



## 60 years - the Church and the State of Israel

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**The churches have changed their theological insights in regard to Judaism but have not made a connection between basic theological insights and their rather short-sighted political declarations regarding Israel and the Middle East conflict. There is an apparent discrepancy between the two that forms a typical pattern that characterizes the time after WW II up to our days.**

### 60 years — the Church and the State of Israel

**Frank Crüsemann**

Church statements on the State of Israel are as old as the state itself. The State of Israel was founded on May 14th 1948 on the basis of the UN Resolution of November 1947. Shortly thereafter the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches met in Amsterdam from August 22 to September 4, it was the first major church conference after World War II and the first of its kind. In a statement about "The Christian behavior towards the Jews"<sup>1</sup> it states: "We see that the creation of the state 'Israel' adds a new dimension to the Christian struggle with the Jewish problem and threatens to complicate antisemitism through political fears and hostilities". Antisemitism becomes political — hasn't it been that before? — and the statement pretends not to have the competence to make a political judgement on the events and "the 'rights' that are thereby affected." Thus there was nothing left to say other than, "the churches have the strict duty to pray and work for an order in Palestine (sic!) that is as just, as it can be in the midst of our human disorder."

This is a strange judgement — both prophetic and lacking in solidarity. Looking back on nearly 60 years, the insight was prophetic in that antisemitism did not disappear through the founding of the state but has become more "complicated," even though the different forms of a radical-Islamic antisemitism that have developed since could not have been anticipated. However, I consider it highly problematic that neither the UN decision as the legal basis of the new state, nor the then current evidence of a continuing anti-Semitism, are mentioned, because the statement was made at the time of the War of Independence, a time when the young state and with it many people who had escaped or survived the Holocaust had again to fight for their lives. This makes it a massive and one-sided statement.

All this in spite of the fact that the text starts with a look at the very recent catastrophe of European Jewry. It speaks of the 110 000 Dutch Jews murdered and of the 6 million Jews murdered by Germany, all members of the biblical people, with which the Church is connected "in a special solidarity." The actual content of the statement consists then of a rejection of anti-Semitism, "as simply incompatible with Christian confession and life" and "a sin against God and humans," although Christian culpability helped it to emerge and become effective. These sentences are embedded in a strong reminder of the Christian mandate to mission, and especially to the Jewish people. The statement on "Israel becoming a state" follows.

Although a re-thinking of the relationship between Christians and Jews has barely begun so soon after the disaster, the connection between basic theological insights and rather short-sighted current political declarations is already apparent here and forms a typical pattern that characterises the following years and even our days. Still, we cannot ignore the fact that many things have changed since then. Since the beginning of the sixties the churches have developed a new attitude towards Judaism. Since the Vatican II and the 1980 statement of the Synod of the Church of the Rhineland, in Germany a long chain of official church statements have been produced.<sup>2</sup> If, besides stating Christian culpability, the permanent election of Israel and the unrevoked covenant of God with the people of Israel are central, then this is a profound break with Christian theology as it had developed since the second Christian century. The consequences of this new approach for Christian self-understanding, Christian piety and theology have in no way been finalised and are still fiercely controversial.

This process took place parallel to the conflict and bloody history of the young State of Israel and its neighbors. Therefore, today political questions must not and cannot be separated from theological ones. This is apparent in each discussion about "Christians and Jews" from the congregational level on up to synodal negotiations. "What does the church say with respect to the State of Israel? Can the State be God's will?" was one of the first questions from the audience, when the topic of Jews and Christians was discussed for the first time in Germany at the 1961 Kirchentag in front of a large audience. This inescapable connection between a central theological issue with a highly political one shall be considered in greater detail.

The wording of the document *Dabru Emet*, with which Jewish circles in the U.S. in 2002 responded to the changes in Christianity, can be taken as a first hint.<sup>3</sup> The most important of these theses are stated in the indicative: "Jews and Christians," it is said in theses 1, 2 and 4, "worship the same God", "seek authority from the same book", "accept the moral principles of Torah." Thesis 3, deals with the land and the current political dimensions, it speaks only about Christians and states aberrantly, "Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel." They "can," they do not have to and they do not always do, even today.<sup>4</sup> Such a curtailment extends logically also to the other topics, none of the *Dabru Emet*'s statements applies fully to all Christians and all churches. Also the inner-Jewish critique has worked this out clearly. However, the difference is considerable. It is even more striking when one observes that the first German translation of the English phrase "can respect" is in the indicative, "Christians respect the right,"<sup>5</sup> as if it were a fact, or as if it should at least be so according to the core of Christian faith. This translation sets a problematic accent against the English original and was corrected in the official website.

