will set the agenda for much future theological discussion, just as did the events in Germany during World War II or developments in Latin America regarding the theology of liberation.

My major focus here is on expatriate attitudes. The local Christian communities, which are overwhelmingly Arab, are too trapped in politics to have freedom for theological reflection. They are, in any case, small, numbering 5-10 per cent of the million-and-a-half Arabs (coexisting painfully with three million Jews) in Israel and the occupied territories. Further, local Christians have steadily lost ground to the Muslims in recent decades because of their higher emigration and lower birth rates. (Indeed, their birth rate is almost as low as that of the Israeli Jews, in contrast to the Muslim rate, which is one of the highest in the world.) In Jerusalem itself indigenous Christians have dropped from 28,000 to 12,000 since the Thirties, while the total city popula-

tion has swollen to over 400,000, a quarter Arabs and three-quarters Jews. (Jews, it should be noted, have been in the plurality in Jerusalem itself—though of course not in the country as a whole—since the first, unofficial, census in 1844, long before the Zionist return to the land began.) Then too the leadership of the Palestinian churches is largely from abroad. This is true even of the large, ancient, and totally Arab-speaking Byzantine Orthodox community, whose clergy have for centuries come entirely from Greece. Thus, although the few thousand Arab Protestants in the Holy Land and the much larger Eastern and Roman Catholic groups are very much on the minds of expatriate Christians in Jerusalem, they themselves are rarely active in theological discussions.

The discussions are therefore dominated by foreigners. There are a great many of these, although the precise size of the expatriate church communities is hard to determine. All varieties of Christians from all over the world are attracted to Jerusalem. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims come each year, including increasing numbers from behind the Iron Curtain. Jerusalem has a dizzying number of church institutions, activities, scholars, and theologians. Almost all of these, including those run by and for local Christians, are supported heavily from abroad. The different foreign groups, unlike the fragmented local churches, are in constant touch with one another. Stimulated by a constant stream of visitors, they have an extraordinarily large number of formal and informal channels of communication. The problem is not lack of discussion, but superabundance. Jerusalem is in some respects a theological tinder-box more likely to spark ideas than to develop them. And these ideas are almost always scrutinized in terms of their bearing on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Before examining some of these ideas, however, we need to sketch the polarization of political attitudes and comment on the powerful but ambiguous connections between theology and politics, between theory and praxis, in this part of the world. Then, we can turn to our main concern: Christian self-understanding in relation to the Palestinian problem.

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The political polarization of Christians in the Holy Land, including those from abroad, is hard to exaggerate. For the great majority, to be pro-Israeli is to be anti-Palestinian, and to be pro-Palestinian is to be anti-Israeli. There is no middle ground. If one defends the legitimacy of the Israeli state, one has been brainwashed by Zionists (as I have more than once been told), but if one admits so much as the possibility of "systematic torture" by the military authorities in the occupied areas, one has been victimized by PLO propaganda. Pro-Israeli Christians agree with Elie Wiesel: "The Jew in victory will not disappoint you: he remains unchanged under changing circumstances. He may no longer be victim, yet he will never be tormentor."

The division of opinion extends to the Egyptian-Israeli peace accords. It is dogma on the one side that the autonomy proposals are a shameless betrayal of an oppressed Palestinian people. The other side maintains just as strongly that only fear of PLO terrorism and hatred of the Jews can account for the refusal of the West Bank Arabs to enter the negotiations. It is useless in some circles to suggest that both views are perhaps correct; that the accords are so ambiguous that only time will determine their import. The pro-Arabs will not concede that fear of the PLO or unjustified hatred of the Jews might be the real reasons for West Bank rejectionism, while the pro-Israelis find it unimaginable that any Israeli regime, even one headed by Begin, could ever engage in "a shameless betrayal of an oppressed people."

One group emphasizes security while claiming not to forget about justice, while the other group does the reverse. Yet their respective notions of security and justice often seem irreconcilable. The pro-Palestinians, led at this point by pacifist Quakers and Mennonites (whose exemplary work among refugees makes them a presence to be reckoned with in the Christian community), argue that security cannot be gained by military means—how did Masada end? Their interlocutors, on the other hand, call for Niebuhrian realism. What, after all, is justice? Is not an exchange of populations often the closest approximation of justice possible in an imperfect world? Has not Israel received a far larger number of Jewish refugees from Arab countries than the number of Palestinians who fled in 1948 and 1967 (excluding, it should be noted, the latter's descendants)? Is not the Arab press much freer to criticize the government in Israel than it is in any Arab country? Are not the Arabs under Israeli jurisdiction more prosperous

and, outside the occupied territories, possessed of greater democratic and civil rights and of better government than under the surrounding Arab regimes? Such arguments, however, smell of paternalistic colonialism to the pro-Palestinians. To them the fundamental issues are discrimination against Arabs in favor of Jews, the self-determination of peoples, and the inadmissibility of changing boundaries by war.

