Christians must extend their "political theology" to include the political reality that is Israel

Political Zionism: A Christian Perspective

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Talking about "political Zionism" is somewhat like talking about the social gospel. Is there any other kind? Even those who subject the biblical message to a thoroughgoing process of spiritualization and/or individualization usually retain substantial elements of its corporate and social dimensions. Without them it would be difficult to maintain any semblance of the Church itself as a community that, in one form or another, takes shape in the world, in society.

In a similar vein, does the Bible really know anything about a vision of Zion that is totally removed from the earth, detached from the mundane realities of social and political existence? The Hebrew Scriptures are filled with the vision of Zion. The eschatological dimension is strong, but so is the down-to-earthness that is such an essential mark of the Old Testament witness. In the end it is the creation that counts. Also, in the final vision of the Apocalypse of St. John, the New Jerusalem is portrayed as coming "down from heaven" to earth.

In the meantime there is an eschatological presence of the Kingdom of God that, when removed from the public realm and turned into private religion, is robbed of its significance as a sign of God's new tomorrow. As Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "we will never be able to sense the meaning of heaven unless our lives on earth include the cultivation of a foretaste of heaven on earth."

The idea of "political Zionism" continues to be problematical to many Christians—in an era when "political theology" plays an increasingly prominent role. When Vatican II, in the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, declared that the Church has no specific political mission, it opened the way for a critical evaluation of some of the Roman Catholic Church's long-standing political alliances. But, as Pope John Paul II made clear during his visit to the Puebla Conference of Latin American Bishops and again more recently in his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, Rome is hardly interested in promulgating an apolitical gospel. Giving up a certain political status in the world in order to indentify with the poor simply means that, for the sake of the gospel, one adopts a *different* political stance.

When liberation theologians talk about a new way of doing theology that is grounded in the concrete historical situation, they are definitely not thinking of history minus its political dimensions. Liberation theology, building strongly on the Exodus motif, is an attempt to express a valid biblical this-worldliness, and to that extent it has an affinity with the basic Hebrew vision of reality.

The evangelical wing of Protestantism, both in its radical and its more traditional expressions, has in recent years produced a considerable body of literature raising issues of a political-theological nature. While there is no consensus among evangelicals about the shape Christian political witness ought to take, there appears to be near unanimity that the gospel does have social-political implications. Concrete applications of general theories and sentiments prove to be complex. The complexities multiply when the churches must deal with the concrete realities of the State of Israel. For instance, the *Vatican Guidelines* for Jewish-Christian relations, issued in 1975, urgently call Christians to strive "to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism" and "to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves," but remain completely silent on the question of Israel. That silence made some Jews wonder aloud whether the document failed to practice what it preached. Surely a very basic component of the religious tradition of Judaism is the confession of the unity between convenant, peoplehood, and land.

This may be a difficult concept for some Christians to comprehend, particularly because the churches have by and large lost touch with the roots of their faith in the Judaic tradition. Christians should resist using such pejorative phrases as "idolatry of the land" and "a real estate mentality in the name of religion." In the first place such language is not very conducive to dialogue, and secondly it tends to obscure the basic fact that in our own political theologies we are still struggling to resolve very similar issues. During a recent conference at Harvard on the theme "Zionism as Theology," it was Professor Marvin Wilson of the evangelical Gordon College who strongly emphasized that God's promises are "tied to earth, life, land." That sort of this-worldly orientation is commonly attributed to mainline ecumenical types who are supposed to have a monopoly on social concern.

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However, such this-worldliness is rarely manifest among them when questions relating to Israel are at stake.

Some years back the National Council of Churches, engaged in one of its periodical Middle East strategy planning processes, solicited comments from a number of church leaders. Dr. David M. Stowe, top executive of a major mission agency and one of the most theologically articulate persons in Protestant bureaucratic circles, submitted his list of basic assumptions. Assumption number one read as follows: "There is no special theological basis for the political state of Israel. Biblical allusions to Israel do not apply to the modern state. At the center of Christian faith is a judgment on every religion of blood and soil." The emphases provided by the adjectives "special" and "political" are noteworthy, but I was particularly struck by the reference to "blood and soil" because it is so clearly a reminder of the Nazi ideology of "*Blut und Boden.*"

After all that has been written in recent years about the biblical theme of "Covenant and land," and in an ecumenical context in which Armenian Christians, many African Christians, as well as others find it difficult to express their basic faith in the unworldly categories of "no-place," this reference to blood and soil seems surprising. Is the explanation that we tend to lose our cool when called upon to reflect theologically about Israel? Political theology is no problem to some Christians, but the embodiment of the ancient dream of Zion in the "political state of Israel" is quite another matter.

