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Christian-Jewish Relations in the Netherlands

Tzvi Marx, July 15, 2007

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*Interview with Tzvi C. Marx**

- The establishment of the state of Israel-and not the Jewish suffering during the Shoah-has catalyzed in the Netherlands a serious rethinking of the relationship of Christianity to Judaism. The theology that Christians had replaced Jews as the "new" Israel was belied by the reempowered Jewish polity in the Land.
- Christian-Jewish relations have several components. One aspect is that a number of Christians study Judaism. A second is interfaith dialogue, and a third concerns Christian attitudes toward Israel. These are to some extent intertwined.
- The current Israeli-Palestinian struggle provides a cover for rehabilitating ancient anti-Jewish feelings. The deeper, historically conditioned anti-Jewish tendencies are not easily disposed of. The culture of paranoiac anti-Judaism is still alive.

"May 1948 marked a new era for Christian-Jewish relations. The establishment of the state of Israel was a theological intrusion into Christian consciousness. It disrupted Christian complacency about being the 'true Israel' in God's eyes and about Christendom as replacing the ancient Israel, the classical substitution theology.¹

"This indigestible theological fact undermined 1,800 years of Christian theology. Apparently, God had not revoked his promises to the Jews. This catalyzed a rethinking about Jews in some Christian circles."

Tzvi C. Marx is director of the B. Folkertsma Institute for Talmudica (Hilversum) and lectures on Judaism at the Radboud University (Nijmegen) and at the Windesheim College (Utrecht). He has Israeli and American citizenships and is an ordained rabbi from Yeshiva University. He holds a PhD from the Catholic Theological University of Utrecht.

Marx adds that Israel's establishment released much energy in Christian circles. "Some was devoted to denial, by claiming that the state did not present any new issue for theology, but only served as a guilt compensation for the Holocaust. In this concept Israel was merely a rehabilitation center for displaced and battered Jews, and should eventually be subsumed within a more universal Arab state in which Jews would be welcome but not dominant. Many of those not involved in denial took, instead, a new look at Judaism and became engaged in its study."

The Shoah and the Theology of Jewish Suffering

Marx stresses that the early-1950s debate on a nonmissionary Christian approach to Judaism was not triggered by the Shoah. "On the contrary, Jewish suffering to whatever degree is compatible with standard Christian theology.

"St. Augustine underlined that the Jews are meant to suffer for refusing to embrace Christianity and for the crucifixion of Jesus.² Their exile and dispersal is an eternal token of divine displeasure.

"That is also why Pope Pius X in 1904 refused Herzl's overtures. Herzl urged him to acknowledge the Zionist movement and the Jewish people's claim to return to the ancient homeland. The Pope responded that since the Jewish people had not recognized Jesus, he could not recognize them. He added that if the Jews agreed to convert to Christianity, he would provide priests to baptize and welcome them home to the Holy Land as Christians."³

Historical Setting

"Before analyzing Christian-Jewish relations in the Netherlands it is necessary to put developments there in their historical context. Trauma and myth are essential in appreciating the new interest that some Christians took in Judaism as well as the Jewish community's indifferent, even skeptical response.

"The total number of Dutch casualties in the European theater of WWII came to 220,000 of which more than 100,000 were Jews. In 1940 the Netherlands had a population of 8.8 million with a total of 140,000 Jews. The political scientist Isaac Lipschits has illustrated the trauma of the postwar nonrehabilitation of Dutch Jews who returned from concentration camps or emerged from hiding. His book describes the tepid treatment that the Dutch accorded to the surviving Jews despite the extreme suffering they had undergone.

"This came from a single-minded interest in rebuilding the war-shattered Holland. The returning Dutch Jews were

essentially treated like all other citizens with no special attention to their discrimination and persecution.⁴ During the German occupation, many members of the Dutch elite signed papers that they were Aryans, thus isolating the Jews.

"There is a cognitive dissonance, ingrained in the Dutch myth, between the positive attitude toward Jews and the fact that the Netherlands was the worst West European country for Jewish survival during the war. This is very difficult to bear for the self-image of the Dutch. For the Dutch Jews it is equally unsettling. It creates an anxiety that makes discussing it very touchy. It has taken much time to acknowledge how dangerous the Netherlands was for the Jews. There could even be a reversion to this reticence in the coming decades."

