

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Hear O Israel

One of the more surprising revelations of the last few months is that the Labour Party of Great Britain is not only infested with antisemitism, but has admitted as much. It is surprising because most people have assumed that no major political party or public institution of any kind would be prey to such a crude prejudice, especially not in the light of the Holocaust. Antisemitism seems to be a thing of the distant and discredited past, at least in Western societies, and its apparent survival has produced not only denunciation but also widespread heart-searching. How could such a monster resurface within living memory of the great tragedy to which it led?

Christians have a vested interest in the subject because of our close spiritual kinship with Jews, and also because the church cannot escape from much of the blame for having caused the problem. It is true that there was some anti-Jewish feeling in ancient times but it was never organised and the Romans treated Jews with remarkable generosity. Judaism was a legitimate religion and, as the Gospels remind us, Roman officials like Pontius Pilate bent over backwards to keep Jews happy, even as they claimed to have no idea what made them tick.

It was only in the Middle Ages, when Europe was united under a Christian culture, that Jews, who did not fit into that, began to suffer systematic discrimination and eventually persecution. In 1290, for example, King Edward I expelled them from England as an act of piety. The ban remained for centuries, so that when Shakespeare created Shylock, the archetypal stage Jew, neither he nor most of his audience had ever met a real one. It was Oliver Cromwell who allowed Jews to return to England, not so much as an expression of religious toleration as the result of apocalyptic prophecy. Many Puritans had come to believe that Christ would return to his own people first, so they reasoned that if the Jews all came to Britain Jesus would appear there. The Jews would then all be converted to Christianity, a twist in the tale that reminds us that

Christian willingness to tolerate them had a motive that did not much appeal to the Jews themselves.

Jewish emancipation had to wait another 200 years, and when it finally came it was secularisation, not Christian love, that brought it about. Alas, emancipation was not the same thing as social acceptance, and in some places the old attitudes persisted. The United Kingdom never had more than a small minority of Jews, but it was a very different story in Eastern Europe. There, especially in the lands of the old Polish Commonwealth, there was a flourishing Jewish culture, complete with its own cuisine (including pretzels and bagels), language (Yiddish, a German dialect) and religious institutions. In a city like Vilnius, now the capital of Lithuania but then a provincial town in the Russian Empire, Jews dominated everything, and the pattern was replicated in other cities across the region. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the Russian government began to see this as a grave danger and unleashed systematic persecutions, known to us by the Russian word *pogrom*. Many of the victims escaped to the United States, where they formed the basis of what is now one of the largest and most influential Jewish communities in the world.

It was in this climate that Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), an Austro-Hungarian Jew, identified the Jewish question as a political one and began to agitate for the establishment of a Jewish state. This was the origin of Zionism. There was no realistic prospect of setting aside part of Europe for that purpose, so the Zionists were forced to look elsewhere. The support of the British Empire was actively canvassed, and at one point there was even a scheme to settle Jews in Uganda. The idea that the natives might not approve was scarcely entertained. After all, they had been brushed aside in North America and in Australia, so why should central Africa be any different? On the Jewish side, the more serious objection to the scheme was that Uganda was not Zion. Only Palestine would do, but Palestine was then part of the Ottoman Empire and had been in Muslim hands for centuries. British policy was to preserve that empire intact as a defence against Russian imperial ambitions, so there was little prospect of any advance there. Meanwhile, many European Jews assimilated into the wider culture, though often with a difference. Their experiences had taught them to be wary of the establishment, and political activists among them were often drawn towards various forms of socialism, including the nascent Labour Party in Britain.

Everything changed in 1914, when the Ottomans foolishly sided with Germany in the First World War. British policy veered from supporting

their empire to subverting it, and every weapon that might lead to that end was considered legitimate. The Arabs were encouraged to revolt against their Turkish overlords, from whom the British promised them deliverance. The saga of Lawrence of Arabia is well-known, and when the Arabs entered Damascus they believed that their moment of freedom had come. The British and the French thought otherwise, however. In 1916 they carved up the Middle East between them, granting Syria (with Lebanon) to France and most of the rest to Britain. As Ottoman rule crumbled, the British even reached out to the Zionists, promising them a homeland in Palestine. As with the earlier Ugandan scheme, the natives were not consulted and probably nobody thought that they mattered very much.

