

## Chapter Five

# The Vatican, Zionism, and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

*Rosemary and Herman Ruether*

### **Pre-Modern Attitudes to a Jewish Homeland**

Jewish Zionism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are modern issues of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In ancient times a different political context shaped Christian attitudes toward Jews and the land of the Bible. During the early centuries of Christianity the Holy Land remained in the firm grip of the Roman Empire throughout its pre-Christian, its Constantinian, and its post-Constantinian eras. The pagan emperor Hadrian squelched the Jewish uprising known as the Bar Kokhba rebellion (132–35 CE) and prevented future Judean insurrections by banishing all Jews from Jerusalem and Judea and rebuilding Jerusalem as a Roman city named Aelia Capitolina, dotted with pagan temples, on the ruins of the former city. This political development and, even more significantly, the destruction of the Jewish Temple in the previous century (in 70 CE) provided ammunition for Christian polemicists in debates with Judaism.<sup>1</sup>

As early as the first half of the second century, Justin Martyr pointed to the Jews' exile from their holy city as divine punishment upon them.<sup>2</sup> Other

1. For detailed accounts of Roman destruction in response to Jewish uprisings (66–70 and 132–35 CE), see Armstrong, *Jerusalem*, 150–66.

2. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, quoted by Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*,

church fathers emphasized the Jews' inability to practice their Temple rites as proof of the divine termination of the Old Testament Covenant, and the sufferings of the Jews as punishment for the death of Christ. John Chrysostom in the late fourth century utilized a gospel text, Luke 21:24, to declare that by Christ's own decree Jerusalem would be ruled by Gentiles until the end of time.<sup>3</sup>

### The Beginnings of Zionism

The traditional concept of permanent Jewish exile, having persisted from Roman antiquity through the Middle Ages, began to be reinterpreted in seventeenth-century English Protestant millennialism.<sup>4</sup> This school of thought, prevalent among English Puritans, emphasized the belief that the redemption of the world was dawning in their own movement, which would result in the reign of the true believers over the whole world. This redemption would include the conversion of the Jews, who would be gathered into the Promised Land. For some this conversion would happen before their restoration to the land, but for others it would happen only after they returned to their land. But, in either case, the restoration of the Jews to their land became a stock feature of millennialist Protestant views of a redemption of the world believed to be happening in their times.<sup>5</sup>

These beginnings of Christian Zionism took on further elaboration in nineteenth-century Europe. British Evangelicals taught that the restoration of the Jews to their land must be the first stage in the conversion of the whole world to Christ and the establishment of peace and justice over the earth. For Evangelical millennialists within the Anglican Church, such as Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, this restoration of the Jews would take place through the British Empire, which would be the agent of a new reign of peace and justice on the earth. Lord Shaftesbury's Christian Zionism would be a spur to the decision of the Anglican Church to create an Anglican bishopric of Jerusalem in 1841. A Jew converted to Anglicanism, the Reverend Dr. Michael Solomon Alexander was selected to

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3. Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 144–49, citing John Chrysostom, *Discourses Against Judaizing Christians* 5.1. The text of Luke 21:24: “. . . Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (RSV).

4. The term “millennialism” refers to a belief in a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth at the end of time. The adjective “premillennialist” describes a subset of millennialist believers who expect Christ to return before, rather than after, the thousand-year period.

5. Ruether and Ruether, *Wrath of Jonah*, 72–74.

represent this vision as the first Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem. It was hoped that he would be the means of converting Jews to true Christianity (Anglican, that is) after their return to their land.<sup>6</sup>

In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America the restoration of the Jews to their homeland became a standard part of Evangelical Protestantism, proclaimed in Bible prophecy conferences and the teaching of premillennialist theological schools such as the Moody Bible Institute. In this apocalyptic vision, the Jews would first be restored to their land in an unconverted state. They would rebuild the Temple and restore the sacrificial cult. Then there would be a period of tribulation led by the Antichrist. Christ would then return, and the Jews would be converted to Christ. The Antichrist would be defeated, and the true Christians (including the converted Jews) would reign over the world in a thousand-year era of righteousness and peace.<sup>7</sup>

These views of Jewish restoration were not limited to Evangelical Protestants but had a wide influence on American culture, both Protestant and Catholic. A study published in 1987 showed that 57 percent of Protestants and 35 percent of Catholics believed that the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 was the fulfillment of a biblical prophecy that the Jews would be restored to their land.<sup>8</sup> However, these ideas of Jewish restoration to their land had no influence on official Catholicism, represented by the Vatican, which clung to the traditional teachings of Jewish exile in punishment for their denial of Christ. No restoration of Jews to the land was envisioned as part of a future, much less a dawning, messianic era.

An irony in the history of Zionism is that Christians began to develop a type of “Zionism” long before Jews. Traditional Judaism of the Babylonian Talmud had developed a doctrine that Jews must refrain from “forcing the end” and not seek to regain possession of the land but must accept their existence under the Gentiles for the time being. The land would eventually be restored to them, but this must be done by the Messiah, not by human effort.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Jews should devote themselves to prayer and strict living according to Jewish law in order to hasten the coming of the Messiah. Some pious Orthodox Jews did return to live in Palestine in earlier centuries of the Christian era, but this was to pray and live a strict life more effectively in order to bring the Messiah, not to regain the land by themselves.

