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## The Protestant Church in the Netherlands Held Captive by its Own Israel Theology?

Lecture on the Opening Day of Friends of Sabeel in the Netherlands on August 25, 2007 at the Head-office of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, PKN) in Utrecht

(The written version of this lecture was not formulated until afterwards. The text below is thus not an exact rendering of what was said. It was written from memory and a few points have been elaborated upon. The title of the lecture was given to me by the people who organized the Opening Day. The English translation is made by Sheila Gogol.

The Protestant Church in the Netherlands, PCN, is since 2004 the continuation of three former churches: the Netherlands Reformed Church, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands)

### I. Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, friends of Sabeel,

It is a memorable day today, now that we are able to witness here the founding and Opening Day of Friends of Sabeel in the Netherlands (Sabeel is the Arabic word for 'path' or 'source'.) Memorable because finally, almost sixty years after the *Nakba*, the catastrophe, as the Palestinians refer to the conquest of the Holy Land and the foundation of the State of Israel, a group of Christians in the Netherlands has now openly and officially expressed its friendship and solidarity with the Palestinians and in particular with Palestinian Christians.

It is memorable that this could happen at the Head-office of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN), memorable and painful at the same time. Because for decades, time and again the On the Way Together (Samen op Weg, SoW) churches and then the PCN have expressed and avowed their solidarity with the people of Israel, and implicitly with the State of Israel, without once acknowledging and experiencing the same solidarity with the Palestinian Christians.

This is surprising and shameful. What is the unflinching solidarity with the Jewish people worth if we do not exhibit the same solidarity with our own brothers and sisters in Christ? And what is the Name of Christ Himself worth, one might wonder, if we are blind to the plight of the Palestinians who live in the Holy Land or have been driven from it, with whom we share our faith in Him?

We all know that after the Second World War our churches in the Netherlands came to be very partial to Israel and were apt to forget the Palestinians and their fate. This was the main emotional trend among the entire Dutch people. Firstly, there was a great and usually religious euphoria about the tiny and ravaged Jewish people who had so touchingly founded a new state in the Holy Land after the holocaust. The *Leon Uris feeling*, one might call it.

And there was the underlying growing sense of guilt about centuries of anti-Semitism and persecution of the Jews ending in the holocaust, - a sense of guilt that grew stronger and was discussed and analysed more and more openly by the church and theologians in the 1980s.

There is also another reason why the SoW churches have focused little or no attention on the situation of the Palestinians in the past few decades, i.e. an erroneous Israel theology. This is precisely what I would like to concentrate on here today as a minister who works in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands with conviction and solidarity, though not with 'unrelinquishable solidarity'. Because if we do not analyse this erroneous theology to the very core and correct it, it will continue to hold us captive and we will continue to overlook the plight of the Palestinians, including the Christians among them. I would first like to give a concise account of the Israel theology in the post-war history of the SoW churches and then proceed to a critical evaluation.

## **II. Unfailing Solidarity: Israel Theology of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands**

The PCN has formulated its present-day stance on Israel in Section 1-7 of the Church Order (Kerkorde) as follows:

“The church is called to give expression to its unrelinquishable solidarity with the Jewish people. As a Christ-confessing community of faith it seeks a dialogue with the Jewish people concerning the understanding of Holy Scripture, in particular as regards the coming of the Kingdom of God.”

In the first sentence, we find the often cited and also often criticized words “unrelinquishable solidarity with the Jewish people.” This formulation came into use around 1990 and was included in the Church Order of the Dutch Reformed Churches (Gereformeerden Kerken) in 1991. The term subsequently became part of the new Church Order of the PKN, which went into effect in 2004.

The term “unrelinquishable solidarity with the Jewish people” is the last stage of a development that began when the State of Israel was founded in 1948. At the time and in subsequent years, various theologians and other Christians referred to the new state as a *sign* from God, a sign of God's loyalty to his people, a sign of his coming Kingdom. The political and secular reality of the State of Israel, now a nation like any other nation, acquired an eschatological glow so fascinating that not much attention was focused on the drama of the Palestinians unfolding behind this sign. A direct theological and emotional link was laid between faith in god and the political reality of a new nation that entailed any number of risks.