The peace treaties of 1919–20 were seen by the Arabs as a great betrayal. Instead of independence, they were colonised by the West, an experience which they understandably found humiliating. Meanwhile, Jewish settlers took advantage of the newly-opened door and began to establish colonies of their own in Palestine. For the most part, this was a peaceful and legal process. Jews bought land from their Arab neighbours and set about creating model towns and co-operative farms (*kibbutzim*) where they revived Hebrew as a living language. Within a generation they had created a new nationality, though as yet nobody really noticed it. At the same time, antisemitism was doing its worst in Europe. The story is too well-known to need repeating, but as the climate soured in the 1930s, more and more Jews sought to flee to Palestine. This alarmed the Arabs, and also the British, who began to realise that their promise of a Jewish homeland was more problematic than they had thought. They tried to keep the peace by limiting immigration, but of course that merely ensured that even more victims would be sacrificed to the Nazi gas chambers.

In the Second World War, the Jews of Palestine sided with Britain, but the Arabs were more ambivalent. Many were attracted by Nazi propaganda and antisemitism, previously almost unknown in the Arab world, became increasingly common. With victory in 1945 everything erupted. It was now virtually impossible to stop surviving European Jews from emigrating en masse to Palestine, and the local Jews began to make plans for establishing an independent state of their own. Post-Holocaust guilt in the West ensured that they would get a favourable reception, and as in 1918, nobody paid much attention to the Arabs. In 1948 the British pulled out, leaving an inter-communal war behind them. The result was a Jewish victory, the establishment of the State of Israel and the exodus of

thousands of Palestinian refugees to neighbouring Arab countries, where they were not wanted. The modern Middle East was born.

The new Israel was a consciously Jewish state that granted automatic citizenship to Jews who went there. An Arab minority was tolerated, but there was no question of returning land and property to the Palestinian refugees. The Arabs have never accepted this situation. For them, Israel was not a newly independent state but a relic of colonialism, and its destruction became part of their freedom struggle. The Six Day War in June 1967 was meant to resolve the problem once and for all, but the stunning Israeli victory changed everything. The Israelis now found themselves masters of the whole of Palestine, including at least half of the refugees who had fled in 1948. What to do with them? At first there was considerable public support in the West for Israel, whose very existence had been at stake in 1967, but as the occupation of Arab land and people became more permanent, attitudes started to change. The Palestinians managed to gain at least some recognition as a people with rights of their own, but how their desire for independent self-government could be accommodated remained a mystery, as it still is.

The reality is that Israel cannot allow the creation of an independent Palestine on its doorstep, especially as it knows that such a state would inevitably be hostile and provide a base for terrorists to attack it. For their part, “justice” to the Palestinians means the recovery of the land lost in 1948, which in practical terms means the whole of Israel. Worse still, the Arab world has become increasingly Islamicised and religious toleration is no longer on the agenda anywhere. Christians are being driven out of places where they have lived for 2000 years and the Jews are long gone. Even rival Islamic sects are not welcome—Sunnis and Shi’as are at each other’s throats in Iraq and Bahrain, and the cancer is spreading.

