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NOTES ON THE STATEMENT ADOPTED BY THE SYNOD OF THE HERVORMDE KERK

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A. The Function of Jesus for Israel

Reacting against an exaggerated emphasis on discontinuity in the recent history of theology, the statement (# 27) overemphasizes in turn continuity in the Covenant. It overlooks the obvious fact that the Jews are not simply called back to God by Jesus (Orthodox Judaism is very much "back to God") but are also called to share in the New Creation revealed to the apostles on Easter morning and to accept the breaking down of the dividing wall between Jews and gentiles (Eph. 2, 14), the end of the radical separateness between the Chosen People and the rest of mankind. Jesus told us that he had been sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. To the apostles was given the function of judaizing the gentiles and revealing to them the new life in the Spirit. "Go, make disciples of all nations!" A pagan can not become a Christian without first becoming a Jew spiritually. (1 Th. 1, 9-10) The Gospel is the good news of the resurrection of Christ announced by the apostles first to the Jews, then to the gentiles who willingly turned from their idols to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jesus has a fundamentally similar function for the nations and for Israel: His Epiphany as the First Born of the New Creation in which we are all called to be incorporated now or in the eschaton.

A corollary to a better balance between continuity and discontinuity would be the problem of alienation. Subjectively---in terms of faith---alienation from the messianic hope in the risen Christ does not imply necessarily alienation from the living God and His Torah.

B. The Promised Land

In a way it sounds very fundamentalist to emphasize the place of the Land among the constituent elements of the covenant. Paul in Romans 9, 4 did not mention it specifically; only the sonship, the glory, the covenants (which might include a reference to the land), the giving of the Law, the worship and the promises; ...the patriarchs. On the side of man the most visible aspect of the covenant is descent from Abraham or more exactly from Isaac, the son of the promise.

The Land might be next in importance. Scriptural texts however need to be read in the context of tradition. The Land was most important in the earliest period

when Israel looked very much like any other nation. Then came more emphasis on Kingship and Prophecy, with finally after the exile emphasis on Temple and Law. By that time Israel did not look at all like the other nations.

In the framework of Christian faith, viewing Israel as a kingdom of priests chosen for the salvation of all nations, galut, the diaspora, has as important a role to play as the Palestinian community--already a minority of the Chosen People at the time of Christ. The Land is not coextensive to all the riches of the covenant. Does it even need be to remain forever one of its essential elements? When God did not keep His promises to David in relation to the Davidic monarchy, nor to Solomon in relation to the permanence of the Temple and the indwelling of His glory in the Holy of Holies, are we not entitled to ask how permanent is the gift to the offspring of Abraham (Gen. 15, 18-21) of the land between the river of Egypt and the Euphrates? The essential problem for the theology of the Land of Israel is the nature, value and permanence of this promise.

Paul in Romans 11 extols God's faithfulness, not in terms of Temple or Law, still less in terms of the Kingdom of David, but essentially in terms of sonship, a sonship which is gratuitous and eternal, and which does insure until the parousia the survival and singularity of the Jewish people. This singularity appears to me as almost ontological. We know that it took the Church some time to realize that John's words "The Word became flesh" meant that the Word assumed not simply a human body but also a created human soul, a perfect human nature. Modern theology with the help of the social sciences could develop a better understanding of the definitions of Chalcedon and could show that human nature is always actualized in a particular culture and a particular society. The Jewish people, offspring of Abraham, and the Jewish religious culture fashioned by the prophets are part of the "hypostatic union" when the other peoples and cultures are not and will never be. We gentiles are always sons by adoption. The Jews--after the covenant at Mt. Sinai--are to a limited but real extent sons by nature, by socio-cultural nature. They are sons by being born of a Jewish mother and not by being baptized in the Holy Spirit. (All this is independent from the degree of alienation, except when consciously and willingly a son does break, not the law, but the covenant itself by becoming a non-Jew.)

In the light of this sonship and of God's faithfulness towards persons, how do we read the Scriptures, or rather what vision of the history of salvation do they communicate to us? Do we start with a full blown, well structured covenant in the promises made to Abraham, or at least at the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai? Or do we perceive a developmental process during which deeper values are progressively revealed, even after temporary setbacks, and others are shown to be only steps towards a fuller state of realization?

The importance of the Land in the total structure of the covenant has to be understood in terms of the spiritual welfare of the people rather than in itself. It is not the Land which comes first but the people, its survival and the full expression of its spiritual nature. "If you keep my Covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex. 19, 5-6)

Israel, notwithstanding various political regimes, native or foreign, did

possess the land of Judea for about 40 generations; then the gentiles came into its possession for about 60 generations until the beginning of Zionism. Theologically speaking, can we draw a simple, univocal parallelism between the second and the first exile, the latter, a short though decisive interlude, lasting only during two generations? The second exile is part of a cluster: fading away of the prophetic voice, closing of the canon of the Scriptures, destruction of the Temple, cessation of the sacrificial worship, and disappearance of the heirs to the House of David. It would be surprising that the position of the Land in the basic covenant of sonship would not be affected by such deep transformations. If the validity or at least the meaning of some biblical texts are questioned in relation to kingship, worship, messianism and even Torah, why would the Land be in an entirely different theological category?