Even where the existence and security of the State of Israel was recognized in principle, conflicts arose again and again in connection with massive military crises in the Middle East. Examples include the Lebanon war, but particularly the first Gulf War in 1990, when some of the leading personalities of the churches in Germany considered the seeming threat to peace as more important than the security of Israel.<sup>6</sup> How quickly the practical assessment of the situation fell apart, despite widespread unity in the fundamental theological realm, was demonstrated in the painful conflicts within the Standing Committee "Christians and Jews" at the Kirchentag.<sup>7</sup>

Let us turn now to the fundamental problems that are reflected in the Christian statements. While theologically there is a single direction and trend, despite all the differences, the reactions to political issues are more fragmented, more insecure and controversial and tend, above all, to consciously avoid clear definitions. There is rarely much more than a fairly general statement of fundamental political solidarity, and often enough even that is missing. The Leuenberger Communion of Churches — an association of European churches — in their statement of 2001, for example, confines itself to support of peace efforts on all sides, rejecting both direct political use of the biblical land promises, and any attempt on the part of Christians to declare them "obsolete;" the recognition of Israel's election should in no instance lead to oppression of others.<sup>8</sup>

Where all these questions are not simply eschewed, there are three key problem areas that come into play here.

– Is the State of Israel and its creation a theological or a secular event? The relationship between the people of Israel and the land is constitutive for the Jewish religion. A theologically positive assessment of Judaism is not possible if this fact is excluded. But the biblical land promises are indeed open with respect to other people and peoples who live in the land, and the concrete shape of the state and its genesis are determined by the complex historical events of the 20th century. Accordingly, Christian evaluations are diverse. They go from the synodal statement of the Church of the Rhineland considering the State of Israel a "sign of God's faithfulness," — and relating it to the "continued existence of God's people" and "its return to the land of promise"<sup>9</sup> — to the strong emphasis by the Protestant Church in Germany insisting in its three studies<sup>10</sup> that it is purely a secular event. In Germany the traumatic events of 1933/34 (when Hitler came to power and the churches had reacted positively [trl.]) play a crucial role in the controversial question of a theological assessment of current historical-political processes. In my view one problem is the almost wanton disregard of the politics of their own government. While usually political statements made by the churches are targeted at respective political institutions or potential voters, in this case quasi-theological judgments and claims are not uncommon. Only in the light of the traditionally disastrous role the Jewish theme has played in Christian thought is it possible to explain that the transition from the purely theological level to assessing and influencing the actual conflict is neither really respected nor reflected and, unlike in other cases, a kind of competence for an ultimate judgement of the world is claimed. Therefore the wording of the Amsterdam statement, brings something to the foreground that is typical even for our days. That the state 'Israel' with its conflicts is responsible for the Christian struggle with the Jewish problem and its new political dimension, is both a significant and ultimately cynical phrasing of the problem.

– On a second level lie the questions of justice and injustice, (possible) human rights violations, the necessity and consequences of the occupation since the 6-Day War and finally an ethical and legal assessment of the events during the founding of the state and the War of Independence of 1948.

We know that in Germany as in Europe a critically-distanced attitude towards Israeli policy on these issues has prevailed for a long time. Again and again one encounters the tendency to denounce only the injustice of the occupation, without considering the historical development and

the broader context and also without even touching on the failures and injustice of the Palestinian side. It is not unusual to remark critically that, in view of German guilt, a certain political correctness forbids any criticism of Israeli politics. Another danger no doubt is the fact that a theologically positive view of the State of Israel measures its politics by (biblical-)ethical standards never used for any other nation, especially not for Israel's opponents.<sup>11</sup>

It might be helpful at this point, to take a moment and compare the er critical assessments of Israel's politics with that of other nations. When the United States under President Bush — or earlier during the Vietnam war — is fiercely criticised — even if this includes a fundamental criticism of capitalism — the existence of the United States or even the American people is never at stake. The same applies to human rights violations by China and even to Germany during World War II, in spite of the greatest crimes imaginable. Except for a brief phase of the so-called Morgenthau Plan the continuing existence of the German people and its fundamental right to political independence has never been questioned. That, however, is very different in the case of Israel. As long as the stated goal of Hamas or the Iranian president is the total elimination of Israel, accepting the annihilation of the state and a large part of its population, any assessment of the situation must include this existential and continuing threat.

– Basically the Christian churches see themselves in a dual loyalty: toward the churches in the Middle East and in particular to the Palestinian Christians that are at home in the land and toward the Jewish State of Israel. Especially churches, like the Westphalian church, that have gone far on the theological level with its explicit renunciation of any mission to the Jews, have explicitly expressed this attitude of dual loyalty.<sup>12</sup> We have to look at the anti-Semitic history of Christianity as well as at the identification of many Christians with the alleged or true suffering of the Palestinian people deprived of their rights, in order to see it as an important step forward, when this dual commitment is clearly stated and, above all, borne out in reality. At the ecumenical level, this is still the exception. This has been shown again by the very one-sided statement of a conference of the World Council of Churches in June 2007 in Amman.<sup>13</sup> While the security of Israel is mentioned only in principle and abstractly in a few contexts, the problems of the Palestinians, the wall and the demand for cessation of the occupation are completely in the centre without any analysis of the overall situation. This is certainly due to the massive presence of Arab Christians at such a conference, while as a rule the Jewish side is not represented.

