

## **Beyond interfaith reconciliation: A New Paradigm for a Theology of Land**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Christian confrontation with the Nazi genocide produced a radical re-evaluation of theology with respect to Christianity's relationship to the Jewish people. Spurred by horror at the Nazi genocide, and motivated by the urgent need to atone for the sin of Christian anti-Judaism and the perceived complicity with or silence during the Nazi Holocaust, this revisionist movement focused on the repudiation of replacement theology. This revisionism has had profound implications for the current discourse on the political situation in historic Palestine. It directs and frames "interfaith" conversations in the West and promotes church policy designed to protect relationships with the Jewish community at the cost of the church's social justice mission with respect to human rights in historic Palestine.

On a deeper level, this revisionist theology serves to support Christian triumphalist tendencies. Whereas the confrontation with the Nazi Holocaust presented an opportunity to confront this quality in Christianity, Christians instead chose to focus on anti-Semitism as the primary Christian sin. As a result, Christian triumphalism is actually reinforced, through an identification with a rehabilitated Judaism and an affirmation of the exclusivist nature of God's covenant with the Jewish people. In addition to this reversion to particularism, Christianity's spiritualization of the land has been disavowed, and a superior Jewish claim to the land is legitimized. The paper discusses the implications of these issues for the development of a theology of land and the current quest for peace in historic Palestine.

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## I. INTRODUCTION: A NEW TRIUMPHALISM

Your Eminences, Reverend Fathers, President and Dean of the Faculty, esteemed colleagues, and students:

I am an American Jew with deep family roots in Palestine, steeped in the tradition of Torah, Jewish history, the liturgy of the synagogue, and the Bible. I am also a psychologist who has been thrust into the realms of theology and politics -- and here they converge -- as a result of my confrontation with the Palestinian Nakba, a crime of dispossession and ethnic cleansing that is the root cause of the conflict in the Holy Land today and that threatens world peace itself. It also threatens the very soul and future of the Jewish people. As an American, a Jew, and a human being who seeks justice and dignity for the oppressed and a livable, nurturing planet for my grandchildren, I stand before you today, honored to be in your midst and grateful for this gathering and for the work of the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum of the World Council of Churches.

As a Jew born into a religiously observant family in post-World War II America, I was raised in a potent combination of Rabbinic Judaism and political Zionism. I grew up immersed in the Zionist narrative of the return to the Jewish homeland. I was taught that a miracle – born of heroism and bravery – had blessed my generation. The State of Israel was not a mere historical event – it was redemption from millennia of marginalization, demonization, and murderous violence. The legacy of this history was a sense of separateness – a collective identity of brittle superiority for having survived, despite the effort, “in every age” – so reads the Passover liturgy -- to eradicate us. The ideology and mythology of the birth of the State of Israel partook of this legacy of separateness, vulnerability, and specialness. I embraced it.

Until I saw the occupation of Palestine and learned the other narrative. Until I realized that the colonial project that I was witnessing in the West Bank, progressing without brakes and with massive funding from my own government, was the continuation of the ethnic cleansing that had begun in earnest in 1948 and that had been planned almost from the beginning of the Zionist project. I returned home to the United States with two questions burning within me: “Why is my people doing this?” and “Why is the Christian world helping us to do it?”

As part of my journey to answer these questions, I have come to several realizations. First: it is clear that politics have failed to bring about a just resolution of this conflict. I now believe that only a civil society-based movement of nonviolent protest against the policies of the State of Israel will produce the political resolution required to bring justice to the Palestinian people and peace and security to the people of the land -- including my Jewish sisters and brothers in Israel. Second: I believe that the church – on an ecumenical and global basis – has a key role to play in providing the spiritual energy and leadership that is needed to ensure the growth and ultimate success of this movement. Finally: only when Christians are liberated theologically to act faithfully, in accordance with their witness to this injustice, will the church be able to fully answer the social justice imperative that calls out to it so clearly. Like the Jews of first century Palestine, we are

living in prophetic times. At no time have we been in greater need of the voices of the prophets, including that of Jesus of Nazareth, who, like the prophets, spoke – and acted – in direct response to the injustice that plagued his people.

Two years ago in Bern Switzerland, American theologian Harvey Cox challenged the assembled at the World Council of Church's Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum conference on "Promised Land" with this question:

"What do we really mean by 'promised land?' How has the term been hijacked and used for various political reasons, when maybe that is not the significance of the texts at all? Ancient Israel is often confused with modern Israel. They are not the same. We can talk about an integral relationship which must be there theologically between Christians and the Jewish people. Jesus was Jewish; the whole background of Christianity comes from the Jewish people, but the Jewish people and the modern State of Israel, though they overlap in certain ways, are not the same, and therefore we have to be thoughtful and self-critical about how that theme is dealt with" (2008, 33).

Cox's bold statement sets before us the most urgent theological issue of our time. Awareness of Israel's current and historic denial of Palestinian rights has been growing among Jews and non-Jews alike. American voices, both secular and from the faith communities, are joining those of religious and political figures across the globe in calling Israel to account for decades of hostilities and for the current political stalemate, and in naming my own government's complicity in financing and diplomatically supporting the policies and actions that stand in the way of peace. Paralleling this important change in political awareness is an equally crucial shift from a theology occupied with the evil of anti-Semitism to one concerned with a theology of land. It is this transition that is a key focus of the work of the World Council of Church's Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum, and the subject of my remarks to you today.