This approach was firmly continued in *Israel, People, Land and state, Assistance to a Theological Reflection, (Handreiking van de Hervormde Synode over Israël, volk, land en staat)*, which was published in 1970 and evoked a great deal of approval but also a great deal of criticism in church and theology. The core of the Memorandum consists of a theological legitimizing of the State of Israel using the following

line of reasoning: God is eternally faithful to His covenant with the people of Israel. The promised land is an essential part of this covenant, so Israel can lay claim to the Holy Land on religious grounds. By virtue of this covenant, the Jewish people should be able to live safely in this land and in order to do so, a form of government is needed. It is thus the mission and duty of Christians to accept the State of Israel on religious grounds.

It was particularly Prof. H. Berkhof who left a significant mark on the contents of this Memorandum. I have a great deal of respect for Prof. Berkhof, but it is hard for me to follow him as regards this point, which I will go into presently.

With a few small alterations, this standpoint dating back to 1970 is still adhered to by the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. "Unfailing solidarity with the Israelites" means the same kind of solidarity with the State of Israel because, so the reasoning goes, the State of Israel is part and parcel of the Jewish consciousness.

The 1970 Memorandum evoked numerous questions and widespread criticism. Can a political phenomenon be so directly theologically legitimized? Due in part to this theological point of view, isn't there far too little focus on the dramatic plight of the Palestinians? Questions of this kind and the recurrent debate led the Reformed Synod (Hervormde synode) to adopt a new policy paper in 1995 entitled *Israel, People, Land and State. A Continued Reflection (Israël, volk, land en staat. Een voortgaande bezinning)*. The decision to launch this continued reflection was made two and a half years earlier after a proposal made by Synodal Board member Ms. drs. de Boer-de Leeuw, who is also attending this Opening Day of Sabeel in the Netherlands.

Although the committee and the synod were unable to arrive at a consensus, it is a policy paper of high quality. The policy paper provides ample information on the recent history and situation of the Palestinians and thoroughly elaborates on various theological and political perspectives. In addition to the excellent information, the strength of this policy paper, which is still worth reading today, lies in this elaboration on the various perspectives. This really made a deep reflection feasible and enabled readers to arrive at their own opinion. And this is a valuable thing, especially if there are great differences of opinion in the church.

In 1991 the unfailing solidarity with the Jewish people was included in the Church Order of the Dutch Reformed Churches (Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland), which essentially meant the Dutch Reformed (Hervormde) line of 1970 was accepted and recorded.

Lastly, a policy paper of the joint SoW churches was published in 2004 entitled *The Israeli-Palestinian-Arabic Conflict (Het Israëlisch-Palestijns-Arabisch conflict, IPA)*. The good thing about this policy paper was that it openly acknowledged that for decades, the churches had not had enough of a focus on the plight and the rights of the Palestinians. But as regards the theological analysis of the relationship with Jews and Palestinians, the policy paper was inadequate in every way.

Firstly, it is incomprehensible that no references were made to Palestinian Christians. What is more, the continuing discussion on the unfailing solidarity was settled resolutely and without much analysis:

The church had unfailing solidarity with the people of Israel, and *Israel* was taken for whatever it purported to be, in other words including the State of Israel. With the Palestinians however, there was only some mention of a *diaconal relationship*.

As if this was not clear enough already, it was resolutely stated that the term *double loyalty*, as related to Israel and the Palestinians, as it had been used in recent years by the World Diaconate, should not be used at all. Based on its own contacts, the World Diaconate had an increasingly altered view of the Middle East with more of a focus on the plight of the Palestinians. This is why references were made there to *double loyalty*. But this point of view and the underlying ideas were never supported by a majority on the Synodal Boards or in the synods. Based on a minimum of theological argumentation, the perspective of the World Diaconate was clearly rejected in the 2004 IPA policy paper.

Criticism of the 2004 IPA policy paper has since become so strong that the Synodal Board of the PCN felt called upon to recently assign a small committee to formulate a sequel to the policy paper. Perhaps the initial version of this sequel will already be a topic of discussion at the coming synod in November 2007. It would be good if the taboo on the Israel discussion could finally be abandoned and if it was possible to have an open discussion without biased standpoints of the synod based on church politics. Perhaps at a later stage it will be possible for a new policy to emerge in which at any rate more justice is done to the position of the Palestinians and in particular to our relationship with Christian Palestinians. Lastly, the new Church Order of the PCN went into effect in 2004 with the above-mentioned term *unrelinquishable solidarity*. I would now like to subject the assumed Israel theology to a critical analysis in seven concise points and try to present a possible alternative.

