

# The Catholic Church, Jews, the Shoah and the State of Israel

Interpretations and responses

BORIS HAVEL



VERTAISARVIOUTU  
KOLLEGIALT GRANSKAD  
PEER-REVIEWED  
www.tsv.fi/tunnus

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.126185>

**ABSTRACT** • Judaism and Christianity are religions whose theological epistemology is based on revelation. The primary source of revelation is Holy Scripture. However, history has also been recognised as a source of revelation, particularly the history of Israel and the Jewish people. Because they understood history as a source of revelation, many religious Jews altered their understanding of Jewish statehood in Eretz Israel during the twentieth century, from distinctly averse to increasingly supportive. On the same principles, the Catholic Church made arguably the most profound change in its theology in the twentieth century, concerning its understanding of Jews and Judaism. This was prompted by another major historical event, the Shoah. While in Judaism the historical phenomenon of the State of Israel profoundly influenced theology, another historical phenomenon, the Shoah, was theologically approached with far more unease and ambiguity. In the Catholic Church, in contrast, the historical phenomenon of the Shoah prompted a serious reconsideration of certain tenets of theology, including soteriology, while the historical phenomenon of the State of Israel did not. This article addresses this apparent contradiction comparatively.

## Introduction: revelation and history

### Revelation as the main source of knowledge of God

Judaism and Christianity are religions that claim revelation as the main source of knowledge of God.<sup>1</sup> The idea of revelation is originally Hebrew, and Christianity inherited it in its emergence as a branch of Judaism. The unique characteristic of the Jewish people, or Israel, is that it was the only people who had received the revealed knowledge of God. In

the words of the Psalmist, 'He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws' (Ps 147:19–20).<sup>2</sup> In the New Testament, when the apostle Peter understood that Jesus was 'the Messiah, the Son of the living God', Jesus approvingly replied: 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven' (Matt 16:16–17).

A prime source of revelation in Judaism and Christianity is Holy Scripture (Buber 1982: 6, Donahue 1982: 231–44, D'Costa

1 I am thankful to Professor Doug Davis for reading a final version of this text, editing it and bringing to my attention some new and valuable sources. All conclusions are mine.

2 Bible verses are from the NIV version, unless otherwise indicated.



Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

2019: 13).<sup>3</sup> The Bible contains ‘all things that pertain unto life and godliness’ (2 Pet 1:3, KJV), and both Jewish and Christian orthodoxy rely on it for theological doctrines, ethics, worldviews and law.

### History as a source of revelation

The Bible, however, provides only a vague background, if any, for understanding contemporary political phenomena, such as the modern state (cf. Ratzabi 2005: 215, Benedict XVI 2018: 179; Garrigues and Kurylo 2022: 42–4 etc.), whose interpretation in theological terms, when it comes to Israel, appears inevitable. There is therefore another well-defined source of revelation, to which Jews and Christians may turn when Scripture seems silent: history. History is a source of divine knowledge, wisdom, inspiration and interpretation, and is generally of the utmost importance for Judaism, in a way unparalleled in any other major world religion or civilisation.<sup>4</sup> For Jews, inasmuch as ‘the God of Israel is the God of History ... every major event in the history of [the Jewish] people is to be viewed as revelational’ (Spero 1989b: 41). Divine knowledge in Judaism may be achieved by observing and interpreting historical events. The historicity of stories on which Judaism was founded is therefore of

the greatest theological importance, such as would not exist if those stories were only legends. The emphasis in biblical stories rests not primarily on their form, logic, aesthetics or eloquence, nor on their complexity, context or splendid scenery (as would have been the case if they were the fruit of the Greek creative mind), but on a divine message conveyed through the events described. That is why we may conclude that the prophets of Israel ‘spoke of God’s action in history rather than of his action in nature’ (de Lubac 1958: 78).<sup>5</sup>

A similar understanding of history may also be found in Christianity. Having originated as a branch of Judaism, Christianity ‘received from the Jews the basic ideas of history having a transcendent purpose’ (Spero 2000: 311). The apostle Paul maintained that Christianity would be fairytale nonsense if its core belief, the resurrection, was not a fact of history: ‘And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith’ (1 Cor 15:14). Nicolas Berdyaev, quoting Schelling, writes that ‘Christianity was *par excellence* historical [and is the] revelation of God in history’ (Berdyaev 1936: 108). According to Henri de Lubac, ‘God acts in history and reveals himself through history’, which is why ‘history is the necessary interpreter between God and man’ (de Lubac 1958: 82). John W. O’Malley points out that the ‘mentality with which many of the most influential bishops and theologians approached their task at Vatican II was more historical than at any previous council’, and he quotes the Dominican Marie-Dominique Chenu’s words: ‘Since Christianity draws its reality from history and not from some metaphysics, the theologian must have as his

- 3 Another source of revelation in Catholic theology is tradition, which is explained in the Dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, *Dei verbum*, while in Judaism there is Rabbinic literature, also widely accepted as a source of divine inspiration. Examination of the correlation between these sources is beyond the scope of this article.
- 4 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi writes that ‘concern with history, let alone the writing of history, is not an innate endowment of human civilization’ (Yerushalmi 1982: 6). Cf. Albright 1942: 176, Vriezen 1967: 45–78 etc.