### **The Christian sin**

I paid a visit to a professor of theology at the seminary of a major Protestant denomination in Washington DC. As the author of articles and books in the post-supersessionist tradition, he has taken on the blatantly anti-Semitic aspects of Christian doctrine, as well as strongly reaffirming the special relationship between God and the Jewish people. I told him that I felt we had a lot in common: that as a Jew, I was committed, as was he as a Christian, to rooting out destructive practices and doctrines in my religious tradition. I described my horror at discovering that my people, in pursuing our ethnic nationalist project, were betraying the most fundamental and cherished elements of our ancient tradition. I said that without question, Christians had to confront the anti-Jewishness of replacement theology -- but that I was concerned that in the rush to atone for anti-Semitism, progressive Christian theology was supporting the abusive practices of the Jewish state by supporting a superior Jewish right to historic Palestine. I expressed my concern that this stream in progressive Christian thought served to furnish

theological legitimacy to Israel's land grab and to its past and ongoing ethnic cleansing, and that it suppressed criticism of Israel's human rights violations and thwarted honest, productive dialogue about the Israel-Palestine situation.

The professor's response was swift: "That's an old story," he said to me. "It's the story of an archaic, tribal Judaism and an enlightened, universalist Christianity. We don't tell that story anymore." He stated that even if this "old story" had not been discredited by virtue of its blatant anti-Semitism and its responsibility for millennia of persecution of the Jews, it was passé, having been demonstrated to be theologically unsound. I was stunned by this reaction. Yes, anti-Jewish Christian doctrine deserved to be discredited in view of its pernicious effects. But I had expected more receptivity to a discussion of this issue.

Theology, I pointed out, had to be in conversation with history. Did the crimes committed against the Palestinian people and the ongoing insecurity visited upon the Jewish citizens of Israel as the result of a quasi-messianic movement merit opening up the topic, despite the possibility that some would cry anti-Semitism? But the professor seemed closed to a nuanced discussion. Anything, apparently, that carried even a whiff of Christian anti-Jewishness, or that might possibly be perceived as such, had to be summarily discounted. Atoning for anti-Semitism trumped all other discussions.

My exchange with the professor that day is far from an isolated case. In our current political climate, it seems acceptable for Christians to look critically at elements of their own faith and history that have caused harm, especially when these have been cornerstones of their doctrine. But it is not permissible to extend this conversation into any critical examination of the behavior of Jews or their institutions. While Christian sins are fair game, criticism of Judaism or things Jewish is simply out of bounds.

It is not hard to understand how this has come to pass. Sixty five years ago, Christians stood before the ovens of Auschwitz and said: "What have we done?" Since then the Christian world has been engaged in a purposeful, passionate, and often painful process to examine its own theology and to reconcile with the Jewish people. But this effort has gone beyond cleansing the faith of anti-Jewish doctrine. In an effort to find an antidote to the toxic anti-Jewish beliefs known variously as "replacement theology" and "supersessionism," Christians in the West have embraced a theology that effectively supports the superior Jewish claim to the land. It represents a regression to an archaic view of God as dwelling in a geographical location and favoring a particular people. It has put the Christian faith, which came to move mankind away from particularism, on a slippery slope to the endorsement of a dangerous, anachronistic ideology of land possession and conquest.

### **A cry for purification**

The Christian project of atonement for its sins against the Jewish people has created an industry of Christian-Jewish interfaith scholarship that has profound implications for Christian attitudes toward the Jewish people and the global discourse about the State of Israel. The historical, psychological and spiritual ground zero of this project is the wartime and postwar reaction of the German Protestant church to the Nazi era. In his 1998

collection, *Jews and Christians: Rivals or Partners in the Kingdom of God?* Belgian theologian Didier Pollefeyt traces this movement, reflecting on the “ground that has been covered in Jewish-Christian relations” since the Second World War. The chapter in Pollefeyt’s collection by German Protestant theologian Bertold Klappert describes the situation of the German Confessing Church in the postwar era. Klappert describes how, confronted with the scale of the crime against the Jewish people, the focus of German Protestant theology had shifted from concern about the faithfulness of the church to its theological core as opposed to the demands of the state, to a penitential focus on Christianity’s culpability for the Nazi genocide. Listen to Klappert’s quote from his teacher and member of the original Confessing Church, Hans Joachim Iwand. In a 1959 letter discussing the Church’s “academic and theological guilt” for Auschwitz, Iwand asks:

Who is going to take this guilt away from us and our theological fathers – because there it started? ... How can the German people that has initiated the fruitless rebellion against Israel and his God become pure? (1997, 43)

In this cry for purification we can discern the central motivation and future direction for a revised Christian theology, a theology that took root not only in postwar Germany but in the Western world at large. Indeed, the history of Christian anti-Jewish doctrine and actions has become a consuming concern for Christian theologians. “Anti-Jewishness,” wrote contemporary Protestant theologian Robert T. Osborne, “is *the Christian sin.*” (1990, 214, emphasis added) Catholic theologian Gregory Baum, writing about the church’s effort to reconcile with the Jewish people and rid itself of its deeply-rooted anti-Jewish biases, declared that “if the Church wants to clear itself of the anti-Jewish trends built into its teaching, a few marginal correctives won’t do. It must examine the very center of its proclamation and reinterpret the meaning of the gospel for our times” (1997, 6–7). Baum – and in this he is joined by a preponderance of other writers, both Christian and Jewish -- tied the need for this daunting project to the impact of the Nazi Holocaust:

It was not until the holocaust of six million Jewish victims that some Christian theologians have been willing to face this question in a radical way...Auschwitz has a message that must be heard: it reveals an illness operative not on the margin of our civilization but at the heart of it, in the very best that we have inherited...It summons us to face up to the negative side of our religious and cultural heritage. (1997, 7)

The work of American theologian Paul van Buren was key in setting the stage for this powerful stream of Christian-Jewish reconciliation and a powerful philo-judaic push in American progressive Christianity. According to van Buren, forging a positive relationship with Judaism and the Jewish people is nothing less than the reimagining of what it means to be Christian. “If the church stops thinking of the Jews as the rejected remnant of the people Israel,” writes van Buren, “if it starts speaking of the continuing covenantal relationship between this people and God, then it will have to rethink its own identity” (1984, 23). Calling attention to the ways in which Christianity had allowed itself to be built on a foundation of anti-Judaism, van Buren set out to correct this theological

error by framing God's covenant with the Jewish people as the basis for the Christian revelation. "Christianity must refer to Judaism in order to make sense of itself," writes van Buren. This is in the service of the "church's reversal of its position on Judaism from that of anti-Judaism to that of an acknowledgement of the eternal covenant between God and Israel" (1998, 85).

