churches together
IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND

The Holy Land as a theological challenge for Western Christianity

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"Never before has history known so many frontiers as in our contemporary world, and at no period has there been such a frequent violation of frontiers as happens today."[1]

In recent years, the way Western Churches have spoken about the holy land and its peoples has become a fraught and vexed issue. Western churches have found themselves caught between two seemingly irreconcilable narratives, that of Jewish self-understanding in a post Holocaust context, and the self-determination of the Palestinian people. This is a theological crisis that has a number of causes and manifestations. This paper has been written for the Consultation "Competitively Loved?" held at St. George's House, Windsor, and aims to set out some of the background issues that will help to inform the conversations that will take place.

Outlining the problem

Firstly, there is the matter of relations with the Jewish people. The history of European Christian anti-Semitism is well documented. Blamed for the condemnation and death of Jesus, anti-Semitic polemic flourished during the Middle Ages. This would lead to expulsions (from England in 1290, from France in 1306 and Spain in 1492) and massacres (during the 1st Crusades in the 11th century, Jewish communities around the Danube and the Rhine were utterly eradicated), along with being routinely blamed for various social ills (from the disappearance of children to the Black Death). The so-called "blood libel" alleged that Jews kidnapped and killed Christian children in order to use their blood in the making of matzos for Passover.[2] "The Wandering Jew" myth from the Middle-Ages, is also illustrative of the pervasiveness anti-Semitism; it concerns a Jewish shoe maker 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.

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[1] Anthony O'Mahony: "Christianity, Interreligious Dialogue and Muslim-Christian Relations", in A.O'Mahony and Michael Kirwan (eds), World Christianity: Politics, Theology, Dialogues, London: Melisande, 2004, p.63

[2] See: Alan Dundes, ed. (1991). The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore. University of Wisconsin Press, 1991; Hannah R.Johnson, Blood Libel: The Ritual Murder Accusation at the Limit of Jewish History, University of Michigan Press, 2012.

The anti-Semitism of Medieval Christian Europe was also inherited by the Protestant Reformers, most notably Martin Luther who, in his tract “On the Jews and their lies” declared they were a "base, whoring people, that is, no people of God, and their boast of lineage, circumcision, and law must be accounted as filth."

Anti-Semitic discourse was heavily bound up with Christian apologetics but also contains other elements, including ethnic scapegoating and what today we would define as racism. This was the context in which Jews lived. The restrictions upon Jews, where they could live, the occupations they could enter, the schools and universities they could attend, led many to conclude that assimilation was the only course open to Jews in Europe. For some this meant conversion to Christianity, whilst for others it meant embracing all aspects of the country in which they lived.

In the 19th century a different kind of Jewish consciousness began to emerge. In the Germanic speaking world, the desire for “heimat” (homeland) represented a critical yearning of the spirit of late romanticism. Rooted in the events of the French Revolution, this came to be expressed as a Promethian energy and vitality that sought to establish freedom and self-determination, free from the domination of either religion or imperial power. This would lead to the emergence of nationalistic fervour across Europe leading to the emergence of nation states with which we are now familiar (Germany, Italy, Ireland, Austria, Hungary to give just a few contrasting examples). For European Jews, this Promethean spirit presented them with a crossroads in terms of their own emerging identity. Was it to be found within the new nationalisms and the nation states that would emerge? Many fervently believed that to be so. But were Jews to find safety and security in these newly emerging political realities? A growing number were coming to the view that this was by no means a given. The Austrian composer Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) summed up the Jewish predicament: “I am three times with a Heimat: as a Bohemian in Austria, an Austrian among Germans and as a Jew throughout the world – always an intruder, never welcomed.”[3] And for one of Zionism’s pioneers, Leon Pinsker, “To the living, the modern Jew is dead, to the native-born he is a stranger, to the long-settled a vagabond, to the wealthy a beggar, to the poor a millionaire and exploiter, to the citizen a man without a country, to all classes a hated competitor.”[4]

Thus what we now know as Zionism emerged. Mahler’s contemporary Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), perhaps the most influential of Zionisms founding fathers, came to believe that anti-Semitism was not something that could ever be overcome. In fact he viewed it as a social disease from which Jews could only ever escape through a struggle to be truly free. It was only by being a people that directed their own destiny that Jews would be truly accepted in the world. In his pamphlet “The Jewish State”, published in 1895, he advocates the orderly exodus of Jews from Europe.

Simultaneously (and not unconnected) European imperial powers were turning their interests towards the Middle East and in particular the need to contain both the Ottoman Empire and territorial ambitions of Tsarist Russia. The Crimean War was primarily a conflict about influence in the Holy Land. Both British and German interest in Palestine would be part of the context for the

[3] Norman Lebrecht, Why Mahler? How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed the World, Palindrome 2010, p.24
[4] words of Leon Pinsker (1821-1891) quoted in Amos Elon, The Israelis: Founders and Sons, London: Penguin Books, 1971, 1983 edition, p.70.

establishment of a joint German and British bishopric in Jerusalem (a move that precipitated the exit from the Church of England of John Henry Newman and others), and the establishment of Anglican and Lutheran presence in the Holy Land that continues to play a critical part in Palestinian Christianity. However British interest in the region, and the realities of World War I, would result in the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Influenced by a growing movement of restorationist Christian Zionism that saw that the return of Jews to Palestine would hasten the return of Christ, it also served Britain's strategic purposes with respect of the Ottomans and Germany. It stated:

"His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."

