

Israel and the church - allies or enemies?

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In recent decades, many mainline churches in the West have joined Arab and Palestinian Christian leaders in their call to the international community to engage in a campaign to delegitimize Israel. The last decade in particular has seen a significant growth of active campaigns within the mainstream Protestant churches, particularly in North America and Europe, promoting the Palestinian cause, criticizing Israel’s presence in Judea and Samaria, and even challenging the legitimacy of the State of Israel. Many mainline Protestant churches now even publicly promote the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement and other campaigns which deny the inherent rights of Israel and the Jewish people.

Such statements and initiatives receive much media attention, and create the impression that most Christians deny the legitimacy of the Jewish State of Israel, or at least are strong proponents of Arab/Palestinian demands in which Israel’s interests are given little attention.

In this chapter we will review some of these initiatives, explore their roots, consider their impact, and conclude with some observations about the implications of these initiatives. But in order to understand these initiatives, we need first to consider their theological underpinnings.

Christian supercessionism

In many of the statements issued by churches and church organizations, one can sense an almost violent opposition to Israel’s perceived claims to exclusivity. One hears echoes of the inflammatory writings of early Church fathers like Origen and Augustine, and the later writings of Luther, who were determined to prove that the Jews, in rejecting and supposedly crucifying Christ, had lost their claim to God’s favour.

This kind of thinking is known in theological terms as “supercessionism”, which can be traced to the second century CE. Some argue that its roots are to be found in the New Testament itself, but this ignores the complex sociological aspects of the process of drifting apart of Christianity and Judaism, a process that took a century or even centuries.

In the New Testament era, the “Jesus movement” was one of many within contemporary Judaism, and many seemingly anti-Jewish utterances in the New Testament should be understood in the context of a sharp-edged internal Jewish debate. Later on, however, as non-Jewish believers gained the majority in the rising Church, the modes shifted. The young

Christian Church had to cope with both internal and external struggles. Internally, the borders of the true faith had to be drawn. Externally, the new religion had to fight for its place in the multi-religious society of the Roman Empire. These struggles went hand in hand.

Due to its ancient origins, Judaism was an accepted and respected religion in Roman society, even enjoying certain privileges. Christianity, on the other hand, was a suspect and often suppressed minority religion. In order to be accepted within Roman society, the church appealed to the ancestry of Israel, claiming to be the legal heirs of Israel.

One of the earliest and most famous champions of this idea is Justin Martyr (ca. 100 – 165 CE), who writes in his “Dialogue with Trypho” that the old covenant was abrogated and replaced by a new covenant in Christ. According to Justin Martyr, the Church, consisting of believers in Jesus Christ from all nations, “is the true spiritual Israel”. The idea grew that because the Jews had rejected Christ, God had rejected them as a people. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem was proof of this. The accusation that the Jews were guilty of deicide (God-killers), laid the cornerstone of all later eruptions of Christian antisemitism.

Surprisingly, many of these early theologians also believed in a future salvation of the nation Israel in accordance with Old Testament prophecy and the Apostle Paul’s teachings. Even Justin Martyr cites from the prophet Zachariah 12:10 to show that “the people of the Jews” will one accept Jesus and mourn over Him “when they see Him coming in glory”. In other words, the Jews (Justin even makes mention of the Twelve Tribes of Israel), despite being “Christ-killers”, will return to God’s favor. Later on, Augustine (c. 400 CE) would express the same expectation, adding that this is “a familiar theme in the conversation and heart of the faithful”.

While successive Church councils prior to the Renaissance drew sharp distinctions between Christianity and Judaism, often condemning the latter, the Church also had to accept the fact of the continuing existence of the Jewish people in their midst. At times, there was a degree of peaceful coexistence, while at other times the “teaching of contempt” (a term coined by the famous French-Jewish historian Jules Isaac) contributed to a climate in which outbursts of violence against Jews could take place.

On Good Friday, when the passage from the Gospel of Matthew 27:25 (“Let His blood be on us and on our children”) was read in the service, Christian mobs in Eastern European towns would throng into the Jewish quarters to teach the “infidels” a lesson. Occasionally, blood libels - rumors that Jews killed a Christian child to use its blood for the preparation of the matza - would stir riots against Jews.

Though never official theology, in church sermons Jews were demonized and pictured as enemies of God. Moreover, the fourth Lateran Council (1215) ordered that Jews should bear a yellow mark distinguishing them as Jews, and should live in separate areas. Finally, the Nazis would draw from a dark legacy of centuries-old Christian antisemitism.