- 5 The word ‘nature’ (טבע) does not appear in the Bible, and has entered the Hebrew language only during the medieval period (Yehuda 2003–4: 5).

primary concern ... to know this history and to train himself in it' (O'Malley 2008: 36). Indeed, according to the constitution *Dei Verbum*, 'This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them'.<sup>6</sup>

How, then, has understanding of history as a carrier of divine revelation shaped concrete theological positions in Judaism and Christianity? Let us begin with a major event of antiquity, the expulsion of Jews (*galut*) from Eretz Israel following two disastrous revolts against Rome.

### Galut in Jewish and Christian theology

#### History in Jewish theological understanding of dispersal and ingathering

Since Israel's 'national history was divine drama' (de Lubac 1958: 79), some key Jewish beliefs regarding messianism, the beginning and the end of *galut*, the final ingathering and national redemption have formed around the historical experience. After the disastrous anti-Roman wars of the first and second centuries AD, especially after the defeat of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135, mainstream Judaism adopted a position of passive messianism and political quietism, and an understanding of the *galut* as penitence imposed on Jews by God (Gordon 1989: 82–99; Havel 2020a: 216; cf. Benedict XVI 2018: 178 etc.). From that time onwards, Jewish national redemption and the re-establishment of a kingdom in Judaea, or Eretz Israel, was understood as an issue of sovereign divine will. It could be

prayed for, but not hastened by Jewish political, social or military activism. Jews could not simply decide to move back *en masse* to their ancient homeland and establish a political entity there. Such a move would indicate a break of penitence, and as such an act of defiant, lawless disobedience to God. The idea of statehood achieved through Jewish political action, before and outside a clear divine messianic intervention on behalf of the Jewish people, after the Bar Kokhba revolt, has been considered theologically illegitimate. When the Zionist movement first appeared in Europe, it prompted suspicion, if not outright hostility, from the majority of Jewish religious leaders.<sup>7</sup> Most early Zionist ideologues were secular Jews, *maskilim*, advocates of enlightenment and believers in the European concept of the nation-state. Zionism was a secular revolutionary movement, whose aim was the re-establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine by human endeavour. Consideration of God, divine purposes or eschatology was virtually non-existent among its early champions. Early Zionism was therefore deemed a theologically illegitimate venture by most contemporary religious Jews. This did not impede its development, however. Zionist leaders more or less respectfully disregarded the pious hostility of religious Jews towards their enterprise, and continued to pursue their goals. Some even envisioned a Jewish future opposed to the religious, traditional and historical development of the preceding centuries, because it was perceived as a perpetuator of Jewish weakness. As E. Kaplan explained, 'Zionism was first and foremost a revolt against the way Jewish history has evolved over the years according to theological and religious values and the kind of ideas and mentalities that it created along the way' (Kaplan 2017: 611).

6 Dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, *Dei verbum* (1), of 18 November, Vatican Council II. 1965. (Vatican Council II).

7 For exceptions see Goldwater 2009.

## Jewish dispersal in Christian theological understanding

Woes that befell the Jewish people after the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in AD 70, the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt and the subsequent expulsion of Jews from Judaea were interpreted by Christians in a methodologically similar way to Jews' perception of their own fate: history revealed divine judgement, and demonstrated that God was displeased with the Jews. The early Church understood Jewish tragedies as God's punishment. Christians, however, added to it an idea of God's permanent rejection of the Jewish people, their curse and their replacement by the Church as the 'new Israel' (Simon 1996; D'Costa 2019: 1; Ben-Johanan 2022: 33). Such notions were argued by some of the most influential Church authors by the mid-second century, often in the context of blaming Jews for deicide, first espoused by Bishop Melito of Sardis (Werner 1966: 199, 207) and Justin, and subsequently Tertullian, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and others (cf. Skarsaune 2002: 259–76). Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Ecclesiastical History* referred to Jewish political disaster as evidence of their spiritual rejection by God. In the following centuries, Christians in many lands adopted a more hostile attitude to Jews, which eventually led to persecutions, confining Jews to ghettos, humiliation, abuse and even murder. In the nineteenth century, anti-Judaism generated racial animosity to Jews, which came to be known as antisemitism. Jewish–Christian polemics of Christianity's first century generated much Christian antagonism towards Jews, but Jewish historical national tragedies of the same age fuelled, amplified and additionally theologically justified that antagonism. For example, the concept of the Wandering Jew was not a product of theological disagreements recorded in

the New Testament, but of a later historical reality observed, recorded and interpreted theologically.

## The State of Israel according to Jewish theological interpretation

### Religious Jewish endorsement of statehood

The establishment, defence and development of the State of Israel prompted a large and growing part of the Jewish religious community to rethink its rejection of the theological legitimacy of a statehood achieved by Jewish political activism. After 1948 Zionism was cautiously accepted, and in the aftermath of the Six-Day War of 1967 was enthusiastically adopted; by the 1980s some of the most zealous Zionists were religious Jews. Religious Zionism is today a major force in Israeli politics. In June 2021 Naftali Bennett became the first prime minister of Israel from the religious Zionist movement. After the elections in November 2022, the coalition of two religious Zionist parties grew into the second-largest conservative group in the Knesset (that is, excluding MPs from other parties such as Likud, Shas or UTJ, whose political ideology also might be described as religious Zionist).<sup>8</sup> Since the first parliamentary elections in 1949, the growth in numbers and influence of religious Zionists is probably unparalleled by any other movement in Israeli politics.<sup>9</sup>

