

The Wages of Supersessionism

by Dexter Van Zile (April 2014)

Antisemitism has gotten worse over the past few decades. Expressions of *Judenhass* that would have resulted in someone being summarily banished from polite society in the first few decades after the *Shoah* are now ignored. Anyone who harbors any doubts about this reality needs only to consider two short vignettes.

The first vignette is from the 1990s. It's the [story](#) of John Strugnell, a biblical scholar who was chief editor of the Dead Sea Scrolls Project. While working on translating the scrolls, he gave an interview to *Haaretz* in which he described Judaism as "a horrible religion." He didn't stop there. "It's Christian heresy, and we deal with our heretics in different ways," he said. "You are a phenomenon that we haven't managed to convert – and we should have managed."

What Strugnell was saying was that the Jewish people really had no reason to exist and should have been subsumed into Christianity centuries ago. It takes a lot of cheek to say such a thing to a reporter for a newspaper located in the homeland for such a people, but Strugnell, who reportedly had some mental health problems in addition to antisemitism, said it plain as day.

The response was quick and decisive. Strugnell was [dismissed](#) from his position and his career never recovered from the disgrace. In 1990, polite society was horrified by what Strugnell said, prompting his colleagues to distance themselves immediately from his comments.

Fast forward to 2013 and consider the story of James M. Wall, former editor of *Christian Century*, the house organ for mainline Protestantism in the United States. His name remains in the magazine's masthead even though he stopped writing for the publication years ago.

Wall hasn't given up his writing career altogether. In fact, has been writing for a website called *Veteran's News Now*, [a blatantly antisemitic website](#) that in one instance published the writing of David Duke, the former Grand Wizard of the Klu Klux Klan. Wall is listed as a consulting editor for the website.

And Wall has written some ugly stuff himself. In June 2010, Wall wrote a [piece](#) describing pro-Israel Presbyterians as "Israeli agents" who had "infiltrated" their denomination's General Assembly. And in December 2011, he wrote a [piece](#) titled "GOP Candidates Wear the Jewish

Kippah.”

After I was confronted with Wall’s connection to *Veterans News Now*, largely as the result of the efforts of two Presbyterian bloggers in the U.S. ([Viola Larson](#) and [David Fischler](#)), I raised the issue with the magazine’s editor, David Heim in an effort to get his name off of *Christian Century*’s masthead.

It didn’t happen. “James Wall did a lot for our magazine,” [Heim said](#). “He deserves to be on our masthead.”

Then I contacted *Christian Century*’s board of directors and asked them to respond. The response I got [was as follows](#): “The board does not assume a role in limiting any past or present editor’s freedom of expression, or in determining what they may publish in other forums.”

So there you have it. In 1990, Strugnell excommunicated himself from polite society espousing antisemitism. But today, in the brave new world of the 21st century, where we are all anti-racists (except when we’re not), Wall’s name stays on [Christian Century](#)’s masthead – despite his antisemitic rants and affiliation with a website that promotes antisemitism. Strugnell was held accountable, but Wall is given a pass by both the editor of the *Christian Century* and its board of directors.

These two vignettes indicate that the taboo against antisemitic discourse and commentary that was present in polite society in the U.S. for a few decades after the *Shoah* has been erased.

It’s one of the lamentable facts of life for people involved in Christian-Jewish relations and the people who work for Jewish federations and community relations councils throughout the United States. They are trying to enforce a taboo that no longer exists.

Zionism Unsettled

The erasure of this taboo can also be seen in the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s decision to distribute *Zionism Unsettled* in the months prior to its upcoming General Assembly slated to take place in Detroit this summer.

Zionism Unsettled is a hateful little text that was published by a group of so-called peace activists in the denomination called the Israel Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church (USA). This organization has posted information approvingly from Al Manar, the Hezbollah-run television station that has [boasted](#) of running a successful campaign of “psychological warfare against the Zionist enemy.”

One of the main things that this document does is lifts up the voices of Jews who have lost the argument over the need for a Jewish state and then presents them as credible voices to non-Jews, as if they are the people whom the Jewish people should have listened to. The authors of the document report these folks are “outside mainstream circles” which is another way of saying they have lost the argument with their fellow Jews.