6. *Ibid.*, 77–78.

7. *Ibid.*, 81–82.

8. Stockton, “Christian Zionism—Prophecy and Public Opinion,” cited by Ruether and Ruether, *Wrath of Jonah*, 82.

9. Rabkin, *Threat from Within*, 71–74.

## Zionism and Nationalism

Reform Judaism, developed in the mid-nineteenth century, originally rejected Zionism.<sup>10</sup> It embraced the Enlightenment promise of a secular democratic state, where religion was to be privatized and people of many religions could co-exist as equals. Emerging European nationalism presented Jews with contradictory options. An Enlightenment nationalism called for ethnically, linguistically, and religiously differentiated groups to privatize these differences and to come together in secular states where all could share equal rights as citizens of a “nation.” Jews could become equal citizens of Western democracies by surrendering any political standing as Jews, in terms of religion or culture. Privately they might practice Judaism, speak Hebrew in their religious gatherings, and study a historic religious culture, but publicly they would speak modern European languages such as French or English and would participate in modern Western cultures and political communities.

But another face of European nationalism insisted that belonging to a particular nationality was itself an ethnic identity historically rooted in and developed by biologically distinct people in particular lands and cultures. Because Jews were a distinct ethnic people with their own culture and “race,” they could not assimilate into any European nationality. It was this exclusivist version of European nationalism that convinced some Jews that assimilation into European nations was impossible, given the racial nature of these nationalisms. Rather, Jews must recognize that they were indeed a separate race. They must claim their national identity as Jews and find a land of their own where they could build a Jewish nation. This perspective became the basis of Zionism.

This meant that Jewish nationalism (Zionism) was shaped in response to an ethnically or racially exclusivist, European nationalism and reproduced a similar racial-ethnic exclusivism of its own. Its plan for a Jewish state was for Jews only. Although some Zionists were willing to claim any land that might be available to them to buy and settle in, for most Zionists this must be Palestine, their historic homeland. Arab Palestinians resident in the land were seen as people to be removed from this land by encouraging them to migrate, or, as the early Zionist Theodor Herzl put it in his *Diaries*, “We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border.”<sup>11</sup>

Another early Zionist voice was Moses Hess, writing his manifesto, *Rome and Jerusalem*, in 1862. Hess argued that people have rights and

10. Ibid., 20.

11. Quoted by Rose, *The Question of Zion*, 62.

identities only as a part of national communities. Jews need to redevelop themselves as a national community by reclaiming their ancient national land in Palestine.<sup>12</sup> The major movements of Zionism, however, began in Eastern Europe after the anti-Semitic pogroms in Russia in 1881. Leo Pinsker wrote the foundational statement, *Auto-Emancipation*, in 1882, arguing that Jews are and have been essentially a nation, not a religious community. They needed to emancipate themselves by developing a national language and a national homeland.<sup>13</sup>

Pinsker's writing was followed in 1896 by Theodor Herzl's *The Jewish State*. Horrified by the outbreak of anti-Semitism in the Dreyfus case in France, Herzl became convinced that assimilation of Jews was impossible in Europe. He, too, sought the solution to anti-Semitism by the founding of a Jewish state in Palestine, which he hoped to facilitate by appealing to the great powers in Europe. He believed they would collaborate with this project in order to reduce what they saw as unwelcome numbers of Jews in their nations in Europe. In 1897 he gathered more than two hundred delegates in Basel, Switzerland, for the founding of the World Zionist Organization.<sup>14</sup>

### The Catholic Response to Early Zionism

At the announcement of the meeting of the Zionist Congress in Basel, the Jesuit publication *Civiltà Catholica* reacted negatively in language that reproduced the traditional Christian teaching of Jewish exile and subjugation to the Gentiles:

1827 years have passed since the prediction of Jesus of Nazareth was fulfilled, namely that Jerusalem would be destroyed . . . that the Jews would be led away to be slaves among the nations, and that they would remain in the dispersion until the end of the world. . . . According to the sacred Scriptures, the Jewish people must always live dispersed and wandering among the nations, so that they may render witness to Christ not only by the Scriptures . . . but by their very existence. As for a rebuilt Jerusalem, which could become the center of a reconstituted state of Israel, we must add that that this is contrary to the prediction of Christ himself.<sup>15</sup>

12. See Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea*, 116–40.

13. *Ibid.*, 178–98.

14. *Ibid.*, 200–231.

15. *Civiltà Catholica*, May 1, 1897, cited in Minerbi, *The Vatican and Zionism*, 96.

This response to the Zionist Congress by a leading Catholic journal reveals that the ancient and medieval view of Jewish punishment through permanent exile was still normative in Catholic thought in 1897.