8 For a definition of religious Zionism, see Spero 1989a: 14.

9 Between the elections of 1949 and 2022 religious Zionists were part of a number of parties and movements, with many other identities and ideologies besides religious Zionism. In addition, many of these parties and movements split, changed names, fragmented, defragmented, formed or joined coalitions, faded, re-emerged in some other form (such as the Gush Emunim movement), or were disqualified from running

## The history and perception of the theological legitimacy of Zionism

Reasons for the change in the perception of the theological legitimacy of Zionism among religious Jews are essentially historical only. Just as history prompted theological disapproval of political messianism, it was history that demonstrated that the Zionist enterprise in Palestine was divinely sanctioned. After almost two millennia, Jews from all corners of the world moved back to their ancient homeland. When the first Jews settled in Palestine in the late nineteenth century, the land was unwelcoming, poor, barren and largely desolate. Much of the northern area around the Sea of Galilee was swampy, while dry desert and wasteland covered most of Negev, Judaea and Samaria.<sup>10</sup> Jewish settlers turned it into fertile soil, inspiring many to interpret their amazing achievements as fulfilment of Isaiah's ancient prophecy that 'the wilderness will rejoice and blossom' (Isaiah 35:1; cf. Ezekiel 36:34–35, Amos 9:13–14, etc.). The State of Israel was established in May 1948, and in the subsequent war as few as 650,000 Jews, some of them Holocaust survivors, defended it against five Arab states reinforced by troops from a dozen other Arab and Muslim lands. The survival of the newly born Jewish state in

(Kach), which makes it difficult to compose even approximately precise statistics. For a recent overview see Hermann 2022.

<sup>10</sup> The question of conditions in these lands at the beginning of the Zionist enterprise later became controversial as a result of political developments. Nevertheless, sources from the final decades of the Ottoman Empire describe Palestine as desolate, largely uninhabited, with a few scattered villages and very poor. A reliable description of pre-Zionist Palestine may be found in Mark Twain's travelogue *The Innocents Abroad*, first published in 1869. For a more detailed study see Peters 1984.

the hostile Arab region was doubted by many, Jews and non-Jews alike, and when it did survive it astounded many more. An image of a miracle thus began to take shape. The God of history seemed to have approved the Jewish revolutionary enterprise in Eretz Israel, and Jewish political theology of almost two thousand years moved away from political passivism towards redemptive Zionism.

## The Holocaust in Catholic theological interpretation

### The development of Christian hostility towards Jews

Christian anti-Jewish sentiment induced by early Christian–Jewish polemics and Jewish national tragedies eventually led major parts of the Church to see 'collective and trans-generational Jewish guilt for the crucifixion' (Ben-Johanan 2022: 13) of Jesus. In polemics and homilies *adversus Judaeos* of the Church Fathers, Jews were denounced as adversaries of morality, faith and truth. The Church adopted what is conversationally known as 'theory of substitution' (cf. Benedict XVI 2018: 168–9), according to which God has rejected the Jews and made the Church into the new Israel. Christian contempt, distrust and hostility towards the Jews inspired or reintroduced fabrications about Jewish scheming, paranormal powers and blood libel, which existed long before the Church was born (some of these accusations were refuted by Josephus in his work *Contra Apionem*). In the mediaeval period, Jews in Christian lands were exposed to persecution, exile, forced conversions and sporadic mass murder. Compelling Jews to wear badges and to live in ghettos in Europe was introduced by Church ordinances. The Catholic liturgy of Good Friday included, from 1570 to 1959, a prayer 'pro perfidis Judaeis' ('for the faithless/

treacherous Jews').<sup>11</sup> Animosity was not the only sentiment towards Jews and Judaism within the Church, even in an age when this was dominant. Pope Benedict XVI explained that Judaism 'was not simply submerged in the world of other religions' (Benedict XVI 2018: 169), and the Church as early as in the Middle Ages recognised Judaism as the only non-Christian permitted religion (*religio licita*). The same is explained by Cardinal Kasper, former president of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, in his description of the development of the document *Nostra aetate* (Kasper 2007: 5). When the age of revolutions arrived, however, modern ideological issues seem to have overshadowed the themes of 'comparative religion' in Catholic attitudes to Jews. The Church accused the Jews of inventing or spreading revolutionary ideologies, atheism, communism, liberalism and other ideas and movements hostile to Catholic teaching and ethics (Havel 2020b: 145). The rise of anti-semitism, and from the 1930s Nazism, can be linked to Christian anti-Judaism. Even though Nazism was a neo-pagan anti-Christian movement, the burden of responsibility of the Church for the appeal of its ideas can be convincingly argued and difficult to ignore (cf. Brog 2006: 30–4). The same by default applies to the Shoah.