Such a balancing of antitheses is anathema to both parties. "Those who are not with us are against us" seems to be a rational position when there is no middle ground. As extremists in both camps like to point out, the Nazis and their victims were not both half-wrong and half-right. Those who insist on remaining neutral or seek to rise above the conflict are cowards or criminally irresponsible rather than praiseworthy champions of objectivity or reconciliation. On this, if nothing else, there is agreement.

This, then, is the rhetoric that dominates the public discussions, but not necessarily the privately expressed opinions of the expatriates. The Christians among them are rarely themselves extremists. Pro-Israelis generally identify with the doves—for instance, the Peace Now movement—while pro-Palestinians do not approve of terrorism. But each side lives in a conceptually different world. One group, for example, finds Arafat clearly Hitlerian but is inclined to make excuses for, even while not approving, the Gush Emunim, while the other group does the reverse.

The ethically sensitive find it difficult to resist morally passionate appeals. Christian pilgrims and tourists arrive, for the most part, with pro-Israeli sentiments and, as could be expected from current popular opinion and news media orientation in Western countries, with considerable suspicion of the Arabs. When the trip is short and the tours guided by government-approved guides, these feelings are generally reinforced; but this changes when there are extensive contacts with the Arabs or prolonged stays in the occupied areas. The visitors come with sympathy for the underdog, but now it seems that it is the Palestinians who are oppressed. Romantic views of the Jews and of Israel quickly crumble among the Gentile youth. A German Christian told me with anguish of how this had happened to his own daughter despite his warnings to her not to expect too much. Such shifts in attitude are even more marked among black African and East Asian Christians who have been reared on the Old Testament as well as the New. They arrive actively pro-Jewish and, when relations to their own Muslim neighbors have been strained, often

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actively anti-Arab. Their views tend to alter when they discover that almost all the native Christians in this country are Arabs, and that they themselves are treated at military checkpoints more like natives than are their Caucasian traveling companions. As one black African pastor put it, "This reminds me of South Africa."

Long-term residents are usually not this simplistic. They are aware of the Holocaust, of the dreadful history of Christian anti-Semitism, and of the factors that forced the establishment of Israel and created its concern for military security. Yet for the most part they are emphatically pro-Palestinian. Those who work for church agencies tend to be so from the time they arrive.

One contributing cause of this pro-Palestinian tilt has recently been described by Judith Banki of the American Jewish Committee in her report on "Anti-Israel Influences in American Churches." The report finds the major source of anti-Israel sentiment to be "Protestant denominations with long-standing involvement in missions in the Middle East, in churches and church-related groups engaged in aiding Arab refugees...and in communions with predominantly Arab constituencies, whether Catholic or Eastern Orthodox." In these quarters, the report continues, advocates of Arab positions often influence church policies far beyond what their numbers would indicate. Members of the mission and development agencies that Ms. Banki describes as "anti-Israeli" do not, in my experience, contest the factual accuracy of her analysis. But, unlike her, they do not consider the facts in the least reprehensible. It is, after all, scarcely surprising that groups that work mainly with Arabs should have pro-Arab sympathies.

Yet it is not the sending agencies but the milieu that chiefly determines the political attitudes of those they send. The few missionaries who work among the several hundred Protestant and Catholic Hebrew Christians are as emphatically pro-Israel as their much more numerous colleagues working among Arabs are pro-Palestinian. This is true even when the sending agencies or denominations are the same. The sociologist of knowledge would probably regard this phenomenon as a psychosocial necessity: not to share the passionate convictions of those among whom one lives is to expose oneself to intolerable emotional and cognitive dissonance.

While there is a pro-Palestinian majority among church workers, among Christian academics residing in Jerusalem the balance is reversed. Many who are theologically most active have little to do with Arabs, whether Christian or non-Christian, and live chiefly in the Israeli world. Most, though not all, end up on the Israeli side.