The issue of the Promised Land figures prominently in this theology. According to van Buren, Christians may participate in the spiritual Jerusalem with the Jews, but the Jews hold the deed to the actual real estate, and the return of the Jews to possess that very same Promised Land confirms this. Consider the following passage from a 1979 interfaith symposium, "The Jewish People in Christian Preaching." Why, asks van Buren, after eighteen centuries, should Christian leaders "turn Christian teaching on its head" with respect to the Jewish people?

The Holocaust and the emergence of the state of Israel...are what impelled them to speak in a new way about Jews and Judaism. ...the Israeli Defense Force sweeping over the Sinai and retaking East Jerusalem was what could not possibly fit our traditional myth of the passive suffering Jew. The result is that events in modern Jewish history, perhaps as staggering as any in its whole history, have begun to reorient the minds of increasing numbers of responsible Christians. (van Buren 1984)

It is not so much the jarring echo of the mythology of a "new Jew" that shocks and concerns me, nor the one-sided, triumphalist narrative of the 1948 and 1967 wars. What is more disturbing is the theological undertone, the biblical drumbeat, in the appearance of two words in this passage: Sinai and Jerusalem. But there is more going on here than a glorification of Jewish power and the Jewish vision of the Return to Zion: it is that now Christians can join in this triumph, and absorb this historical event into their own vision of what it means to be faithful to God's plan. These events of our time, continues van Buren, reflect "the will of the holy one of Israel, that the greatest of all love affairs of history between God and God's people continue, but that God provides also a way for Gentiles, as Gentiles, to enter along with the chosen people into the task of taking responsibility for moving this unfinished creation nearer to its completion" (1984, 25).

This is an astonishing reversal in Christian thought. This revised theology perpetuates the triumphalism that helped create the very sin that Christians are attempting to correct. Chosenness has been returned to the Jewish people, and then claimed as well for Christianity as heirs to this privileged status. We have here a kind of Judeo-Christian triumphalism—a significant step backward from the spiritualization of the land and the universalization of the parent faith that characterized the original Christian vision. And this is not a theological quibble -- this shift carries huge consequences. First: it provides theological justification for a massive and an ongoing abuse of human rights. Second: it blocks Christian actions, on both individual and institutional levels, to address this wrong by opposing Israel's actions as a state.

In the introduction to his book, Pollefeyt proposes to “reflect the critical questions we must confront in framing a theology that can help us in the modern age.” Pollefeyt has assembled an impressive collection, but in his goal of laying out the groundwork for an alternative to substitution theology, he errs in looking backward, rather than forward. In his introductory chapter, Pollefeyt brings in Rabbi Irving Greenberg’s now well-known dictum: “No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children.” Greenberg’s principle has achieved the status of an ultimatum, holding Christianity and indeed Western civilization hostage to the historic victimization of the Jewish people. Pollefeyt writes that if Christianity, “even after Auschwitz, can only bring its message at the expense of the life and well-being of the Jewish people, then Christianity is simply immoral and unbelievable. ....” (1997, 20) It is true that historically Christianity did establish itself at the expense of the Jews, with disastrous consequences throughout history. But now, in *this* historical context, there is a terrible cost in narrowing the focus in this way. Baum’s statement that “Auschwitz has a message that must be heard” is correct. But this must be seen as applying to civilization as a whole, to all the holocausts born of religious particularity and ethnic and nationalist supremacy. This penitential Christian focus on the sins against the Jews – what I, with apologies to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, would call *cheap penitence* – becomes problematic in the current historical context, because it serves to support the very particularity that the early Christians had come to confront in the time of Rome. Who are the burning children? Of course, we must see them as all children. But in practice, this is not so. In practice, the lives of Jewish children have preference over Palestinian children. In practice, Jewish suffering has become the benchmark, defense of Jewish claims and fears the primary focus. And in the current context, the considerable forces that support the interests of the Jewish state above all others are more than willing to exploit this Western Christian attitude.

There are fundamental theological issues raised here. The approach presented by Pollefeyt and others reviewed here rests on the assumption that Christianity was established in the negative – as a replacement for Judaism. This is not the case. Christianity in its earliest days was meant to continue Judaism, not supplant it. History and circumstances got in the way of that project of Jesus’ followers and laid the groundwork for replacement theology. But there is a core of Christianity that has nothing to do with the toxic campaign against the Jews that insinuated itself into the faith early on and that has been the source of so much suffering over the centuries. In atoning for their triumphalism, Christians have succeeded only in reinforcing it through their endorsement of the Jewish people’s nationalist project. This is a betrayal of the core of Christianity. We need to pick up the trail where it was lost, back in the first century, when an itinerant Jewish mystic brought his people together in opposition to the evil of the Roman oppressor and in resistance to the oppressive practices of their own theocracy in Jerusalem. In this regard I refer you to the work of John Dominic Crossan, Walter Wink, Richard Horsely, Norman Gottwald, Neil Elliot and others, who understand the Gospels as the record of a movement of social transformation and of nonviolent resistance to oppression.