These three thematic areas identify constellations that contribute to the shaping of every opinion. Only the future will show, whether the German churches, despite their extensive theological reorientation towards the people of God, will in times of conflict de facto forget their solidarity with Israel. There is no doubt, however, that progress has to be made in establishing a political equivalent to the theological recognition of Israel in both theory and practice. Too much has been left undone. In my opinion there are three main aspects that we should focus on:

The recognition of the fact that the covenant between God and Israel has not been abrogated must lead to full recognition of the meaning or the "physical centre of the covenant,"<sup>14</sup> namely the promise of the land, not yet recognized by the churches everywhere with the necessary clarity.<sup>15</sup>

Judgments and claims should no longer be derived exclusively from political (and military) dimensions of the conflict nor from theological and moral principles without sufficiently taking into account the history of the conflict and the political analysis. A first step could be a comparison to our own history either German or European.

In the ecumenical realm the basic recognition of a dual loyalty must also lead to the inclusion of the Israeli perspective. Giving a larger platform to Christian than to Jewish voices is de facto a continuation of the old Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

1. Text according to R. Rendtorff/H. H. Henrix ed., *Die Kirchen und das Judentum* [The Churches and Judaism]. Dokumente von 1945-1985, Paderborn/München 1988.
2. Texts by Rendtorff/Henrix (Note 1) also H. H. Henrix/W. Krause ed. *Dokumente von 1986-2000*, Paderborn/Gütersloh 2001.
3. German translation Henrix/Krause 974-976, Englisch Original [www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=1014](http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=1014)
4. For a critique see E. Brocke, in: R. Kampling/M. Weinrich ed., *Dabru emet — redet Wahrheit. Eine jüdische Herausforderung zum Dialog mit den Christen*, Gütersloh 2003, 103-112. [A Jewish Challenge to Dialogue with Christians]
5. So the official translation in Henrix/Krause 975; also in H. Frankemölle ed., *Juden und Christen im Gespräch*. [Jews and Christians in conversation]. *Dabru Emet - Speak Truth*. Paderborn/Frankfurt/M 2005, 41.
6. The most significant of these the Superintendent of Lippe, Ako Haarbeck: (cited in G. Kammerer, *In die Haare, in die Arme. 40 Jahre Arbeitsgemeinschaft "Juden und Christen"* at the German Protestant Kirchentag, Gütersloh 2001, 143): ["Not even the willingness of the Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein to commit a further genocide, especially on Israel, can justify the war"].
7. Comp. Kammerer, *In die Haare* 112ff.137ff.
8. *Kirche und Israel.. Ein Beitrag der reformatorischen Kirchen Europas zum Verhältnis von Christen und Juden*, *Leuenberger Texte Heft 6*, Frankfurt/M 2001, 76. [Church and Israel. A Contribution of the Reformation Churches of Europe to the Relationship Between Christians and Jews].
9. Rendtorff/Henrix 594. Rendtorff / Henrix 594th Vgl. bes. die Handreichung »Israel: Volk, Land und Staat« von 1970 (Rendtorff/Henrix 461ff). [See especially the handout "Israel: People, Land and State"].
10. Rendtorff/Henrix 573f; Henrix/Krause 662f and esp. 913ff.
11. So explizit die holländische Studie »Israel: Volk, Land und Staat« von 1970 (Rendtorff/Henrix 476f). [So explicitly the Dutch study "Israel: People, Land and State"].
12. *Evangelische Kirche von Westfalen, Israel — Palästina. Frieden im Nahen Osten*, *Materialien für den Dienst 3/2003*. [Evangelical Church of Westphalia, Israel - Palestine. Peace in the Middle East, Materials for Service].
13. *Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen. Internationale Friedenskonferenz, »Kirchen gemeinsam für Frieden und Gerechtigkeit im Nahen Osten«*, Amman, Jordanien 19.-20. June 2007 [World Council of Churches. International Peace Conference, "Churches Together for Peace and Justice in the Middle East"]. [www.oikumene.org/documents](http://www.oikumene.org/documents).
14. So the wording of *Dabru Emet*.
15. See also F. Crüsemann, *Bausteine zu einer christlichen Theologie des jüdischen Landes*, in: *Die Gemeinde als Ort von Theologie*, FS J. Seim, Bonn 2002, 31-45 [Building Stones to a Christian Theology of the Jewish Land in "Congregation as Place for Theology"].

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