Zionism remained a minority view among nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Jews, most of whom embraced other options, religious or secular. The American Jewish community, dominated by Reform Judaism, even reacted with outrage when Christian Zionists in 1891 appealed to President Harrison to support a renewed Jewish state in Palestine. Reform Rabbis of the Pittsburgh conference responded by saying, "We consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state." These American Jews saw in Christian Zionism a scheme for deportation that threatened their status as United States citizens. For these Reform Jews, Judaism was a universal religion of Jews who were citizens of many nations. They even deleted the prayer for messianic restoration to Jerusalem from their prayer book.<sup>16</sup> Only with the outbreak of Nazi anti-Semitism in the 1930s and the systematic effort to exterminate Jews in Europe did the majority of Jews become converted to the support of Zionism in the 1940s.<sup>17</sup>

The Vatican became aware of Zionism at the time of the founding of the World Zionist Organization in 1897. The pope may have read the negative reaction published in *Civiltà Cattolica* four months before the Congress actually took place. Immediately after the Congress the pope issued a circular letter protesting the idea that the Holy Places of Palestine might be occupied by Jews. The apostolic delegate in Constantinople, Monsignor Augusto Bonetti, was called to Rome to consult with the pope on "measures to be taken against the Zionist movement." The pope also consulted with the French Foreign Ministry to oppose any changes that would give the Jews occupation of the Holy Land. In addition he sent an envoy to the sultan in Constantinople appealing to him not to give Palestine to the Jews.<sup>18</sup>

Herzl became aware of these negative Vatican responses to Zionism through Italian and French newspapers after the Congress and immediately contacted the Vatican nuncio in Vienna for an audience. He hoped to

16. Rausch, *Zionism*, 88.

17. The postwar support for Zionism is being rethought by many Jews today in light of the conflict with the Palestinians, which is recognized as being rooted in Zionism as an ethnic-exclusive Jewish nationalism that has sought to eliminate the Palestinian people from the land claimed by Jews. For these Jews this exclusivist racial nationalism is seen as deeply contrary to Jewish values of justice. See Weiss, "It's Time for the Media."

18. See Minerbi, *The Vatican and Zionism*, 96–97.

explain Zionism to the pope as no threat to the Christian Holy Places. He finally received an audience with the nuncio in Vienna a year and a half later, in February 1899. The nuncio denied that there was any hostility toward the Jews on the part of the Holy See, who, he said, had always protected them throughout history. He also said that he personally was not unfavorable to the Zionist project.<sup>19</sup> But Herzl, recognizing that it was the pope who was his chief opponent, sought an audience with him.

In January 1904 Herzl was received by the Secretary of State of the Holy See, Cardinal Merry del Val. Herzl insisted that the Holy Places would be extra-territorialized and there would be no domination over them by the Jews in the Zionist project. But the cardinal insisted that the denial of Christ by the Jews made their rule over the Holy Land unthinkable:

I do not quite see how we can take any initiative in this matter. As long as the Jews deny the divinity of Christ, we certainly cannot make a declaration in their favor. Not that we have any ill will toward them. On the contrary, the Church has always protected them. To us they are the indispensable witnesses to the phenomenon of God's term on earth. But they deny the divine nature of Christ. How then can we, without abandoning our own highest principles, agree to their being given possession of the Holy Land again?<sup>20</sup>

The cardinal arranged for Herzl to be received by Pope Pius X three days later, on January 25, 1904. The pope was equally stern in insisting that Jewish possession of the land could not be accepted because of Jewish denial of Christ.

We cannot encourage this movement. We cannot prevent the Jews from going to Jerusalem—but we could never sanction it. The ground of Jerusalem . . . has been sanctified by the life of Jesus Christ. As the head of the Church I cannot tell you otherwise. The Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people.<sup>21</sup>

Herzl repeated his claim that the Holy Places would be extra-territorialized and would not be ruled over by Jews, but he recognized that the pope was not impressed by this assurance. In the pope's eyes Jerusalem's holiness resided in its identity as an integral whole, not as a collection of separate shrines and

19. *Ibid.*, 97.

20. Entry of January 23, 1904, Herzl's *Diaries*, quoted by Minerbi, *The Vatican and Zionism*, 98.

21. Entry of January 26, 1904, Herzl's *Diaries*, quoted in *ibid.*, 100.

churches. In this initial meeting of the Holy See with Herzl on Zionism, the Church's arguments against it focused entirely on theological reasons. These were seen as absolutely excluding any Jewish rule in Palestine.

Cardinal del Val's interview in *Die Welt* a few months after Herzl's audience with the pope seemed to open up a different option. He said:

How can we deliver up the country of our Redeemer to a people of a different faith? . . . Yet the Church would do nothing to impede the Zionist's effort to obtain, "a home in Palestine secured by public law. . ." For that is an entirely different matter. . . If the Jews believe they can ease their lot in the land of their fathers, that is a humanitarian question in our view. The foundation of the Holy See is apostolic; it will never oppose an undertaking that alleviates human misery.<sup>22</sup>

What was meant here by a "home in Palestine secured by public law"? Del Val seems to be talking about Jews living in Palestine under a non-Jewish rule, as distinct from Jewish rule in Palestine. This, he claims, would be purely humanitarian, an option the Holy See would not oppose.

