

# 'Love affair between God and Israel continues'

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Some Christians are developing "fresh thinking" about the Jews and their God and the Christian relationship to the Jews, according to a theologian from Temple University in Philadelphia.

DR. PAUL VAN Buren, who spoke in the latest session of the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue, said Christians' fresh thinking about the Jews springs from serious thinking about the Holocaust, or the murder of millions of Jews by the Nazis in the World War II era.

Van Buren, who spoke at St. Paul's Lutheran Church, said a Christian who studies the Holocaust begins to view the Jews "in a new way, namely as a living people with a history."

CHRISTIANS traditionally have had to think about the Jews, according to the professor, because Christianity began as a Jewish sect and because the Jews "rejected the Jesus Christ of the Christian Church, along with the church itself.

"The Jew did so as an act of fidelity to Torah (teachings of Judaism) and Torah's God. He refused to accept a messiah, a master, a lord whose followers, servants or disciples were hostile to God's Israel.

"He rejected the church's distinction between redemption in principle or in the heavens and the reality of an unredeemed existence in the real world."

CHRISTIANS IN history developed negative thinking about the Jews' rejection of the Christ of the church. "The Jews along with their rejection were thought by Christians to be repudiated by

God, their calling handed over to the church and their history at an end," said Van Buren.

By considering Jews' history to have come to an end, said the professor, Christians have paid a "fearful price. It cost us also the consequence of turning away from history.

"ALTHOUGH DAILY trained for the coming of the kingdom, we built a theology of an other-worldly kingdom that left creation to stumble on as best it could."

The speaker, an ordained Episcopal priest, presented the view that the Nazi murder of Jews cannot be dismissed as "a secular or even a pagan phenomenon for which we (as Christians) bear no responsibility."

Christians' turning away from history "into that other-worldly spirituality made us unable to take history seriously.

"ONE CONSEQUENCE was that the church was largely unable to respond positively to the challenge of the Renaissance (the transitional period of the 14th to 16th centuries between the Medieval and modern eras) and retreated into a quietism that left modern Western civilization no alternative but that of increasing secularization or a return to ancient European paganism."

VAN BUREN said that Christians who, through thinking about the Holocaust, have come to view the Jews as "the living people Israel" must also "think through afresh our understanding of Israel's God.

"Contrary to what we have said for 18 centuries, we must now reckon with the fact that God has not abandoned his people, that the oldest and no doubt the stormiest love affair of all history, that between God and Israel, continues.

"We shall have to speak of this every time we dare to speak of that second and shorter love affair which God began with his Gentile church.

"Neither church nor synagogue has been able to admit that God can and has carried out both these affairs at once.

"SPEAKING NOW only for the church, we have conceived of God in our jealous and exclusive image. But now we are forced to see that God can reveal himself differently to at least these two communities.

"His Torah can be one thing for Israel and another for the church. Jesus Christ can be one thing for the church and another for Israel."

From thinking about the Holocaust, according to Van Buren, "it will follow that the history of God with his creation cannot be thought to have stopped with the end of the Bible. The story goes on, and now it must include the Holocaust.

"Even more importantly, it will have to include the response of the Jewish people to the Holocaust, the establishment of the state of Israel and the return of God's people to that storied place.

"Israel is, of course, more than a response to the Holocaust. It is a response of the Jewish people to their whole history, and at the deepest level it is a Jewish response to the God of Israel and his election of the Jewish people."

VAN BUREN acknowledged that "an event as ambiguous as the present state of Israel" can be questioned as being part of "God's self-revealing work."

He said, "I see no reason to deny the ambiguity of the establishment, maintenance and life of the present state of Israel. That am-



Dr. Paul Van Buren

biguity, however, only reminds us that the human side of God's history with his creation has always been ambiguous."

CHRISTIANS WHO have developed "fresh thinking" about Jews and their God also develop "acts of solidarity with and support for the Jewish people, which is the mission of the Christian Church to the Jews," according to Van Buren.

He said, "I do not see how there can be a church without a mission. I also do not see how there can be a church that does not have a very special relationship with the Jews. I, therefore, cannot conceive how there can be a church without an explicit mission to Jews.

"The question that has to be asked, however, is that of the purpose and shape of that mission. If Israel has a mission from God — and I believe it does, namely to be such a light to the Gentiles that the nations come to the service of the Creator and so with Israel — then the Gentile church has been called by God to support this covenant."

VAN BUREN said modern Israel is not free to "cooperate with God's intention for it to be a prototype of his reign of peace and righteousness for his creation. Surrounded by enemies sworn to destroy it, what choice has Israel but to build its life around the task of defense and security?"

Since the Gentile church outnumbered the Jews 70 to 1, "what task could be more central to the mission of the Gentile church than that it build a wall of defense around Israel ... that it may have the space and freedom to fulfill its own mission of being God's beacon of light for the blind nations of this world who are stumbling towards the destruction of God's creation?"