It is the crisis of the land today that brings us to this point, and it is the articulation of a new theology of land that is the crucible in which this work will be done. Before I turn to this, however, I will first discuss the major barrier that confronts the church in taking up this work in earnest. I have termed this “the interfaith trap.”

## **II. THE INTERFAITH TRAP**

As described above, the postwar years produced confessional statements by various German Protestant churches as they struggled to come to terms with the consequences of Christian anti-Jewish doctrine. For the Roman Catholic Church, Vatican II in 1965 was a watershed event, as the Church undertook a long overdue examination of its attitudes toward the Jewish people. Christian-Jewish “interfaith” dialogue was originally undertaken to break down age-old barriers of fear and mistrust between the two communities. Today, however, this dialogue now follows clear rules that serve to insulate Christians from any perception of anti-Jewish feeling and to protect the Jewish community from any possible challenge to unqualified support for the State of Israel or the validity of the Zionist project. These rules are playing out in the academy, in the pews, in interfaith relations on the highest levels, and in everyday encounters. They are rendered more powerful by never being stated or acknowledged.

### **Capturing the academy: the rules for Christian-Jewish dialogue**

Fundamentally, there are two rules:

1. “Sensitivity” to “the Jewish perspective” and Jewish self-perception (as defined for all Jews by one group who claim to represent the whole) is paramount. This is a variation on the burning children principle – sensitivity to Jewish experience determines the direction and nature of the discourse.
2. The superior right of the Jews to the land is not to be challenged.

Time permits me to offer only several examples:

Ruth Langer is a Reform Rabbi and Associate Professor of Theology at Boston College. In 2008 she published a paper entitled “Theologies of the Land and the State of Israel: The Role of the Secular in Jewish and Christian Understandings.” In the paper Langer invokes the first rule, that Christians accept “Jewish self-understanding” regarding Jewish identity and the land of Israel as definitional and unassailable. For Langer Jewish self-experience is characterized by two basis elements: (1) The Jewish attachment to the Land of Israel as a Jewish homeland is an essential element of being Jewish – it cannot be questioned. (2) Related to this is the Jewish experience – which Langer presumes to describe for all Jews -- of being a people apart. Langer argues that the failure of the Enlightenment to bring Jews fully into Western society and to establish the Jews as a religious group like any other is evidence that this quality of Jewishness is essential and inalienable. Langer ignores the range of diversity of Jewish experience on both these



axes. For her, any Jew who disagrees with her description of Jewish experience is in flight from his or her Jewish identity, like those Jews who sought to assimilate in order to curry favor and advantage with the dominant Christian society in which they lived, or worse, those who actually converted to Christianity. And, points out Langer, it was a vain attempt anyway: Although many Jews had attempted to shed their particularism, and with it the identification with the idea of a return to Zion or any sense of seeing themselves as a separate nation, economic and social marginalization and sporadic violence forced them back into a separatist, and ultimately nationalist, stance. The Nazis, of course, provided final and tragic support for those who advance this analysis.

The argument from history is central in defending the Zionist project against those who would question its validity, sustainability, morality, or logic. “Christians,” writes Langer, “must strive to learn by what essential traits Jews define ... Christian-Jewish dialogue. In terms of ... the development of adequate theologies of the land and state of Israel within the context of the contemporary dialogue, this is a crucial first step.” (2008, 16-17)

The use of the historical argument to control the so-called “dialogue” between Christians and Jews takes second place only to the imperative of repudiating replacement theology. In the June 2009 edition of *Cross Currents*, a quarterly on religion with a progressive and interfaith bent, published an issue titled “The Scandal of Particularity.” The title of this issue, which features articles by Jewish, Catholic and Protestant authors, suggests a critical analysis of the claim of any religion to a superior or exclusive path to God. In fact, however only Christian particularity is targeted in the publication. The entire issue follows closely the rules of interfaith “dialogue” described above, providing a theological and spiritual basis for the Jewish claim to the land. In one article, William Plevan, a Rabbi and student of theology at Princeton, draws heavily on the anti-supercessionist work of Orthodox Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod. “Wyschogrod argued” writes Plevan, “that the central theological concept of Judaism is God’s election of Israel to God’s beloved people. While God demands that Israel observe the commandments and while certain beliefs about God’s nature may be implicit in the Biblical record, the essence of divine election is not the commandments or any beliefs about God, but rather God’s preferential and parental love of the carnal family of Israel, the flesh and blood descendants of Jacob” (2009 217). According to Plevan, this exclusivist core is essential to interpreting the message of the Gospel, claiming that “the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ actually has roots in Jewish ideas, such as God’s presence in the people Israel.” The Temple, although physically gone, is preserved as symbol of landedness and Jewish exclusivity. A piece by Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin entitled “The Place of ‘Place’ in Jewish tradition” claims that although the land has a spiritual and psychological meaning, this “nod to the universal does not cancel out the particular.” Jewish life, asserts Cardin, is “all bound up in that particular bit of land on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea” (2009 214). The land of Israel is the gift of God to the Jewish people, its *nahalah* – inheritance.