Christians Study and Teach Judaism

Marx points out that Christian-Jewish relations have several components. "One aspect is that a number of Christians study Judaism. A second is interfaith dialogue and a third concerns Christian attitudes toward Israel. These are to some extent intertwined."

He considers that multiple motives are behind the Christian surge in the study of Judaism, including:

- Understanding "Jesus the Jew" or the Jewish roots of Christianity.
- Reconfiguring Christian identity now that it can no longer be the "New" Israel.
- Understanding Judaism in its own terms as a vital faith. This is accompanied by wanting to discover the worlds of Jewish hermeneutics and exegesis, which differ from their Christian counterparts.
- Searching for personal spiritual meaning, having lost a toehold in Christian identity.
- Confirming Christian messianic hopes in the Tanach.
- Studying Judaism as part of worldwide religious phenomena, especially in universities.
- Performing an act of repentance, which is, keeping Jewish awareness alive through learning, as compensation for the Shoah. This also involves support for rebuilding Jewish sites such as the Synagoge op de Dijk (the Synagogue on the Dike) in Slidrecht, and the Aaltense Synagoge (the Synagogue in Aalten).

Marx observes: "One exceptional Jewish effort to sponsor such study was the establishment of the B. Folkertsma Stichting voor Talmudica in Hilversum. It was founded by Prof. Rabbi Yehudah Aschkenasy, an Auschwitz survivor, in 1974. He developed a cadre of Christian and Jewish Talmudists who today teach in universities and serve as an intellectual resource on Judaism for the general public.

"This institute makes Judaism accessible to non-Jews, mainly Christians through its library, courses, and publications. Its books, study manuals, and educational materials reach thousands. Many of these 'students' of Judaica organize *leerhuizen* for ongoing study. The one in Arnhem recently celebrated its fortieth anniversary. Even today its study of Psalms draws sixty participants."

The *Leerhuis*: A New Development

"A *leerhuis* is a sort of Bet Hamidrash, functioning mostly in a Christian context, where Christians and Jews reflect on biblical texts, Jewish traditions, and Jewish-Christian relations. The aim is to learn from Judaism how to become better Christians. Although mostly initiated by Protestants, they are also attended by Catholics and Jews.

"Since the 1960s, these grassroots initiatives have shaped a deep awareness among many Christians of Judaism's importance for Christian identity. Protestants, in returning to Christianity's biblical roots, saw in a historical 'Jewish' Jesus a possible solution to their theological difficulty with the 'trinitarian faith,' or the atoning quality of Jesus' death.

"Christians learn about the Jewish way of interpreting the Bible, Jewish prayer, philosophy, and Hasidic tales, and the Jewish heritage in Christianity, especially in the New Testament where Jewish teachers, scholars, and rabbis figure significantly. This includes seeing Jesus as a Jewish teacher.

"There are no precise statistics on the number of these *leerhuizen*. The Folkertsma Institute alone has seventy on its lists. A *leerhuis* can have fifteen to ninety participants, meeting six to twelve times a year for two hours. They can consist of clergy or laypeople."

Advancing the Study of Judaica on the Scholarly/University Level

"University-level Jewish studies are sufficiently widespread to have stimulated the organization of the informal Dutch Association of Jewish Studies. As a framework for those teaching Judaica in the universities, it is affiliated with the European Association for Jewish Studies. It tries to encourage young scholars to enter this field. Judaica is also taught in the MA-level World Religions programs at the Radboud University of Nijmegen and at Utrecht University.

"The Foundation Compendium Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum was established in 1969 as an international effort of Jewish and Christian scholars. It publishes scholarly books on Judaism, such as *The Literature of the Sages*. Israeli scholars like the late David Flusser and Shmuel Safrai have been engaged in this effort.

"Over the past ten years, the Amsterdam Studies in Jewish Thought Series was advanced by Dr. Reinier Munk, professor of modern Jewish philosophy at Leiden University and the Amsterdam Free University (VU). He has brought Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik's writings to the Dutch public and has in this series published eleven scholarly works by writers like Prof. Zeev Harvey and Prof. Avi Ravitsky.

"Other institutes also offer Jewish studies on a scholarly level. The Juda Palache Institute within the University of Amsterdam offers courses in Hebrew language and literature. The Menasseh ben Israel Institute for Jewish social, scientific, and cultural studies promotes awareness of the Jewish contribution to advanced thought in the Netherlands."

