

To be published in Reflections : Yale Divinity School 1985.5

Zionism, Israel, and Christian Hope

Robert Andrew Everett

What meaning does Zionism have for Christians and Christian theology? That is the question to be addressed in this paper. This question is problematic because of the inclination of many Christians, both liberal and conservative, to be either hostile to Zionism or to reduce it to one act in the greater drama of Christian eschatology. Yet the question must be clearly addressed for the sake of Christianity.

Zionism and the State of Israel have profound ramifications for Christians and Christian theology that, if understood correctly, have great implications for our theological self-identity. In an unexpected way, Zionism has given to Christians the possibility of freeing themselves from a past theological tradition which has implicated the Church in the sin of antisemitism and acts of anti-semitic violence against the Jewish people. A thoughtful Christian response to Zionism can provide the basis for a Christian theology which can develop an understanding of Jews and Judaism which embraces the highest ideal of Christian ethics of loving one's neighbor, as opposed to the traditional Christian view that can be characterized as a theology of victimization of the Jewish people. Such a new theology must deal with both the theory and praxis of Christian theology about Jews and Judaism and the realization that history can and should inform and transform our faith.

The Land of Israel has always played an integral role in Jewish life and identity.¹ The belief that God would restore Jewish sovereignty over the land always has been a key concept in Jewish

messianic hopes. Throughout the ages, Jews never lost their desire to regain sovereignty over the land. It was this impulse in Jewish history which gave rise to the modern Zionism movement. Although conceived as a secular-political movement, its success in restoring Jewish sovereignty over the Land of Israel transformed it into a redemptive movement which gave historical reality to Jewish messianic hopes.² Through Zionism, the Jewish people have been freed from a state of subjugation and victimization. Zionism has restored a sense of identity to the Jewish people that had been seriously challenged by assimilation, secularization, and persecution. However, the return of the Jewish people into history as a sovereign nation is fraught with ambiguities and uncertainties, and Zionism has not been able to totally free Jews from the struggle for survival.

What Zionism has done is to put that struggle on a new basis. Redemption can never be anything but partial in human history, but Zionism has given to the Jewish people the opportunity to engage in the struggle of history as Jews freed from dependence on others for that right. The willingness of Jews to fight for and defend their right to survival is a sure sign of Zionism's success in liberating the Jewish people. Zionism has given to Jews the power to resist being made victims. Those who wish to victimize the Jewish State must be prepared to pay a price. Jews feel a new sense of pride and purpose because of the State of Israel. In a world full of peoples struggling to overcome being victims of religious, economic, political, and sexual oppression, Zionism stands as a model of a successful liberation movement. The fact that Israel must continue to grapple with the ambiguities of statehood, military power, and economic uncertainty is simply part of the price it must pay for

being a part of history. Not unlike the situation of any nation or people freed from a state of victimization and struggling to remain so.³

There is a great deal of interest and support for liberation theology in the Church today, particularly among liberal Christians. The Church has identified itself increasingly with the struggles of many groups such as Blacks, women, and homosexuals to free themselves from being victimized by oppressive theological ideas. Why then has there been so little Christian support for the Zionist struggle to free the Jews from being victimized? Surprisingly, it is the very real redemptive nature of Zionism which seems most problematic to Christians. It is distressing to say, but true nevertheless, that Christians have historically viewed Jews only as victims. In fact, this ideological view of Jews as victims has been supported by a Christian theology of victimization; a theology that appeared to give divine sanction to the belief that Jews were fated to be eternal victims. It is here that the Zionist challenge to Christian theology is joined.

The theology of the victimization of the Jewish people is an idea deeply rooted in Christian theology. The basis of this theology forms what Jules Isaac has called the "teaching of contempt".⁴ The theology of victimization took hold in Christian thought when the early church leveled the charge of deicide against the Jewish people. The charge is found in the Gospels and in the writings of Paul.⁵ The alleged role of the Jews in the death of Jesus, and their rejection of the Church's claim that he was the Messiah of Israel were used as grounds to justify the idea that

God had cursed the Jewish people. According to Church teachings, all Jews were under this curse for all times. Their only chance for redemption was by conversion to Christianity, and Jews who remained Jews remained cursed. The idea that the Jews are a cursed people deeply embedded itself in Christian thought, and it has had a very lively history and a powerful hold on the Christian mind. Until recently, it was rather impossible to find any Christian thinker who thought otherwise, and the idea certainly informed popular opinion among Christians.