Wyschogrod is popular in Christian circles as well. Indeed, American Christian theologians are in a rush to endorse this kind of Jewish particularism by adopting, whole cloth, the writing of this Jewish triumphalist theologian. Those who choose not to are

simply remaining silent. A number of the articles by Christians in this issue of *Cross Currents* also draw heavily on Wyschogrod, as well as on the work of Kendall Soulen, the theology professor I introduced earlier in this paper who took exception to my analysis of Jewish exceptionalism. P. Mark Achtemeier, a Presbyterian pastor and Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, contributes a piece entitled “Jews and Gentiles in the Divine Economy.” “History,” he observes, “has...dramatically failed to unfold as supercessionist theologies would have led one to expect” (2009 147). Citing Soulen and Wyschogrod, he holds that the persistent survival and cultural vitality of the Jewish people is evidence of God’s enduring love for his entire creation. This theme carries through the entire issue, a publication purportedly devoted to the “scandal of particularity!” Clearly, in today’s academy a strict double standard applies. In the rush to interfaith reconciliation, “anti-” or “post-supersessionism” appears to have less to do with cleansing Christianity of particularity and more to do with establishing Jewish particularity as a fundamental theological principle.

### **Closing the deal: the land promise**

A centerpiece of the *CrossCurrents* issue is the article by John T. Pawlikowski, a prominent Catholic theologian and Director of the Director of the Catholic-Jewish Studies Program at the Catholic Theological Union.” In his piece, entitled “Land as an Issue in Christian-Jewish Dialogue,” Pawlikowski asserts that the Vatican’s 1993 recognition of the State of Israel was pivotal in correcting Christianity’s historic anti-Judaism. With that act, he wrote, “the coffin on displacement/perpetual wandering theology had been finally sealed” (2009, 199) Pay attention to what is being done here: recognizing the Jewish state corrects Christian theology! But there is more: Pawlikowski goes on to repudiate Christianity’s spiritualization of the land, taking issue with “efforts by Christian theologians to replace a supposedly exclusive Jewish emphasis on “earthly” Israel with a stress on a “heavenly” Jerusalem and an eschatological Zion” (2009 199). He continues: “[T]his tendency has the effect of neutralizing (if not actually undercutting) *continued Jewish claims*. The bottom line of this theological approach was without question that the authentic *claims to the land* had now passed over into the hands of the Christians. Jerusalem, spiritually and territorially, now belonged to the Christians” (2009 199, emphases added).

I find this an astonishing argument. In the original Christian visioning – and this was a revolutionary and critically important development — Jerusalem itself became a symbol of a new world order in which God’s love was available to all of humankind. The Christian vision clarified the meaning of the land promise in the covenantal relationship, removing any ambiguity about possession or ownership. But Pawlikowski was now maintaining that this spiritualization of the land was a betrayal of God’s covenant with the Jews – that it had deprived us of our birthright. According to him it was now incumbent upon Christians to honor the claim of the Jewish people to the Holy Land, and indeed to Jerusalem itself. But this is not Christianity! The whole point of spiritualizing the land was to deconstruct, using the full power of the prophetic tradition, the idolatry of Temple and land possession – in Walter Brueggemann’s terms, the royal consciousness that seeks only to maintain itself at the expense of community life and social justice.

In the Gospel accounts (Mark 13:2, Matthew 24:2), Jesus stands before the Temple and says: “Not one stone will be left upon another!” Translation: *this old order is over*. And in the Gospel of John (John 2:21), when Jesus says “Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up,” the narrator, just to make sure we get the theology right, explains: “He spoke of the temple of his body.” Body of Christ: one body – mankind made one, whole, united in one spiritual community. Christians, in an act of penitence and collective drive for purification, are now actively engaged in a deconstruction of this core element of their faith. We have to be very concerned about this — generations of mainstream pastors and theologians in the West have been educated in versions of this revised theology. This is the theology called into service by the Jewish establishment and elements within the churches themselves to oppose faithful, prophetic efforts within denominations to take faithful stands against companies profiting from the occupation and theft of Palestinian land.<sup>1</sup> These are the arguments used to muzzle and intimidate clergy and secular leaders from speaking out against the State of Israel’s human rights violations. The Christian impulse for reconciliation has morphed into theological support for an anachronistic, ethnic-nationalist ideology that has hijacked Judaism, continues to fuel global conflict, and has produced one of the most systematic and longstanding violations of human rights in the world today.

### III. A THEOLOGY OF LAND

A theology of land that is responsive to the current crisis is important not only because of its relevance to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The issue of the land focuses the most urgent theological issue of our time: the particular vs. the universal. As such, it poses two fundamental theological questions: What is God’s love? What is faithfulness to his plan? Today, as Harvey Cox pointed out in the passage I quoted early in this paper, the theology of land has been hijacked. It has become the captive of the penitential impulse of the Christian world on a religious level, and, on a political level, brought into the service of the preservation of the interests of the few and the powerful. Theologically, the land has become, in a very real sense, the coin of the realm. And so we must pose the question: What is the meaning of the land promise? In our search for an answer, we begin by stating what land in the Bible is not: it is not territory. Rather, it is an evolving construct having to do with the nature of God’s plan and the divine relationship with humankind.

#### Context, meaning, and the scriptural narrative

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<sup>1</sup> The latest example is a piece published in the June 29, 2010 edition of *The Christian Century*, entitled “Habits of anti-Judaism: Critiquing a PCUSA report on Israel/Palestine,” by Ted A. Smith and Amy-Jill Levine, professors at Vanderbilt Divinity School. In a shocking distortion of the Presbyterian Church’s Middle East Study Group’s evocation of Ephesians 2:14, they claim that “‘Breaking down the walls’ in order to form ‘one new humanity in the place of two’ evokes old echoes of theological supersessionism and transposes them into a political key.” They ask us to believe that the report advocates “a historical narrative that points indirectly to a single state—a new social body—in which a Palestinian majority displaces Jews.” The Presbyterian document can be found at <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/middle-east-study-committee-full-report/>. The Smith and Levine piece is at <http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=8539>.

