



# The Return of the Wandering Jew: The State of Israel as a Theological Challenge for Jewish-Christian Relations

31.05.2017 | Peter Colwell\*

**Subsequent the third contribution of a series of articles (for part one see [here](#), and part two here) that features a dozen Christian and Jewish theologians reflecting on the state of Jewish-Christian relations today and whether there exists a “special relationship” between the two religious traditions. The articles were first published in CURRENT DIALOGUE No. 58, 2016, edited by the World Council of Churches and are republished with kind permission.JCR**

“The Wandering Jew” is a myth from the Middle-Ages and concerns a Jewish shoemaker who taunted Christ as he carried the cross to Calvary, and as a result was said to have been cursed and banished from the land of Judea, destined to wander the world until the Second Coming of Christ. It belongs to a corpus of anti-Jewish polemic that would perpetuate a narrative of Jewish rejection of Christ, their subsequent killing of him, and their theological invalidation and replacement. For centuries, the “wandering Jew” came to epitomize just how much European Jews were regarded as politically, morally and religiously suspect. It also symbolized the extent to which the power Christianity had over Judaism was total and permanent.

The polemics that one religion uses against another are important indicators of some of the complexities that exist in the way the religions relate together and how power is exercised. This particular piece of anti-Jewish polemic helps reveal two important aspects of Christianity’s complicated relationship with Judaism, particularly at the present time. First of all, it reminds us of the long history of antisemitism, which although is most severe in the European context, is one that is borne out of the ancient separation of Church and Synagogue in the Eastern as well as the Western Church. The anti-Jewish language from figures as diverse as John Chrysostom and Martin Luther is illustrative of this, but also the way in which scripture has been interpreted. The way in which the language of “the Jews” in John’s gospel and the way in which Jesus’ disputations with the Pharisees are read, interpreted and understood in respect of Jews and Judaism suggest that this difficult aspect of the Jewish-Christian relationship is not one that is easily, or quickly, addressed.

The second aspect of the Jewish-Christian complexity relates to the Holy Land itself. Prior to the end of World War II, the “Land” was not a significant issue for Jewish-Christian relations, although there has been a continuous Jewish presence in and around Jerusalem throughout the centuries. However, it was growth in that population towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, and then the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, that meant that the issue of the Land and Jewish relationship to it once more became a critical issue in Jewish-Christian relations. To pick up the polemic issue again, it was as though the Wandering Jew had returned home in complete defiance of centuries of Christian antisemitism. In the words of Rabbi David Hartman, the “rebirth of the State of Israel has shattered the Christian theological claim of God’s rejection of the Jewish people as witnessed by their endless suffering and wandering.”[\[1\]](#)

We can therefore identify a twofold challenge to Christian theology presented by a continuing and

flourishing Judaism. On the one hand are the Jews, Christ's own people, who in the main reject him, yet with whom, according to St Paul, the covenant is still active, and so how does one relate to that theological crucible? This is a matter that has been the main concern of Jewish-Christian dialogue since the Holocaust, in an attempt to recover the historic closeness of the two religions. On the other hand, a different sort of theological challenge is presented by the creation of the State of Israel, and this has received less attention in the dialogue between Jews and Christians.

The reason for its relative neglect is because of the way it relates to the former issue – Israel has become crucial to Jewish self-understanding in the post-Holocaust

context and demands that Christianity relates to Jews in ways other than as victims of Christian hegemony. Yet it sometimes seems as if Christians ought to accept uncritically the State of Israel, regardless of its actions towards the Palestinians. Thus, a number of denominations in Europe and North America have felt torn between two inescapable issues of justice – addressing deep-rooted Christian antisemitism and advocating for justice for the Palestinians. An emphasis on the former can lead to the accusation of ignoring the cries of Palestinians, and a commitment to the latter invites the charge of disproportionately holding Israel to moral standards to which its Arab neighbours are not held (with a suspicion that age-old antisemitism might be one of the motivating factors).

Part of the reason why Jewish-Christian dialogue finds itself caught within this dilemma is the lack of any adequate Christian theological appraisal of the implications of Israel as a contemporary political reality as well as a hermeneutical and theological concept. The hermeneutical issues are acute, given that the name chosen for the new homeland for the Jews was Israel. It immediately connects contemporary Jewish political self-determination with the Jews of the Bible, implying biblical warrant for a modern nation state, and as such makes it almost impossible to divorce the language of the Bible wherever Israel is mentioned, with the present reality of Israel and its conflict with Palestinians.

