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CHRISTIAN WORSHIPERS in Jerusalem. 'Early Christian writers spoke of a Jewish Restoration to the Holy Land. After the Reformation this became a movement. In English-speaking countries the 19th and early 20th centuries saw many strong Christian Zionists.' (Reuters)

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# Balfour line-up has disintegrated

• By RAYMOND APPLE

Christian Zionists made the Balfour Declaration possible. What watered down the original commitment to reconstituting Palestine as the Jewish national home and substituted vague wording about a Jewish national home in Palestine was largely Jewish non-Zionists like Rufus Isaacs who thought "Judea for the Jews" sounded too Jewish.

Israel Cohen says in *A Jewish Pilgrimage* (1956), "From the very beginning the Zionist cause enjoyed the support of many Christian friends, who were influenced either by their study of the Bible and their belief in the prophecies about the restoration of Israel, or by their sympathy with the sufferings of Jewry and their desire to see them ended through the recovery of national independence."

The British Mandate complicated the situation but on the whole Christian friendship held firm, and post-Holocaust guilt allowed a honeymoon with the Jews and even the suggestion that Jews are entitled to Christian theological penitence.

Today, the Balfour Declaration line-up has been superseded. British parliamentarians include Christian Zionists but many MPs are neither Zionists nor Christians.

Jews are alive and back in their ancestral home, but some Christians – whether in Britain or elsewhere – cannot see the hand of God in the establishment and persistence of Israel. To them Israel is at best a puzzle, at worst a scandal.

Those with moral courage insist that Israel has a right to be, to defend itself and stay alive. Others say that Israel's return to power comes with too much nationalism, and that no degree of friendship can whitewash some Israeli policies.

For me personally the watershed was 1991. At the World Council of Churches assembly in Canberra, I was an observer for the Executive Council of Australian Jewry and, through them, world Jewry. It was a crucial moment in the Middle East. Israel could not be ignored, but I could. I asked for the opportunity to speak at one of the sessions. My request was denied, and I was left to network on the sidelines of the assembly.

I saw that religion – in one form – had facilitated Zionism, and now religion in another form was trying to dismantle it. Judaism saw Israel as "the land where God dwells," the Jewish homeland, the messianic center for mankind. Zion was central to Jewish prayer and practice. It had always had a Jewish presence; the dispersed millions had yearned to return.

Christianity thought the Jewish people were forsaken by God; Jewish talk of restoration to the homeland was either fantasy or a scandal. Pope Pius X told Theodor Herzl, "We are unable to favor this movement. We cannot prevent the Jews going to Jerusalem, but we could never sanction it... The Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people." Protestant leaders did not put it so starkly but possibly agreed. The establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine surprised and embarrassed the Christian community. A fossil people had come alive!

Christian voices feared for their holy places and urged the internationalization of Jerusalem. The fact is that no Christian holy place has been harmed since 1948, except by Christian squabbles. Bartley Crum wrote, "Stories alleging mistreatment by Jews of Christian churches and sites are shameful fabrications." Talk about internationalizing Jerusalem was dropped, though there are now claims that a Palestinian capital should be sited in east Jerusalem and Christian opinion is largely uninterested.

Another issue from 1948 onwards was the Arab refugees, though there was little concern for Jewish refugees from Arab lands. Arab refugees mostly fled on the instructions of their own leaders, not because Israel ejected them, as British police confirmed at the time. They could have been resettled in Arab territory but Ralph Galloway, who led UN relief work in Jordan, said in the 1950s, "The Arab states do not want to solve the refugee problem. They want to keep it as an open sore, as an affront to the United Nations and as a weapon against Israel. Arab leaders don't give a damn whether the refugees live or die."

The bigger issue was Israel itself. How could a Jewish state be squared with 2,000 years of Christian

certainty that "the virgin of Israel has fallen, never again to arise" (Amos 5:2)? It was not just a question of politics and territory but of ideology. Harold Fisch wrote, "The very intrusion of the Jewish people into world history is what disturbs."

Christian Zionists saw the hand of God in what had happened and proclaimed their love for Israel and the Jewish people, while not necessarily endorsing every Israeli policy. Others reinforced their ideological antagonism by citing Israeli "militarism."

Long before 1991 in Canberra, I was confronted in London in 1967 by a local cleric who objected to the Six Day War and said that the Bible expected the Jews to be pacifists. The fact that then, and many times before and after, Israel faced existential threats was brushed aside. The Jews were being tiresome again! Then, after the Six Day War the so-called Palestinian issue emerged as almost a godsend for the opponents of Israel.

In the past I had been the butt of occasional antisemitic calls, "Jew, get back to Palestine!" Now the calls were "Jew, get out of Palestine!" The fact is that there had never been a people called Palestinians, and many of the inhabitants of Palestine were Jews. Because my father was born in Jerusalem, I claim to be a Palestinian, and there are millions like me. The fact is also that there had never been a state of Palestine nor territory governed by Palestinian Arabs. Few of today's Palestinians have any deep roots in Palestine.

Yet, ignoring history and international law, there is now a mantra: "This land is Palestinian: give it back!"

It is part of the slew of stereotypes utilized by Christian anti-Zionists: for example, "Israel is a rogue state!" My reply: don't worry whether it's true – the slogan sounds good. Another slogan: "Israel is an apartheid state!" My reply? Don't worry that apartheid in South Africa was quite different, a deliberately chosen policy of racial separation, suppression and subservience, called by Bishop Joost de Blank "the dirty word of the 20th century." In relation to Israel, the dirty word is inaccurate but it sounds good.