The issue of context becomes critical in this discussion. In his contribution to this symposium, Professor of Systematic Theology George Sabra notes the increased prominence of contextual theology in the last four decades. With respect to our topic, he identifies three “clashing” contexts. Early Christian tradition provided the first context, in which the People of God was clearly the Church, replacing the “Israel” of the Old Testament. The second context is represented by the post-Nazi era Christian revisionist effort to reinstate the primary relationship of the Jewish people with God, emphasize Jesus’ closeness with the Jewish practice and establishment of his time, and affirm the theological significance of the State of Israel. The third context, in Sabra’s view arising in reaction to the second and in particular to the establishment of the State of Israel, is the trend among some Middle Eastern theologians to downplay or even deny the theological significance of the continued survival of the Jewish people and of the State of Israel. In all cases, Sabra notes, the notion of People of God and the view of the land it self is clearly colored by the experience and political agenda of the subjects. While recognizing that all theology is done in and responds to its historical context, Sabra cautions against the trend to have the contextual be determinative of the theology and biblical interpretation. “We must attempt to transcend our contexts,” he writes, “so that the gospel may be visible across, through, but also sometimes *in spite* of our contexts. For that, a dialogue of contexts is necessary so as to transcend one’s immediate context” (2010, unpublished MS).

The work of Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann provides an example of an approach that follows Sabra’s prescription. In his work on the land, Brueggemann presents the land as both metaphor and as a stage upon which the drama of the divine-human relationship is enacted. The land, writes Brueggemann, is a powerful force for “wellbeing characterized by social coherence and personal ease in prosperity, security, and freedom” (2002, 2). It is rootlessness, not meaninglessness, he writes, that creates the crisis of faith for the people. Indeed, in the Old Testament narrative it is particularly with the loss of the land -- in exile -- that the people discover who they are and undergo the painful struggle to come to terms with the true meaning of the covenant. Like Sabra, Brueggemann calls on us to remain grounded in the narrative provided by scripture as we seek to understand the meaning and transformative power of theology with respect to the notion of peoplehood and the role played by the land.

The importance of a theological response to context is reflected in the development of Brueggemann’s thinking about this topic. Although earlier in his writing Brueggemann appeared to grant the Jewish people a special (albeit conditional) entitlement to the land, recently he has brought his theology of promise into conversation with contemporary events. “This ideology of land entitlement,” he points out, “serves the contemporary state of Israel” (in Braverman, 2010, xv). It is an ideology, he continues, that is “enacted in unrestrained violence against the Palestinian population...It is clear that the modern state of Israel has effectively merged old traditions of land entitlement and the most vigorous military capacity thinkable for a modern state” (ibid xv). For Brueggemann, this is not an isolated observation targeted at the Israeli regime; it is part of his overarching vision of how power corrupts and how land promise can become land entitlement in service to

systems under the sway of royal consciousness. “It is clear,” writes Brueggemann, “that the same ideology of entitlement has served derivatively the Western powers that are grounded in that same ideological claim and that have used that claim as a rationale for colonization...The outcome of that merger of old traditional claim and contemporary military capacity becomes an intolerable commitment to violence that is justified by reason of state...*That is, land entitlement leads to land occupation*” (ibid, xv; emphasis in original).

### **An evolving concept**

The concept of the land in the scriptural narrative reflects this evolutionary trajectory. We must see this scriptural narrative as one unified story, beginning in Genesis and continuing through Revelation. It is a story in which the concept of land persists as a powerful and evolving theme, a theme that is central to the narrative and that reflects a response to historical context. The original land promise sets in motion a dramatic story of the transition from the tribal to the universal, from a concept of a territory possessed and conquered to that of the establishment of a global order of social justice. Here is where the notion of the continuity of scripture we have been considering in this conference is useful – the fundamentals of universalism found in the Old Testament finding their continued expression in the vision articulated in the New Testament. But “continuity” may not be the best word to describe the rocky, twisty road that we traverse here. The Old Testament may contain all the ingredients needed for the ultimate achievement of the Kingdom of God, but the Bible does not serve up this feast all at once. We have to spend a lot of time in the kitchen. God gives the people a land – just as he gives them kings. And it is for the people – with the help of prophets -- to painfully work out what this means.

In the Old Testament narrative, God comes first to mankind by choosing one family for a role in establishing his plan for a just society. The land plays a central role in the unfolding drama of this covenantal relationship. The people are special (*kadosh*) – set apart from the other peoples, and they are given the land in tenancy as a part of this covenant. The drama continues when the people demand a king. God tells Samuel to warn the people that a king will subvert the primary goal of the covenant of establishing a just world: the king will see the land as a possession, distribute resources unfairly, destroy community and family life, and ultimately bring the wrath of God down upon the entire people. Of course this is precisely what happens -- ultimately the “kingdom” falls and the people are vomited out of the land, just as specified in the Levitical and Deuteronomic warnings. But even through these vicissitudes, the exclusivist frame of the original covenant persists. Throughout, the People of Israel retain their special relationship with God, and with that the primary claim to the land – the promise itself, in its exclusivist frame – is never withdrawn. Although Israel is enjoined to treat them justly and even as equals, non-Israelites are “strangers,” or “resident aliens,” as the work *ger* is sometimes translated. All through the vicissitudes of the divided kingdom, the destruction of the northern kingdom, the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile, and the return, this primary tie of people, God, and land is maintained. A theology of landedness –place -- persists. Jerusalem remains the *place* where God dwells. Even with the

prophets' protestations against the abuses of King and priest, this exclusivist core persists. The return recorded in Jeremiah and the time of Ezra and Nehemiah can be seen as a restorationist event. The Temple is rebuilt – this is never in question. But just as Father Paul Tarazi points out in his contribution to this conference: just because God tells you to build the Temple – or doesn't tell you not to – doesn't mean it's a good idea!