Of course this does not refer to the whole of Palestine, and uses the hitherto unknown term "national home", which would lead to wide and far-reaching interpretations that did not acknowledge any obligations on Britain. Speaking to the Peel Commission in 1937, the Prime Minister at the time of the Declaration David Lloyd-George, stated that the interpretation at the time was that a Jewish State would not come into being without the acquiescence of the majority of the inhabitants of Palestine, but if, by virtue of the Declaration, Jews became the majority, Palestine would become a "Jewish Commonwealth".[5]

Jewish migration to Palestine continued throughout this period and would intensify as Europe became increasingly unsafe for Jews. The British Mandate for Palestine, which it received from the League of Nations in the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, provided an opportunity for the realization of the aspirations of the Balfour Declaration. The eventual establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was a tragedy for the Palestinian people who faced evictions from their homes, destruction of villages, being made refugees and for a good many, death. This was the Nakkba (literally tragedy). The 1967 Occupation of Gaza, the West Bank and Golan Heights following the Arab defeat at the end of the Six Day War resulted in future occupation and injustice for the Palestinian people. The resulting conflict with Palestinians led to the further loss of land (particularly illegal settlements being built by Israel), militarization, frequent military incursions, suffering and death, leading to many Palestinians choosing to leave the region to make new lives for themselves in other parts of the world. The conflict would result in Israelis being injured and killed by terrorist incidents, in particular, suicide bombings. Thus security for Israel came to be a defining issue in the attempts at creating a two State solution - with the separation wall cutting off Palestinians from their land being a critical part of Israeli response to the deteriorating security situation, yet also impeding the ever illusive peace. The Kairos Palestine document summarizes the predicament:

"The separation wall erected on Palestinian territory, a large part of which has been confiscated for this purpose, has turned our towns and villages into prisons, separating them from one another, making them dispersed and divided cantons. Gaza, especially after the cruel war Israel launched against it during December 2008 and January 2009, continues to live in inhuman conditions, under

[5] Gudrun Krämer, A History of Palestine, University of Princeton 2008, pp.150f

permanent blockade and cut off from the other Palestinian territories. Israeli settlements ravage our land in the name of God and in the name of force, controlling our natural resources, including water and agricultural land, thus depriving hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, and constituting an obstacle to any political solution. Reality is the daily humiliation to which we are subjected at the military checkpoints, as we make our way to jobs, schools or hospitals. Reality is the separation between members of the same family, making family life impossible for thousands of Palestinians, especially where one of the spouses does not have an Israeli identity card. Religious liberty is severely restricted; the freedom of access to the holy places is denied under the pretext of security. Jerusalem and its holy places are out of bounds for many Christians and Muslims from the West Bank regularly and the Gaza strip. Even Jerusalemites face restrictions during the religious feasts. Some of our Arab clergy are barred from entering Jerusalem."[6]

The Western Churches, and indeed the international ecumenical movement represented by the World Council of Churches, have been faced with a set of critical issues. The first of these is the implication of Christian theology in centuries of anti-Semitism culminating in the Holocaust/Shoah. Thus arose the need to find a different mode of engagement with Judaism, as a living faith not merely the ancient origins of Christianity. Thus also arose the need to counter "replacement theology" that taught that Christianity was the fulfilment of Judaism. But Jewish-Christian dialogue has often struggled with the issue of the State of Israel, which for the vast majority of Jews is central to Jewish self-understanding in the modern world. As the former chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has stated, if Christians wish to understand Jews then they must understand the importance of the State of Israel. However, the treatment of the Palestinian people, their deaths, suffer, detention, land confiscations and no State of their own, has resulted in the complaint that one replacement has been exchanged for another. In the words of Pastor Mitri Raheb from Bethlehem:

"In the same moment when (Western) theologians were countering a kind of "replacement theology", a theology that understands the Christian Church to have replaced Israel, they fall into another trap of "replacement theology", a theology that replaces the Palestinians by the Jewish people and looks at the land being connected only to one people, that is the Jews, and not to those who remained there centuries and might have more Jewish roots than most of those "imported" merely for demographic reasons…This "replacement theology" provided a theological cover for an ongoing racial replacement policy of the State of Israel".[7]
Meanwhile attempts at meeting these concerns, by way of policies and reports from churches that have sought to stand in solidarity with Palestinians, have often caused offence amongst European Jewish communities, already feeling a sense of beleaguerment, that Christians are cooling towards them and in their harsh criticisms of Israel and questioning a central part of Jewish self-understanding (and sometimes with an accusation of anti-Semitism).