### Catholic change in theology on Jews and Judaism prompted by the Shoah

A new, positive dynamic and rapprochement between Christians and Jews began during the Shoah: 'in the Nazi concentration camps, where often Jews and Christians were confronted with a barbaric neopagan totalitarian

system [they] together discovered their common heritage and common values' (Kasper 2007: 4). After the Second World War, as the extent of the genocide against Jews became widely known, the Catholic Church entered a hitherto unprecedented process of critical self-examination of her relationship with the Jewish people (cf. Bea 1966: 7). Recognition of heinous crimes and many sufferings which the Church had inflicted upon the Jewish people throughout history consequently led to an earnest repentance. One of the first major official changes in the Catholic position towards Jews was explicated in the 1965 document *Nostra aetate* of the Second Vatican Council: 'the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures'.<sup>12</sup> A pioneering voice in favour of reforming Catholic understanding of Jews and Judaism was that of the Croatian Cardinal Franjo Šeper, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1968–81. In 1963 Šeper argued before the Council that Jews should be called 'People of God' (JTA 1963: 1), and in the discussion which led to *Nostra aetate* he asserted: 'how can the Church not show interest in the old and new persecutions against an innocent people in such an atrocious manner? If we have been silent so far, now is the time to speak' (JTA 1968: 3). In the following decades further change in theology about Jews and Judaism was made in the Catholic Church, reflecting the position of the Old and the New Testament on Jews and Israel. However, 'the immediate background to the doctrinal turn with regard to Jews and Judaism' was the Holocaust (Ben-Johanan 2022: 11), that is to say historical experience, not the Bible. As

11 For more on this expression, see Oesterreicher 1947.

12 Declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions, *Nostra aetate* (4), of 28 October, Vatican Council II. 1965. (Vatican Council II).

Cardinal Kasper explained, 'For Christians, it has become the object of shameful repentance and, through historical and theological reflections, the starting point for our own conversion and new relations with the Jewish people' (Kasper 2007: 9). The document *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* by the Pontifical Biblical Commission concludes:

Modern times have made Christians more aware of the close fraternal bonds that unite them to the Jewish people. During the Second World War (1939–1945), tragic events, or more precisely, abominable crimes subjected the Jewish people to a terrible ordeal that threatened their very existence throughout most of Europe. In those circumstances, some Christians failed to exhibit the spiritual resistance to be expected from disciples of Christ, and did not take the appropriate initiatives to counter them. Other Christians, though, did generously aid Jews in danger, often at the risk of their own lives. In the wake of such an enormous tragedy, Christians are faced with the need to reassess their relations with the Jewish people. (Pontifical Biblical Commission 2001)

Much of the change in Catholic theology regarding Jews was led by John Paul II and Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI. In 1981 Ratzinger succeeded Cardinal Šeper as the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a position he held until 2005, when he was elected pope. In the preface to the document quoted above Ratzinger wrote: 'In its work, the Biblical Commission could not ignore the contemporary context, where the shock of the Shoah has put the whole question [of Church's attitude to Jews] under a new light' (Pontifical Biblical Commission 2001: Preface; cf. also Kasper

2010: 62–8). In an earlier text Ratzinger pleaded: 'After Auschwitz the mission of reconciliation and acceptance permits no deferral' (Ratzinger 1999: 22), and in one of his last articles, that 'since Auschwitz, it has been clear that the Church needs to think anew about the question of the nature of Judaism' (Benedict XVI 2018: 163). Nazi genocide against European Jews thus prompted not only Christian repentance but also a change in the Catholic theology regarding 'the nature of Judaism', which in itself is closely related to the core theological issue, the doctrine of salvation. The unique soteriological importance of Israel and the Jewish people has been recognised in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which asserts that 'pagans can discover Jesus and worship him as Son of God and Savior of the world only by turning toward the Jews and receiving from them the messianic promise as contained in the Old Testament' (Catechism 2000:133/528, cit. also in Ratzinger 1999: 25). Even though a positive view of Jews is a dominant message of both Old and New Testaments, it took a historical event for the Church to reject hostility towards the very people which brought salvation (John 4:22) to the world. The depth of that change can hardly be overemphasised. There are, of course, still unresolved theological issues in the Catholic understanding of Jews and Judaism, such as 'the problem of whether there are one or two covenants' (Kasper 2007: 10). Ratzinger points to plurality of covenants in Holy Scripture, and suggests a formula of the 'never-revoked covenant' (Rom 11:29) as 'helpful in a first phase of the new dialogue between Jews and Christians' (Benedict XVI 2018: 184). Inasmuch as issues such as this touch the very core of the Catholic and Christian faith, and they are evidently part of the biblical revelation, their resolution goes beyond what can be established based upon historical experience alone.

## The missing puzzle: the Jewish interpretation of the Shoah and the Catholic interpretation of Israel

We have now seen how religious Jews changed their position on the theological understanding of Jewish statehood in light of historical events related to the State of Israel, and that the Catholic Church revised its theological understanding of Jews and Judaism in light of historical events related to the Shoah. It therefore seems logical to pose two questions: 1. How have religious Jews interpreted the Shoah in their theology? 2. How has the Catholic Church interpreted the State of Israel in its theology? A first observation is that, for entirely different reasons, the answers appear delicate, burdened by unease and marked by ambiguity.