Since the Middle Ages, mainstream Catholic and Protestant theology has generally held that the Church replaced Israel in God’s salvific plan. This was connected with thinking about the

“kingdom of God”: the more the church became entwined with the state, the more it lost sight of Old Testament prophecy and rejected the idea that Jesus would come again as Messiah to establish a kingdom on earth. They either postponed his coming to some undetermined date, or connected it with the final judgment of all people at the end of days.

Nevertheless, there were always schools of theologians who reckoned with a restoration of Israel as a nation. This was especially true for English and Dutch Protestant Puritanism from the 17th century onwards. The restored belief that, one day, all Jews would accept Jesus as Messiah and would be restored in their ancient homeland, coupled with a growing expectancy of Jesus’ coming, led to growing missionary activities among the Jews. This in turn laid the cornerstone for the rise of Christian Zionism in the 19th century.

The role of the churches during the Holocaust has often been discussed. The attitude of Pope Pius XII (the ‘Silent Pope’) towards Nazi Germany is well-documented. The Patriarchs of the Greek Orthodox and Bulgarian Orthodox Churches, on the other hand, spoke out against the deportation of the Jewish people, saving the lives of hundreds of Jews by their personal efforts. Other Church leaders, for example in Rumania and Lithuania, failed to speak out and even encouraged the Nazi persecution of the Jews. In Protestant churches, there was no less diversity and ambiguity. Yet, in many countries, many individual believers - church leaders and members alike - risked their lives to save Jews.

World War II and the subsequent establishment of the State of Israel caused a revolution in the Church, and evoked much new theological reflection. For many, it became clear that old theological positions with regard to the Jews were no longer tenable. Yet supercessionist thinking seems to be in the veins of Christian theology. And though few would still openly subscribe to supercessionism today, the basic idea that “the Church has replaced Israel” remains very much alive in other, often less outspoken forms.

A popular theology today is “fulfilment theology”, which holds that in and after Jesus Christ, the promises and blessings for Israel have been fulfilled, and expanded or broadened to apply to the whole world and to every people. In this view, the particular role of Israel in God’s redemptive plan becomes obsolete.

Evidently, the idea of a continued particular place for Israel in God’s plan remains a stumbling block for most Christian theologians.

The Roman Catholic Church

The attitude of the Roman Catholic Church towards Israel is complex and multi-faceted. On the positive side, in 1965 the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic church issued the encyclical “Nostra Aetate” (In our time), on relations between the Church and non-Christian religions. This revolutionary document was the first official Roman Catholic document to renounce every form of anti-Judaism, acknowledging that to call the church the “new people of God” cannot mean that Jews are no longer the people of God.

Fifty years later, in December 2015 on the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Vatican issued a new document entitled “The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (a quotation from Paul’s letter to the Romans 11:29), in which supercessionism is again unequivocally rejected.

The Pope, however, not only heads the Roman Catholic Church, he is also head of a political institution – the Holy See, which is a sovereign state under international law, a Permanent Observer Non-Member State of the United Nations, and a participant in many international political institutions.

The Holy See has a troubled relationship with Israel; it only formally recognized the existence of Israel as a state in 1993, is involved in unresolved discussions with Israel concerning title to several holy sites, and still refuses to recognize the sovereignty of Israel over East Jerusalem, including the Old City.

Protestant Churches

It is probably fair to say that, consciously or unconsciously, supercessionism underlies the thinking of most Protestant Christians in the West. Increasingly, Protestant Christians are motivated by notions of human rights, justice and social equality. Under these standards, it is the duty of Christians – to whom God has given the responsibility to be peacemakers and to defend justice and truth - to ensure that any claim to uniqueness or preferential treatment is categorically rejected. The view frequently espoused by these churches is that while the Jewish people may have had a legitimate claim to our sympathy in the past, and even may have been deserving of their own homeland, the modern state of Israel has, through militarist expansionist policies and its mistreatment of the Palestinians, forfeited any rightful claim to legitimacy.

Nevertheless, since World War II, a number of Protestant churches have issued declarations renouncing supercessionism and underlining God’s unbroken covenant with Israel, most notably the Netherlands Reformed Church (see case study below) and the German Protestant Church (see for example, the declaration of the Rheinland Synod in 1980).