Interfaith Interaction of Christians and Jews

"OJEC (Overleg Joden en Christenen in Nederland) or the Dutch Interfaith Organization was instituted in 1981. Rev. Dr.

Simon Schoon, a Protestant minister and Mrs. Marion Wolff-Kunstenaar, a Jewish activist were prominent in this effort. The former was its director for the first ten years. This organization, comprised of representatives of church and synagogue groups, publishes bulletins and brochures. It also sponsors regional and annual national activities to promote mutual Christian-Jewish understanding.

"The organization is a member of the ICCJ (International Council of Christians and Jews) and participates in its annual or semiannual international conferences. One of its more popular-for Christians, at least-annual activities is its *Leren en Vieren* (Shabbat and Sunday learning and celebrating) weekends, which are attended by sixty to ninety people.

"Christians get a taste of the Jewish Shabbat while Jews get a glimpse of Christian observances of Sunday. The disproportion of many Christians to few Jews testifies to the asymmetric interest in the interfaith arena. The general attitude of Jews to Christianity in the Netherlands is 'You leave us alone and we'll leave you alone.' Not so the Christians. A significant number are very interested in Judaism."

The Protestant Church of the Netherlands

"The new attitude toward the Jewish people and Israel in the largest organized church of the Netherlands, the PKN (Protestantse Kerk in Nederland) is expressed in its theology of *Onopgeefbare verbondenheid*-the irreversible (or unbreakable) bond-with Israel. The meaning of this concept and its application to the people of Israel in the state of Israel is a major subject of discussion within the church.

"The earliest version of the charter of the Reformed Church stated: 'The churches are called upon to substantiate the irreversible bond [that links] the community of Christ to the people Israel; and seek for opportunities wherein Jews and Christians can witness this mutually.'⁵

"The PKN formulated this concept as follows: 'The Church is called upon to substantiate her irreversible bond to the people Israel. As a Christ-confessing faith community, it seeks conversations with Israel concerning its understanding of sacred Scripture, in particular, concerning the coming of God's kingdom.'

"Despite its theological commitment to the people Israel on the theoretical level, the PKN wrestles with an identity dilemma. It struggles to find a balance between its special 'solidarity' with 'Israel' and what it takes to be its universal moral responsibility. In actuality the fight is between the forces within the PKN that support Israel and those that favor the Palestinians. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been the subject of intense discussion and has led to some downgrading of support for Israel that was more prominent in the 1970s."

Stress in the PKN

"For example, before its reorganization three years ago, the Protestant Church had a department, with four personnel, called Church and Israel that attended to and educated about the responsibility of Protestants to make their theological commitment consistent with the Church articles. The department supported regional subgroups whose focus was also Church and Israel. Afterward, this department was subsumed as a subsection under a broader part of the PKN administration. Recently this too has been reduced to a mere project with only one person active.⁶

"Witness also the recent furor over the PKN withdrawing its Kerk in Aktie (Church in Action) from the UCP's (United Civilians for Peace, a Dutch nonchurch coalition) so-called 'observers' group, for the latter's one-sided criticism of Israel and sympathy for the Palestinians. The Kerk in Aktie committee is officially active within the PKN and should officially express its activism in a way that accords with the PKN's commitments. Because it allowed itself to be represented in the UCP, however, the PKN was criticized as taking the side of the Palestinians. In order to obviate this charge, the PKN withdrew its Kerk in Aktie group from the UCP.

"In an article critical of the PKN policy, Dr. At Polhuis, a minister in Rotterdam-South wrote: 'There must be no doubt that the Church supports the existence of the state of Israel. "Yes" to Israel and "no" to Hezbollah and Hamas and what they stand for. When that is clear, then the Church may, nay, must, out of its social-welfare calling, speak up vigorously for the Palestinians to help in the establishment of their own state.'⁷

"The current state of the 'Israel zondag' (October Sunday) is another symptom of the stress concerning the Protestant attitude toward Israel. In this project, the PKN originally devoted the first Sunday of October to preaching supportively on Israel in the churches. The day, however, has become one of tension for many ministers who don't know how to preach positively on Israel to their congregations in the current state of affairs. The perplexed leadership mixes theology with politics and confuses humanitarian, religious, and theological aspects.