### **World War I and the Period Between the World Wars**

The role of Zionism in Palestine took a decisive new step in World War I.<sup>23</sup> In this war the diminishing Ottoman Empire that was ruling Palestine allied itself with the Germans. Meanwhile the British sought an alliance with Arabs, represented by Husain ibn 'Ali, the grand sharif of Mecca, to split them from the Ottomans. The British High Commissioner for Egypt and the Sudan, Henry McMahon, promised the sharif an independent Arab state in exchange for his alliance with the British against the Turkish-German powers. These Arabs envisioned this state as incorporating the whole Arab-speaking region, including Palestine, although the British would later insist that it did not. On the basis of this correspondence, which the sharif understood as a firm agreement, the Arab armies revolted against the Ottoman Turks. With the assistance of British officers, such as T. E. Lawrence, they began a drive that captured the Arabian peninsula and pushed north and west from there.

During this period the British Foreign Office, represented by Sir Mark Sykes and Lord Arthur Balfour, entered into conflicting agreements with

22. *Die Welt*, April 1, 1904, quoted in *ibid.*, 101.

23. For a detailed account of events narrated in this paragraph and the next, see Schneer, *The Balfour Declaration*, 165–236.



France and with the Zionists. In May of 1916 Sykes made a secret agreement with the French, represented by Charles Picot, to divide up the Arab region into five sections. Two would be under French administration and two under the British. The fifth area, Palestine, was to be under the three allied powers of Britain, France, and Russia, The Arabian peninsula was left to be a self-governing Arab state.

Meanwhile Lord Balfour made another agreement with the Zionists, promising Jews a “national home” in Palestine. The Arabs were outraged at what they saw as their betrayal by the British. The Balfour Declaration was issued on November 2, 1917, as General Allenby and his army completed the conquest of Palestine in a triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It asserted:

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 existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status of Jews in any other country.<sup>24</sup>

The Balfour Declaration would receive official international legal status in 1923, with the acceptance of the British Mandate for Palestine by the League of Nations. It has several notable features. The British promise only to facilitate a “national home” for the Jews, not a “Jewish state.” Nothing is said about Jewish rule in this “home.” In fact, the British intended to rule it themselves, giving Jews areas to live in, but not to rule. Arabs are not mentioned as a major part of the communities resident in Palestine, even though they comprised more than 90 percent of the population at that time. “Existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine” could have been intended to refer to them, but also to the Christian Holy Places presided over by Western Europeans and Greek Orthodox.

Though generally hostile to the Balfour Declaration, the Vatican was cautious about a response to it until its meaning became clear. Generally the Vatican did not oppose a “home” for the Jews in Palestine, if that was understood as areas to inhabit that would not interfere with either the Christian Holy Places or with the Palestinian Christian and Muslim population. It was deeply set against a Jewish sovereignty over the whole land. Cardinal Gaspari, Secretary to the Vatican, expressed his concerns about the British declaration to the Belgian diplomatic representative:

24. *Ibid.*, 341.

Britain has apparently assumed an obligation towards the Jews to whom they will hand over a part of the administration of Palestine. Influenced by the big Jewish bankers of England and the United States, the British politicians do not sufficiently take into account the deep difference which exists between them and the Jewish people. It seems the British politicians fail to appreciate the dangers of this solution for Christian interests in the Holy Land.<sup>25</sup>

This situation was further confused in 1918 by a misquotation of a statement from James Cardinal Gibbons, leading Catholic churchman in the United States, that the pope supported the rights of the Jews in Palestine. This outraged the Arab Christians. Gibbons, who was strongly pro-Jewish, had responded to the Zionist Organization of the United States by saying, "It is with pleasure that I learn of the approval accorded by His Holiness, Benedict XV, to the plan providing a homeland in Palestine to the members of the Jewish race."<sup>26</sup> The distinction that the pope would have made between rule over some or all of Palestine and residence there under the British was not clarified in Gibbons' letter.

The pope later came to appreciate British rule in Palestine, perceiving that it treated the various communities of Palestine equally. The Vatican greatly increased its institutions in Palestine in the 1920s, building numerous churches, schools, orphanages, and hospitals. Many of these institutions, such as the schools and hospitals, served the Muslim population equally with the Christian. The papacy came to be concerned, not just about the Catholic Holy Places, but about the indigenous Palestinian population as well.<sup>27</sup>

This concern was aggravated in the 1930s as Nazi oppression of Jews in Germany grew and fleeing Jews created a greatly expanded Jewish immigration to Palestine. The growing Jewish population in Palestine bought up more and more land, creating agricultural communities and corporations that denied employment to the Arabs. Arabs, growing ever more destitute and marginalized, organized protests and then moved to armed rebellion against the British. The British responded by repressing the rising revolt under martial law, imposing massive arrests of leaders and collective punishment in villages. Many thousands of Palestinians died, were injured, or suffered imprisonment in this conflict (1937–38). The British found themselves having to commit massive funds and troops to put down the revolt as

25. Minerbi, *The Vatican and Zionism*, 122.

26. *Ibid.*, 123.