### **III. Analysis of the Israel Theology of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and a Possible Alternative**

#### **1. Ideological veil**

The first and most important point is that the Israel theology of the SoW churches has unmistakably served as an ideological veil for decades so that the plight of the Palestinians was barely visible, if at all. This was also publicly acknowledged a number of times in official documents of the churches themselves, and admitted by PKN secretary Plaisier when he was in Palestine in 2004. This acknowledgement has not however led yet to a thorough reconsideration and alteration of our own Israel theology and church policy.

As a result, most of the church members still do not know a great deal about the Palestinians and their history, and do not even know there are Palestinian Christians. Most church members do not know that about 400 Palestinian villages have been evacuated and destroyed since 1948, that the foundation and expansion of the State of Israel turned approximately a million Palestinians into refugees, many of whom still live with their children and grandchildren in various camps or have been forced to emigrate.

Most church members know very little, if anything, about the apartheid in Israel itself and the repression in the Palestinian regions. As I said before, what is our solidarity with the Jewish people worth if we do not exhibit the same solidarity with our Palestinian fellow Christians?

In recent decades, the church has become increasingly aware of its Jewish roots, there has been a revival of Jewish studies and theological study groups on Judaism have been started all over. All this was and continues to be extremely worthwhile. But if we speak so much about justice on the basis of the Jewish tradition without focusing at all on the victims of the new Jewish state, what does this say about all these Judaic studies and theological study groups on Judaism?

## **2. Ethnically based Israel theology**

From the very beginning, in my opinion the Israel theology of the SoW churches, now the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, has been shaped by the unbiblical and ethnically dangerous point of departure that *the people of Israel or the Jews* should be primarily viewed as an *ethnic* unit. The church has declared its unfailing solidarity with an ethnically defined people. We know from recent history in the Balkans for example how dangerous it can be to link ethnicity and religion.

It was noted in the Dutch Reformed Memorandum of 1970 that Israel itself knows who it is, and that is the point of departure for the church. The solidarity of the church is thus with the ethnic self-conception of Israel and the Jewish people instead of with Israel as the people of the Torah. Along this ethnic line it is virtually inevitable that this solidarity be expanded to the State of Israel and that this be theologically legitimized.

The result is that by virtue of its Church Order, the PCN exhibits more solidarity with for example a secular Jew in Alaska than a Christian Palestinian in Palestine. That the State of Israel also primarily defines itself as an ethnic unit is evident from the fact that according to its present-day legislation, a Jew from Alaska has more right to live in Israel than a Palestinian whose ancestors lived there for centuries.

The ethnic self-conception of Israel is likewise basis for its own set of laws, and as a result, the country still does not have a constitution. A constitution, after all, would have to meet with the international standard which, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, does not draw ethnic distinctions. In Israeli law, the Jewish nature of the state prevails above the democratic aspect, so that judicially as well as in day-to-day practice, Israel carries out a policy of apartheid. Arabs are still viewed and treated as second-class citizens in Israel. From a historical perspective, it is understandable that Israel should be concerned about the Jewish nature of the state. But sooner or later, the ethnic apartheid that serves as the basis for the state will inevitably have to be acknowledged there as well as by the churches in the Netherlands. There has not been any sign of this yet.

In short, the ethnically based Israel theology of the PCN reflects the ethnically based legislation and politics of Israel and is inextricably linked to them.

### 3. Solidarity on the basis of what?

After centuries of anti-Semitism and persecution of the Jews, it is rather pretentious for a church like the PCN to refer to its unflinching solidarity with the Jewish people, as if there is any reason to think we will be able to put this solidarity into effect. In my opinion, this one-sided solidarity of the church means a new but this time philo-Semitic annexation of Judaism.

But what then is the alternative to an ethnically based Israel theology if we do not want to revert back to the anti-Judaism replacement theology of the past? I am convinced there can only be a special religious bond on the basis of a shared belief, shared Holy Scriptures (in this instance the Old Testament, the Tenach), and a shared tradition. Our unflinching solidarity is with Israel as the people of the Torah, and this Torah is the basis of our solidarity. Since we share the first part of the Bible, we are linked and have recourse to the same book, no matter how different the exegesis is of the Tenach from the perspective of the Talmud or the New Testament.