It should not be thought, finally, that these various groups—church workers and academics, pro-Palestinians and pro-Israelis—are socially isolated from each other. They are in constant contact and often live in the same communities or work in the same institutions. Some have extensive contacts with both Arabs and Jews. Yet they become polarized. It happens time and again that good friends find they can no longer talk politics seriously with each other. In larger gatherings the silence on the Arab-Israeli conflict is often resounding.

In a highly polarized situation such as now exists in the Holy Land, the normal correlations between theological and political positions often disintegrate. Theological anti-Semites sometimes become politically pro-Jewish, and religious philo-Semites can end up in the pro-Arab camp. As social or political scientists might put it, infrastructural pressures on occasion override the legitimating theological superstructures, thus producing bizarre combinations.

Incongruities between theological and political outlooks can, of course, be handled in diverse ways. First, there is the possibility of compartmentalization. A theologically anti-Semitic pro-Israeli, for example, may never have been challenged to reflect on the relation between his enthusiasm for a Jewish state on the one hand and what his theology says about Jews on the other. Or, on the level of political philosophy, a strong libertarian may never have had his attention called to the degree to which freedom of religion is restricted in contemporary Israel.*

Compartmentalization is not the only way to handle theological-political dissonance. On the logical level, most religious outlooks can be made compatible with divergent or opposing political options. Some Protestants are enthusiastic about the return of the Jews because they believe this is a sign of the approach of the millennium, but that does not exclude the rabbinic view that the return must meet certain ethical and religious conditions. Adherents of this tradition (of which con-

*While it is true that the Ottoman *millet* system was taken over by the new Israeli state in 1948, against the desires of the secularist Zionist majority, largely because there was not time or peace enough to compose a constitution (Israel, like Britain, still does not have a written one), the fact must also be noted that the secularists, having lost confidence in the ability of Israel to maintain a distinctive Jewish identity without religious support, now increasingly seem to agree with the National Religious parties on the need for legally established religion (which, in accordance with the *millet* system, involves the establishment of Christianity for Christians, and Islam for Muslims, as well as of Judaism for Jews). The system has now become virtually ineradicable, but that does not diminish the scandal to uninformed visitors when they discover there is no civil marriage or divorce, that Reformed and Conservative rabbis and synagogues suffer under such severe disabilities that they find it well-nigh impossible to function, and that the law against proselytism is formulated so broadly that it is legally possible, for example, to penalize Christian groups with foreign attachments, such as almost every Christian group has, for accepting converts from Judaism. The government has so far carefully refrained from taking action under this last provision, presumably because the number of Jewish converts to Christianity is so small that Orthodox Jewish pressure to enforce it has been minimal. The problem of religious liberty is nevertheless very much in the air. I have heard discussions among Christians (but never between Christians and Jews) of the strains the restrictions on religious liberty in Israel produce in the consciences of strong pro-Israelis who are also ardent advocates of religious liberty and of the separation of Church and State in the United States. These restrictions, needless to say, are a powerful argument for their opponents: Why should you be silent about things in Israel that you would vehemently condemn in the U.S.?

temporary Jerusalem has its share) can therefore, without self-contradiction, side politically with the Palestinians on the grounds that the present Israeli state cannot be what God has in mind. (The pre-millennialists who take this view are on this point in agreement with the intensely conservative Orthodox Jewish Neturei Karta.)

Theologies that helped create the conditions under which pogroms flourished may properly be labelled anti-Semitic. Yet firm believers in these theologies sometimes, though all too infrequently, resisted the pogroms, occasionally at the risk of their lives. To those who look hard enough, these traditionally anti-Semitic Christian theologies provide reasons for protecting Jews, and they do not exclude a priori the possibility that the return to the land and Jewish nationhood might be just and righteous developments. Even a Church Father such as Jerome, who definitely rejected belief in Israel's return, said: "We cannot condemn it because many ecclesiasts and martyrs have affirmed it" (*In Jeremiam Prophetam*, IV, ad 19:10,11). The point is that traditional interpretations of Christianity were designed to relate to a very wide range of diverse times, places, and circumstances. As a result, they rarely have direct and unambiguous political applications. They were not ideological in the narrow sense of having been created to legitimate anti-Semitic attitudes. It is quite possible, therefore, to combine such interpretations with almost any position on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

After allowance has been made for the possibility of reconciling apparently contradictory views, the fact remains that certain theologies and political orientations have powerful "elective affinities." The bonds that hold them together are perhaps more symbolic or aesthetic than strictly logical. Be that as it may, those who see a Jewish state as a millennial sign find it difficult to become politically anti-Zionist without losing their religious fervor, and political pro-Zionists find it at least as hard to become theologically anti-Zionist without changing their political allegiance.

