



A Theology of the Land and the Diaspora

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October 7, 2023, marks a turning point: The Hamas massacres recontextualize the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Christians must also address this theologically. In Jewish-Christian dialogue, a theology of social space must be developed that takes into account both the Palestinians and God's covenantal action.

Even a truism must be repeated from time to time: the meaning of a thing is determined by its context. For example, the word “preis” can either mean an award or the cost of something. The significance of the Jewish-Christian relationship is also not given in itself. Rather, it is constituted by the social context. This context is undergoing major change. The Hamas massacre and its aftermath have made this obvious and functioned as a catalyst. How must the Jewish-Christian dialogue be contextualized?

As is well known, Jewish-Christian dialogue expanded more broadly in the 1970s and 1980s. Shaken by the Holocaust, society and the church slowly acknowledged their shared responsibility. The process of coming to terms with the past began, a culture of remembrance developed, and debates about the incomparability of the Shoah arose. What had been hostile to one another in Europe for centuries was now linked with a hyphen: Jewish-Christian. The idea of Judaism as the root of Christianity, which could not exist without Judaism, became widespread. The young and idealized state of Israel was seen as a redress and a new beginning.

With the end of the Cold War, the social context changed. The Western liberal concept of society captivated the world. There was talk of a clash of civilizations. Islamist terror in the West quickly made it clear that in a post-secular world, Islam had to be reckoned with as a sociopolitical power. New battle lines exploded. The Middle East became Europe's geographical interface with the global world. The war in Syria, the “refugee wave” of 2015, and the transformation of Turkey under the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are telling examples of this. The State of Israel, for example, is located where the social, cultural, and religious battle lines of the globalized world intersect.

Two secular narratives of European guilt

Now a new postcolonial narrative has emerged: Israel as a European invasion of the Middle East. The occupation of the Palestinian territories, which violates international law, is seen as contemporary evidence of this. The fact that the State of Israel was established to protect against antisemitism and to ensure Jewish political self-determination is being pushed into the background or completely suppressed.

Currently, two cultures of remembrance are intersecting, each seeking to atone for the guilt of European history: that toward the Jews and that toward foreign cultures. They are in conflict. Both secular narratives can only perceive the Jewish people in the land of the Bible as an accidental product of history or as an alien body.

In contrast, the churches must bring their traditions into the interpretation of the Middle East conflict in a prudent and theologically reflective manner. They are committed to the “never again” of antisemitism. However, simply robotically repeating “never again” is not enough in view of the

changed situation. Coming to terms with the Shoah is a new focus for advocating for justice in the land of the Bible, where a politically strengthened Judaism operates. At a time when Christians must reckon with their colonial history, it is essential that Jewish-Christian dialogue also address the Palestinians. This is all the more so since secular Zionism has been underpinned by national-religious motives since the occupation of the Palestinian territories in 1967.

In addition, it is important to convey the achievements of Jewish-Christian dialogue in the Global South. Postcolonial criticism comes from Africa. At the same time, the focus of the universal church is shifting there. To convey the importance of a positive connection between Judaism and Christianity in Africa, but also in India, Asia, and the Muslim-dominated Orient, is extremely difficult, since there is hardly any contact with a vibrant Jewish community there. This difficulty is currently also evident in relation to Pope Francis. Despite all the equidistance he maintains from the conflicting parties in the Middle East, it is clear that he is closer to the post-colonial narrative than to the post-Shoah culture of remembrance. He comes from the Global South.

In light of the renewed virulent antisemitism in both East and West, the question remains whether the “Jewish question” of European modernity has returned on the global level. Is Israel today “the Jew” among states? As a secular Israeli, Michal Govrin stated: “We used to wear a yellow star, now a blue one.” She was alluding to the Israeli flag. The National Socialists not only sought the final solution to the Jewish question. They also promised to solve the “social question” with it, because in their eyes the Jews were to blame for everything. Is the idea circulating once again that world peace will be easier to achieve once the Middle East conflict is resolved? Has anti-Zionism, like antisemitism once was, become a “cultural code” (Shulamit Volken) that is simply part of a left-liberal and post-colonial world culture?

Christian anti-Judaism has largely been overcome in the mainstream churches. But these churches must confront the deeper causes of Jew-hatred. They are aware of the evil that—slippery, disguised, and diffracted—is hard to comprehend. Do conspiracy theories about Jewish world domination represent secular distortions of a previous belief in God? Is frustration with an overly complex, unredeemed world mutating into Jew-hatred because Judaism has awakened messianic awareness and thus also the awareness of unredeemedness?

Anthropological and theological factors must be explored anew. Distinctions such as religious, ethnic, left-wing, and right-wing antisemitism must be questioned. The relationship to Judaism is not a side issue but affects all aspects of Christianity. If the church does not actively address it, it too risks slipping back into anti-Judaism. The “Jewish question” must be replaced by Jewish-Christian dialogue.

In addition to the fight against antisemitism, there is also the debate about the land of the Bible. The Second Vatican Council deliberately excluded the land and state of Israel. The 1965 declaration *Nostra Aetate* deals with Judaism as a religion, not as the Jewish people. However, the Jewish people and the State of Israel were addressed in Jewish-Catholic discussions, particularly at the dialogue meetings of the International Liaison Committee, from 1971 to 1973. Ultimately, the Roman Catholic Church rejected any theological interpretation of the Zionist project. In 1985, the “Notes on the Correct Presentation of Jews in Catechesis and Preaching” stressed that the State of Israel should be described only in secular-historical and international legal terms. However, the return of the Jews to the land is, of course, a sign that one has to interpret theologically.