The response is often: But God chose all of Israel, didn't He, as a people and an ethnic group, and this is something He adheres to. This is absolutely true. The Jewish people as entire ethnic community is the choice God made, because He had to start somewhere ("God started small," as Berkhof says), but it could have also been some other people. However, the fact that the entire Jewish people was chosen does not necessarily mean this entire people is a "people of the Torah." Only to the extent that this people allows itself to be called and wishes to live on the basis of this calling and the Torah is it the *people of God's covenant* that the Church has unflinching solidarity with.

So the fact that it is the chosen people does not confirm the ethnicity of the group, on the contrary, it emphasizes its relativity. Time and again, the prophets of the Old Testament made this clear. Israel was not chosen on the grounds of natural, ethnic properties or qualities. In this sense, Israel was purely the address, the focus of the selection. The distinction between Israel as an ethnic group and as the people of the Torah was repeatedly referred to by the prophets as decisive. The relativity of the ethnicity aspect was also clear from stories like the ones about Rachab and Ruth, foreign women who were accepted into the family tree of the Messiah.

The surmount over all ethnic differences and thus the universalization of the message of the Kingdom ultimately manifested itself in the figure of Jesus Christ and was then bravely approached by the apostle Paul. Paul was not always popular among church people because of his difficult letters and their sometimes moralizing tone. But the main tenet of his theology was revolutionary and liberating, as we have to discover and learn again and again.

Paul discovered from his meeting with Christ that the gospel, which first grew from Jewish roots, was to expand and grow as a universal message that was to go beyond all ethnic borders. Paul thus did not sever the gospel from its Jewish roots. He made it clear again and again that we should gratefully respect the fact that God began with Israel and that this election was permanent. But on the grounds of God's revelation in Christ, he also saw that the gospel, with its Jewish roots, would grow into a universal tree with branches that went beyond all the ethnic borders. It was this magnificent and at the same

time so subtle vision on the part of Paul that has been so severely misunderstood in the Israel theology of the PCN. And it is indeed a sad portent that at a recent meeting of the Turning Point Work Group (Werkgroep Keerpunt), it was the Jew Hayo Meijer from A Different Jewish Voice (Een Ander Joods Geluid) who presented us with Paul's words from Romans 9:6: "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel."

Haven't we as churches learned anything from World War Two about the permanent embeddedness in the Jewish Scriptures and history? Yes we certainly have. There are two important theological points of departure that to me have become impossible for the Church and religion to abandon. Firstly, that the Bible is a Jewish book from start to finish, and the Church can only properly comprehend itself from the perspective of the Jewish story of salvation and Scriptures. Secondly, God is still going His own way with the Jewish people of the Torah. The Church has not replaced the Jewish people, which is why the idea of replacement theology is out of the question.

These points of departure imply a priority of Israel in the story of salvation and its hermeneutic priority where it concerns the exegesis of the Scriptures. But not a theological and ethical priority of present-day Israel as *ethnic* community as differentiated from other peoples. Outside the covenant, Israel is no different than any other people, which certainly holds true for the State of Israel as compared with other states.

Non-religious Jews can rediscover their religious identity and return to the covenant and the Scriptures that the Eternal One gave to them as His first choice. But to the extent that secular Jews do not wish to have any part of this, Christians can not claim to have a special religious link with them.

#### **4. The self-conception of Israel**

In various documents of the SoW churches, later the PCN, the self-conception of Israel was always taken as the main point of departure. According to this view we have to take Israel as it conceives of itself, secular or religious, including the State of Israel.

In every form of dialogue and solidarity, the self-conception of the other party is of essential importance. A good relationship starts with listening to each other and allowing the other party to have its say. But this cannot mean the self-conception of the other party takes the place of one's own opinion and evaluation. Just as the self-conception of moderate or extreme Moslems does not mean we have no opinion of our own, for example on the rights of women or on certain ideas in the Koran. Ever since 1970, the SoW churches have nonetheless replaced their own free and Christian approach, to which they in all modesty are being called, and which is always under the last judgment of Christ, with the self-conception of Israel as ethnic community. Moreover, this abandonment of our own Christian freedom and judgment was accompanied by virtually no focus on the self-conception of the Palestinians, not even of the Christians among them.