27. Kreutz, *Vatican Policy*, 45–46.

a new world war was impending in Europe. This brought the British to the realization that they had to back away from this conflict and conciliate the Arabs, lest they ally themselves with enemies of Britain.

Meanwhile the British organized a royal commission, which reported in 1937 that the Palestinian Mandate was unworkable. The Peel Commission recommended the partition of Palestine into a small Jewish state occupying 20 percent of the land and a large Arab state joined with Jordan. But the Jewish state would have three hundred thousand Arabs in it; the commission recommended that they be transferred to the Arab state. The British would retain rule over the Jerusalem-Bethlehem area with a corridor to the sea, together with the ports, railroads, and airfields. The Palestinian leaders rejected this partition, which would have given the best agricultural land to the Jews. The Vatican added its voice to this situation with a letter to the British government, objecting to the partition of the land and calling especially for the protection not only of the Christian Holy Places, but also of the Christian minorities.<sup>28</sup>

In 1939 the British decided they could not afford this upheaval because of the prospect of impending war. They backed away from their commitment to the Zionists for a Jewish homeland and imposed a strict limit to Jewish immigration and land purchase in Palestine, declaring that this measure would be followed by the creation of a Palestinian state where Jews and Arabs would share government, not separate Arab and Jewish states. Zionists denounced the British for this move, and radical Zionist groups, such as the *Irgun* and the Stern Gang, began to turn their guns on the British. From 1939 to 1948 the British would rule Palestine without the cooperation of Jews or Arabs.<sup>29</sup>

## **After World War II: Humanitarian Concerns and Social Justice**

During World War II Pope Pius XII spoke out many times against anti-Semitism but was later criticized for not being emphatic enough. Catholic institutions played a major role in the rescue of Jews in Europe. Although the papacy was supportive of the immigration of Jews to Palestine, it remained opposed to the Zionist goal of a Jewish state.<sup>30</sup> The war saw the emergence of the strongly pro-Zionist United States as a world power. With

28. Kreutz, *Vatican Policy*, 63–65.

29. For an account of political events in Palestine between 1936 and 1945, see *ibid.*, 59–86.

30. *Ibid.*, 75–84.

American support, the United Nations voted in 1947 for the partition of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state. The Arabs rejected the partition, as did the Vatican, while the Jews accepted it as the legal basis of a Jewish state, although they did not endorse the limits of the territory assigned to them in the plan.

As the British withdrew from the area in 1948, a war broke out between the newly declared Jewish state and Arab armies from Jordan and Egypt. The better organized and more determined Israelis soon pushed these Arab armies aside and expanded into more than half of the lands assigned to the Arabs, driving the residents of many Arab villages into exile. Jordan annexed the remaining part of the West Bank, and Egypt occupied the remainder of Gaza, causing the land designated for Arab state to disappear. A million Palestinians became refugees,<sup>31</sup> driven into the West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan, and Gaza. Israel also confiscated much of the Arab land in Israel, making many of these Palestinians refugees as well. Contrary to Israeli claims that the Palestinians “voluntarily” left, this was an intentional effort by the Israeli leaders to clear as much of the land as possible of Palestinians.<sup>32</sup>

The Vatican quickly became heavily involved in humanitarian aid to the Palestinian refugees, most of whom were Muslim. In June 1949 the pope established the Pontifical Mission for Palestine, creating more than 270 social welfare centers that distributed food, clothing, and medicine to the refugees and opening hundreds of schools for the children. Catholicism thus became firmly committed to the Palestinian people as a whole, calling for their repatriation and a just sharing of the land of Palestine between Israel and the Palestinians. The Vatican also refused to give official recognition to the State of Israel, on the grounds that its territorial borders were “undecided.” This stance would last until 1993, and in the following year the Vatican also gave official recognition to the PLO as representative of the Palestinian people.

In January 1964 Pope Paul VI made a major pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It was the first time in history that a pope had personally confronted the realities of the Palestinian situation and the politics of the Middle East. He was able to see for himself the deep suffering and misery that displacement and marginalization were imposing on the Palestinian people, and this experience made a deep impression on him. He could see what their needs were and determine what the Church’s humanitarian services should

31. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees was aiding one million registered refugees in 1949; Ruether and Ruether, *Wrath of Jonah*, 103.

32. For historical research on the Zionist agenda at that time, see Pappé, *Ethnic Cleansing*.

include. Many of the pope's later remarks and initiatives were shaped by his experience at that time.<sup>33</sup>

After his pilgrimage the pope arranged with the Christian Brothers to set up Bethlehem University, which exists today as a major educational institution for Palestinians in the West Bank, the majority of whom were and are Muslims.<sup>34</sup> In October and November of 2006 Herman Ruether spent considerable time in Bethlehem, especially at Bethlehem University, and was impressed by the prevalence of Muslims at the school and their warm identification with it. In 2010 Rosemary Ruether spent some days visiting with families in a refugee camp in the Bethlehem area, all of whom are Muslim. The young people in this camp spoke English fluently and were able to interpret for us. They were proudly attending Bethlehem University.