Modern Zionism is a political movement. It must be understood in the context of specific historical realities: the Enlightenment, emancipation, secularization, modern nationalism, as well as the pervasive reality of anti-Semitism in Western society. Yet Zionism cannot be understood solely in terms of modern political history. "As a hope, as a dream, as an article of faith, it lived in the hearts of the Jews of all ages" (Heschel). The Hebrew Bible and Jewish worship kept this liberation movement alive for many centuries. Not for one day have the Jews neglected to remind themselves and the world of their refusal to abandon Zion and their determination eventually to return there in order to unite the people and the land in a national community where Jewish spirituality, peoplehood, and culture would be expressed in a free society. The struggle has been fought through daily prayers, through the longings of souls afire, through the living out of hope, and, at different times in history, through actual returns to the Holy Land.

True, modern Zionism introduced new dimensions into the ancient dream, but those were not foreign elements in the basic beliefs of Judaism. The God of Israel who has revealed himself through the law and the prophets refused to confine his rule to the realm of the inner recesses of the human heart. He is Lord of history. He acts through exodus, through exile, and through return and restoration. He wants his Name to dwell upon the earth, which implies that he wants to be served through the lives of peoples, nations, cultures, and social-political structures.

Such a juxtaposing of religion and politics, of the sacred and the secular, presents unsurmountable problems to some Christians, who have come to view the dynamics of history in terms of neater schemes. It would be so much simpler if Zionism could be dealt with exclusively as a political phenomenon, or entirely in terms of a spiritual vision. In the former case Zionism is usually portrayed as nationalism pure and simple; or, if the critics happen to advocate a nationalistic position of their own, Zionism is Western imperialism.

"Religious Zionism," wrote Morris Jastrov in 1919, "should demand the respect of those who cannot accept the doctrine on which it rests. Being purely an ideal, it is an impressive dream—and also innocuous." But modern Zionism has refused the respectable role of an historically irrelevant ideal. It became the social action movement within Judaism. Nineteenth-century Zionism emerged partly as a reaction against "rabbinical quietism," a Judaism that at times lived too exclusively by the tenets of apocalyptic eschatology and which preached a passive hope in the ultimate redemption that would be realized by divine intervention. Decades before Theodore Herzl's *The Jewish State* appeared, the orthodox rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer wrote:

> My dear reader: Cast aside the conventional view that the Messiah will suddenly sound a blast on the great trumpet and cause all the inhabitants of the earth to tremble. On the contrary, the Redemption will begin by awakening support among the philanthropists and by gaining the consent of the nations to the gathering of some of the scattered of Israel in the Holy Land.

God acts in and through historical processes and human actions. Religious Zionists, without abandoning the eschatological aspects of their messianic faith, believed in miracles and in the human calling to help make them happen. Judaism has always been imbued with a strong sense of God's incarnation into history. It has been antidualistic in its thinking, ever searching for a synthesis of the secular and the spiritual, not a synthesis leading to a neat harmonious system, but one that acknowledges the sanctification of earthly realities, no matter how fragmentary they may be.

When the dream of Zion becomes embodied in worldly structures, it inevitably enters the realm of historical ambiguity. That is the way of the Kingdom of God; it is the way of all divine incarnation. David Hartmann has said that the return of secular Zionism is the return of the Lord to history—with all the problematics involved in that. No political theology can avoid these problematics, as is clearly shown by the debates raging within the Christian churches during the past years.

The State of Israel too is a reality that falls far short of the dream. Christians familiar with the biblical prophetic visions of Zion cannot help but reflect on the gap between dream and reality. As we do so, however, we should be honest about our own history. Deep in the Christian psyche is implanted the notion that Jewish history really ended when the Roman legions ransacked Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and destroyed the Temple. To most Christians a living, evolving Judaism over the past nineteen centuries is vir-

tually unknown. Somehow the awful fallacy has been propagated that the end of Judaism is an implied article of our faith. The troublesome fact is not just that the reality of Israel falls short of the dream, but that the reality is there at all. Arnold Toynbee, who in his ten-volume *A Study of History* never tired of describing post-70 A.D. Jewish life and culture as a "fossil," and who believed that total assimilation was the ideal solution to the "Jewish problem," could only see the establishment of the State of Israel as something that should never have happened. He represents a pervasive assumption in Western culture.

Many Jews too have agonized about the ambiguities inherent in every embodiment of a dream in a social-political reality. Albert Einstein, while supporting the Zionist cause, went through inner struggles as he sought to reconcile his hopes for Israel with a state "with borders, an army, and a measure of temporal power...." Leonard Fein, in an article entitled "Israel or Zion," writes about his sense of disappointment "that the Israel of our dreams and fondest hopes had been displaced by the Israel that was, necessarily and inevitably, preoccupied with unemployment, with crime, with inflation, and, of course, with guns."