In contrast to the West, it seems that churches in the developing world, Africa and Asia in particular, tend to be less rooted in supercessionist ideologies, and are more receptive to the notion that God remains faithful to the Jewish people. They are therefore inclined to be either positive or at worst neutral with respect to the State of Israel. Less influenced by Western theology, and more faithful to a literal interpretation of the Bible, such Christians are more receptive to the idea that the Church can exist side-by-side with Israel, in expectancy of the coming of Messiah. Accordingly, these churches have tended not to participate in Church-sponsored anti-Israel campaigns.

Orthodox Churches

In Eastern Orthodox churches, the idea of the Church as the ‘new Israel’ is deeply rooted. For example, a document issued by a “Christian Roundtable of Eastern Orthodox priests and

cultural representatives” in April 2007 observed the presence of antisemitic tendencies among traditional Orthodox Christians. This document, however, is evidence that there are those within the Orthodox tradition who reject supersessionism and antisemitism, as incompatible with the Christian faith, and condemn the teaching of contempt, calling for reconciliation between Jews and Christians.

Churches and International law

Churches and Christian institutions often rely on their interpretation of international law to back their claims. In many cases, they refer specifically to the Opinion of the International Court of Justice in 2004 concerning the security barrier erected by Israel in response to dozens of lethal terrorist attacks carried out by Palestinians who were able to pass freely into Israel from the West Bank.

According to the policy adopted by the General Council of the United Church of Canada in 2012, the “occupation” of the West Bank and Gaza is indisputably illegal under international law, all settlements should be dismantled, the separation barrier should be removed and the Palestinian right of return should be affirmed. The church leadership calls on members of the church to boycott products produced in the settlements or the occupied territories and divest from companies that are profiting from the occupation, and to support programs which promote the Palestinian cause. The Church of England, the Methodist Church of Great Britain, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the World Council of Churches have all adopted similar policies.

Palestinian Liberation Theology

In recent years, many church organizations, especially in the West, have been influenced by the “Kairos Palestine Document: A Moment of Truth—A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering issued by the Palestinian Christian community”. This document, originally written in Arabic, mainly by Arab Palestinians, purports to present the “Palestinian Christian” narrative by providing “a list of various oppressive Israeli measures taken against Palestinians,” and by presenting “the real nature of the conflict,” which is not an Israeli war against terror but “an Israeli occupation faced by Palestinian legal resistance.”

The Kairos document was followed by the “Bethlehem Call” issued in December 2011 by the Kairos Palestine Committee. Here again, the authors consistently cite international law and legal terminology:

- “As witnessed with our own eyes, the treacherous conditions imposed by the Israeli occupation on Palestinians and their land have reached a level of almost unimaginable and sophisticated criminality. This includes the slow yet deliberate and systematic ethnic cleansing and the geo-cide of Palestinians and Palestine as well as the strangling of the Palestinian economy.”

- “The government and State of Israel is now regarded as an apartheid regime in terms of international law.”
- We “call the Israeli occupation of Palestine a crime and sin. We reject any theological or political justification for the Occupation.”
- We “reject any argument aimed at convincing Palestinians and the international community that the problems are caused by Muslims rather than the Occupation.”
- We “demand that the Right of Return for all Palestinian refugees be enforced.”
- We “support and commit ourselves to the dismantling of Israeli apartheid.”
- We “commit to engage in creative, non-violent resistance in response to the call from our Palestinian sisters and brothers to this end, including BDS.”

In a similar vein, in September 2009, the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC), released its “Statement on Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.” The Statement called for “an international boycott of goods produced in the illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied territories.” The WCC has consistently used the mixed rhetoric and language of international law and theology to back its support of the Palestinian narrative:

- “For the last forty years the Christian churches have called for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestine ... The Palestinian Christians from Gaza to Jerusalem and to Nazareth, have called out to their brothers and sisters in Christ with this urgent plea: ‘Enough is enough. No more words without deeds. It is time for action’ . . . Thus, in Amman, Jordan ... we representatives of Christian churches and church-related organizations from every corner of the earth, affirm the decision of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches and launch the ‘Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum’ as an instrument to ‘catalyze and co-ordinate new and existing church advocacy for peace, aimed at ending the illegal occupation in accordance with UN resolutions, and demonstrate its commitment to inter-religious action for peace and justice that serves all the peoples of the region.’”
- “After decades of dispossession, discrimination, illegal occupation, violence and bloodshed in Palestine-Israel, Christians are challenged to continue to study, critique and re-vision theologies of land . . . A central issue for the conference was how the Bible is read.