In 1962 Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), which was subsequently continued after his death by Paul VI. This council would have a major impact in church renewal and in the creation of a new relationship of the Catholic Church with social justice issues worldwide. In consideration of the Holocaust, European delegates were very anxious that the Council issue a major statement on Judaism, repudiating anti-Semitism. Delegates from the Middle East, however, were worried that such a statement would be seen as endorsing Zionism. The Vatican assured them that this statement would be purely religious, not political. On October 15, 1965, on the eve of the final vote on the declaration, Paul VI even personally assured Father Ibrahim Ayyad, a Roman Catholic priest deeply committed to the Palestinians, that the Council “would not allow its decision to be exploited by the Israelis,” and the decision would not adversely affect “the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.”<sup>35</sup>

As a result, the statement on Judaism was rethought and recast more broadly in the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate*, October 28, 1965), which included Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism.<sup>36</sup> This declaration did not attack or criticize any of these religions, but rather lifted up what was regarded as positive aspects of each of them, in an ascending order, with Islam and Judaism seen as closest to Christianity.

Concerning Islam, the declaration said of Muslims, “They adore the one God . . . merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth

33. Kreutz, *Vatican Policy*, 114.

34. Irani, *The Papacy and the Middle East*, 32.

35. Kreutz, *Vatican Policy*, 119.

36. The declaration can be found on the Vatican website: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostreaetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostreaetate_en.html). The words quoted from it below are drawn from sections 3 and 4.

. . . they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees. . . . Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin mother. . . . [T]hey await the day of judgment. . . . Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving, and fasting.” The Council acknowledged that there had been many “quarrels and hostilities” between Christians and Muslims in the past, but urged that all “forget the past” and work for “mutual understanding” and “social justice.”

The strongest and the longest statement is reserved for Judaism. The Church affirms that the “beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses, and the prophets.” Although “the Jews in large number [did not] accept the Gospel. . . . Nevertheless, God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers. He does not repent of the gifts He makes.” Alluding to the idea that the Jews would repent at the end of history, the declaration says that “the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice.” Nevertheless, the Jews are to be revered for their patrimony and not discriminated against in any way.

The statement rejects any right to use the conflict that occurred at the time of Christ as a basis for discrimination against Jews today. It says that although “the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His Passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. . . . [M]indful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel’s spiritual love, [the Church] decries hatred, persecution, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.”

As we have seen in this essay, the claim that Jewish rejection of Christ was the reason why the Church rejected Zionism was prominent in the first responses of the Church to this movement in 1904, at the time of Herzl’s audience with Pope Pius X. Although this claim was not cited thereafter, the viewpoint remained in the background because it had not been repudiated. But after 1965 this argument could no longer be used. The Vatican II statement removed from Catholicism any use of Jewish rejection of Christ as a basis for anti-Zionism. Criticism of Israel then became clearly political and ethical, not theological. Social justice for the Palestinians and the need to find a solution to the conflict by equal sharing of the land between the two people became the focus of the Vatican reservations toward the State of Israel.

Another important development of the Vatican II period, although independent of the Council's declarations, were papal declarations on behalf of global social justice. On April 11, 1963, Pope John XXIII issued the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (*On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty*).<sup>37</sup> The foundation of well-ordered societies, according to the encyclical, is the principle that every person is endowed by nature with intelligence and free will and has rights and obligations flowing from this nature that are universal and inviolable and cannot be in any way surrendered.

Human rights, according to this encyclical, include the rights to life, to bodily integrity, to the means suitable for the development of life, food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and social services. There is also the right to security, in cases of sickness, inability to work, widowhood, old age, unemployment, and any other case that deprives a person of the means of subsistence. Persons should be free to choose their state of life and have the right to set up a family, with equal rights and duties for men and women. They have a right not only to work, but to go about work without coercion. This right includes working conditions where physical health or morals are not endangered. All humans have the rights of private property, of assembly and association, of movement and residence in their country, of emigration to another country, and of participation in public affairs, as well as juridical protection of these rights.

The pope then goes on to comment upon the emergence of various groups of oppressed people, including the working classes, women, and colonized nations, all of whom should share equally in such human rights. For example, on women he says, "Women are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity. Far from being content with a purely passive role or allowing themselves to be regarded as a kind of instrument, they are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons." Especially relevant to the Palestinian plight are the pope's remarks on refugees:

The deep feelings of paternal love for all mankind which God has implanted in Our heart makes it impossible for Us to view without bitter anguish of spirit the plight of those who for political reasons have been exiled from their own homelands. There are great numbers of such refugees at the present time, and many are the sufferings—the incredible sufferings—to which they are

37. The encyclical *Pacem in Terris* is on the Vatican website: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_11041963\\_pacem\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem_en.html). The words quoted from it below are drawn from paragraphs 41, 103, 105, and 172.

constantly exposed. . . . [I]t is not irrelevant to draw the attention of the world to the fact that these refugees are persons and all their rights as persons must be recognized. Refugees cannot lose these rights simply because they are deprived of citizenship of their own States.