"Blatant anti-Israeli tendencies include those of the IKV (Interkerkelijk Vrede; Interchurch Freedom) and Catholic Pax Christi organizations. They take one-sided pro-Palestinian positions in symposiums, conferences, and statements. They turn for support to extreme leftist Uri Avneri's critiques of Israel, 'new' historians like Ilan Pappé, and to the one-sided anti-Israeli views of the Dutch Jewish left-leaning organization Een Ander Joods Geluid who purport to represent 'Another Jewish Voice' within the Netherlands (other than the mainstream organizations). In numbers if not in volume that voice is very small."

Israel

Marx says: "Alongside the ambivalent wrestling of the PKN one also finds pro-Israeli tendencies. Christenen voor Israel (Christians for Israel), through their publications, fundraising, and demonstrations, provide unconditional support. Although many of them, as an aspect of their messianic Christian outlook, have a hidden agenda of saving Jews in the End of Days, their support for Israel is unambiguous.

"The Platform Kerk en Israel (Church and Israel Lobby) consists of ministers who are members of the PKN. They lobby for proactive support for Israel by their churches. Since 2003 they have sponsored annual conferences on anti-Semitism, Israel, and so on. They also provide opinion pieces to the newspapers and offer critical voices within the PKN. Although small, they are effective in stimulating public discussion within their church.

"Another group along these lines is Rev. Dr. Geert Cohen Stuart's Vanuit Jeruzalem (From Jerusalem). In addition, the Eindhoven Region of Ministers, which is a regional division of the nationally organized Protestant Church, sponsors annual study conferences in Antwerp on Jewish themes attended by ninety to a hundred people, mostly clergy.

"Often published in the newspapers are the scholarly, pro-Israeli views of Prof. Dr. Rev. Hans Jansen-a former Catholic priest, now a Protestant minister and professor. He is also a researcher at the Simon Wiesenthal Institute in Brussels. His one-thousand-page book documenting Muslim anti-Semitism (2006) has opened the eyes of many to the new anti-Semitism posed by certain Islamic circles.⁸

"A further sign of support for the Jewish position is that of illegalizing Holocaust denial. The Christen Unie (Christian Union) political party now has six members in the government coalition. Through its then parliamentarian, now deputy minister Tineke Huizinga-Heringa, it proposed a law in 2006 that would prohibit denial of the Holocaust. This is on the current agenda of the new government."⁹

Problematic Trends

"A number of much-publicized incidents suggest a change in attitude from the previous, self-evident atmosphere of support for the Jewish people and Israel along with almost reflexive recoil from anti-Semitism. A new mood has allowed the following kinds of incidents to pass unfiltered:

- The PKN published its new liturgy book in 2002 in which the Improperia, the classic anti-Jewish Good Friday liturgy, was offered as an option with footnotes to explain its anti-Jewishness away. Despite strong protests by Christian and Jewish theologians and by members of the interfaith association (the OJEC) during a specially convened all-day meeting in Utrecht at the headquarters of the PKN, the PKN published it anyway.
- A Protestant minister, Kees Mos, gave an anti-Semitic sermon in Wassenaar in March 2005. He said "And what we in the course of time realize, sixty years after WWII is that Hitler was actually more at home in the Bible than we want to admit. And that Hitler took biblical ideas to their ultimate conclusion. For Hitler said: The Jew in us must disappear! For a new kind of person must arise! These God's chosen people have shown themselves to be like Judas."¹⁰

"The PKN gave only a lackadaisical response. Much objection, however, was raised including by CIDI (Center for Information and Documentation Israel)¹¹ and by many well-meaning Christians, but somehow this anti-Semitic sermonizer-who only partially apologized after a long time-got away with it through the bureaucratic machinations of the PKN.

- Another discouraging sign was the censuring of Prof. Dr. Piet van der Horst's farewell lecture by the University of Utrecht in June 2006. In the lecture, titled "The Myth of Jewish Cannibalism," he intended to trace this theme all the way up to and including the current libels by Islam. But the dean of the university and its academic board-partly out of self-interest with the university initiating an educational program for Islamic imams-warned him of (unproven) dangers against which they would not be able to protect him. They also denigrated the lecture's academic level. Van der Horst is a highly respected professor and member of the prestigious Dutch Academy of Sciences. On that same occasion Van der Horst also criticized the downgrading of chairs and the quality of Jewish studies in Dutch universities. To this the special chair on Christian-Jewish relations at the University of Kampen is an exception. Filled for five years by retired Prof. Simon Schoon, it is now held by Dr. Dineke Houtman.
- A similar attempt at censorship occurred on the occasion of Dr. René Süß receiving his doctorate for a dissertation on Luther's systematic anti-Semitism at the Protestant Faculty in Brussels in 2006.¹² He was strongly advised not to publish the dissertation as a book. It was quite strange to award the man a doctorate for this research and then attempt to deny him the right to publish his results."