### The Jewish theological response to the Shoah

Given the understanding of the history of the Jewish people as 'revelational', the Shoah gave rise to the question of how to interpret such an immense horror, applying the same theological and epistemological principle. Where was God when six million,<sup>13</sup> a third of world Jewry, perished? Rabbi Jonathan Sachs wrote that 'After the Holocaust, the *shoah*, there was one of the great silences in Jewish history', because to assume that 'He [God] was present seemed a blasphemy; that He was absent even more so' (Sacks 1992: 25, 41). The easiest way to confront the Shoah, seemingly, was to interpret life and death in a new way, which excluded God. Not surprisingly, many Jews lost their faith after the Shoah. Their

13 As one of the most prominent historians of the Holocaust, Yehuda Bauer (b. 1926), explained, six million is an 'iconic number'; the most acceptable and likely number of Jews that perished in the Shoah is between 5.6 and 5.8 million (Bauer 2020: 2).

experience may be embodied in the famous words of Richard L. Rubenstein, that 'we live in the time of the death of God ... We stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any purposeful power beyond our own resources. After Auschwitz, what else can a Jew say about God?' (Rubenstein 1966: 152). A similar cry was uttered by Elie Wiesel: 'Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes' (Wiesel 2006: 34). The very concept of Jews being 'a chosen people' and 'a people created to fulfill a universal mission for humanity became for the majority of Jews a meaningless pretense' (Schweid 2005: 5). Questioning God and the meaning of history (cf. Katz 2005b: 14) during and in the aftermath of the Shoah was due not only to an understanding of history as revelational, but also to the utter difficulty of framing those horrors in a Jewish worldview, according to which 'there is no sin without punishment, and no punishment without sin' (Kahane 2005: 22). Indeed, it was inconceivable, unthinkable, unfathomable, unutterable, beyond imagination and acceptability, reprehensible to even suggest, that the mass-murder of Jews was a consequence of some Jewish transgression. However, according to Rabbi Binyamin Zev Kahane,

saying that there was punishment, but there is no sin, is first of all, '*kfira*' (heresy) in a principle of our faith – that the Almighty supervises and gives reward and punishment on all our deeds. This is what caused the leaving of the faith after the Holocaust. We grow up believing in reward and punishment, and now we are told that this is an exception to the rule. (Kahane 2005: 22–3)

The classical Jewish theologians Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Joseph B.



Soloveitchik and Mordecai Kaplan ‘barely spoke about the Holocaust’ (Braiterman 1998: 162).<sup>14</sup> Modern Jewish theologians did find a way to address the question of the Shoah, often with more delicacy than in the quotation above (cf. Spero 2000; Katz 2005a etc.). Yet the uneasiness in approaching it from the position of classical Jewish theology of history has not disappeared, and it probably never will. Whereas in regard to the phenomenon of the Jewish state there were theological interpretations of history with clear, bold, unambiguous references to Holy Scripture and Jewish tradition, in the discussions of the Shoah ways to *respond* to it rather than to *interpret* it were dominant for years. When theological interpretations of the Shoah were suggested, such as in the depressing work by Rubenstein, it was often discussed as if meaningful Jewish history ended with it. Steven T. Katz, however, points to the inconsistency of such an approach: ‘Logic and conceptual adequacy require that if in our discussion of the relation of God and history we want to give theological weight to the Holocaust, then we *must* also be willing to attribute *theological* significance to the State of Israel’ (Katz 2005b: 16, emphasis in the original).

14 The author also listed ‘post-Holocaust theologians [who] practically spoke of nothing else’. Among these are: Hannah Arendt, Bruno Bettelheim, Raul Hilberg, Lucy Dawidowicz, Terrence Des Pres, Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, Jean Amery, Cynthia Ozick, Philip Roth, Irena Klepfisz, Abba Kovner, Dan Pagis, Aaron Appelfeld, Leon Uris, Menachem Begin, Dov Shilansky, Meir Kahane, Avi Weiss, Arthur Cohen, and Irving Greenberg (Braiterman 1998: 162).

## The Catholic theological response to the State of Israel

Now, turning to the Catholic Church, we find a similar boldness of theological interpretation on the one hand, and an unease which entails *response* rather than *interpretation* on the other hand, but in reverse. The Church interpreted the Shoah in a way which profoundly affected its theology. But the State of Israel has generally not been interpreted theologically by Catholic theologians. Catholic thinkers ‘exerted considerable effort to avoid any theological discussion of the Jewish state, even though Jews beseeched them to do so’ (Ben-Johanan 2022: 60–1).

Reluctance to interpret Jewish statehood theologically was not shared by all Western churches. Many Protestants and Evangelicals have been interpreting the return of the Jews to their ancient homeland as a fulfilment of the biblical prophecies and promises, and even supported it in various ways (cf. Hedding 1978; Brog 2006; Havel 2013; D’Costa 2020, etc.). The Catholic Church, however, showed substantially more restraint. When Pope Paul VI visited the Holy Land in 1964, he never even mentioned the name Israel. A first explicit mention of the State of Israel in a papal document was by Pope John Paul II in 1984, and the first reference to the State of Israel in an official Vatican document was recorded one year later (Lux 2010: 72–3).<sup>15</sup> It was only in 1993, forty-five

15 Richard C. Lux is apparently referring to the 1985 document ‘Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church’, which explains: ‘The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is in itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law’ (Cunningham 2017: 4).

years after its establishment, that the Vatican recognised the State of Israel, even though Pope John Paul II seems to have supported it long before (Messori 2005: 100). To be fair, the Jewish return to Eretz Israel, and the form in which Jews organised their society politically, may easily be understood as two separate phenomena, demanding separate consideration. The issue of the particular political form in which the return of the Jews comes about cannot be lightly interpreted as the fulfilment of God's promises, since 'to do so would give divine authority to a nation-state', which would demonstrate a 'dangerous conceit' (D'Costa 2020: 1–7). Pope Benedict XVI seems to suggest an approach somewhat mirroring Pauline ambiguity. On the Vatican's recognition of the State of Israel he wrote:

The question of what to make of the Zionist project was also controversial for the Catholic Church. From the beginning, however, the dominant position was that a theologically-understood acquisition of land (in the sense of a new political messianism) was unacceptable. After the establishment of Israel as a country in 1948, a theological doctrine emerged that eventually enabled the political recognition of the State of Israel by the Vatican. (Benedict XVI 2018: 178)

The question of what 'theological doctrine emerged' seems to be left unanswered. In the following sentences Benedict XVI implies that no theological or scriptural meaning can be directly attributed to the State of Israel, even though 'the Jewish people, like every people, had a natural right to their own land', and in this sense the Jewish state 'expresses God's faithfulness to the people of Israel' (Benedict XVI 2018: 178–9). Lawrence Feingold points out that 'If the Chosen People is still chosen, then their corporate

return to the Holy Land ... cannot be seen merely as an historical accident' (Feingold 2022: 4). Karma Ben-Johanán summarised the Catholic dilemma in the following words:

Any objection to the Jewish state on theological grounds was out of the question, since it re-created the logic of the rejected replacement theology; any support of the state for theological reasons would be a blatant breach of the distinction between theology and politics and the principle of political neutrality, while a nontheological position vis-à-vis Jewish politics conflicted with tradition. (Ben-Johanán 2022: 63)

The Catholic dilemma regarding the theological approach to the State of Israel substantially rests on the lack of a normative theory of contemporary history in regard to theology. The reality of contemporary history's impact on Catholic theology is evincible in the case of the Shoah, but the Church appears silent on the question of whether that case proceeded from a theory, was a precedent, or a *sui generis* phenomenon. It is somewhat reminiscent of the difficulty in establishing the relationship between Holy Scripture and tradition as sources of revelation at the Council of Trent (Schelkens 2010: 85–6), which appeared to be due to an entanglement of theological, political and historical processes of the time.

### Concluding remarks

As we compare the Jewish theological positioning regarding the Shoah on the one hand, and the Catholic theological positioning regarding the State of Israel on the other, we may notice that in spite of the initial comparable attitude of unease, their ways, in that aspect, eventually parted. A new generation of Jewish theologians is more willing

to contemplate a theological approach to the worst disaster their people has ever suffered. This is often done in correlation with the establishment of the Jewish state, and thus the final conclusion is one of hope and a restored confidence in the God of history. The Catholic theological approach to the State of Israel, on the other hand, remains more cautious and inconclusive. A key explanation, again, may be related to history.

Jews have, as it happens, experienced persecutions, destructions and major national calamities countless times before, throughout the centuries and the millennia. Though they may not have been on the same, or even a similar, scale to the Shoah, Jewish theology is ingrained with a deep awareness that their people has virtually always been exposed to the violent hostility of other nations. In that sense, the Shoah was unique in its scope, but generally speaking not in its essence.<sup>16</sup> Jewish theology was therefore equipped with methods for its interpretation.

The Catholic Church, on the other hand, has, prior to the mid-twentieth century, never been even close to pondering the possibility that biblical promises to Israel may be fulfilled through Jewish ingathering to Zion and the re-establishment of a Jewish state in some form, as part of historical and political, rather than eschatological, processes. In the Church Fathers, classic medieval theology or Catholic tradition, there is virtually nothing that points to a possible restoration of a

political Israel (cf. Ekman 2009: 223). And how could there be, if the Jewish exile was understood as ‘punishment of Israel’s failure to recognize Christ’ (Feingold 2022: 12). Shortly before the State of Israel was established, Jacques Maritain asserted that ‘Jews ... are not a nation’ and that ‘Israel is disinclined – at least, so long as it has not brought to completion its mysterious historic mission – to become a nation, and even more, to become a state’ (Maritain 1944: 129). Even between the Second Vatican Council and the Vatican’s recognition of the State of Israel, any trace of official Catholic theological interpretation of modern Jewish statehood was effectively non-existent. ‘Sometimes all theological significance is explicitly denied to the State of Israel, sometimes merely its creation is mentioned’, explained Petra Heldt and Malcolm Lowe (1989: 135–6). Since 1993 Catholic theological consideration of Jewish statehood has been gently, almost timidly, emerging, if for no other reason than because Israel theologically simply cannot be ignored away. Some Catholic scholars believe that today there is a ‘Catholic theology of the State of Israel that is consistent with the teaching and direction of our relationship with the Jewish people’ (Lux 2010: 82), but what that theology is, is a matter on which official and a widely accepted Catholic *interpretation* has not been unravelled, and it is not likely that it will be in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, the Catholic Church has delineated a *response* to the Jewish state, which is one of recognition and a somewhat restrained endorsement (cf. Pizzaballa 2022). In line with the Ratzinger’s words cited above (Benedict XVI 2018: 178–9), we may even understand it as an endorsement without restraint. What is more, it can be argued that the State of Israel has been a source of an increasing philosemitic attitude for many Catholics (Havel 2020b: 148). Apparent lack

16 A major difference in essence between the Shoah and most previous persecution is that: ‘Jews could no longer save themselves through abandoning their faith’ (Kassov 2017: 635). Antagonism toward Jews was defined in racist, rather than religious or ethnic, terms, but racist antisemitism, even though a concept of the modern age, is a continuation of anti-Judaism, as has been discussed *inter alia* in this article.