Perhaps one of the most jolting examples of how this theme has survived in the Christian mind comes from a most unexpected source, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was able to write that "the Church of Christ has never lost sight of the thought that the 'chosen people' who nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross must bear the curse of its action through the long history of suffering."⁶ Bonhoeffer, the great Christian martyr of the Nazi era, sums up perfectly the whole attitude of the Christian tradition toward Jews. They are victims of a divine curse. This theological idea has made Christians rather indifferent to Jewish suffering. As Bonhoeffer explains, Jews suffer because they killed Jesus and rejected him as Messiah. The early Church believed they had historical validation for this theology. Hadn't the Temple been destroyed in 70 C.E.? Were not the Jews dispersed from the Land at that time? Wasn't this a clear sign of God's displeasure? The Church answered in the affirmative to these questions, and thus solidified within its theological tradition a theology of victimization of the Jewish people.⁷ As the Church gained politi-

cal power, it was able to translate its theology into political and social policy.⁸ The theological accursedness of the Jews manifested itself in Christian laws which made Jews outcasts and victims of Christian hostility and power. The Jewish experience in Christendom has been characterized by forced baptism, expulsion, and death.⁹

An important component of the Christian theology of victimization is the idea that Jews are in total exile: exile from God, exile from their supposed Savior, and exile from their land. All of Jewish history and Jewish reality was interpreted as an exile. The legend of the Wandering Jew personified the belief that Jews were both historically and ontologically in exile. In Christian thought, they were shadow figures who were a dire warning of the consequences of unbelief and a people devoid of any means of redemption. A whole tradition sprang from the theology of victimization which linked the Jews to the Devil.¹⁰ This mythology did much to reinforce the notion that Christians should be suspicious of Jews, and that Jews deserved any suffering inflicted upon them. It made perfect sense to believe that if Jews were cursed and rejected by God, they would naturally hate God and be willing to serve the Devil, the Archenemy of God. No crime was too horrendous to accuse the Jews of committing. It became common place to believe that Jews killed Christian children for their blood, that they poisoned wells and that they desecrated the Eucharistic host. Wasn't that simply a replay of the original deicide? The more Jews were demonized, the easier it was to justify their status as victims. They deserved it, according to Christian theology.

According to the theology of victimization, it was out of the question that Jews could ever regain their sovereignty over the Land of Israel. Historically, it isn't true that Jews were totally exiled from the Land. Jews have always lived in the Land since the time of Jesus.¹¹ Christians, however, firmly believed in the idea that the Jewish diaspora was a direct result of their divine punishment. Theologically, it appeared impossible for Jews to ever regain sovereignty of the Land. Sovereignty would imply Jewish power, and Jews as victims, according to Christian theology, were not allowed to have power. When Pope Pius X told Theodor Herzl that the Church could not accept the Jews repossessing the Holy Land as long as they refused to accept Christ, he was merely reiterating the traditional Christian theology of victimization. For the Jews as Jews, there can be no power, no sovereignty, no redemption. They can only be victims.

The theology of victimization also reflects just how powerful an influence the ideas of Marcion have been on the Church. The dramatic dualism in Christian thought that contrasts the Church as the New Israel over to against the Jews of the Old Israel, Jewish Law versus Christian Grace, the God of Vengeance of the "Old Testament" versus the God of Love in the New Testament all reflect Marcionist tendencies. The supersessionist theology of the Church, which claims that all the promises of God now belong to the Church while God's curses belong to Israel, is a major factor in the theology of victimization. Judaism and the Jewish people came to have no real value for Christians except as a negative contrast to Christianity. While Marcion was branded finally as a heretic, his basic