There are also deeper theological challenges here. The first is the word "Israel" itself. The choice of this Biblical name for a modern State, a Biblical name with profound theological and ecclesiological overtones for Christianity creates a problem for theological and liturgical language. This is expressed pointedly by the late Bishop Kenneth Cragg:

[6] "Kairos Palestine: A moment of truth, A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering" http://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/about-us/kairos-palestine-document
[7] Mitri Raheb: "Shaping Communities in times of Crises: Narratives of Land, People and Identities", www.mitriraheb.org

"How should we read now the ardent prophecies of 'the land' and return from exile? In particular, how should Arab Christians do so in painful ambiguity of 'blessing the Lord God of Israel' when the Israel is that of Menachem Begin, Moshe Sharon, Rabbi Kahane and the Ansar internment camps – not the Israel of Zechariah the priest or of Luke the Christian in their Benedictus?"[8]

A different theological challenge is an hermeneutical one. The former Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah has warned of the dangers of creating a new Macionism[9]. As such most Palestinian theologians had veered away from such an hermeneutical direction and sought new ways of engaging with the language of the Old Testament in light of contemporary events. Munther Isaac, a Palestinian theologian (also of Lutheran background) suggests this new Marcionism has become part of Palestinian Christian belief and practice. This he sees through a liberation theology approach and also through a spiritualizing of Biblical texts. He also notes that this is a tendency that is being followed by Arab theologians in other parts of the Middle East, reflecting how central and emotionally charged the Israel-Palestine conflict has become.[10]

Then there is the matter as to whether the language of Jewish-Christian relations is defined largely through the European story pre-1945 and not sufficiently by the realities of Israel being a central part of Jewish identity. The "return to history" (probably coined by Gershom Scholem) is a key concept in Zionist thought that describes how Judaism emerges from its spiritual quietism in Europe to play its own distinctive role in human history that is not characterized by its subservient role to Christendom. But as David Hartmann suggests it also appears to reverse and refute a medieval anti-Semitic polemic that narrated the archetypal Jew, cursed to wander the earth, banished from the land for eternity, because of the rejection and killing of Christ.[11] For this and other reasons writers such as the Israeli feminist Jaqueline Kahanoff, view Zionism as a post-Christian and post-Islamic Judaism.

However a final question that remains unresolved is to what extent Christianity has an underdeveloped theology of land. Having viewed the land as largely redundant very early on (the centre moving from Jerusalem to Rome or Constantinople), and taking a more eschatological view of Jerusalem at least, the notion of land is one with which Christianity might be said to struggle, at least in terms of holiness and particularity. Where territory has be vigorously defended the outcomes have often resulted in a shameful episode in Christian history. Yet the doctrine of the Incarnation tells us of the importance of God's intervention in a given place and time. As Clare Amos observes:

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[8] Cragg, The Arab Christian, London, 1992 p.237

[9] Marcionism – the 2nd Century heresy that rejected the Old Testament and the language of God as portrayed within it

[10] Munther Isaac's approach to a theology of the land is through the discipline of Biblical studies, whereby Biblical history (Old and New Testaments) are read as pointing to a missional theology of the land that "universalized in Christ" the promises concerning the land. See, From Land to Lands, from Eden to the Renewed Earth, Langham Monographs, 2015 Munther Isaac: "Reading the Old Testament in the Palestinian Church Today: A Case Study of Joshua 6", in Salim J.Munayer & Lisa Loden (eds), The Land Cries Out: Theology of the Land in the Israel-Palestinian Conflict. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012, pp.217-233

[11] see further: Peter Colwell: "The Return of the Wandering Jew: The State of Israel as a Theological Challenge for Jewish-Christian relations", in World Council of Churches: Current Dialogue 58, November 2016, pp.26-28

"The incarnation of Christ is, for Christians, the point where God intersects with humanity, eternity intersects with time, and universal space intersects with a particular point of geography…Incarnation does not at all remove or supersede this necessary 'scandal of particularity' of the which the city of Jerusalem is one of the most powerful examples. Incarnation in fact requires that we take seriously the temporal and geographical particularities and parameters of Christ's life, for otherwise we begin to slip into a gnostic vision."[12]

John T. Pawlikowski suggests that Christianity is not alone in struggling with this and advocates the development of a "theology of belonging" whereby Christian theology can take account of both Judaism and Islam.[13]

Conclusion

This short paper has attempted to summarize both the conflicting narratives with regard to Israel and Palestine. Both tell in part a story of a painful fault line in the politics of the Middle East, but also illustrate a fault line within Christian theology in the 21st century, which has its roots in the history and politics of the 19th and 20th centuries. That fault line is the clash between on the one hand the post-Holocaust theological imperative to re-evaluate Christianity's theological understanding of Judaism, and on the other, the need for a theology of recognition with respect to indigenous Christianity in the Middle East. One seeks to honour Jewish aspiration of self-determination in the land, whilst the other determines to recognize the vitality and essential quality of a Christian presence in the land of its birth. Can Christian theology find a resolution to this apparent contradiction? Whether it can or not, the difficulties will remain and a greater sense of various theological currents requires great ecumenical reflection from the churches.

July 2017

[12] Clare Amos, Peace-ing Together Jerusalem. Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2014, p.62f

[13] J.T.Pawlikowski: "Ethics in a Globalized World: Implications for the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict", in Peace and Change, October 2011, Vol.36, Issue 4, pp.541-555