This way of putting the case, however, does not do justice to the complexities of change. Conversions can start on either the political or theological levels, but rarely on both simultaneously. The convert then tries to make his old theology supportive of his new politics (or, in the alternative instance, his old politics congruent with his new faith). Thus strong supporters of Israel often favor major revisions in traditional Christian outlooks in order to eliminate material that can be used, even when it need not be, for anti-Semitic purposes, while pro-Palestinians often resist such changes on the grounds that this is tampering with the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. In other words, to return to academic jargon, theological superstructures and political infrastructures are partially independent variables that reciprocally influence each other. They interact dialectically in Jerusalem as elsewhere in the world.

The theological side of the dialectic is much the easiest to discuss openly, while political divisions are often too sensitive for public debate. The result is that political passions are often displaced

onto the theological level, and topics which may seem quite unexciting in other parts of the world become charged with emotion.

The most crucial of these topics are the theologies of the land and of the covenant. Are there one, two, or an indefinite number of covenants and covenanted peoples? Is there basically only one people of God, as the Catholic, John Oesterreicher holds? And does this imply, as Krister Stendahl of Harvard suggests, that Christians are a kind of Jewish sect that loses its essential character when it forgets that fact? Alternatively, are there two quite distinct covenants, and, if so, how are they related? Has the new covenant in Christ simply inherited and absorbed the old with the result that unbelieving Jews are pretenders to what is no longer theirs? This has been the traditional view through most of church history, but can it be purged of its anti-Semitic venom as the Second Vatican Council attempted? Should Christians say with St. Paul (Romans 11:28-29) that, even after Christ, Jews remain the heirs of the biblical promises made to the patriarchs, and that postbiblical Judaism is thus a legitimate and valid religion, but one which will be completed and fulfilled, though perhaps only at the end of time, by acknowledgment of Jesus as the Messiah? Or is it better, as much post-Enlightenment Protestant scholarship has done, to adopt a history-of-religions approach, and regard postbiblical Judaism and Christianity as new religions derived from a common source but now, apart from the accidents of history, having no special theological relationship different from what each has to any other faith—Islam or Buddhism, for example?

Two other approaches have become very popular among Christians who make it their main business to fight anti-Semitism. One, originating with James Parkes and similar to the Jewish position of Franz Rosenzweig, holds that Judaism and Christianity represent two distinct and equal covenants, one for the Jews, the other for Gentiles. Developing out of this genetically, though perhaps not logically, is a second view now represented by Roy and Alice Eckhardt and eloquently expounded by Rosemary Ruether in her *Faith and Fratricide* (1974). This attacks the very notion of uniquely elect or covenanted peoples on the grounds that it is inherently triumphalistic and, ultimately, anti-Semitic. It suggests, if I understand it rightly, that there are as many covenanted peoples as there are religions (and ideologies?) that open themselves up to God's eschatological future. Given the unredeemed character of history, it is meaningless to claim that Jesus is the Messiah, although for Christians (but only for Christians) he points in a paradigmatic way to the coming kingdom of justice and righteousness.

Adherents of all these positions were present at a recent conference on "Christianity in the Holy Land" organized by the Ecumenical Institute at Tantur on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Palestinian Christians, however, were absent from the conference; the only Arab Christian participant was from Egypt. Perhaps because of this there was no open advocacy of the traditional view that the new covenant in Christ has simply replaced and absorbed the old, although this remains the overwhelm-

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ingly dominant, even if unarticulated, assumption among Palestinian Christians. The Vatican II modification of the traditional view was powerfully presented by a staunch pro-Israeli, Marcel Dubois, head of the Dominican Isaiah House (which is devoted to promoting Christian-Jewish understanding) and senior lecturer in Greek and medieval philosophy at Hebrew University. Another staunch pro-Israeli, J. Schoneveld, theological advisor in Jerusalem to the Netherlands Reformed Church, sympathized with the very different position represented by Rosemary Ruether but argued that religious reconciliation could be furthered in the Holy Land through “viewing Torah, Christ and Koran as different points of entry into the movement, beginning with Abraham, of God’s purpose to establish righteousness and justice on earth.” As far as I was able to gather, those who thought in terms of a history-of-religion approach, that there are no special theological ties between contemporary Christianity and Judaism, were mostly pro-Palestinian. In contrast, “one covenanted people” and the conceptually quite different “two-separate-but-equal covenants” positions were mostly favored by pro-Israelis.