thesis of separating the Church from Israel was ultimately incorporated into the Church's teachings.¹² Even the continued use of the term "Old Testament" by Christians to refer to the Hebrew Bible is a subtle indication of a mind set unable to see anything positive in Judaism.¹³ Christian theology has been able to deal with Jews only in negative terms. Christian apologetics claim the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as their own, but it has insisted that "what begins in the one is consummated in the other, what starts with the one is fulfilled in the other, and the darkly perceived and imperfect God of the Jews is transfigured and illuminated by the God of Christian love and grace....Marcionism was repudiated as having indited an absolute theological ceasura, but the Marcionist suspicion and loathing for the dark God of creation and the Jews is preserved as the teaching of the humiliation of the Jews".¹⁴ Ultimately, the Church's triumphalistic theology could be justified only by making the Jews its most obvious victims.

The theology of victimization of the Jews raises grave moral problems for Christianity. Upon immediate reflection, it seems that the Christian ethic of love would be a potent antidote for such an idea. But the theology of victimization proves quite immune to Christian love. Once it is established that God has cursed the Jews, how can one then argue that Christians should love them? If Jews have been fated by God to have, as Bonhoeffer said, a long history of suffering, who are Christians to try to alter this history by doing anything to relieve Jewish suffering? The theology of victimization thus precludes Christian love as a basis for relating to Jews. Their role as victim is divinely ordained. Traditionally, it has been believed that the only love

Christians could show Jews is by converting them, but that is nothing but a less violent form of victimization which still denies Jews any hope of redemption or divine love while they remain Jews. It is really a form of spiritual genocide against the Jewish people.

During the Holocaust, Jews became the ultimate victims. Jews alone were singled out for complete extermination.¹⁵ For Christians who follow the theology of victimization to its logical conclusion, the Holocaust raises no moral problems. But can we really accept the idea that our theology justifies such a victimization of the Jews? Does not the continued acceptance of a theology of victimization make us accomplices in the murder of the Jews? Christians today have proven willing to deal with the problems of theological racism, sexism, and sexual oppression. Are we not called today, in light of the Holocaust, to reconsider our theology of the victimization of the Jews?¹⁶

The Catholic theologian David Tracy has suggested that an hermeneutics of suspicion be applied to the Christian theological tradition.¹⁷ Such an hermeneutics may discover that "later historical events can demand reinterpretations of the founding events. Indeed, later historical events can even challenge not the founding religious event but the authoritative response to that event."¹⁸ The Holocaust demands of Christians that they apply this hermeneutics of suspicion to their theology of victimization. The Church stands condemned for the social and political consequences of its theology of victimization in the Holocaust. In light of the Holocaust, it is a moral imperative that the Church reinterpret this theology

so that it is no longer implicated in the crime of theologically supporting the victimization of the Jewish People. This imperative leads us directly to Zionism and the State of Israel and their meaning for Christians and Christian theology.

The redemptive nature of Zionism in Jewish life cannot be underestimated. Zionism has allowed the Jew once again to claim such universal ideas like justice, truth, and peace within his or her particular Jewish identity. Zionism is the revival of Jewish Messianic hopes, giving new meaning to Jewish life and history. Zionism has lifted the Jews out of the state of victimization and given them power. With this power, Jews are now able to resist any attempt to make them victims. Liberation theology has no better model for the implementation of its goals than Zionism.¹⁹

With their return to history as a sovereign nation, Jews have now put an end to the myth of exile. Theologically interpreted, Zionism is the fulfillment of God's promise to His people that they would have a land in which to live as a people, and that land is Israel. Zionism belies the theological idea that the Jews are a cursed people. With the re-emergence of a sovereign Jewish state, one is faced with the historical fulfillment of the divine promise. The State of Israel can be interpreted as a holy reality for Jews as it is the most visible and concrete symbol of God's unending grace and love for His people.²⁰ The State of Israel may well be of sacramental significance for Christians as well. It is, to be sure, a very mundane and historical sacrament, but a symbol of redemption nonetheless.²¹

The theology of victimization of the Jewish people has been employed by Christians to justify their belief that Jews should be victims for nearly two thousand years. But this theology really

has been a cancer in the soul of Christianity. It made a mockery of Christian love. It permitted Christians to ignore the evil consequences of its theological tradition. It compromised the Church as a moral agent. It deformed the Christian character. It ultimately involved the Christian community in the attempted genocide of the Jewish people. This long accepted theology of victimization now has turned on Christians as an accuser. Christians stand accused of being victimizers by consequence of their own theological beliefs. The very credibility of the Christian enterprise is now challenged by how Christians respond to their accuser.