The encyclical is addressed not only to the priests and leaders of the Catholic Church but to all “men of good will.”

This stirring document was followed by an insightful encyclical from Paul VI dated March 26, 1967, namely, *Populorum Progressio* (*On the Development of Peoples*).<sup>38</sup> This document is addressed particularly to the needs of developing nations emerging from colonialism. The pope cites his experiences of traveling to Latin America, Africa, India, and Palestine as grounding his concerns on this issue. These nations need more than political independence. The disparity between rich and poor nations must be overcome. Here the pope even endorses the right to expropriate landed estates from the wealthy when they are “unused or poorly used, bring hardship to peoples, or are detrimental to the interests of the country,” and when this serves the “common good.” “Unbridled liberalism” (*laissez-faire* capitalism), in which private property is seen as having no limits or social obligations, is condemned, in the phrase that Paul VI quotes here from his predecessor Pius XI, as an expression of the “international imperialism of money.”

Generally the pope calls for transformations of these situations through reform rather than violent revolution, although acknowledging that sometimes revolution is necessary when there is “long-standing tyranny.” He calls for world powers “to set aside part of their military expenditures for a world fund to relieve the needs of impoverished peoples.” In this remarkable encyclical, which goes on for many pages, the Holy See takes the side of developing nations vis-à-vis the rich and powerful nations of the world. By mentioning Palestine along with India, Africa, and Latin America, he includes the Palestinian people among those whose needs should be addressed by the whole world.

After the Second Vatican Council the Holy See began to grant audiences to leaders of the State of Israel. In January 1973 Pope Paul VI met with Golda Meir; this was the first time a pope had met with an Israeli Prime Minister. A communiqué issued immediately after this meeting said that the pope,

38. The encyclical *Populorum Progressio* is on the Vatican website: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_26031967\\_populorum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html). The words quoted from it below are drawn from sections 24, 26, 31, and 51.



. . . having recalled the history and suffering of the Jewish people, explained the viewpoint of the Holy See on questions that touch most closely its humanitarian mission, such as the problem of the refugees and the situation of the various communities living in the Holy Land . . .<sup>39</sup>

The director of the Vatican Press office, Federico Alexandrini, clarified further that there was no change in the relation of the Vatican to Israel or to the Palestinians as a result of the meeting.

The attitude of the Holy See with regard to Israel remains . . . unchanged. The Pope had accepted the request of Mrs. Golda Meir because he considers it his duty not to miss any opportunity to act in favor of peace, for the defense of human rights and those of the communities, . . . and in order to aid especially those who are the weakest and those who are defenseless, in the first place the Palestinian refugees.<sup>40</sup>

This mention of the Palestinians by the Holy See deeply angered Meir and caused an uproar in Israel.

From 1974 the PLO, with Yasir Arafat as its head, gained increasing international respectability as the representative of the Palestinian people. The Soviet Union influenced the PLO to abandon a claim to all of Palestine and to accept a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, a position partly endorsed in the Palestine National Congress meeting in June and July of 1974. In November of 1974 Arafat addressed the United Nations General Assembly. Arafat concluded his detailed remarks on the causes of the Palestinian oppression with these words: "Today I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter's gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand."<sup>41</sup> Following his address, the United Nations voted in favor of granting the PLO observer status at the UN by Resolution 3237 (XXIX), and the PLO's permanent observer mission was established at that time.<sup>42</sup> Its status did not entail any designation of statehood.

In December 1987 the Vatican appointed Michel Sabbah, a Palestinian, as the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. Although the Latin Patriarchate had been established in 1099, at the time of the Crusades, it was marginalized by the fall of the Crusader states and eventually located in Rome. It was reestablished under the Ottoman sultan in 1847, but the office of Latin

39. Irani, *The Papacy and the Middle East*, 38.

40. *Ibid.*, 39.

41. Arafat, "Yasir Arafat Addresses," 10.

42. "Background Paper Related to Palestine Status."

Patriarch was held by Westerners. Thus the appointment of a Palestinian as Latin Patriarch changed the official face of Roman Catholics in Israel and Palestine.

Born and educated in Palestine, Michel Sabbah held the position of General Director of the Roman Catholic schools in the region and subsequently that of President of Bethlehem University. As Latin Patriarch, an office he held for twenty years (1988–2008), he represented the Vatican and served as the spiritual leader of all Catholic Christians in Israel and Palestine. He has spoken out strongly for Palestinian human rights, the end of occupation, the return of the refugees, and a two-state solution.<sup>43</sup> His successor, Fouad Twal (2008 to the present), is also a Palestinian and has continued this call for Palestinian rights, the end of the Wall and the checkpoints, and a Palestinian state. Thus the Latin Patriarchate has become an insistent voice for Palestinian rights.

