

Aumann, Moshe, Conflict and Connection: The Jewish-Christian-Israel Triangle

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Possible End to Strained Relations Between Jews and Christians

Alfred Muller

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In 1987, when he just arrived at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, Moshe Aumann became deeply impressed by

a document of the Presbyterian Church. The document dealt with the relations with the Jewish people. "It was an honest document," he says. "It came to grips with very sensitive issues."

Since then, he has a special interest in Church documents that deal with Jewish-Christian relations. When he heard of new publications and did not get them automatically, he would ask for them. He

continued his search for Church statements in libraries. "I have seen many documents since then, but I always come back to this one," says the now retired diplomat.

In the document the Presbyterian leaders stated that Jews and Christians worship the same God; that the Christians have not replaced the Jews as the People of the Covenant; that the Church is

guilty of abusing the Jews and that God has promised the Jews a land.

He served at the Israeli Embassy in Washington as Consul General for the mid Atlantic states and as Minister-Counselor for Relations with the Churches. He had to explain Israeli positions to the

Christian public in the United States via its Churches, bible colleges and seminaries. At the same time he monitored what was happening among the Christians.

After his return to Jerusalem in 1990, he kept interest in the Jewish-Christian relations. He became editor in chief of the

magazine *Christians and Israel*, a publication of the Association for Christians and Jews in Israel. Recently, he compiled important Church statements and commented on them in his book *Conflict*

& Connection, the Jewish-Christian-Israel Triangle, published by Gefen Publishing House in Jerusalem and New York.

“Two millennia of estrangement and hostility, rancor and hatred, persecution, conflict and strife may finally have come to an end,” he writes in the epilogue. “Our generation is witnessing

a swelling tide of new thinking and new speaking in Christendom” The two factors that brought about the change were the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

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Aumann’s view Christians faced a choice: either to revise their theology or to rebel against this whole development. The rebirth of Israel, the massive return of Jews to their ancient homeland and

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rebel against this whole development.

Assemblies

Most of the documents mentioned in his book were published after the Holocaust, with as exception the statement of the Assemblies of God in 1927. The Assemblies of God spoke more than 20 years

prior to the establishment of the Jewish state about “the salvation of national Israel”. In 1945 the Assemblies condemned anti-Semitism and disapproved of ministers identifying them-selves

with those who were engaged in anti-Semitism. "The main reason why no Christian should be anti-Semitic is that our Saviour was a Jew," the document noted.

Aumann's book also includes excerpts of Luther's anti-Semitic writing "On the Jews and Their Lies" (1543). Luther's statements are contrasted with a statement of the Seventh General

Convention of the American Lutheran Church in October 1974. The American Lutherans say in it that "no Christian can exempt himself from involvement in the guilt of Christendom. But Lutherans bear

a special responsibility for this tragic history of persecution, because the Nazi movement found a climate of hatred already in existence"

Interest

The Church declarations appear at a time when Jewish-Christian contacts increased. However an asymmetry occurred: Christians were more interested in dialogue than Jews. Christians would like to

start a theological dialogue as well, whereas Jews show little interest in the theological views of Christians.

Nearly all Jews who participate in the dialogue with Christians are secular, Reform or Conservative Jews. The Orthodox Jews were hardly ready to join the dialogue. Aumann assumes this is because of

the centuries long persecution by Christians. These have caused feelings of anger and suspicion. On top of this, many feel that the dialogue is yet another attempt to proselytise.

However, there are some exceptions. The late rabbi and scholar Joseph Soloveitchik approved Jewish-Christian dialogue as long as it would deal with social and humanitarian issues. Religious or

theological topics were not to be touched. Another exception is rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, the founder of "The International Fellowship of Christians and Jews". His organisation channels American

Christian support for Israel.

The author says that the attitude of Christians towards the Jewish people vary. Orthodox Churches in 1972 started to show interest in the dialogue with the Jews. Orthodox Christians did not have

the same amount of guilt feelings about the Holocaust as their Western fellow believers. On the contrary, they viewed themselves as victims of the Nazi regime as well.

Nevertheless, in October 1997 the Eastern Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, while visiting the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, vigorously denounced anti-Semitism. He described

the State of Israel as a "guarantor" of the Jewish people's survival.