The overwhelming evidence against Christians as the victimizers of the Jewish people would seem to preclude any possible acquittal of the charges. But the judge in this case is God, and because God is the judge, there is hope. According to a rabbinic story, when a person is judged by God, God sits upon the seat of judgement. But when God goes to pass sentence, He sits upon the seat of mercy.²² Despite the crimes committed in the name of the theology of victimization, Christians have been extended the divine hand of mercy through Zionism. Christians who wish to redeem themselves and their theological tradition from the role of victimizers of the Jewish people can do so only by supporting the Zionist effort to restore power to the Jewish people and to free them from being victims. Christians can receive God's grace only by supporting His continual love and redemption of the Jewish people demonstrated in the restoration of Israel. By their support of Zionism and the State of Israel, Christians take the first step in freeing themselves from the theology of victimization. The anti-Zionism

found in the Christian Church today is simply the proof that the theology of victimization has not been completely overcome. Anti-Zionist Christians still see Jews only as victims and never as victors within human history. Christian anti-Zionism is a denial of God's grace to both Christians and Jews.

Zionism has overturned the theology of victimization. The Christian claims that Jews are a cursed people is belied by the restoration of Jewish sovereignty over the Land of Israel. The long history of Christian victimization of the Jews has now made Christians victims of their own self-inflicted sin. Christian resistance to the Jewish state will continue as long as Christians are unable to overcome the theological prejudice which says Jews are to be victims. Until we do overcome, until we are able to support and defend the Jewish State, we Christians will remain tied to a theological tradition which justifies our playing a role in victimizing the Jewish people. But history has now transformed our faith. It is ironic that those considered victims for so long should now be the source of Christian redemption. This wouldn't be the first time, however, that salvation has come from the Jews.²³ It is no longer necessary to believe that in order to love Jesus we must make his people victims and hate them. Zionism is not only an instrument of redemption for Jews, but can now be seen as having a redemptive quality for Christians, freeing them from being victimizers. How we choose to respond to Zionism will determine whether we live in grace or sin.