of theological interpretation should therefore not surprise, frustrate or disappoint Jews or Catholics, who believe that there is more to the State of Israel than mere political composition. For such a cautious, conservative institution, as disinclined to undertake major theological reconsiderations as the Catholic Church is, the aspect of time is inevitable in framing a new position on an issue not explicitly referred to in Holy Scripture, and not without major controversy. From that perspective, seventy-five years is merely a promising, intriguing and inspiring beginning. ■

**Boris Havel** is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, Croatia, where he defended his doctoral thesis 'Religious Aspects of the Arab-Israeli Conflict' in 2012. He teaches graduate and undergraduate courses on Middle Eastern topics, and a course on the history of Israel at the Catholic University of Croatia. He obtained an MA in comparative religion at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel, a BA in international relations and BA in history at the Oral Roberts/Livets Ord University in Uppsala, Sweden. He is court interpreter for the Croatian, English, Hebrew and Swedish languages. Havel is the author of the books (originally published in Croatian): *Arab-Israeli Conflict: Religion, Politics and History of the Holy Land* (2013), *Survey of the History of Israel: from Abraham to the Modern State* (2015), *Israel: Nation Born in a Day. Book One, History of Israel from Abraham to Bar Kokhba* (2022) and numerous academic articles and essays in Croatian and English. In 2023 Havel was recipient of the Croatian national prize for scholarship.



## Bibliography

- Albright, William Foxwell. 1942. *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press).
- Bauer, Yehuda. 2020. 'Creating a "usable" past: on Holocaust denial and distortion', *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 14(2): 209–27, doi: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2020.1805916>>.
- Bea, Augustin. 1966. *The Church and the Jewish People: A Commentary on the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers).
- Ben-Johanan, Karma. 2022. *Jacob's Younger Brother: Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press).
- Benedict XVI. 2018. 'Grace and vocation without remorse: comments on the treatise *De Iudaeis*', *Communio: International Catholic Review* 45(1): 163–84.
- Berdyayev, Nicolas. 1936. *The Meaning of History* (London: Lowe and Brydone Printers Limited).
- Braiterman, Zachary. 1998. *(God) After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton University Press).
- Brog, David. 2006. *Standing with Israel: Why Christians Support the Jewish State* (Lake Mary: Front Line).
- Buber, Martin. 1982. *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies by Martin Buber*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books).
- Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (2000). *Second Edition, revised in accordance with the official Latin text promulgated by Pope John Paul II* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, Libreria Editrice Vaticana).
- Cunningham, Philip A. 2017. "The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29): a reflection on the theological questions pertaining to Catholic-Jewish relations on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* (No. 4)', *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 12(1–39), doi: <<https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v12i1.9792>>.
- D'Costa, Gavin. 2019. *Catholic Doctrines on the Jewish People after Vatican II* (Oxford University Press).
- D'Costa, Gavin. 2020. 'Catholic Zionism: the Jewish state is a sign of God's fidelity', *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 1(299): 1–7.
- De Lubac, Henri. 1958. *Catholicism: A Study of Dogma in Relation to the Corporate Destiny of Mankind* (New York: Sheed and Ward).
- Donahue, John R. 1982. 'Scripture: a Roman Catholic perspective', *Review & Expositor* 79(2): 231–44, doi: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/003463738207900204>>.
- Ekman, Ulf. 2009. 'Israels återupprättelse', in *Andliga rötter*, ed. Ulf Ekman (Uppsala: Keryx), 223–34.