There can be no doubt that juxtaposing religion and politics is a risky business. The temptations of idolatry are ever present. The biblical belief about covenant and land can be distorted into a "blood and soil" ideology, a modern form of Baal worship. Politics can become dehumanized and the state can assume demonic forms. The Old Testament itself contains a strain of tradition (e.g., Gideon and Samuel) that questions the establishment of a kingdom precisely because of the potential corruption of political power. Israel, called to be a *laos*—a people of God—must not become an *ethnos* like all other nations. However, such biblical reservations about political power should not be interpreted as an unqualified rejection of a national political life for the people of Israel.

The State of Israel was not born in total innocence. Professor Zwi Werblowsky of Hebrew University has written about that (*The Christian Century*, February 4, 1970) with an honesty that has been quite rare in the debates on the Middle East issue:

> The Zionist achievement, for all its being in the profoundest sense a manifestation of historic justice for the Jewish people, somehow involves an injustice to others....Since the Fall, no activity is perfectly righteous and just. In whatever one does, there is an element of injustice, an element of sin. Now it is possible, of course, to take a very simplistic look at Israel and regard it as unmitigated evil, the very incarnation of brutal injustice. The Arab leaders surrounding us take such a view. But for Jews it is an existentially tragic struggle between two kinds of justice, if I may use that phrase.

From the earliest days of the modern Zionist movement, there has been debate within Judaism about the meaning of a renaissance of Jewish national life. Achad Ha'am, in his critical response to Herzl's *The Jewish State*, expressed his fear of a Zionism that would seek to save the body of the Jewish people but not its soul. Since the establishment of the State of Israel, Martin Buber and others have affirmed Zionism while at the same time warning that Israeli realities must not be equated with the future of the Kingdom of God. The Jewish Prayer Book speaks about "the beginning of the dawn of our redemption." Heschel calls Israel "an echo of eternity." These all suggest that the State of Israel and its policies are not exempt from the prophetic criticism to which all human endeavors must be subjected.

Honest criticism of Israel by Christians should not be silenced by putting a "guilt trip" on people because of past history. On the other hand, and in view of that past, it is not too much to ask that some sensitivity be shown to Jewish self-understanding. Furthermore, in an age of propaganda and prejudice, when the world is subjected to the irrationalism of a U.S. resolution that calls Zionism "a form of racialism and racial discrimination," it seems reasonable to ask that volatile generalizations be avoided and terms of reference be carefully defined.

For example, an evangelical radical, Wes Michaelson (*Sojourners*, March, 1977), editorializes that modern Zionism is "foreign to the heart of Judaism" and equates it with "the violent schemes of the Zealots." Such conclusions are based on a set of assumptions that need to be challenged. If all that is intended is a critique of certain Israeli policies, such generalizations are an unfortunate overkill.

Here are some of the assumptions that seem to be implied in that not atypical editorial:

a. Leave it to us Christians to define what the "heart of Judaism" is. That sort of Christian imperialism has been going on for centuries. True, Judaism, like Christianity, does not speak with one single voice, and Zionism means many different things to many different people, including many Jews. But on the question of the "Heart of Judaism" as it relates to the vision of Zion and the calling of the Jewish people to give it expression in concrete historical existence, there is a very large measure of consensus among the Jews. Anyone who reads a book like Abraham Joshua Heschel's *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* would certainly have to wonder how in the world he could have recognized himself or the Judaic faith he wrote about in Michaelson's description of Zionism as an essentially violent and parochial Jewish nationalism.

b. Judaism is reduced to "the Jewish heritage of the Old Testament." Forget the fact that out of the heritage of the Old Testament a living Talmudic tradition has evolved that has shaped Judaism, just as the New Testament tradition has shaped Christianity. What about a Maimonides of old and a Martin Buber in more recent times? Can we really talk about Zion and the "heart of Judaism" without taking into account what Jewish sages have to teach us?

c. The Old Testament message is essentially reduced to its "prophetic roots." In other words, prophetic criticism becomes the heart of the Old Testament witness. Torah, with all its earthy implications for the life of the nation and the daily life of its people, becomes, as it were, consumed in the fires of the prophetic "No." Pro-

phetic critique indeed belongs to the genius of the Judaic tradition. But the dialectic between the always fragmentary forms that God's revelation takes in historical existence, including social-political forms, and the prophetic protest against nationalistic idolatries must not be dissolved into an apocalypticism that makes radical critique the essence of biblical religion. Sanctification of the Name as service of God in the world has not brought us the eschaton. Therefore, the prophetic "No" is needed as a constant reminder of the transcendent vision. In the meantime, however, signs of the Kingdom of God must be established upon the earth. Incarnational faith does not remain inactive until the days of purist politics have arrived.