1. The Christian scholar, James Parkes has written: "For Jews the Land is a Holy Land in the sense of being a Promised Land, and the word indicates an intensity of relationship going beyond that of either of the other two religions [Christianity and Islam]. As it is for Christians, the Land is unique; but the nature of its unique appeal goes further, and has throughout the centuries involved the idea of settlement and return, and an all-pervading religious centrality possessed by no other land." Parkes, Whose Land? A history of the peoples of Palestine. Harmondsworth. Penguin Books, 1970, p. 135. The literature on this topic is vast. Some helpful references are: Abraham J. Heschel, Israel: An Echo of Eternity. New York. Noonday, 1967. W.D. Davis, The Territorial Dimension of Judaism. Berkeley & L.A.: University of California Press, 1974. The Gospel and the Land. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1974. Arthur Hertzberg, The Zionist Idea. New York: Atheneum, 1968. Walter Brueggemann. The Land. Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1977. Zvi Werblowsky. "The People and the Land" and Ronald Hals, "The Promise and the Land" in Paul D. Opsahl and Marc Tannenbaum, eds. Speaking of God Today: Jews and Lutherans in Conversation. Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1974. Uriel Tal, "Jewish Self-Understanding and the Land and State of Israel", with responses by Jacob J. Petuchowski, Arthur Hertzberg, and Richard Rubenstein in Union Seminary Quarterly Review. Vol. XXVI, No. 4, (Summer) 1971. James Parkes. End of an Exile. Micah Press. Marblehead Mass. 1982. See my article on Parkes' views of Israel and Zionism, "A Christian Apology for Israel", in same volume. A. Roy and Alice Eckardt, Encounter with Israel. New York: Association Press, 1970. Paul Van Buren. A Christian Theology of Israel. New York. Seabury Press. See chapters five and six in particular. A very brief but thoughtful summary of Christian Theology and the Jewish Land Tradition can be found in John T. Pawlikowski's, What are they saying about Christian-Jewish Relations? New York/Ramsey. Paulist Press, 1980. I leave it to the reader to consult the extensive bibliographies to be found in these books and articles. At the risk of appearing glib, I also refer the reader to the Hebrew Bible for the foundational ideas of the relationship of the Jewish people to the Land.
2. This is what Arthur Hertzberg argues in his introductory essay in his The Zionist Idea. It remains one of the best introductions to Zionism. See also Jacob Neusner, Stranger at Home. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, pp. 169-204.
3. For those who would argue that in order for the Jewish State to come into existence an injustice had to be done to the Palestinians, I refer them to the following books which forcefully defend Israel from such a charge. Joan Peters. From Time Immemorial. New York, Harper & Row, 1983. James Parkes. The Emergence of the Jewish Problem 1878-1939. Westport, Ct. Greenwood Press, 1970. James Rudin. Israel for Christians. Philadelphia. Fortress Press, 1982. Frank Gervasi. The Case for Israel. New York. The Viking Press, 1967.

13. John T. Pawlikowski. "Jews and Christians: The Contemporary Debate" in Quarterly Review. 4.4.(Winter) 1984. pp. 26-27.
14. Cohen. Op.Cit. pp. 424-425, footnote 6.
15. On the question of the uniqueness of the Holocaust see: Steven Katz. Post-Holocaust Dialogues: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought. New York: NYU Press. 1983. pp. 287-319. A. Roy and Alice Eckardt. Long Night's Journey into Day: Life and Faith After the Holocaust. Detroit: Wayne State Press. 1982. pp. 41-66. Emil Fackenheim. To Mend the World. New York. Schocken Books. 1982. pp. 9-14.
16. A recent statement by the World Council of Churches meeting in Vancouver, B.C. that urged Christians not to allow the Holocaust to be a factor in how they viewed the Arab-Israel conflict reflects the Church's tendency to ignore the history of Jewish victimization at the hands of Christians. The W.C.C.'s position can only be described as morally bankrupt. It is as if the W.C.C. told whites in America to ignore the history of Black slavery in American history when trying to understand the Black condition today or telling men not to think about the history of male sexism when deciding upon feminist issues.
17. David Tracy. "Religious Values after the Holocaust" in Christians and Jews After the Holocaust. Abraham Peck, ed. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1980. pp. 87-107.
18. As Quoted in Cohen. Op. Cit. footnote 6. p. 436. See also footnotes 3, 4, and 8. pp. 435-437. I am indebted to Cohen's insights on the application of Tracy's hermeneutics of suspicion to the question of theology and the Holocaust and the issue of Zionism.
19. John T. Pawlikowski. Christ in the Light of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue. New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press. 1982. pp. 59-75 contains an interesting survey of how Liberation theologians deal and do not deal with issues of Jewish-Christian relations and Zionism.
20. Tal. Op. Cit. for ways in which Jewish thinkers have dealt with this problem, particularly the ideas of Abraham Isaac Kook.
21. A. Roy Eckardt. "Secular Theology of Israel". Christian-Jewish Relations. London: IJA. 72 (September) 1980.
22. C.G. Montifiore and H.Loewe. A Rabbinic Anthology. New York: Schocken Press. 1974. p. 234. Lev. R. Emor, xxix, 3.
23. John 4:22. The hostility of the writer of John's Gospel toward the Jews remains problematic for contemporary Jewish-Christian relations. On this point, however, of salvation coming from the Jews, the writer may have unwittingly given us a profound truth that Christians have forgotten all too often.