- Feingold, Lawrence. 2022. 'The return to the Land of Israel as an eschatological sign in the light of Romans 11', in *Contemporary Catholic Approaches to the People, Land, and State of Israel*, eds. Gavin D'Costa and Faydra L. Shapiro (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press), 3–20.
- Garrigues, Jean-Miguel, and Eliana Kurylo. 2022. 'The relationship of Israel to the Promised Land after Christ: Catholic questionings', in *Contemporary Catholic Approaches to the People, Land, and State of Israel*, eds. Gavin D'Costa and Faydra L. Shapiro (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press), 41–57.
- Goldwater, Raymond. 2009. *Pioneers of Religious Zionism: Rabbis Alkalai, Kalischer, Mohliver, Reines, Kook and Maimon* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications).
- Gordon, Martin L. 1989. 'Messianism: conflicting conceptions', in *Religious Zionism. After 40 Years of Statehood*, eds. Shubert Spero and Yitzchak Pessin (Jerusalem: Mesilot and The World Zionist Organization), 82–99.
- Havel, Boris. 2020a. 'Aspekti razvoja židovske političke mesijanske misli nakon Bar Kohbina ustanka', *Obnovljeni život: časopis za filozofiju i religijske znanosti* 75(2): 215–27, doi: <https://doi.org/10.31337/oz.75.2.5>.
- Havel, Boris. 2020b. 'Christian philo-Semitism: sources and challenges', in *Taking Responsibility for our Time: The 25th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between the Holy See and the State of Israel (1994–2019)*, eds. Zoran Turza and Suzana Obrovac-Lipar (Zagreb: Catholic University of Croatia, Embassy of the State of Israel), 138–54.
- Havel, Boris. 2013. 'Kršćanski cionizam: nastanak i razvoj neočekivanoga političko-religijskog fenomena', *Politička misao* 50(1): 129–54.
- Hedding, Malcolm. 1978. *Understanding Israel* (Oklahoma City: Zion's Gate International).
- Heldt, Petra, and Malcolm Lowe. 1989. 'Theological significance of the rebirth of the State of Israel', *Immanuel* 22/23(1): 133–45.
- Hermann, Tamar. 2022. 'The religions Zionist Sector at bay', *Religions* 13(178): 1–20, doi: <doi.org/10.3390/rel13020178>.
- JTA. 1963. 'Declaration on Jews drafted by Vatican for Ecumenical Council', *Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin, October 7, 1963*, 30(189): 1–4.
- JTA. 1968. 'New Vatican Curia Prefect is staunch supporter of Declaration on Jews', *Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin, January 18, 1968*, 36(13): 1–4.
- Kahane, Binyamin Zev. 2005. *Confronting the Holocaust* (Inwood: HaMeir L'David).
- Kaplan, Eran. 2017. 'Zionism and its critics', in *The Cambridge History of Judaism, Volume VIII: The Modern World, 1815–2000*, eds. Mitchell B. Hart and Tony Michels (Cambridge University Press), 611–32.
- Kasper, Walter. 2007. 'Paths taken and enduring questions in Jewish-Christian relations today: thirty years of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews', in *The Catholic Church and the Jewish People: Recent Reflections from Rome*, eds. Philip A. Cunningham, Norbert J. Hofmann, and Joseph Sievers (New York: Fordham University Press), 3–11.
- Kasper, Walter. 2010. 'Kršćani i Židovi – jedan narod Božji', *Communio* 36(109): 62–8.
- Kassov, Samuel. 2017. 'The Holocaust and its aftermath', in *The Cambridge History of Judaism, Volume VIII: The Modern World, 1815–2000*, eds. Mitchell B. Hart and Tony Michels (Cambridge University Press), 633–73.
- Katz, Steven T. 2005a. *The Impact of the Holocaust on Jewish Theology* (New York & London: New York University Press).
- Katz, Steven T. 2005b. 'The issue of confirmation and disconfirmation in Jewish thought after the Shoah', in *The Impact of the Holocaust on Jewish Theology*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: New York University Press), 13–60.
- Lux, Richard C. 2010. *The Jewish People, the Holy Land, and the State of Israel: A Catholic View* (Mahwah: Paulist Press).
- Maritain, Jacques. 1944. *Redeeming the Time* (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press).
- Messori, Vittorio (ed.). 2005. *Crossing the Threshold of Hope by His Holiness John Paul II* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf).
- O'Malley, John W. 2008. *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press).
- Oesterreicher, John M. 1947. 'Pro perfidis Judaeis', *Theological Studies* 8(1): 80–96, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056394700800103>.
- Peters, Joan. 1984. *From Time Immemorial: The Origins of the Arab-Jewish Conflict Over Palestine* (New York: Harper & Row).
- Pizzaballa, Pierbattista. 2022. 'Preface', in *Contemporary Catholic Approaches to the People,*

- Land, and State of Israel*, eds. Gavin D'Costa and Faydra L. Shapiro (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press), ix–xiii.
- Pontifical Biblical Commission. 2001. *Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, <[https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20020212\\_popolo-ebraico\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html)> (accessed 29.10.2022).
- Ratzabi, Shalom. 2005. 'Is there religious meaning to the rebirth of the State of Israel after the Shoah?' in *The Impact of the Holocaust on Jewish Theology*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: New York University Press), 211–25.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 1999. *Many Religions One Covenant: Israel, the Church, and the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press).
- Rubenstein, Richard L. 1966. *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Company).
- Sacks, Jonathan. 1992. *Crisis and Covenant: Jewish Thought after the Holocaust* (Manchester University Press).
- Schelkens, Karim. 2010. *Catholic Theology of Revelation on the Eve of Vatican II: A Redaction History of the Schema De fontibus Revelationis (1960–1962)* (Leiden: Brill).
- Schweid, Eliezer. 2005. 'Is there a religious meaning to the idea of a chosen people after the Shoah?' in *The Impact of the Holocaust on Jewish Theology*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: New York University Press), 5–12.
- Simon, Marcel. 1996. *Verus Israel: A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire AD 135–425* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization).
- Skarsaune, Oskar. 2002. *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influence on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press).
- Spero, Shubert. 1989a. 'Introduction', in *Religious Zionism. After 40 Years of Statehood*, eds. Shubert Spero and Yitzchak Pessin (Jerusalem: Mesilot and The World Zionist Organization), 13–15.
- Spero, Shubert. 1989b. 'The religious meaning of the State of Israel', in *Religious Zionism. After 40 Years of Statehood*, eds. Shubert Spero and Yitzchak Pessin (Jerusalem: Mesilot and The World Zionist Organization), 40–58.
- Spero, Shubert. 2000. *Holocaust and Return to Zion: A Study in Jewish Philosophy of History* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House).
- Vatican Council II. 1965. 'Documents of the Second Vatican Council', <[https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/index.htm](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm)> (accessed 21.10.2022).
- Vriezen, Theodoor Christiaan. 1967. *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (London: Lutterworth Press).
- Werner, Eric. 1966. 'Melito of Sardes, the first poet of deicide', *Hebrew Union College Annual* 37(1): 191–210.
- Wiesel, Elie. 2006. *Night*, translated from the French by Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang).
- Yehuda, Zvi A. 2003–4. 'Psalm nineteen: its coherence and message. The interrelation of nature and Torah in Jewish liturgy and thought', *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy* 26(1): 1–14.
- Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim. 1982. *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press).