

SUMMARY OF THE LECTURE:

THE NEW PATTERN IN JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

by

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Two recent factors have resulted in a re-thinking within Christianity of its relationship towards Judaism and Jewry; namely the Holocaust in Europe and the establishment of the State of Israel. They have induced the Churches to acknowledge the inadequacy of their traditional view that the persecution and exile of the Jews testify to the truth of Christianity and to the error and sin of the Jews who reject Jesus as Messiah.

Two "models" of this re-thinking within the Christian Church are: a) the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council; and b) the study "Israel and the Church", commissioned by the General Synod of the Netherlands Reformed Church in 1959.

The Second Vatican Council on Israel

A change in the traditional attitude is seen by Tal at Vatican II in that the suffering and persecution of the Jews are no longer considered as the result of, or as punishment for, their negation of the Christian truth but on the contrary as the cause of this negation. From this the conclusion would emerge that the Church has to fight suffering and oppression in order to abolish the existential situations which prevent the Jews from accepting the Gospel. This is in accordance with Tal's overall assessment of the increased concern for social justice at Vatican II, which he interprets as being basically a wish to remove existential obstacles to accepting the Gospel.

Tal notices a characteristic difference between the Council's attitude towards Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam and its attitude towards Judaism. These religions are recognised more or less in their own right and for their own value, with their beliefs being formulated according to authentic concepts of their own. But when the Council, in its desire for dialogue, addresses itself to Judaism, it does not recognise it as a partner because of any value or right of its own which it might possess in the eyes of the Church, but rather because of two assumptions which in fact deprive it of its inde-

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pendent value: firstly, because of the historical assumption that the New Testament is hidden in the Old Testament; and secondly, because of the eschatological assumption that complete salvation will be made possible when Jewry comes to recognize that this is the salvation which, from the beginning, was hoped for in Judaism and was implied in it. The Jewish people thus exists not because of autonomous reasons but because of the New Covenant that was implied in it from the beginning. The Old Covenant has not lost its validity, and therefore also the continued existence of Israel is necessary. But the independent value of the Old Testament and of Judaism is not recognised, because they are considered to reach their full realisation – and thereby their liquidation – in the New Covenant and the new People of God, i. e. the Church.

The Netherlands Reformed Church on Israel (1959)

In this Church's study on "Israel and the Church" Tal sees the influence of a classical Christian mode of thinking, according to which historical empirical reality testifies to a super-historical metaphysical reality. This mode of thinking makes it impossible to consider Judaism any longer as being deprived of election, for Israel's present situation testifies that the election has not been withdrawn. Hence a positive attitude is adopted towards the State of Israel and consequently to its military victories.

The link between the People of Israel and the Land of Israel should not be, according to the Netherlands Reformed Church, a link of blood and soil, not a natural link, but rather a supernatural one, based on the biblical promise to the patriarchs. While the Christian should support the renewed link between Land and People, he should at the same time demand – or expect – from the Jews that they should, as in the days of Samuel, resist the temptation "to be like all the nations" (I Sam. 8). For Israel, the link between People and Land should not be of a particularist nature, but of a universalistic one. This attitude is paralleled by Tillich and Niebuhr who, according to Tal, expect from the Jewish state a display of prophetic universalism which the Christian nations have been unable to accomplish. It would be Israel's task to give Christianity an example of a national existence in which the sacred space-oriented dependence on the soil would be overcome by a moral time-oriented reaching-out towards the future. The support for the State of Israel is here not derived from its autonomous right of existence, but rather from its possible function as an example for Christianity.

Tal further quotes the Netherlands Reformed document as saying that now, with the establishment of the State of Israel, suitable conditions have been created for the Jews to get to know their Messiah. Tal mentions that in the Church Order of the Netherlands Reformed Church the term "Mis-

sion among Israel" has been replaced by the term "Dialogue with Israel", but he does not consider this as a fundamental change because the objective remains that the Jews should recognise Jesus as their Messiah. The only difference is that the acceptance of the Gospel is not considered as a change of religion but as the return of Judaism to its original, eschatological meaning, which is implied in the Old Testament.

In conclusion Tal notes that despite new formulations the Church's attitude to Judaism has not essentially been changed. The Church continues to consider the goal and the right of the Jewish existence to lie ultimately in the latter's liquidation, and she expects the Jews to agree to this, this time not out of a situation of humiliation but rather out of one of equality.

The empirical facts, on the one hand of the survival of the Jewish people despite the Holocaust, and on the other hand of Jewish political sovereignty, cannot easily be put in concordance with the classical Christian concept of the history of salvation, and therefore cast doubt on its validity. They demand a renewed system of Messianic interpretation in the Church. This might be one of the deeper reasons for the difficulty the Church has in accepting the regained national existence of the Jewish people without at the same time attempting to impose all kinds of conditions.

Summary by Coos Schoneveld