Fast forward to first century Palestine: The historical frame is the Roman Empire -- the ultimate expression of acquisitive greed. The Temple is still standing. Jerusalem is ruled by a client government installed by that Empire. This is the context of Jesus' ministry, which is a direct response to the evil of that arrangement, and the frame for his revolutionary concept of Kingdom of God. Liberation theologian Walter Wink writes about Jesus' statement, *My Kingdom is not of this world*. Wink points out that in the gospel of John the Greek word for "world" is *kosmos* – which translates as *order* or *system*. This world, Jesus is saying, this system of empire which seeks only to increase its own power and reach at the expense of communities, families, human health and dignity, this world order will give over to the Kingdom of God – something completely different.

It's important, therefore, to realize that in its original proclamation, the Kingdom of God was *specific*. It was proclaimed in a particular historical context. And thus it is in every historical era, at every point that a particular society confronts a challenge to the social justice imperative. For the writers of the Gospels, Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God dispenses, finally, with the concept of God's indwelling in the land, of a particular location as the place where God is to be worshiped. In the Christian vision, the idea of the physical land as a clause in the covenant disappears. In Jesus' Kingdom of God, both the land and the people lose their specificity and exclusivity. Temple -- gone. God dwelling in one place -- over. And, significantly, Jesus' Kingdom takes the next step – it jettisons the "*Am Kadosh*" or "special people" concept. The special privilege of one family/tribe/nation separated from the rest of humanity is eclipsed.

This specific, contextual issue is at play today as never before. We (the Jewish people of today) are deeply involved in the drama of this narrative. Our commitment to political Zionism has stopped our ears to the call of the Old Testament prophets to reject the idolatry of king and Temple. It has further thickened the historical wall separating us from the challenge of that first-century Galilean visionary and prophet to take one further, giant step out of our exclusivist origins toward the embrace of a universalist, community-based egalitarian society. Instead, our investment in an ethnic-nationalist project in historic Palestine has returned us to the world of Kings and to the restorationism of Ezra and Nehemiah. Not that Christians have not succumbed to the human tendency to slip back into the comfortable framework of war, territory and conquest. Medieval depictions of the New Jerusalem gave way to Crusader depredations and military sieges of the actual city of stone and wood. Christian Zionism in its most recent "progressive" manifestation seeks to undo the spiritualization of the land and grant the deed to the property to the Jewish people in an effort to overcome the horror over the ovens of Birkenau. (And it is *this* Christian Zionism, hiding in plain sight in the mainstream, that I think is more dangerous than the dispensationalist variety of Christian Zionism, which can be

dismissed as extreme or heretical). But the direction is and always has been clear: Zion is not a geographical location. Rather, is a symbol of God's steadfast love -- the solidity, comfort and fixed point of the covenant -- and, later, in the Christian vision, of the Kingdom: God's universal gift of peace and justice to all of humankind. Can we learn to accept this gift?

### **From triumphalism to community**

At the conclusion of his own contribution to the collection, Pollefeyt reminds us of the argument of Job's comforters that Job must have sinned because God can only act justly. At the end of the story, this argument is reversed to show that Job -- here seen by Pollefeyt as the Jewish people -- is the innocent one, the true witness to God's justice and rightness. I urge great caution here. This is standing displacement theology on its head, saying that Jewish suffering is proof not of their treachery but of their blessedness and their loyalty to God: and so the Jews are reinstated as God's elect, with Christians as their supporters and heirs. The notion of God's elect is an archaic, triumphalist concept. Christians, in resuscitating it and reassigning the role to the Jewish people are committing an act of hubris and folly. Jews, in invoking the land promise as if it were a clause in a real estate contract, are guilty of an act of catastrophic idolatry. And, put together, what we have here is a Judeo-Christian triumphalism that, in the realization of political Zionism in today's geopolitical context, represents a greater threat to humanity than the Roman Empire ever did.

There are myths operating for both faith groups here. For Christians, it is the myth of a unity, a coherence with the Judaism of the first century -- as if it were possible to undo that fateful parting of the faiths that laid the foundations for anti-Semitism. For Jews, it is the myth of the possibility of a return to a mythical state of national unity and dominance, exemplified by the Davidic dynasty of Temple and political hegemony -- as if this could somehow redeem the suffering of millennia, the burning of children. There is a profound denial of horror here for both groups, an attempt to make it all better. Christians can't undo two thousand years of persecution and the effects of Christian anti-Judaism on not only the Jews but on all of Western civilization. We Jews can't restore the Palestine of 1948 or reverse the effects of four generations of dispossession and refugee status--nor are we realistically expected to do so. But we can turn to a new future of community united against the common enemy of militarism and empire. Particularity is a scandal -- an affront to our senses and our rationality, and a dangerous misunderstanding of God's nature and his will. There is no one, special way to God. All scriptures point in a single direction: the building of a community of humankind to confront the urgent issues facing humanity and the planet. We are *all* elected. We are *all* responsible for our fellow man and for honoring and respecting the physical environment.

This is what it means to be people of God and this is the meaning of the land. As the psalm proclaims: The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world and all who dwell in it. We can find no more faithful and clear articulation of this theology than the Palestine Kairos document:

We believe that our land has a universal mission. In this universality, the meaning of the promises, of the land, of the election, of the people of God open up to include all of humanity, starting from all the peoples of this land. In light of the teachings of the Holy Bible, the promise of the land has never been a political programme, but rather the prelude to complete universal salvation. It was the initiation of the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

This is my message to Christians, as a Jew who is experiencing, all too vividly, the dangers of particularity: beware of slipping into a newly minted Christian triumphalism under the cover of reconciliation with the Jewish people. The challenge to people of all faiths is to take the lesson from the current experience of the Jewish people with our ethnic-nationalist experiment: God grants specialness to no one people. Redemptive violence is the result, and it is a lie.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION: WHAT CAN WE DO?**

The new theology of land is important because the church – meaning Christians in the congregations, pastors in the pulpits, bishops and denominational staff in the dioceses, synods, presbyteries, and denominational headquarters, seminary professors and university teachers of Bible and theology-- needs to be liberated theologically to answer the urgent call for Palestine. The uncomfortable truth is that for many Christians, vigilance against anti-Semitism has come to trump commitment to justice for the Palestinian people—justice that alone will bring an end to the Israel-Palestine conflict and the hope of peace for both peoples.