One of the foremost champions of Palestinian Liberation Theology in the past two decades is Anglican Vicar and political activist Rev. Stephen Sizer, who put his views as follows:

“When we talk about Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures, we are not talking about a racial identification . . . Israel as a racial identification, as a national people, was never how

the Old Testament understood God's people . . . In my Bible when Christ died on the cross, he was Israel, he was the remnant . . . When he says 'I am the vine' he is saying 'I am God and I am Israel' . . . When Jesus says 'I am the vine' he is replacing Israel".

This mixing of replacement theology, international law and rejection of the Jewishness of the State of Israel is reflected in the writings of influential Evangelical leaders like the late John Stott, Rector Emeritus of All Souls Church, London. In a sermon on The Place of Israel, Stott stated: “

“Is the setting up of the State of Israel a fulfillment of the prophecy? Well, I cannot go into this in a detail . . . you need to think about political issues here. The risk of ignoring the justice of the Palestinians' cause is on the one hand, and on the other is the risk of encouraging further Jewish expansionism since the land promised to Abraham in the Old Testament included territory that belongs today to Jordan and to Lebanon and to Syria. So beware of what you are saying if you think all that belongs to the Jews forever . . . It is hard to see how that secular, unbelieving State of Israel can possibly be a fulfillment of those prophecies . . . A return to Jewish nationalism would seem incompatible with this New Testament perspective of the international community of Jesus.”

Many of these mainline church statements have strongly been influenced by the writings of Anglo-Saxon (British and American) Evangelical leaders like Colin Chapman, Stephen Sizer and Gary Burge. In more recent years, these writers have allied themselves with the movement of Rev. Naim Ateek, who established Sabeel, an organization at the forefront of the development of what has become known as “Palestinian Liberation Theology”.

According to Ateek, “here in Palestine Jesus is again walking the via dolorosa. Jesus is the powerless Palestinian humiliated at a checkpoint . . . In this season of Lent, it seems to many of us that Jesus is on the cross again with thousands of crucified Palestinians around him . . . The Israeli government crucifixion system is operating daily.”

Naim Ateek has been supported in this line of thinking by the South African Anglican activist and theologian Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who has led comparisons of Israel to the apartheid regime of South Africa.

For the last decade, Tutu has been consistent in seamlessly interchanging Biblical and legal concepts in his highly-publicized condemnation of Israel:

“We have visited Israel/Palestine on a number of occasions and every time have been struck by the similarities with the South African apartheid regime. The separate roads and areas for Palestinians, the humiliation at roadblocks and checkpoints, the evictions and house demolitions. Parts of East Jerusalem resemble what was District Six in Cape Town. It is a cause for abiding sadness and anguish. It revolves around the way in which the arrogance of power brings about a de-sensitisation. Once this has occurred it permits atrocious acts and attitudes to be visited on those over whom power and

control are exercised. What such people are doing to themselves just as much as their victims should also be of concern . . .”

After example of the use of theological themes as a tool of political condemnation of Israel can be seen in the writing of Yohanna Katanacho, author of *The Land of Christ: A Palestinian Cry* (2012):

“Love is an opportunity to pursue justice . . . and the Kairos Document is a document of love, because we talk about where sin is . . . We believe, and I believe, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza strip is a sin, and people need to repent from that sin.”

Case study - Israel and the Protestant churches in the Netherlands

Among the earliest church denominations to officially reconsider their theological stand towards Israel and the Jews were the Protestant churches in the Netherlands. In 1951, the Netherlands Reformed Church adopted a new church order, in which for the first time in history, the fundamental relationship between the church and Israel was mentioned and defined in terms of dialogue.

In 2004, the newly formed Protestant Church in the Netherlands defined itself principally in relation to Israel as “sharing in the expectation bestowed on Israel” and confessed its calling to concretize its “unrelinquishable bond with the people of Israel”. Other, but by no means all, Protestant churches have followed suit.

In 1970, the synod of the Netherlands Reformed Church issued a document called “Israel, people, land and state”. This document was provoked by a resolution adopted by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Uppsala, 1968, which according to the Dutch representatives was far too one-sided against Israel. In subsequent meetings of the WCC, Dutch representatives have always spoken up for Israel. The keyword in this document is God’s faithfulness to Israel, of which the return of the Jews to their ancient homeland is a “sign”. Christ, the document states, has a different meaning for Israel than for the nations. The document was meant as a guide for theological reflection on Israel, and was a landmark document in renouncing supersessionist theologies.