### C. The Rights of the Palestinians

What strikes me most in the statement is that nowhere does it face honestly the most difficult problem: the right of the Palestinians to own their land not merely as individual proprietors, but as a body of persons living in the same country for more than a thousand years and like other nationalities enjoying the political right to self-determination after centuries of oppression by Mamelukes, Turks and other conquerors. It is not simply the fact that (# 42) "the other people could deny a place to the Jews who are in their midst" or (# 49) "it belongs to Israel's vocation to search for a political solution which would not be based on violence...but on justice and true humanity." It is not merely a question of human rights in general, the need to treat the Palestinians as human beings. It is essentially the acknowledgment or the denial of a particular right acquired by a particular group of people during the last millennium. Looking at the problem in terms of ethics and of its legal expression in the jus gentium, we have to recognize that everyone in the past--except possibly the Canaanites--has claimed right of ownership on Palestine through conquest, and that such a possession did become a matter of justice and proprietary right only through positive prescription, i.e., the process of acquiring title to property by reason of uninterrupted possession of specified duration. It is often said that 60 years of Zionist establishment have already created such a right of prescription. What then about 1300 years? If God intends to keep the sons of Jacob as the sole legitimate owners (in legal terms) of the land of Abraham, why did He allow the sons of Ishmael to remain the bona fide occupants for more than 40 generations, notwithstanding a fierce onslaught by all of Christendom? Moralists and the theology of ethics ought to have something to say about the relation of positive prescription to the implementation of justice!

In secular terms Jews and Moslems have definite historical rights to the Land of Abraham. It is a delicate process to assess these rights in ethical and legal terms. We know too well that neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians will ever agree to be or to become a minority in their own motherland. A fair division of the heirloom and genuine political equality are necessary preconditions to a just solution. But such a solution remains unthinkable as long as the Palestinians are unwilling to share with the sons of Jacob the ownership of the Land of Palestine and the Israelis are unwilling to share with the sons of

the Prophet the ownership of the historical area of Jerusalem, the Holy City.

It is difficult to recognize mutual rights on the same piece of property when it is so passionately loved! It is only to the extent the Christian churches will experience the depth of the struggle for survival as well as the attachment to the Land which are present today among Israelis and Palestinians alike that there is any hope they will venture constructively on the perilous path of mediation and reconciliation.

#### D. The Theology of Zionism

Faced with a possible or actual return to Zion modern theology reacted in three different ways:

- 1) The missionary-eschatological approach of the Anglican divines in the Elizabethan era. See: Franz Kobler, The Vision Was There, London, Lincoln-Prager, 1956, p. 128.
- 2) The millenarian approach, based on the teaching of the prophets, found among Christian Zionists during the 19th century.
- 3) More recently, in line with the revival of biblical studies, the covenantal approach to the Promised Land which is discussed in these notes.

These three approaches are interesting, sometimes exciting, but never completely convincing, though they reinforce each other. Our Jewish friends are irritated by the first, find the second one appealing, and experience the third more in terms of nationalistic than religious faith. To our Moslem friends each approach is simply erroneous.

A factual approach in terms of natural law, social ethics and jus gentium might be anathema to many theologians of the reformed tradition. It might be too Greek and not very semitic or at least not very biblical! I do not want to discuss here the problem of rational ethics and its relation to the Word of God. Historically the Church has not limited herself to proclaiming the Gospel. She has been like a magnet at the heart of different cultures, revealing our messianic hope but trying at the same time to bring together into a common consensus the elements of moral experience that were diffused at particular moments in history. If faith, hope and charity are her domain and her being, the Church has never pretended that she has the monopoly on prudence, temperance, fortitude and the queen of secular virtues: justice. This is where the dialogue is wide open today. Social ethics are at the core of the "Humanum" which recently has been attracting much ecumenical attention. This is not THEO-LOGY per se, but which theologian today would deny its relevance?

It might be that in the framework of "faith and witness" the churches have nothing to proclaim concerning Zionism, except the word of Paul that the Jewish people remains even in its unbelief the beloved son of God; Paul certainly meant as long as Israel remains faithful to the Covenant. Is it not because the Church had nothing to proclaim that the Christian theologians expressed such terribly negative attitudes towards rabbinic Judaism, speaking with their prejudices rather than in the Holy Spirit and bringing on the Church the guilt



of so much innocent Jewish blood! At the coming of the parousia, the Church will have to recognize its first signs; but in the in-between time from Pentecost to the consummation of history, the Church does not know or is not told what the Spirit is trying to say to the synagogue.