The tensions reflected in these discussions of the covenant were considerable and were greatly heightened when attention turned to the theological significance of the land. One of the world’s foremost Islamists, the Anglican Bishop Kenneth Cragg, categorically denied that Christians can acknowledge inherent holiness in any land. Connections of this kind were severed by the New Testament. This point is important, he further argued, for the Muslim-Christian dialogue in the context of the *terra sancta*. Both Christians and Muslims can agree in rejecting the Zionist “myth of inherent sanctity transcendently conferred” on a given territory. On the basis of this agreement they can then go on to discuss their major differences on “how to hallow, how to suffer, and how to reconcile” in the face of the problems created for both by Zionism. The bishop never said so expressly, but it was clear that his sympathies were with the Palestinians, even though, for Islamic as well as Christian reasons, PLO tactics would seem to him deplorable.

A German Catholic systematic theologian, Laurenz Volken, was more nuanced. New Testament writers have both positive and negative attitudes toward the notion that there are specially holy places.* Instead of choosing one of these theologies of the land to the exclusion of the others, Christians should ask if they are reconcilable. Volken argued on a variety of grounds—

biblical, Aristotelian-Thomistic, and modern phenomenological-existential—that particular places, and not only times and rites, can have enduring sacramental significance for the psychosomatic unities which are human beings. The political resonances of this paper were strong, but unclear. Did the argument perhaps favor the 1948 Vatican position (which has never been officially retracted, but has also never been reiterated) that Jerusalem, with its sacramental significance for three faiths, should be internationalized? Could it perhaps be given a pro-Israeli twist on the grounds that the religious importance of the land for Judaism is greater than for any other religion, and that this is one of the legitimate interests which any just settlement must take into account? Participants were left to speculate.

What is clear from this and other occasions, however, is that the land has displaced the covenant as the central theological issue among Christians in Jerusalem. More precisely, the question is whether the covenantal promises to Israel, assuming these remain in some sense in effect, continue to have a reference to the land and, by extension, to the state of Israel. This is not an altogether new concern. It was much discussed by Jews in the nineteenth century and after, and became prominent in Jewish-Christian dialogue in other parts of the world as well as Israel after the 1967 war. In Jerusalem, however, more than elsewhere, it is a problem of which Christians are intensely aware.

One American Christian in an open letter to a Jewish friend remarks that when in 1965 he defined Judaism without reference to a Jewish homeland, the Jewish response was, “How profoundly you have understood us.” Today, if he gives the same definition, the response is, “Like Christians always and everywhere, you do not understand, and are guilty of blatant bias.” He continued: “At a time when our nation [that is, America] is deeply threatened by nationalism...Judaism is consumed not by zeal for world peace and international justice, but by the politics of a particular nation-state....But isn’t there still more to Judaism than Israel?...Perhaps Christians are sympathetic to Judaism only when it is being persecuted and not when it is associated with victory, as in June, 1967. Perhaps our Christian tradition, ‘Whoever seeks his own life, loses it,’ has numbed us....”

*On the exegetical questions W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land* (1974), basically favors Cragg’s position, while W. Brueggemann, *The Land* (1977), argues against Davies and offers more support to Volken.

In quoting this letter, Shemaryahu Talmon of Hebrew University agrees that Judaism cannot be understood in terms of the "professed universalist ideologies of western Christians of a post-nationalist era." The Jewish self-conception is ineradicably that of "a community with special ethnic and religious identity which expresses itself in national institutions." This view of religion, he further argues, is shared by Muslims and also by the Arab Christians. Only if it is taken seriously can they—as well as those who "definitely belong in the orbit of Christian culture" without being active participants in the Church—become a part of significant inter-religious discussions. Further, "the dialogue cannot be expected to derive vitality and meaning from an inherited guilt complex. The renaissance of Jewish national identity must be understood and accepted not as a redress for the disaster of the Holocaust, but as a historical phenomenon independent of considerations of moral bookkeeping." It appears that, in Jerusalem, not only is the land replacing a landless covenant, but the state of Israel is replacing the Holocaust as the central issue in Jewish-Christian relations.