In contrast to the silence and timidity of much of the church, there are strong signs that the church, at local and denomination levels, is waking up to the urgency of the situation. We are witnesses to the birth and growth of a global, grassroots civil society movement to challenge the current establishment of Apartheid in the Holy Land – a movement in which the church will continue to play a critical role. Two such signs are seen in the current Palestinian Christian witness represented by Sabeel and the Palestine Kairos document. Unapologetically Christian, Sabeel’s mission and the powerful message of the Kairos document both lay claim to the ministry of Jesus in proclaiming the duty of resistance to tyranny -- resistance, in the words of the Kairos document, “with love as its logic.” This expresses the urgent truth: that the truest expression of love toward the Jewish people is persistent, faithful opposition to the crimes that have been visited upon the Palestinian people by the State of Israel. A theology of land must be an expression of and guide for this opposition in its many forms. As expressed in the Kairos document, the theology must give support to the growing Palestinian civil society movement of nonviolent resistance to the Apartheid and colonial policies of Israel. A theology of land is expressed in support by congregations, denominations and church leaders for the Palestinian United Call for Boycott Divestment and Sanctions. It is expressed in the growing connection between civil society organizations in Israel and Palestine and the West (and increasingly the South), and, more and more, in the involvement and



commitment of the churches on congregational, denominational and ecumenical levels in the work of these organizations and in institutions working for social justice in both societies. A theology of land becomes the reclaimed voice of a church which, in answering this prophetic call, is claiming its legacy and its faithful heart.

I see a theology of land enabling and supporting movement toward justice in the following ways:

1. Liberate and empower the church's leadership by (a) clarifying the theology and (b) mobilizing the leadership for action. Clergy must see the struggle for justice in Palestine as one of the most urgent social justice issues of our time. A vigorous, intentional effort to develop the theology should be pursued in national and international conferences involving seminaries and universities. Prominent theologians, clergy and lay leaders should be involved, in close coordination with peace activists from the faith community and the secular realm.

2. Local action. Committees should be organized at local levels including clergy from all denominations in coordination with community leaders, activists, academics, seminarians, and their professors to educate themselves about the facts of the conflict, commit themselves to prayer, study and action, pursue ties with civil society organizations in the region and domestically, and develop plans for action at local, regional, national, and international levels. It's a big tent – action can include working to increase awareness in congregations and communities through the organization and sponsorship of educational events, involvement in the global movement for economic and cultural pressure on Israel and on companies profiting from the oppression of Palestinians, and political advocacy to influence national government policies in the region.

3. Surface and clarify the interfaith issue. As awareness of Israel's current and historic denial of Palestinian rights grows, so too does opposition on the part of powerful elements of the organized Jewish community to any criticism of Israel or any action intended to question or change America's unconditional and massive support of the state. One focus of this opposition is the initiative by some church denominations for phased divestment from companies involved in Israel's occupation of Palestinian land. Most recently, even fiercer opposition has been leveled against those who are joining with secular and Jewish peace groups in endorsing the Palestinian call for a comprehensive economic and cultural boycott of Israel (<http://www.pacbi.org/>). The acceleration in ecumenical activity on the part of Palestinians and on a global church basis for a theology of land that supports nonviolent resistance to oppression evidenced by the Palestine Kairos document and the work of the Palestine-Israel Ecumenical Forum of the World Council of Churches has also met with condemnation from Jewish advocacy groups. This is unfortunate, but it cannot be allowed to thwart the activism or distract from the doing of theology. Christian-Jewish dialogue has played an important role in breaking down millennia of distrust and fear between our communities. But the work that calls is no longer about repairing the past. It is, rather, about the urgent need to look forward. If Christians and Jews can come together in the work of forging a theology of land that

disavows particularism and privilege and shows the way to a sustainable future, so much the better. But for Christians, *this must not be seen as a project of interfaith reconciliation*. Rather, the work of theology today is about the church – ecumenically, denominationally, and locally – getting its own house in order.

The call to the church is clear – it is the same call to social justice that was heard in the U.S. in the middle of the last century, when the church, led by Martin Luther King Jr., led the movement that changed the political wind and brought an end to centuries of legally sanctioned racial discrimination. Sitting in jail in Birmingham, Alabama, King penned this historic letter to his fellow clergy, who were urging him to cease his civil disobedience and to curtail his call for in the struggle for racial equality. In response to this, King wrote:

There was a time when the church was very powerful--in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated."

...the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century.

Reverend King's call is the same that was answered by the church that brought about the end of Apartheid in South Africa. It is the call that rings out clearly in our day.

I began this presentation in Genesis – with the covenantal promise that began the process of understanding God's coming to mankind -- the beginning of our invitation as humankind to understand his plan. I would like to conclude with words from the end of the last book of the Bible, words that remind us that even when the work seems most difficult and success the most elusive, the vision remains before us, and the duty to work, as God's hands on earth, to bring the Kingdom, can never be set down.

*I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.  
And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.  
And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,  
"See, the home of God is among mortals.*

*He will dwell with them as their God;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;  
And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."*

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