For the Orthodox Jewish and Moslem theologians the theologies of Land and State remain paramount. For them the separation of the things of Caesar from the things of God is pure heresy, at least in the confines of the Land of Israel and the Land of Islam. But can our pluralistic society in this atomic age sanction the settlement of national boundaries on the basis of religious faith? The military conquest of the Old City in Jerusalem has started a religious war which will end only in a sudden holocaust or in a slow bloodletting that will poison international cooperation for many decades to come.

From the time of the great schoolmen Christian theologians in increasing number have come to recognize the relative autonomy of the "humanum" in the creation of new cultural forms and new social structures, even in the progressive discovery of higher moral goals. Jesus Christ, through Whom as Eternal Word all is created, was sent by His Father to the world in order to save it, not to continue the old creation which is still growing in stature and freedom....if not in wisdom and in favor with God. Our best hope is that Orthodox Jewish and Moslem theologians, facing an entirely new world situation, will find creative ways to integrate this new awareness of the relative autonomy of the "humanum" in the framework of their respective beliefs.

Rather than simply proclaiming the faith of the Church, the role of Christian theologians in these areas where Scripture and Tradition have little to tell us is to delineate more clearly the secular character of certain problems and to help create a wide consensus for a religious humanism which is at the same time personal and social. They need to realize that in these areas the word expected from the churches is to be proclaimed in the context of "justice and service." The founders and pioneers of Zionism were great secularists. The problem ought to remain where they placed it then. Nevertheless social justice is where we all meet and on which we will be judged some day by the living God!

Moral man, however, will never fully satisfy the aspirations of religious man. At least our curiosity wants to read "the signs of the times." If in our contemplative moods we, Christians, need to find the meaning of the return to Zion in the context of the history of salvation it might be more rewarding to place less emphasis on a theology of the Land and a theology of the State and to concentrate our efforts on Zionism as a secular movement in the framework of a healthy theology of the People of God.

A genuine theology of Zionism would not so much look backwards to a far distant past as it would try to emphasize the continuity of development in the history of the Covenant and the emergence of new configurations--not reconstructions--to face entirely new situations, even if God would be simply permitting and not initiating the appearance of these new configurations.

God writes straight with crooked lines, says an old Portuguese proverb! Once

Judaism's heretical offsprings, Christianity and Islam, had stolen its universal vocation (see # 38) and had become for the nations "a sign that it is God's will to be on earth together with man" (# 41)--the basic problem for Judaism was survival in integrity without assimilation or suffocation. We are passing into an entirely new period or era or eon; Talmudic Judaism is questioned in Jerusalem and in the Diaspora. How, then, to save Jewishness in a secularized world? Many honest Zionists thought that a New Zion would be the answer and provide Judaism with the real center it needed, but only Old Zion could generate the enthusiasm and the energy necessary for such a new departure.

In modern Judaism the nationalist state is in the process of replacing the Mosaic Law as the paramount element of the covenant. (The state is in fact more important than the land.) The Christian theological answer to this "auto-determination" of the Jewish people in our age of nationalisms might not be found in the ad hoc approaches mentioned earlier: Land in covenant, prophetic vision or missionary hope, but rather in the simple theology of the first book of Samuel, chapters 8 to 11, which describe the birth of the monarchy, the salvation of Israel from assured death at the hands of the Philistines. Still the texts are so ambivalent or contradictory that it will be forever impossible to discover if the establishment of the monarchy was God's will or "man doing his own thing." Nevertheless God chose David as a king according to His heart, and He might still some day find a Knesset who in a quite new Davidic tradition will surprise the world!

Faithful to the Zionist dream, but at the same time sensitive to the prophetic vision of social justice born in Jerusalem, such a Knesset would reverently acknowledge the limit imposed on the dream of Zion's rebirth by the right of others, concretely the secular right of the Palestinians to have in the Land of Israel a national home they don't need to be ashamed of in order to fulfill joyfully their mission in Islam: to be the land-bridge among all the Arab nations and to guard faithfully the tomb and the land of Abraham, the friend of God.

Such an acknowledgment would be a heavy cross to bear but it might produce a hundredfold. It could purify the world from the idol of nationalism. It would certainly transform a physical return to the land of the ancestors as an outpost of European culture, into a rediscovery of the semitic roots of Jewish life. It would create a new society which, more than Japan or Lebanon, would be an astonishing meeting of East and West. It might bring about a great spiritual awakening in many Jewish communities in Eretz Israel as well as in galut!

But who are we Christians to pretend to know what the Spirit is telling the children of the Promise?