



How the State of Israel Affects Today's Jewish-Christian Dialogue

31.10.2006 | Schoon, Simon

Prof. Simon Schoon of the Theological University, Kampen, The Netherlands, explores the implications of various models of Christian-Jewish relations for attitudes toward the State of Israel. An address at the conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews, Vienna, July 2-5, 2006.

How the State of Israel Affects Today's Jewish-Christian Dialogue

Simon Schoon

Ambivalence

The relationship between Christians and Jews is a passionate one, over the centuries, in both the negative and in the positive sense. Few themes in church and theology today cause such emotional debates and deep controversies as the relationship between Christians and Jews, between the Church and the Jewish People, between Christianity and Judaism. In the last decades many church documents have stated that in the relationship between Christianity and Judaism the very heart of Christianity is at stake.¹ On the one hand Christians feel a strong bond, even gratitude, towards the Jewish People, because from this people Jesus was born, whom Christians regard as the Messiah. On the other hand they feel challenged in their faith, even a resentment and irritation, because the very same Jewish People rejects Jesus as the promised Messiah. Still more awkwardly, the Jews seem to have good reasons for rejecting Jesus, because the world did not change for the better since his coming. In the past the hottest issues in polemics, apologetics, and rarely in dialogue, were the Messiah-ship of Jesus, anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, and Mission to the Jews. Today the most sensitive issue is: The State of Israel.

Love-Hate

The relation between Christians and Jews can be characterized as a 'love-hate relationship'.² This means that a relation is ambivalent: sometimes the love prevails, sometimes the hate. The one sentiment can easily change to the other and vice-versa. The same expression is used in Dutch, but mentions the hate first, not the love. A 'hate-love relationship' would be more accurate, because almost always in history the hatred came first as the strongest feeling. To be fair, there were always exceptions. Only the future can show whether this ambivalence in the relationship between Christians and Jews can be overcome and the hatred can change into love.

Generation gap

At the beginning of the 21st century there remains much ambivalence in the relationship between Christians and Jews. Frequently the flames of passion run high. When a controversial book is published on the significance of the Messiahship of Jesus, or when some shocking event happens in the Middle East, there are fierce debates in the churches and scores of Readers' Letters appear in church-periodicals and newspapers. Older church-members are more affected by the *Shoah*, while younger people are more influenced by the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There is a

generation gap in the different Christian reactions towards the State of Israel. My younger students at the university are not so much interested in the classical themes of the official Jewish-Christian dialogue. They respect every religion, of course they think, also Judaism. They are much more interested in the question of the role of religion in society. Especially the place of Islam in our society is for them a very hot issue.

Older people have vivid memories of the Second World War and are still wrestling with feelings of guilt because most of them have done nothing to resist the deportation and annihilation of the Jewish population. They are mostly very pro-Israel and often support also the activities of the Christian Zionist Movement.³

Same patterns

All currents and models of thought of the past are still strongly present in the passionate relationship between Christians and Jews: On the one hand anti-Judaism, on the other hand philo-Judaism. On the one hand Mission to the Jews, on the other hand Judaizing tendencies. Views on Jews and on Judaism touch upon all disciplines of theology and sometimes cause wide-ranging discussions in congregations and parishes. Attitudes towards the modern State of Israel vary greatly. They range from support for the Greater Israel Movement to the conviction that the State of Israel is racist and should disappear as soon as possible. Appalling events in Israel and the Palestinian Territories can suddenly change deep-felt love into hatred, or hatred into love. The conclusion is inevitable: Ambivalence prevails! The situation seems to be very different in the 21st century, but the patterns and thoughts of the past are still determining ideas and attitudes.

Perhaps it is expected by this audience that I will describe and analyse Christian reactions and responses to recent political developments in Israel and the Palestinian territories. But which Christian reactions? Those of Christians in Bethlehem, of whom many – according to Father Pizzaballa, the Franciscan Custos of the Holy Land⁴ - feel harassed by the Muslim majority? Or should we listen more to the voice of the Lutheran Pastor of Bethlehem, Mitri Raheb, who wrote the book in 2004 *'Bethlehem Besieged: Stories of Hope in Time of Trouble'*?⁵ Or should we respect the passionate feelings of Christian Zionists in the region where I live in Holland, who travelled to Israel several times last year to join Orthodox Jews and demonstrate against the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza? Or could we better support the stand of resolution A012 of the Episcopal Church in the US, which advocates for an end to the isolation of East Jerusalem and Bethlehem from the West Bank; removal of the Wall; assurance of human rights for Palestinians, and so on? Should we listen to the voices of the Sabeel Institute for Palestinian liberation theology⁶, or should we be shocked by the facts of the recently published book of Hans Jansen documenting Arab anti-Semitism, with a CD-Rom with 1500 shocking cartoons⁷? Most people miss the information and the expertise to decide, and side therefore with the party they like or supported already. Everybody collects his own facts and own so-called scientific proofs of the facts. A dialogue of the deaf!