For Palestinian Christians, this is a hermeneutical crisis in a way that it is not for their Muslim neighbours. Writers such as Mitri Raheb and Naim Ateek have highlighted the way in which Palestinians have become victims of a theo-political displacement that makes Biblical interpretation (especially in respect of the Old Testament) particularly difficult. Pastor Mitri Raheb has suggested that whilst Western Christians have sought to reject replacement theology, whereby the church replaced Israel, it had nonetheless allowed a new form of replacement theology, whereby the Palestinians are replaced by the modern State of Israel.<sup>[2]</sup> Meanwhile, the former Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Michel Sabbah has warned against the tendency amongst Palestinians to fall into a form of neo-Marcionism (Marcionism being the heresy that denied the validity of the Old Testament), and Munther Isaac believes that this has become hermeneutical practice among many Palestinian Christians.<sup>[3]</sup> It is as though the Bible itself had displaced Palestinians from their land, or as Bishop Kenneth Cragg puts it: “the painful ambiguity of blessing the Lord God of Israel.”<sup>[4]</sup>

For Christian theology, names such as “Israel,” “Jerusalem” and “Zion” have, over the centuries, a spiritual and atemporal association within Western Christian theology and only become subject to re-examination with the emergence of the State of Israel as a political and temporal reality that also compels Christian theology to re-examine its relationship to the Land and Judaism. When there were territorial claims on Jerusalem (particularly during the Crusades), Jews were never seen as having any legitimacy there.

The “atemporal” nature of a Christian theology of Zion is most apparent in devotional texts,

---

hymnody and Christian Psalm adaptations. Numerous examples can serve, including “Jerusalem the Golden,” “Blessed city, heavenly Salem,” and “Glorious things of thee are spoken.” What is evident from these illustrations is how the atemporal importance of Jerusalem (and by implication, the Holy Land) has been a dominant and overarching theme of Christian theology and devotion, especially in post-Reformation Europe. Any sense of Jerusalem’s temporal nature is seen to end with biblical times and the church looks beyond history to the eschatological images that are described in Revelation 21. John T. Pawlikowski, the Roman Catholic theologian of the Jewish-Christian encounter, notes how this was driven by the need to replace Jewish exclusiveness with regard to the land with an eschatological Zion, and that to some extent, the Christian language of “Holy Land” is part of the same tendency.<sup>[5]</sup>

Zionism, and particularly the creation of the State of Israel, raises a significant challenge to Western Christian theology. Having viewed Judaism as a faith tradition that had been superseded by Christianity, the temporal importance of Jerusalem had all but evaporated, and reduced to eschatological hope. Yet Zionism sees part of its task as reversing the eradication of Jews from history, and so the Jews “returning to history” (in the words of Gershom Scholem) suggests an ontological crisis for Christian self-understanding, that a faith that it believed had been superseded had returned to history, self-defined in biblical and Davidic terms (albeit with a strong secular underpinning). These challenges are both hermeneutical and ecclesial. Hermeneutical, insofar as the methodology of scriptural interpretation is critical here, and ecclesial, because so much ecclesiology is predicated upon the church (the Body of Christ) as “the New Israel.” Thus we can see that the existence of the State of Israel is a significant hermeneutical and ecclesiological challenge to Christian theology more generally, but a theology of the Land, more specifically, and how it relates to Palestinians.

The context of Jewish-Christian relations is evolving and changing, away from the issues of European history and towards those that relate directly to Israel as a reality of Jewish self-determination. If Christians are honest then they will recognize that, for them, post-Holocaust guilt, and therefore relating to Jews as “victims” of Christendom, has been the primary impulse for dialogue with Jews. Yet the existence of Israel as a modern democratic state throws down a challenge to this older paradigm, asks of Christians to engage with Jews as a people and of a religion who regard themselves as masters of their own destiny and not dependent upon Christian benevolence and repentance. And thus another honest question to reflect upon would be whether, given centuries of antisemitism that believed the Jews to be banished from the land, destined to wander and always a subject of Christian hegemony, is a Jewish return to history a deeply problematic reality for Christianity that requires an honest re-evaluation? Furthermore, there is an urgent task to address theologically the challenge of the existence of the modern nation-state called “Israel,” with all the biblical associations that come with that, both in terms of our engagement with contemporary Judaism and also in taking much more seriously the perspective of Palestinian Christianity, which represents an unbroken line in the land of Palestine from the day of Pentecost to our present time.

---

\*The **Rev. Peter Colwell** is Deputy General Secretary, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, and Researcher at the Centre for Eastern Christianity, Heythrop College, University of London.