## 5. Israel theology vs. international law

The PCN rightly adheres to the notion that if it is at all possible, following international law should be the first priority in political and social issues. Churches and religions should encourage each other to support and reinforce international law on the basis of their own religious sources and convictions. However, the Israel theology of the PCN goes against these views and weakens the system of international law. Because in at least an emotionally religious way, this Israel theology creates a separate position for the State of Israel. There is recurrent proof that this is indeed the outcome of the theology of the PCN. In the official PCN documents on Israel, the various United Nations resolutions, which are as clear as they can possibly be, play only a secondary role. It is this international framework however, as is formulated in the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man, that is the only framework all the peoples of the world share. This is where our responsibility lies, this unique framework – the emergence of which has truly been a miracle – links us all and churches should give it their utmost support.

Why hasn't the PCN leadership ever made any statement about the Israeli barrier, which was officially condemned by the International Court right here in The Hague to the extent that it crosses Palestinian territory, with the far-reaching ramifications that this has? The PCN leadership will never say it openly, but in a religious and emotional sense, they accept the State of Israel sometimes acting as if it is above international law.

## 6. Ethical ranking?

There is another reason why we might wonder whether the term *unfailing solidarity* is theologically and ethically feasible. After all, it does suggest a ranking according to which Jews deserve an ethical preferential treatment above others such as Palestinians. But from a Biblical and a Christian perspective, this is out of the question. Jesus made it clear on various occasions that each individual (Jew, Samaritan, Greek etc.) can be seen as our fellow man and lay claim in the same way to our love and responsibility. This is essentially connected to his universalization of the gospel and its ethics, as was followed by Paul. If we have a special religious connection with religious Jews or Palestinians on the basis of religion and the Scriptures, this does not mean an ethical preferential treatment as compared with others. It simply means that on the basis of a shared foundation, we can expect a great deal from each other and address each other in a common responsibility. This type of joint framework should not put others who are outside this framework into an ethical second-class position. After all, it was the aim of the gospel to put an end to ranking of this kind.

This basic idea was still the point of departure for the World Diaconate, now Church in Action (Kerk in Actie). This is why references were made there to a *double loyalty* to Jews and Palestinians. Freedom and justice are universal values we should spread without prejudice. So underlying the terminology

used by the World Diaconate, there is essential Christian theology, which makes it even more painful that the synod of the SoW churches rejected the notion of *double loyalty*.

Church in Action is still regularly impeded in its efforts to concretely put its own interpretation of this double loyalty into effect. Church in Action was recently planning for example to support a selective boycott (recommended by various organizations including Sabeel) against companies that profit from the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. However, as soon as the PCN Synodal Board heard about it, without any prior discussion in the synod, Church in Action was immediately forbidden to take part in the boycott. But we can be grateful to Church in Action for not giving up its convictions and to Feije Duim, Church in Action staff member, for making it possible for us to witness the Opening Day of Sabeel Netherlands here today.

## **7. Palestinian Christians as touchstone**

I hope from the bottom of my heart that my own PCN will soon realize it is caught up in the erroneous ethnic theology that reinforces the injustice in the Middle East. It is not a question of us being for the Palestinians and against the Israelis or the other way around, or of measuring one group's violence against the other's. It is not about any kind of party thinking at all. What is important is that we as Christians and as churches rediscover our evangelical freedom of universal peace and justice. It is on this basis that we can build up our connections and critical contacts with Israelis and Palestinians alike, with Jews, Christians, Moslems and people of other beliefs or of no beliefs at all.

As church and as Friends of Sabeel, we are not only dealing with Palestinian Christians. I am convinced however that our theology and attitude towards the Palestinian Christians is the touchstone for our Israel theology and our approach to the conflict in the Middle East.

One thing should be clear here today at the Head-office of the PCN: as Friends of Sabeel, we should never again allow the Palestinian churches and Christians to disappear from our field of vision.

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### **Theses to discuss at the workshop**

1. The Israel theology of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN) serves as an ideological veil that keeps the history and situation of the Palestinians out of our field of vision.
2. The Israel theology of the PCN is founded on an unbiblical ethnic basis.
3. The Israel theology of the PCN is a new but now philo-Semitic annexation of the Jewish people by the church.
4. Due to the fear of dissension and conflicts, the issue of Israel and the Palestinians is a taboo at the PCN.
5. The Israel theology of the PCN means a misinterpretation of the Christology of the apostle Paul.
6. From the perspective of the gospel as well, we would only do justice to the Jewish people if we view and treat the State of Israel the same way as any other country.
7. The apartheid policy of present-day Israel should be approached just as critically as the apartheid policy in South Africa at the time.