This shift, oddly enough, parallels a Christian theological movement that heretofore has generally been associated with anti-Israeli political sentiments. Theologies of hope and liberation hold that the Church's mission is to engage in the struggle for justice, freedom, human dignity, and peace as part of God's anticipatory action in preparation for the Coming Kingdom. From this perspective, the churches through most of their history have been captive to spiritualistically other-worldly and individualistic misunderstandings of their vocation; but God has nevertheless used the prophetic message and messianic hope of which they have been the reluctant bearers to revolutionize the world. Western humanism together with democracy, socialist idealism, and even science itself (according to, for instance, Whitehead and Collingwood) are inconceivable without the ferment of the biblical message. As usual, the good has occasioned the bad, and the corruption of the best has proved to be the worst: Christian and post-Christian civilization, it is alleged, now pose the gravest threats to human existence history has ever seen. In this contemporary situation, the churches no longer serve as instruments, not even unconscious and unwilling instruments, of God's transforming purposes, except to the degree that they deliberately and faithfully make those purposes their own. The passion of the Hebrew prophets for societies in which justice, freedom, dignity, and peace can flourish must become a consciously central concern of the churches if they are to prepare and share in the messianic glory. There are clearly marked resemblances between this way of thinking and a certain, though not currently dominant, stream in Zionist thought. For the Christians it is the Church that should be a light to the nations in quite concrete social and political terms; for the Jews it is Israel.

Some of the motifs of liberation theology have been used against Zionism and Israel by Arab Christian theologians. Arabs almost always see the Palestinians as an oppressed people struggling for

freedom against colonial domination. For those whose view of the political realities is different, however, a theologically based concern for the development of just societies can lead to a different conclusion. This concern makes it possible to heed the plea of Israelis at a consultation with the World Council of Churches in Jerusalem in 1974: "An open mind should be preserved regarding the possibility that the next stage of salvation history *might* [emphasis in the original] be taking place in the classic locus where it has been taking place for so long. No Jew would claim that such events only take place here." "If the endeavour of Jews in this country is crowned with success defined in terms of the Torah, only then will the inference be allowable that this work of man is indeed the beginning of the deliverance or the salvation." History moves—or, as the biblically oriented believer would say, "God works"—through particular events, persons, peoples, and lands which then become exemplary or paradigmatic for the rest of the world. There is no reason within an eschatologically directed liberation theology to exclude the possibility that the next developments of universal significance in the biblical story of the world's redemption might occur in the Holy Land among Israelis, or among Palestinians, or, best of all, among both together.

When emphases on the social and political dimensions of the Church's mission are joined to biblical expectations of the return of Christ as the manifest (rather than, as now, the hidden) Messiah, these hopes for Israel become more specific. Marcel Dubois holds that the Jewish nation is invited, in line with its election and bond with the land, to realize its "vocation to universality....In this way the People of the Bible would also in its present condition remain a model to all beneficiaries of God's gifts. Such is without any doubt the ultimate significance of the return to Zion, and the demand that it implies. It is the programme model of all sanctity....Our task as Christians is, through love and prayer, to help Israel play this grand and difficult role in gratitude and humility."

Dubois is not a fundamentalist nor a premillennialist. He has no timetable for the arrival of the Eschaton. There is no guarantee, if I may be allowed to put words in his mouth, that the present Israeli state will not prove to be a Hasmonean Kingdom and that other peoples, acknowledging their vocation to sanctity, might surpass Israel as light to the nations. Yet a position such as Dubois's is troubling, not only for those opposed to Israel, but to many of its supporters.

Uriel Tal, for example, the great Israeli authority on nineteenth-century German anti-Semitism, speaks of the peril of "creating a situation in which political reality is sanctified and metaphysical meaning is bestowed on the Land and the State." Yet he and others recognize that, without religious motivation, the Israeli experiment will fail. As Moshe Greenberg has put it, "The question is whether it will be possible to infuse the best young minds with a vision of the positive Jewish possibilities of the State so as to make it possible for them to withstand the pressure to emigrate and make their careers anywhere in the western world. Their education has prepared them so well to hear the appeal of the

underdog, and it is a problem to instil in them the idea of a positive Jewish future for the state.”