d. Exile becomes *the* central symbol of biblical faith and life. I do not deny that it is an important symbol, both in the Old and in the New Testament. Those who have been grasped by the dream of the Kingdom of God have a true sense of the universal nature of exile. We are sojourners indeed, "like pilgrims in a foreign land" (Augustine) who must learn to sing the Lord's song in strange surroundings. From the biblical perspective, "homeland" is an eschatological notion. But the Bible also knows about return and restoration. Here again the biblical dialectic must not be resolved in a onesided fashion.

Wes Michaelson, following Jacques Ellul, points out that "the Jewish people have served as a prophetic presence in a myriad of societies, where they have been a sign of faith in the faithfulness of God, even amidst the most horrifying of historical experiences." True enough. But to Jews such statements often sound as if Christians assign to them a peculiar mission, namely, to express peoplehood without nationhood till the end of days. William Holladay, for example, describes the situation of the Babylonian exile, when there existed a "community with covenant integrity but without political integrity," as the ideal for Jewish existence (and, I might add, also as evidence of the theological illegitimacy of the State of Israel).

Such statements have led Rabbi Henry Siegman to remark:

> They love Jews who are disincarnated, who are suffering servants, who are ghostly emissaries and symbols of an obscure mission. They cannot abide Jews who are flesh-and-blood people, who are men and women in all their angularities and specificities, who need to occupy physical space in a real world before they fulfill whatever loftier aspirations they may have. They are distressed by the notion that Jews should want a flesh-and-blood existence as a people in the real geography of this world [*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*].

I know that the people like Wes Michaelson in the *Sojourners* community are themselves prepared to accept the consequences of an "exile existence" in order to express their witness in the United States today and the world at large. I have dwelt on the *Sojourners* editorial partly because I have high regard for that publication's credibility and because I believe that a creative dialogue between its representatives and representatives of the Jewish community is possible. Without trying to set the agenda for such an encounter, I have attempted to sort out some of the issues. If we want to analyze the sources of violence and militarism in the Middle East, fine. If we have different perceptions on the history of Palestine and the nature of the Palestinian issue, let's discuss them. If the issue is justice and human rights in the whole Middle Eastern region, let's focus on that topic. If the concern is that some people seem to hold the view that belief in God's continued covenant with Israel implies that one adopt a totally uncritical attitude toward Israeli policies, let's challenge that. But, before we generalize about Zionism as violent zealotry, about the State of Israel, and about the "heart of Judaism," let us be sensitive to the complex nature of each of those phenomena and the dynamics of their interrelationships, otherwise, instead of contributing to peace and understanding, we achieve the opposite: more estrangement and hostility.

The prophetic imperative is important precisely because of the primacy of politics. When I speak about the primacy of politics, I am referring first and foremost to the context of God's revelation, rather than to the Church's priorities in its programmatic concerns. The God of the Bible wants his Name to dwell upon the earth; he is establishing his kingdom of *shalom* in the world. The One who calls us to dream about a new heaven and a new earth wants to be known among the nations and to be served through their cultures. And that means politically shaped cultures. Therefore, the issue of political power cannot be avoided.

At heart both Judaism and Christianity are incarnational faiths. That is to say, both view God's presence in history in terms of embodiment—enfleshment in concrete historical realities. At issue between them is the meaning of the Christian confession of God's incarnation in Jesus as the Messiah and the implications of that confession for the shape of redemption in the world today. From the Jewish perspective any claim of the arrival of the Messianic age in this obviously unredeemed world would seem to imply a suprahistorical concept of redemption that in the final analysis is located in heaven, a concept that tends to lead to neglect of the earth. That issue, however, should be explored in another context. The point I wish to stress here is that the "worldliness" that lies at the heart of Hebrew faith is a dimension of biblical revelation that the churches very much need to rediscover. Otherwise all our talk about political theology will produce little more than endless polarizations.

Political theology without eschatology ends up as utopian ideology that, when put into practice, usually leads to tyranny. On the other hand, eschatology without political theology produces a disembodied message that bears little semblance to biblical incarnational faith. A genuine Christian-Jewish dialogue on these matters has hardly begun. It is one of the most urgent issues on the interfaith agenda, not only for the sake of Christianity and Judaism, but for the sake of the world we are all called to serve. WW