This is the backdrop against which the apparent revival of antisemitism in the West must be considered. What is the relationship between Judaism and Israel? For many secular Jews in the West, Israel means nothing and they do not support it. The same is true of some ultra-religious Jews who are waiting for the eschatological return of the Messiah and reject merely human attempts to hasten that. Israelis on the whole are not religious and nobody would describe their state as a model Old Testament theocracy. In fact, some of the country’s most enthusiastic religious supporters are Evangelical Christians, whose motives are not all that far removed from those of Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans. Many of these Evangelicals live in the United States and the Israelis are not slow to exploit their credulity. People who can build replicas of Noah’s ark

and store tinned foodstuffs in the expectation of Armageddon can easily be persuaded to see the existence of Israel as a sign of the end times, and their votes, combined with those of American Jews, swing elections. Europeans are much more sceptical, but their voice does not count. As long as the United States remains the most powerful player in the Middle East, Israel is safe. The downside is that anti-Israeli sentiment is liable to shade imperceptibly into antisemitism as Jews become increasingly closely identified with the state that claims to be their homeland, whether they have ever been there or not.

Faced with this situation, the Christian churches are in a quandary. On the one hand, they recall the Holocaust and the long history of Jewish-Christian antagonism that preceded it, and are loth to condemn (or even to criticise) Israel. On the other hand, many Palestinians are Christians and they have been badly treated both by the Israelis and by Muslim Arabs. The churches cannot just walk away from that and must speak up for the oppressed, even when they know that if the oppressed ever become the oppressors they will deal ruthlessly with their erstwhile persecutors. There is no magic solution to this dilemma and equally sincere Christians can be found on both (or all) sides of the debate. As a result, any "official" Christian response will probably have no positive effect and end up dividing the church rather than helping either Israel or the Palestinians.

Perhaps the best way forward at the present time is to remind everyone that the root of the problem is not political, as Herzl and the Zionists thought and as most Labour antisemites probably still think, but religious. Israel is what it is, and just as important, where it is for religious reasons. However unbelieving most Israelis are, they owe their state to the promises God made to Abraham 4000 years ago. To understand how the Arabs feel about that, ask yourself how many Britons would willingly go into exile and leave the country to an alien sect that claimed that its ancestors built Stonehenge and that the country therefore belongs to them? At the same time, Christians continue to believe that the Jews are God's chosen people and this has not changed, even though they have rejected Christ. Paul tells us in Romans 9-11 that a hardening has come upon Israel so that the Gentiles can be brought into the fold of Christ. When that work is accomplished, then the hardening will be removed and "all Israel" will be saved. It is hard to believe that Paul included every single person with some claim to be Jewish in his designation of "all Israel". Most probably he was thinking mainly of devout Jews who strive to keep the law of Moses themselves, but we cannot be entirely sure about that. When the Gentile mission will finally be accomplished is another

unknown. Undoubtedly we are closer to that goal now than the church of Paul's day was, but how much further we have to go remains a mystery.

What is clear is that Christians have a duty to proclaim the Gospel to all people without fear or favour. Jesus came to his own people, and who are we to deny them the good news in the name of some superficially polite interfaith dialogue? If Jesus is right for us then he is right for Jews too, and to seek to exclude them from his blessings is perhaps the most insidious form of antisemitism imaginable. At the same time, we must accept that for many Jews any Christian mission will be tainted with the memory of persecution and we must be sensitive to that. Anglicans have a good record on this score. The Church's Ministry among Jewish People (CMJ) has a long and honourable history, and it cannot fairly be accused of antisemitism. At the same time, it has never abandoned its evangelistic mission, which in many respects is more urgent now than ever. The State of Israel will fight its corner as long as it can, but it is hard not to sense that in the end it will succumb to the force of Arab numbers. What will Israelis do then, when their dreams of a secular salvation turn to dust and ashes? It is not our business to hasten the coming of that day, but we must be ready to face the possibility that the State of Israel will eventually collapse, and to deal with that eventuality if and when it comes. In the end, the church's message has to be: "Hear O Israel! The Lord your God is your only Saviour, and as your great prophet Zechariah reminded your ancestors, it is not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord that you will be redeemed (Zechariah 4:6)." Israel has survived against the odds by the power of God, and its future is in his hands. It will be saved, not by politics but by faith in Christ the Messiah. On that we should all be able to agree and to go forward in faith, knowing that he who is with us is greater not only than those who are against us, but also than whatever paltry strength we might be able to muster in an attempt to combat them.

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