Some Christian friends of Israel such as the Eckhardts are afraid, however, that any suggestions of a religious significance for the return to the land and the building of the nation will perpetuate Christian anti-Semitism: “the creating of the Third Jewish Commonwealth has to be demythologized of any idea of the beginnings of, or the coming of, ultimate redemption.” “If a political interpretation of the reconstituting of the Jewish commonwealth must be that God has moved to restore Israel today, thus revealing His mercy, it follows that the destruction of Israel tomorrow would have to be comprehended as an act of divine disfavor, one that manifests God’s judgment....The only licit non-Jewish authentication of Jewish sovereignty (or, for that matter, Jewish authentication) is an insistence upon the historical, juridical, and oral validity of Israel.” Israel, contrary to the biblical injunction but in conformity with a certain kind of secular Zionism, must be looked at simply as a nation like other nations, and no higher standards or expectations should be applied to it than to any other country.

Thus, at this point even if no other, some Christian friends of Israel agree with the professed view of the PLO that Israel should be regarded exclusively as a secular reality among other secular realities. They think that the only way to extirpate the theological roots of Christian anti-Semitism is to banish the notion of elect or covenanted peoples and lands. Only thus can Jews be protected from that ambivalent combination of Christian love and hate from which they have so horribly suffered. Yet these foes of anti-Semitism do not want to conclude from this that Christians should be as little concerned about a Jewish homeland as they are about homelands for Armenians, Chaldeans, or Lebanese Maronites—all of whom are Christian peoples whose situation at present is rather more desperate than that of the Jews. They argue that the Holocaust and its long and grim prehistory make the Jewish case unique.

It is doubtful, however, that the appeal to past suffering will indefinitely motivate special interest in Judaism and Israel. As S. Talmon points out, “non-white and non-western Christians—Africans and Asians...refuse to be laden with the white man’s burden.” Only those are likely to regard Jews, Judaism, and a Jewish state as peculiarly important who believe that the history and heritage of this people give it unmatched potentialities for making unique contributions of universal significance: that is, to be “a blessing to all nations.” It is dreadfully unfair to burden any nation with these biblical hopes; and yet it is precisely because Jews and others

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have expected so much of the Jews that Israel now exists.

These exaggerated expectations (together with their dark underside of violent disappointment) are strongest, needless to say, in those cultures imprinted with the biblical story. Thus the Balfour Declaration is inconceivable without the Christian background of those who favored it; the establishment of Israel in 1948 was made possible by historically Christian countries; and the present United States support for Israel depends in part, and perhaps crucially, on a deep-seated philo-Semitic strain in Anglo-American Protestantism. Even in the past it is an open question whether Judaism would have endured in medieval Europe any better than in Tang Dynasty China if it had been regarded as a matter of indifference.

Thus the de-Christianization of the West poses a major problem for Judaism. It removes one source of antagonism, but replaces it with lack of interest; and it is not at all clear that the latter might not be more dangerous than the former. Further, while the weakening of cultural Christianity may well make the Christian remnant more pro-Jewish, it does not necessarily make them more pro-Israeli. Increasingly, theologians describe the Church as a diaspora called to be a prophetic and often persecuted minority witnessing to God’s righteousness and love in the midst of a faithless generation. Their sympathies under these circumstances are likely to be, not with the state of Israel, but with the *galut*, the Jewish diaspora. The Judaism to which they are closest in their own Christian self-understanding is that of currently neglected writers such as Arthur Cohen, for whom the *galut*, not the return to the land, is theologically central for Jewish existence. This Christian diaspora outlook can help foster a powerful sense of the unity of Jews and Christians in the one covenanted people of God, but it is also more than skeptical of all nationalistic enthusiasms, whether Israeli, American, or Palestinian.

Thus the Middle East conflict confronts Christians as well as Muslims and Jews with crucial theological problems. The scriptures Christians share with the Jews suggest that the return to Zion can be a decisively important messianic sign, but at the same time, the New Testament (as well as the rabbinic tradition) makes quite clear there is no guarantee that any particular return will fulfill the conditions which make it authentic. How seriously should this biblical hope, together with its qualifications, be taken? Then too many Christians are increasingly inclined to affirm that peoples and religions other than Judaism and Christianity—and not least among these Islam—can also in God’s providence have special vocations of universal significance in preparing for the Coming Kingdom. What, however, is the relation of this view to the historic Christian conviction that the Messiah who comes will be recognized by all nations as the one who has already come in an anticipatory way in Jesus Christ?

These questions touch on what the Protestant Reformers called the heart of the gospel. The answer given will shape Christian identity, affect relations to Judaism and Islam, and have a perhaps not inconsequential influence on the Arab-Israeli conflict. **WV**