I hope you are not eagerly waiting on my comments to all these different opinions and to the latest incidents. And if you - yet - are waiting for that, I have to disappoint you. I am not of the opinion that churches have to comment on all political events and developments. They have, in my conviction, to support those who build bridges, to give voice to the voiceless, and to listen to all parties involved in the conflict. The churches have to stand up for the right of the State of Israel to exist and to be a haven for all Jews who want to live there. And they have also to support the right of the Palestinians to live in peace in their own independent state.

Models

What I want to do, is to give some insight in the background of the very different Christian standpoints and attitudes. What are the theological rationalizations of the different views? To

discover that, it may be helpful to distinguish a number of models in conceptions of Christians on Jews and Judaism, so as to clarify Christian ideas and positions in the past and the present. They can all be applied to Christians' attitudes toward the State of Israel as well. The models cannot always be separated but must certainly be distinguished. The most important models are as follows, indicated with keywords:

a. Replacement

This model dominated in Church history. It asserts, that after Jesus Christ the Church has taken the place of the People Israel. The task of Israel was only to bring the Messiah and after fulfilling that mission its task in salvation history was finished. In this model the New Covenant replaces the Old Covenant, baptism replaces circumcision, and the Gospel replaces the Law. Often the dispensation of 'Ancient Israel' is seen as earthly, the dispensation of the Church as spiritual.

In this model the State of Israel has, in theory, no special theological or religious significance for Christians. In practice this frequently means, however, anti-Judaism in sermons and religious teaching, and anti-Zionist reactions against the State of Israel.

b. Typology

Although the typological reading of the Bible was already customary in the Qumran community, the Church Fathers are in this type of reading mainly influenced by Philo of Alexandria. Israel in the Old Testament is regarded as *typos*, pointing to the fulfilment of the *typos* in the New Testament. This can, but does not necessarily imply, replacement of Israel. It means for example in Calvinism that the 'shadows' of the Old Covenant are now seen as clearly lifted in the light of Christ. The present People of Israel is viewed as still living 'in shadows'. A triumphalist theology is the consequence. In this view only a mass conversion to Christ can bring about a solution for the conflict in the Middle East.

c. Illustration

In this model the Jews are regarded as an illustration of especially sinful people. As an obstinate people in the Old Testament and as an unbelieving people in the New Testament the Jews show how disobedient all people are. Their behaviour is paradigmatic and contagious. In Christian sermons the Jews became from the very beginning and are still today the illustration-model *par excellence*. In their own State the Jews illustrate paradigmatically the sinfulness of humankind. This year there was a public uproar in the press and the media in the Netherlands because of a sermon of a Protestant pastor, who told his congregation that 'the Jew in us' had to be killed and that Hitler had understood that quite well.

d. Eschatology

In this model the conviction is expressed, that the eschatological and apocalyptic texts in the Bible are being fulfilled in our days before our own eyes. Many evangelical Christians look particularly upon the unification of Jerusalem in 1967 as the beginning of the end-time. They see the events around the Jews and the State of Israel as the setting of the stage for the Second Coming of Jesus. They hope to hasten his coming by unconditionally supporting the State of Israel. In their view there is no real place for Palestinians in the Promised Land.

e. Israel as 'notion'

Some Christians like to deal with the biblical concept of 'Israel' as a critical notion both toward the present-day Church and to the modern Jewish People and State. For them the direct self-identification of the Jewish People and the Jewish State with the name 'Israel' is objectionable.

Biblical Israel is in their view not a 'nation', but a 'notion' that in our days becomes especially visible among the poor and oppressed in the world. In this view the Jews are often idealized as a wandering people, who have to live in exile. The Jews are chosen, as long as they were the suffering people. For those Christians the Palestinians have today replaced the Jews and they deserve now this title because of their suffering. So, in these church circles there is mainly support for the plight and the needs of the Palestinian People.

f. Experiment

The Jews are God's particular chosen people and the State of Israel is a kind of 'experimental garden', where exemplary justice must be done by its inhabitants. They are called to live up to the biblical commandments of peace and justice, as an example for the whole world. Those Christians tend to judge the State of Israel by higher standards than all other peoples and states in the world.

g. A sign of God's faithfulness

In the second half of the 20th century confessional statements of some Protestant churches, especially in Germany and the Netherlands, have called the return of the Jewish People to Israel a sign of God's faithfulness toward his Covenant People. It is stressed in these declarations that God's election of the Jewish People is irrevocable. These positions - in the Netherlands already in 1959, in Germany in 1980 - have come nowadays under strong criticism. Many maintain that these statements were made under the impression of the *Shoah* and are theologically naïve, because – in their opinion - they deal too easily with the complicated question of the relation between God and history, and are betraying the universal message of Christianity. Yet, I myself feel most comfortable with this theological and political approach.

Questions

All these – old and new – concepts on Jews and Judaism exist today among Christians. Consciously and unconsciously, they are decisive for Christian attitudes towards the State of Israel. Sometimes opposing opinions cause fierce debates in churches but also in the context of Jewish-Christian dialogue. Questions like the following are debated:

- Is the State of Israel a normal state like all other states, with good and bad policies, with successes and failures?
- Or has the State of Israel a special theological significance for Christians?
- Should this State be regarded as 'God's own miracle in our time'?
- Should Israel be measured by the standards of justice that are laid down in the Bible or - just as any other state in the world - by the standards of international law?
- Is criticism on the policies of Israel by Christians welcomed, when the solidarity with the existence of the State of Israel is beyond any doubt?