Nostra Aetate

The first important document was the Vatican's Nostra Aetate (1965). "It was the first time that any major Christian Church stated that the Jews of Jesus' time could not be held responsible

collectively for His death," Aumann states. "Certainly not later generations. Most of the persecution in the last 2000 years was based on the opposite of that thesis."

In 1974 another important Catholic document appeared, the more detailed "Guidelines". The "Guidelines" instructed ministers and teachers how to convey Nostra Aetate's message through

its educational institutions, textbooks and the media.

The next statement, the "Notes" of 1985, dealt with the correct way to present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis. These document mentions the State of Israel for the first time.

"It was a real turning point. The attitude of all the Churches was still very reserved as far as Israel was concerned."

However, not all trouble spots have been overcome, Aumann states. The Vatican's intention to canonise pope Pius XII (Eugenio Pacelli), despite his controversial role in the Second World War,

caused Jewish protests. For years the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) appealed to the Vatican to permit Jewish scholars access to the Vatican's archives. In

December 1999 a team of three Catholics and three Jewish historians finally began their research. However, in July 2001 the team announced it would suspend its work due to insufficient access to the

archives.

The State of Israel

Aumann's conclusion appears in the sub-title of the book. The three components - Judaism, Christianity and the State of Israel - should go together. Acknowledgement of Judaism should lead to

acknowledgement ' of the national aspirations of the Jewish people.

"What I found most interesting to see in the development is, that the attitude of a given Church towards the Jewish people and the Jewish religion, was not always reflected in its attitude

towards the State of Israel," the diplomat says.

The document of the Presbyterian Church of 1987, for instance, shows a major change of attitude towards the Jewish people, but not towards the Jewish state. The document states: "As Reformed

Christians, how-ever, we believe that no government at any time can ever be the full expression of God's will. All, including the State of Israel, stand accountable to God. The State of Israel is a

geopolitical entity and is not to be validated theologically."

The Presbyterians refer to the Hebrew prophets, who told their people that those in possession of “land” have a responsibility and obligation to the disadvantaged, the oppressed and the

strangers in their gates. “God’s justice, unlike ours, is consistently in favour of the powerless.”

A negative attitude towards-the- Israeli policies can be found in a statement of the World Council of Churches of September 2001. The one-page resolution talks six times about “the illegal

occupation of Palestine” (or variations on the theme), Aumann notes. Nowhere mentioned are the brutal terror attacks on Israelis. The resolution urges the believers to pray for the Palestinians, but

it does not see the need to do so for the Israelis.

Evangelical Churches

A lot of support for Israel can be found in the Evangelical Churches. The support has the potential to affect international relations. The United States of America is Israel’s most important ally

in the world. In the States are many Evangelical Christians who reject a Palestinian State and the “Road Map”.

They believe that Israel has every right to be in Judea and Samaria, and that the Jewish settlements in that area should not be dismantled. “But their support for us can go only so far as we

ourselves want to go in Jerusalem,” Aumann says. “If our prime minister and our government vote

in favour of the Road Map, they cannot do anything about it.”

Many people, both Christians and Jews, are not aware of the change in attitude. What could be the reason? “In general, not much publicity has been given. People do not take so much interest in

religious matters. In the Christian world these changes are taking place mainly at the top levels of the Churches. In our dialogue with Christians we urge them to speed up this process a little bit,

that people should become aware of what is going on.”

“On the Jewish side is another factor. There exists a kind of natural resistance to any good news coming from the Christian side. The record of Jewish-Christian relations is, to put it mildly,

not a happy one. It is a record of persecution, discrimination, oppression, slaughter, forced conversions. That weighs very heavily on the Jewish psyche. It is not easily erased.”

“I am not asking for a judgement. I am not asking my fellow Jews to say: everything is wonderful, and all is forgiven now that the Church is doing something good and is working towards

reconciliation. But I am working hard to convince my fellow Jews that something good is happening. That we ought to respond to that. First of all, I would like to see an acknowledgement that a change

is taking place. Such an acknowledgement would encourage the Churches to continue this process.”

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Alfred Muller is a freelance journalist living in Jerusalem. This book is available through www.israelbooks.com and the ISBN number is 965-229-299-0