The United States, with Israel, has boycotted any direct relations with the PLO, labeling it a “terrorist organization.” This view, however, became increasingly isolated from the world at large. The Vatican, along with most nations, recognized the PLO as the national representative of the Palestinians. On December 30, 1993, the Vatican moved to grant a “fundamental agreement” with the State of Israel, officially recognizing it and clarifying the rights of the Church in that country. Specifically named are the Church’s rights to educational, health care, and media organizations as well as respect for the status quo of the Holy Places, Catholic institutions, and the promotion of pilgrimages in Israel.<sup>44</sup>

To make clear that the Holy See had in no way backed away from its commitment to the rights of the Palestinians, less than a year later, on October 26, 1994, the Vatican met with Palestinian representatives and entered into official relations with the PLO. The agreement calls for “a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East . . . and a peaceful solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which could realize the inalienable national legitimate rights . . . of the Palestinian people.” The PLO affirmed the equality before the law of the three monotheistic faiths in Jerusalem and its “permanent commitment to uphold and observe the human rights to freedom of religion and conscience, as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” The Holy See, in turn, affirmed its own commitment to

43. See Sabbah, *Faithful Witness*, with its biographical introduction by Christiansen and Sarsar.

44. *Fundamental Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Israel* (1993), at <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFA-Archive/1993/Pages/Fundamental%20Agreement%20-%20Israel-Holy%20See.aspx>.

these equal rights of the different religious communities.<sup>45</sup> Pope John Paul II had previously met with Yasir Arafat in 1982 and again in 1988.<sup>46</sup>

John Paul II, who became pope in 1978, and his successor, Benedict XVI, installed in 2005, had different backgrounds and experiences of the Middle East than Paul VI. John Paul II, as a Pole, grew up with close relations with Jews and was shaped by the struggle against Nazi oppression of the Jews and the Poles in World War II. Benedict XVI, as a German, is sensitive to charges of anti-Semitism and of German responsibility for the Holocaust. Yet both popes maintained the Holy See's commitment to the Palestinians and their rights to equal sharing of the land with the Israelis. It was John Paul II who met with Arafat twice and entered into the agreement with the PLO, alongside that with Israel.

In December 2012 Pope Benedict XVI spoke out in praise of the United Nations' vote that made Palestine a non-member observer state of that body. This UN decision recognizes Palestine as a nation-state, and not simply as an "entity" (as in 1974). This is the same status enjoyed by the Holy See. One hundred thirty-eight members voted on November 29, 2012, for this change of status, while only nine, most notably the United States, Canada, and Israel, voted against it. Several close allies of the U.S., such as Britain and France, chose to abstain rather than support the "no" vote. The Vatican declared that the enhanced status of the Palestinians at the UN "does not constitute, per se, a sufficient solution to the existing problems of the region." This would require "effective commitment to building peace and stability, in justice and in the respect for legitimate aspirations, both for the Israelis and the Palestinians."<sup>47</sup>

The official views of the Catholic Church on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are more in line with the views taken by developing nations than with those of the United States. This was evident in a 2010 statement promoting just peace in Palestine, issued by church leaders in the Philippines. The first signature was that of Bishop Deogracias Iniguez, Co-Chair of the Ecumenical Bishops Forum and Chair of the Episcopal Commission on Public Affairs of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines. This statement, signed by thirty-six church leaders of the Philippines, decried Israel's violence against international peace activists aboard the Freedom Flotilla bringing humanitarian aid to Gaza. The statement went on to say:

45. "The PLO-Vatican Agreement," at <http://www.jerusalemquarterly.org/View-Article.aspx?id=233>.

46. Kreutz, *Vatican Policy*, 158, 162.

47. Glatz, "Vatican Praises."

It is time to end Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian lands. It's time for Israel to stop bulldozing Palestinian homes and to urgently implement a freeze on all settlement construction as a first step towards the dismantlement of all settlements. It's time to end the dispossession of the Palestinian people and the violation of their human rights and dignity. It's time for the Palestinians to exercise their right to self-determination. It's time for Palestinians who have been refugees for sixty years to have the right to return to their homes. It's time to do away with apartheid and double standards. The Separation Barrier is a grave breach of international and humanitarian law and must be removed from occupied territory. It's time to stop discrimination, segregation, and restrictions on movement. It's time to stop the recent Israeli military order that will categorize tens of thousands of Palestinians living in the West Bank as "infiltrators"—ostensibly because they lack proper permits—and give military officers sweeping control over their deportation. . . . It's time for healing to begin in the land called holy. Jerusalem must be an open, inclusive, and shared city in terms of sovereignty and citizenship. The rights of its communities must be guaranteed—Muslim, Jewish, and Christian, Palestinian and Israeli—including access to Holy Places and freedom of worship. Now is time for each of us to speak out and act, fulfilling our Christian vocation as peacemakers. It is time for freedom from *oppression and occupation*.<sup>48</sup>

This impassioned and comprehensive statement on behalf of Palestinian rights and shared rights to the Holy Land reflects the views of Christian leaders in a developing nation, led in this endeavor by a Catholic bishop. It is much in accord with the views that have come from the Holy See. Since then, a new pope, Francis, was elected in 2013. It is not yet known what his views on Palestine are, but his commitment to the poor and to the people of developing nations suggests that he will be sympathetic to papal precedents promoting social justice.

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