In fact, a strict separation of religion and politics ensued, which continues to shape the Vatican's actions today. This enabled the Holy See to establish diplomatic relations with the State of Israel in 1993. However, when the Vatican document “For the grace and calling of God are irrevocable (Rom 11:29)” on the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* remained silent on the land and State of Israel in 2015, Jewish circles criticized this as a painful omission. In 2018, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI entered the debate, writing that, for Jews, this period in history is the time of the Diaspora.

Many Jews felt offended (cf. HK, August 2018, 13–16; May 2019, 49–51).

In light of the national-religious, messianic thinking on the part of the Jewish settlers and the eschatological-apocalyptic thinking of radical Islamists like Hamas, representatives of Jewish-Christian dialogue are called upon to develop a narrative beyond Palestinian liberation theology or Christian Zionism. A covenant theology that coheres with God's unrevoked covenant with Israel must provide the framework. The land can be understood as a privileged place for the Jewish people to live according to the Torah. This can be linked to a democratic constitutional state.

Finally, it is important to remember that God led the Israelites into a land that already had a population. Furthermore, Christian theology must incorporate the message of the New Covenant, which specifically allocates a place for non-Jews in the land.

What is needed, therefore, is a theology of social space that takes into account God's covenantal action as well as the fact that the Promised Land and the Diaspora are interrelated. There can be no theology of the land without a theology of the Diaspora. This includes considering the function of holy sites and their traditions. They help us understand the land as a homeland that has religious significance and is associated with life in the Diaspora. With their social teaching, social ethics, and political theology, the churches can also contribute a rich, differentiated and intellectual tradition. Humanitarian aid and general ethical appeals are not enough.

The Western paradigm of secularization is called into question

In a globalized world, Jewish-Christian relations are definitely a phenomenon that directly affects only a few people. Socially, the debate about Islam is at the forefront.

This, too, is reflected in the pontificate of Pope Francis. He brought Rabbi Abraham Skorka from Buenos Aires to the Vatican. Right at the beginning of his term of office, he set an example with his visit to the Holy Land. Since then, however, in his efforts for world peace and social justice, he has appealed primarily to Islam. Consider the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* or the Abu Dhabi Declaration (cf. HK, February 2024, 32–35). Indeed, Jewish-Christian relations today can only be cultivated in the context of the trilateral relationship between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. In both the West and the Middle East, this dialogue is struggling toward a new configuration of religion and politics. The Western paradigm of secularization is being questioned.

This is also evidenced by the debate before October 7 over legal reforms in Israel. The Islamist Republic of Iran and its allies, which attacks Israel as the epitome of the West, are also testimony to this. Neither Hamas nor the militant settlers support a two-state solution as initiated by the West.

Identity politics versus liberal-democratic forces

In the current war, Palestinians are only fighting against Israelis to a limited extent. But where are the battle lines? Isn't it religiously motivated movements that question the separation of religion and politics as established by Western modernity? Identity politics forces versus openly liberal-democratic ones? Israel seems to have become the scene of a microcosm of the struggle over the relationships among religion, society, and politics, which challenges the entire world.

Jewish-Christian dialogue, in turn, has its "setting in life" in civil society, which has developed in Western societies between the political and the private spheres. This is where religions locate themselves socially according to modern thinking. If this place is taken away from them, they either combine with politics or create the glue for ethnic belonging. Jews and Christians, who know about each other, fight to preserve the structures of civil society of which they themselves are a part, for the sake of freedom and justice. They recognize their commitment to education, which connects

people beyond their ethnic origins in a meaningful way in a state governed by the rule of law.

Many Jews expected greater sympathy from Christians after the Hamas massacre and antisemitic rioting. They have asked themselves what the dialogue and friendship of recent years are worth in the current situation. The loud silence from the Christian side has hurt them. Palestinian Christians have spoken similarly. What does it mean to the churches in the West that they are brothers and sisters in faith? They, too, feel hurt when the West is indifferent to the Christian presence in the Holy Land (cf. HK, October 2024, 24–27). Jews and Christians alike bring these parallel inquiries to the deeper motivation for dialogue. What is the basis of dialogue? What is the commitment to each other?

Judaism and Christianity are interrelated

Human responsibility in the face of past and present suffering and injustice must always be a motivating factor. Beyond the history of persecution in recent centuries, research has revealed how Judaism and Christianity are historically and theologically linked. Rabbinic Judaism and patristic Christianity developed with mutual influence in the post-biblical period. The Christ event together with the destruction of the Temple forced Judaism, as well as the messianic movement that had gathered among the proselytes of the Jewish people with Paul's help to reassert themselves and establish their identity canonically. This process of differentiation is called "The Parting of the Ways." In this sense, rabbinic Judaism and Christianity not only emerged simultaneously, but both consider themselves respectively to have been established and committed by God. They refer to each other even in their constitution. In the space between them, Islam was born in late antiquity.

For believers, the question arises as to what this reference to the "other " means. All the great theologians of the Christian tradition, from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas and up to the theologians of the 20th century, have grappled with this question. Theology must build upon this in a courageous new setting today. We are only at the beginning of the Jewish-Christian dialogue.

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