In many local parishes in the Netherlands, so-called study houses (from the Hebrew: beit midrash) arose, where people learned about Judaism and studied the Bible with a new sensitivity to its Jewish character.

At the same time, there was opposition to the document, both from theological and political viewpoints. Critics of the document objected that the State of Israel could have any theological or Biblical value. As a result, the Church Order of the Protestant Church (2004) stipulates in diplomatic formulation that the confessed bond with Israel is not with ‘Israel’ but with the ‘people of Israel’.

Since the first intifada, political criticism of the State of Israel has grown stronger and stronger, both from Church authorities and local Dutch churches. Today, political aspects of the State of Israel seem to totally overshadow the original intentions of the confessed bond of between the Church and Israel. The “conflict” has hijacked theological reflection. With the issuing of the Palestinian Kairos Document in 2009, pro-Palestinian activism has taken an increasingly prominent position within the Church. has increasingly The Friends of Sabeel Netherlands and related organizations critical of the State of Israel, some of them Jewish, though relatively small in numbers, are raising their voices. However, they have not yet succeeded in changing the church order, or having a synod adopt a BDS program. A number of church leaders have firmly stated that it is not the role of the Church to engage in political activities like BDS campaigns.

Meanwhile, there are many Dutch Christians who have a deep love for Israel and the Jewish people and reject supercessionism in all its guises. Interdenominational organizations like Christians for Israel and church groups like the Platform Appeal Church and Israel within the Protestant Church, try to encourage Christians to support Israel and to call the Church back to its task of concretizing the bond with Israel, by ongoing theological reflection on the Jewish roots, by actively engaging in dialogue with Jewish groups, and by giving positive support to the people and the State of Israel.

The Church and NGOs

The World Council of Churches, Presbyterian Church, United Methodist Church, World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and United Church of Christ participated in the World Conference Against Racism, held in Durban, South Africa in 2001, at which the foundations for the modern BDS movement were laid.

Since 2001, BDS has developed as a key issue in mainline Christian denominations in the United States, Europe, Canada and elsewhere. A number of European governments, the United States and Canada provide funds for church-based efforts to delegitimize Israel. These tax-payer funds are disbursed as grants to church-based humanitarian NGOs, including Christian groups that promote BDS and the one-state solution.

The Dutch government grants hundreds of millions of euros annually to Dutch church-based aid organizations such as Kerk in Actie (KIA), the Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO), Oxfam Novib, Cordaid and Pax Christi. In turn, these groups disburse funds to NGOs around the world. KIA and ICCO both provide funds to support the work of Sabeel, a Christian organization which supports the “delegitimization and criminalization of the Israeli government”, according to one of its activists.

The Swedish government’s International Development Cooperation Agency provides millions of dollars aid per annum to Diakonia, Sweden’s largest humanitarian NGO. Diakonia, founded in 1966 by five Swedish churches, is closely associated with and provides financial assistance to Sabeel.

The Holy Land Trust (HLT) is an NGO established in Israel. HLT conducts a wide range of activities, such as tours to the region, with the objective of delegitimizing Israel. HLT has received funding in recent years from government-sponsored NGOs in USA, Netherlands, UK, and EU.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is funded by a number of governments, either directly or via church aid organizations in Europe and North America. The WCC's Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel purposefully uses what NGO Monitor describes as "inflammatory and demonizing rhetoric against Israel" and engages in BDS campaigns.

In a detailed report published in November 2012, Italian researchers show that since 2001, the Italian government and local Italian authorities have provided millions of tax-payer euros to a number of NGOs that are actively involved in "anti-peace and anti-Israel political activity."

Conclusions

There is no doubt that at least in north America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, there is an increasingly voluminous part of the Church that is outspokenly opposed to the State of Israel and critical of its policies in relation to Arab Palestinians, who are perceived as being underdogs in the conflict.

But it must be stressed that even in north America and Europe, official statements or initiatives of church denominations or organizations do not necessarily reflect the opinions of their grass-roots constituencies. They are often as not the result of initiatives taken by certain elements within the organization, mostly reflecting left-wing, anti-establishment ideologies. The rank-and-file members of the established churches in the West are just as likely to be neutral on such issues, and the majority is highly likely to oppose any form of boycott.

Interestingly, those regions of the world where the Church is growing fastest – Africa and Asia – are much less influenced by traditional supercessionist theologies, and as such are more inclined to be neutral or even supportive of Israel and the Jewish people. The challenge now is to give these Christians a platform to raise their voice into the political sphere, where the anti-Israel advocates have to date been so influential.

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