Conclusion

Marx concludes: "The optimistic expectations that the third millennium would usher in a new period of universal reconciliation will not be realized. There are troubling trends that require a renewed effort to transfer the gains of the latter half of the twentieth century into the twenty-first century, a period marked by resurgent Islamic cultural militancy in the Netherlands and in Europe generally.

"The current Israeli-Palestinian struggle provides a good cover for rehabilitating old anti-Jewish feelings. These lie so deep that they have hardly been overcome. Even with theologically transformative statements like that of Nostra Aetate, the Rhineland Evangelical Church declarations,¹³ and the *Onopgeefbare verbondenheid* article of the Dutch Church, the deeper, historically conditioned anti-Jewish reflexes are not easily disposed of.

"They live in the memory, customs, language, ritual, canon, and liturgy of the churches. We must confront the renewed fury of these reawakened feelings, now under the flag of Islam in its rejection of the Jewish presence in the Middle East as an independent polity, Israel. The culture of paranoiac anti-Judaism is still alive. We must do our utmost to recruit our energies and our allies in the battle to prevail over that culture."

Interviewed by Manfred Gerstenfeld

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Notes

1. This supersessionism is also called replacement theology.
2. Augustine's (354-430) doctrine of testimony (Testimonium) "generated an image of the Jew as a living fossil bound by the dead letter of his law, blind to the correct interpretation of the Bible and trapped in the rituals of the Scriptures, a type of Jew who never actually existed" except in Augustine's imagination. This Jew, through his humiliating circumstances, was a necessary witness to the truth of Christianity. Ram Ben-Shalom, "Medieval Jewry in Christendom," in Martin Goodman, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999), 162-63.
3. From "Pope Benedict XVI: Preliminary Observations by Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal," 21 April 2005. Downloaded from internet, 2007, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 355 Lexington Ave., NY, NY 10017. See www.ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=353&page_id=1001&page_prg_id=4108.
4. Isaac Lipschits, *De Kleine Sjoa: Joden in Naorlogs Nederland* (Amsterdam: Mets en Schilt, 2001), 4. [Dutch]
5. Gereformeerde kerkorde (an article in the statutes of the Reformed Church of Holland), 25 November 1991, article 93. (Source: Simon Schoon, *Onopgeefbaar Verbonden: De weg naar vernieuwing in de verhouding tussen de kerk en het volk Israel* [Kok: Kampen, 1998]). [Dutch]
6. From a recent personal communication from someone within that organization.
7. At Polhuis, "Eenzijdig wil kerk niet zijn dus is zij niets," *Trouw*, 18 August 2006. [Dutch]
8. Hans Jansen, *Van jodenhaat naar zelfmoordterrorisme* (Heerenveen: Groen, 2006). [Dutch]
9. NIW, 6 March 2007.
10. See www.trouw.nl/preekwassenaar for the original Dutch sermon.
11. Since 1974 CIDI (Centre for Information and Documentation on Israel), based in The Hague, has been distributing information about Israel and the Jewish people. CIDI has access to the most comprehensive Dutch archive of material on Israel and the European Jewish community, and organizes many activities. See www.CIDI.nl.
12. Réne Süss, *Luther's theologisch testament: Over de Joden en hun leugens* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2006). [Dutch]
13. *Declaration of the Synod of the Evangelical Church of the Rhineland*. "... the Synod of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland accepts the historical necessity of attaining a new relationship of the Church to the Jewish people...that the continuing existence of the Jewish people, its return to the land of Promise, and also the foundation of the state of Israel are signs of the faithfulness of God toward his people." Official church statements from the 1980s quoted in Dr. Dagmar Pruin, "The Jewish-Christian Dialogue in Germany: What Lessons Can We Draw from It for a Dialogue with the Muslim World?" www.aicgs.org/analysis/c/pruin021507.aspx

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About Tzvi Marx

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