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Is Anti-Zionism Anti-Semitic?

-- Alain Epp Weaver

Should anti-Zionism, as distinct from critiques of particular policies and practices of the State of Israel, be viewed as a form of anti-Semitism? Two recent statements arising from Christian-Jewish dialogue groups suggest as much: One comes from a [Catholic-Jewish conference](#) held in Buenos Aires in July 2004; the other is a [May 2005 report](#) emerging from a series of Jewish-Protestant conversations at the University of Chicago. According to the line of reasoning in these statements, to question Israel's military occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with its attendant human rights abuses, might be legitimate. What falls beyond the pale of acceptable criticism, however, are questions about the justice of the State of Israel's founding or about the Zionist project of establishing and maintaining a Jewish state.

The statement from the Buenos Aires meeting of academic and clerical figures declares a "rejection of anti-Semitism in all its forms, including anti-Zionism as a more recent manifestation of anti-Semitism." The report that grew out of conversations at the University of Chicago Divinity School cautions that "those who criticize Israeli policies should take care to ensure that such criticism not threaten Judaism, the Jewish people, or the legitimacy of the State of Israel." The Christian participants in the dialogue proceed to affirm as an "act of justice the establishment of a Jewish state after two thousand years of Jewish exile, wandering, and homelessness." The document thus draws on biblical imagery concerning the pain and anguish of exile, affirming the "Jewish state" as the antidote to homelessness. Such an approach both mirrors the standard Zionist "negation of the diaspora" (*shelilat ha-galut*) and appears to assume without question that the only political alternative to "exile" is nationalist sovereignty.

Both statements thus warn that critiques of Zionism and of the "legitimacy of the State of Israel" are akin to anti-Semitism. While "anti-Zionism" is left undefined, Zionism is implicitly defined as the movement to establish "a Jewish state," so anti-Zionism must therefore be understood to be a theological or political position that at least questions if not opposes the justice of establishing and maintaining a "Jewish state." Recognizing the State of Israel's "legitimacy" is bound up with recognizing it as a "Jewish state." A reader of the documents is left with the understanding that Christians, while they might criticize particular Israeli policies or actions, should affirm Zionism and recognize the justice of "the establishment of a Jewish state."

But "Jewish state" is left undefined. In contemporary Israeli political discourse, the question of the Jewishness of the Israeli state is repeatedly tied to questions of demography. Many proponents of the separation barrier and the "disengagement" from the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank argue that such separation is required in order to protect Israel's Jewish majority from the demographic threat represented by the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Israeli officials, when arguing against the return of Palestinian refugees to homes and properties inside Israel, routinely

describe calls to allow refugee return as attacks on Israel's character as a "Jewish state." Israel's identity as a Jewish state, on the terms of this political discourse, was and is thus tied to creating and maintaining a Jewish demographic majority within particular territorial boundaries.

The Protestant participants in the Chicago dialogue describe "the establishment of a Jewish state" as "an act of justice." (Justice understood naturally? Theologically? We're not told.) If "Jewish state" is understood in the demographic terms described above, then the following conclusions would follow from the Chicago report's claim. First, the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians (Christians and Muslims) from their homes and villages in 1948 was, if tragic, also necessary. If Zionism meant creating a state with a Jewish majority in historical Palestine, then some form of "transfer" of Palestinians was imperative, even just. Second, it thus follows that any return of these Palestinian refugees that would undermine this Jewish majority must be prevented. Indeed, Israel has adamantly rejected refugee return. The logic of the Chicago and Buenos Aires documents falls -- wittingly or unwittingly -- in line with the Israeli characterization of calls for refugee return as anti-Semitic threats to Israel's Jewish identity.

On what theological or other grounds would Christians recognize Israel as a Jewish state, if that means embracing as a natural or theological good the expulsion of Palestinians in 1948? Put another way, must calls for Palestinian refugee return, or for a single binational state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, be described as anti-Semitic?

I think Christians can and should recognize Israel -- as they recognize all states, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United States -- as a way in which God is ordering the rebellious powers of the world for the providential care of humanity. This is a far cry, however, from recognizing as a theological or natural good the way in which particular states come into being, or affirming the self-understanding of particular states.

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