In an open dialogue between Jews and Christians all these questions can be discussed. There can be no blockade for a discussion on this topics. That would mean an end to the dialogue.

Opposing views

Very different positions, sometimes diametrically opposed to each other, are propounded by Christians. In evangelical circles much of the outlook is established, strengthened by a flood of publications by modern fundamentalist-Christian - mainly American - writings on Israel and the Middle East conflict. These combine Old Testament prophecies with current political events and see God's ancient promises fulfilled before their own eyes. They ask their churches and governments to support unconditionally the State of Israel and the policies of the Israeli State,

because they are convinced that only in this way will God's design be fulfilled and the Second Coming of Jesus be realised soon. They find in the State of Israel their natural allies among the colonists in the West Bank and the ultra-nationalists. They are often strongly Islamo-phobic and regard the Islam as the apocalyptic evil of the Last Days. Quite often they see Messianic Jews, who believe in Jesus, as the anticipation of what soon will happen to all Jews.

At the other end of the church's religious-political spectrum, the 'eschatological' model is fundamentally rejected. There the guiding principle is that 'biblical Israel' as 'model' or 'notion' stands for all the poor and oppressed in the world. Those of the latter conviction are more inclined to listen to the voices of Palestinian Christians, who feel themselves oppressed by the Israeli occupiers. They support the demand that Israel leave immediately all occupied Palestinian territory and advocate the establishment of an independent Palestinian State. These differences in the standpoints of Christians, based on opposing models of thinking, seem totally irreconcilable.

Messianic fever

Last year I edited a book on Messianic expectations of Jews and Christians and wrote myself an article in this book on 'Messianic fever'.⁸ I tried to describe the ideas of different groups: The religious colonists in the West Bank, the militant Islamists, and the conceptions of Christian Zionists. They all hear, in their own particular way, the footsteps of the approaching Messiah, or the nearing of the Kingdom of God, or the coming closer of the Final Judgment. And they all want, quite often by violent means, to hasten the coming of the Messiah, and to prepare the messianic future as they see it.

Their numbers seem to be growing. And quite often they dictate policies of governments by their pressure and sometimes by their acts of terrorism.

Could we not better leave all kind of messianic inspiration for political standpoints, just to avoid the danger of messianic fever? What could churches and religious people contribute? How can peaceful religious voices be heard, amidst the many voices of religious hatred and religiously motivated violence?

I mentioned in this article as examples the writings of the Jewish scholar David Hartman in Jerusalem and the German Christian theologian Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt (who passed away in 2002). They both - in their own way - pleaded for giving up the great and dangerous messianic dreams. And advocated to turn messianic hope into a pragmatic attitude of taking small steps of compromise in the direction of a solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This ominous question must be put: Will the whole Middle East suicide-bomb itself, with weapons of mass destruction? Or – as Bernard Lewis puts it - 'will Jews and Palestinians be able to abandon grievances and victimhood, settle their differences, and join their talents, energies, and resources in a common creative endeavour'? Or is this perhaps also an unrealistic messianic dream?

Notes

1. Documented in: E. J. Fisher, L. Klenicki, *In Our Time. The Flowering of Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, New York/Mahwah, 1990; A. Brockway, P. van Buren, R. Rendtorff, S. Schoon, *The Theology of the Churches and the Jewish People. Statements by the World Council of Churches and its member churches*, Geneva, 1988; R. Rendtorff, H. Henrix (Hg.), *Die Kirchen und das Judentum. Dokumente von 1945 bis 1980*, Paderborn/München, 1988; H.H. 2 Henrix, W. Kraus (Hg.), *Die Kirchen und das Judentum. Dokumente van 1986-2000*,

- Band II, Paderborn/München, 2001.
2. See: S. Schoon, 'Protestants and Jews: A Love – Hate Relationship', in: P.N. Holtrop, F. de Lange, R. Roukema (eds), *Passion of Protestants*, Kampen 2004, 189-211.
 3. See a balanced article: H. Ronning, 'The Land of Israel. A Christian Zionist View', in: *Immanuel* 22/23 (1989), 120-132. Also: I.H. Anderson, *Biblical Interpretation and Middle East Policy. The Promised Land, America, and Israel, 1917-2002*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, etc 2005, 7-50, 130-138.
 4. 'Christen im Heiligen Land sind Ziel islamistischen Hasses', in: *Kirche und Israel* 21/1 (2006), 86-88.
 5. Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2004.
 6. Zee www.sabeel.org
 7. H. Jansen, *Van jodenhaat naar zelfmoordterrorisme. Islamisering van het Europees antisemitisme in het Midden-Oosten*, Heerenveen 2006.
 8. G.C. den Hertog, S. Schoon (eds), *Messianisme en eindtijdverwachting bij joden en christenen*, Zoetermeer 2006.

Simon Schoon is minister of the Reformed Church, Gouda, and Professor of Jewish-Christian Relations at the Theological University, Kampen, The Netherlands.