More slogans, more rhetoric: "Gaza is a prison camp" – but Gaza is ruled by Palestinians, and Israel withdrew years ago. Another slogan: "They're crucifying Jesus again!" But the Jews didn't crucify him the first time, and no Palestinian is eradicated by Israeli policy. The slogans continue: "They're burning little children!" But it is Palestinians that hide behind little children and send missiles into Israeli kindergartens. Next slogan: "The danger comes from the settlers!" The so-called settlements are not military strongholds but peaceful communities in areas that will be part of Israel in any peace deal. They occupy 2% of Judea and Samaria. But critics use the epithet "settler" for any Jew and any Israeli, never caring to check the facts. The mere word "settler" is another piece of ruinous rhetoric, code for "the Jews should die."

In Sydney I saw a man in a clerical collar marching in a pro-Palestinian demonstration with a placard, "They killed the Prince of Peace, so what do you expect from them?" He looked like a priest, but scholarship has repudiated his accusation. A "priest" who doesn't know that Jesus was a Jew has learned nothing. His placard said "they": clever but cruel. Is "the Prince of Peace" served by provocation and incitement?

The real issue is whether Christianity ought to be pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel. There is an obvious humanitarian concern. Religious ethics certainly stand for love of neighbor, though there are differences between Jewish and Christian interpretations. Both faiths believe in justice, though they part company on the definition. Of course neither Judaism nor Christianity can approve inhumanity, and whoever the victim is, believers certainly ought to be the first to protest.

The choice between being pro-Palestinian or pro-Israel is neither simplistic nor easy, but a complex issue. It's a strange paradox when anti-Zionist Christianity argues that Jews should suffer and wander without a homeland while urging that Palestinians ought to have security and territory.

Early Christian writers spoke of a Jewish Restoration to the Holy Land. After the Reformation this

became a movement. In English-speaking countries the 19th and early 20th centuries saw many strong Christian Zionists. Today, however, the idea of Israel as fulfillment of biblical prophecy is too disturbing for some Christians.

The United States has large numbers of (often Republican-leaning) pro-Israel Evangelicals. A fourth of American Christians see support for Israel as a religious principle. This position is held by the International Christian Embassy, Christian Friends of Israel and Christians United for Israel, as well as preachers who claim 50 million supporters. They express support of Israel through tourism, philanthropy, investment and public advocacy.

The International Council of Christians and Jews in 1992 said that the Promised Land and the peoplehood of Israel are part of the Sinai Revelation. Christian Zionists see Israel as evidence of God's purposes and of the Jewish roots of Christianity. The Christian Right argues, "To stand against Israel is to stand against God."

Opponents call Zionism heresy and claim that it reduces the chances of Middle East peace. The Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism in 2006, drafted by an American clergyman and endorsed by the Latin and Syrian Orthodox patriarchates and the Episcopal and Evangelic Lutheran churches, called Christian Zionism "a false teaching that corrupts the biblical message of love, justice and reconciliation" and said it promoted a militarism, occupation and a one-sided interpretation of the Middle East situation. Surely a fair-minded Christian should speak from facts and not fictions.

Anti-Israel Christians eradicate Israel from their prayers and remove Zion from the Psalms. A Protestant embrace of BDS policy that is widely supported on university campuses calls on churches to boycott firms that trade with Israel. Its propaganda uses shaky "facts" (it can't see that attacking Israel's economy harms the Palestinians), but it influences people to regard Israel as bad news.

Christians are far too quiet when historical revisionism removes Zion and the Temple from the Bible, when Palestinian leaders deny the Jewish connection with the Holy Land and say there never was a Jewish sanctuary in Jerusalem. Yet the rewriting of history undermines the whole Jesus narrative.

The Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theological Center started off by calling Jesus a Marxist revolutionary, in South Africa it accused the churches of ignoring poverty and supporting the institutions of power, then it turned upon Israel, though it doesn't take too much notice of the deteriorating situation of Christianity in Arab society.

The Roman Catholic Church has changed its position on the Jews and Israel. It took nearly 40 years, but now Israel and the Vatican exchange ambassadors. In 1985 Pope John Paul told me in Australia that the Israeli ambassador had said to him, "I bring you the greetings of the government and people of the State of Israel." The pope replied, "Please give my greetings to the government and people of the State of Israel."

In 1982 the Texas Conference of Churches recognized that a new era had begun when it said, "God's spirit is moving over the waters once again." Rev. Prof. Robert Anderson of Melbourne urged "that measure of theological confidence and maturity that will enable us to be rid of fulfillment theology and of supersessionism once and for all, root and branch." He quoted Father Edward Flannery who said, "The burden of proof rests on him who holds that Israel's continuing Covenant must be a landless one."

Some Christians have the courage to quell their qualms and show understanding for Jews and Israel. For others it is more expedient to endorse anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli propaganda, or to remain silent. Christian support voiced in private is not always repeated in public. Jews can and do make subtle suggestions as to how theology can view the new signs of "God's spirit moving over the waters." Theology does not need to embrace an anti-Israel position – nor to say it is all too hard and retreat into inaction. The Christian Zionists who backed the Balfour Declaration would be most unhappy.

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