The text invokes Martin Buber as pointing to a road not taken. Buber, who privileged the concerns of Arabs in the Middle East over the needs of Jews fleeing Nazi-dominated Europe, was afraid of Jews having power, because they would lose their innocence and their purity once they had it. Problem is a people can be free and sovereign or it can be innocent. It cannot be both. Israel has wielded power with a lot more responsibility than its adversaries and other regimes in the Middle East. But the sins of these regimes simply do not generate the same level of concern on the part of the PC(USA)’s “peace” activists and leaders.

At points, the document actually insults the intelligence. It invokes the testimony of Imam Mustafa Abu Sway from Jerusalem who talks about the inclusive nature of Islam and juxtaposes this with Zionist exclusivity. Previously Sway has stated that it is a theological impossibility for Muslims to accept a Jewish state. “But Jews should trust Islam,” he assures us. “They will be treated justly in an Islamic state, because they’ll be under the protection of Allah.” How can anyone who has seen how Christians and Jews have been oppressed in Muslim-majority countries actually take such talk seriously?

Predictably, the aforementioned James Wall, who serves on the editorial team for a patently antisemitic website, has endorsed the text, declaring that it is a “well-timed and important study guide.” So has Walter Brueggeman, who has previously [affirmed](#) the notion that Jewish self-understanding is the root cause of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

And guess who else has endorsed the text! None other than David Duke, the former Grand Wizard of the Klu Klux Klan! Duke was apparently jubilant that the document affirms notions of Jewish supremacy that he’s been espousing for years.

Duke *should* be happy. His ideas have gone mainstream with the help of the PC(USA), a historically important church in the U.S. The book, which is sold through the PC (USA)’s website ignores Islamist hostility toward Israel, exaggerates Israel’s sins and uses Jewish voices to legitimize its calumnies. It invokes the massacre perpetrated by Baruch Goldstein in 1994 to portray Israeli society as racist and intolerant but makes little, if any mention, of the problem of Islamist violence against Jews and Israel.

Get Ready for the Pacifists

People inside and outside the PC(USA) have condemned *Zionism Unsettled* and the organization that produced it – the Israel Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church (USA), but eventually, the debate over this text will fade from view.

In the months and weeks ahead, the drama will shift from the IPMN to another organization called the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, a pacifist organization that is going to take the lead in the effort to get the denomination to divest from Caterpillar, Motorola and Hewlett Packard at the upcoming General Assembly scheduled to take place in Detroit this summer. One would think that a “peacemaking” organization would not enlist itself in the propaganda war against Israel, but that is what it has done.

There is a certain genius to the way the anti-Zionists in the PC(USA) have played it. First, they got the American Jewish community up in arms with a hateful little text that is nothing more than an extended essay at Jew-baiting.

Then, they will let things settle down and let the pacifists take center stage with the push for divestment. By the time the General Assembly rolls around this summer, the document *Zionism Unsettled* will be forgotten and people will be left to juxtapose angry Jews with those nice pacifists from the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship. As events progress, the attention will shift from the ugliness of *Zionism Unsettled* to just how angry the Jews are.

The anti-Zionists in the PC(USA) and their enablers in the denominational headquarters in Louisville, Kentucky are not stupid. They may have made a [shipwreck of their denomination](#), but they sure have mastered the art of Jew-baiting for fun and profit.

What we are seeing is a small number of “peace” activists engaging in a campaign of psychological warfare against the Jews in the United States. They are using the diminishing assets of a historically prominent, but dying, mainline church to do it and the denomination’s leaders are not only allowing it to happen, they are cooperating with this campaign.

Not only is the denomination selling the booklet on behalf of the IPMN through its website, it has also raised money for the organization. They have also provided ideological cover for the IPMN’s attack, saying in effect “They’re just trying to start a conversation.” (Apparently, “trying to start a conversation” is Presbyspeak for jabbing someone in the eye with your thumb.)

In Evangelical World as Well

The anti-Zionism that has afflicted the mainline Protestant world for years is starting to manifest itself in American Evangelicalism as well. The folks at Bethlehem Bible College, a non-denominational Protestant school located in the West Bank has organized three Christ at the Checkpoint Conferences that take place at a five-star hotel in the city of Jesus' birth. The conferences have taken place every even numbered year since 2010.

At the most recent conference, which took place in March, there was [one lie that was repeated three times](#) – that Israel has constructed a security barrier completely around the city of Bethlehem. This falsehood was offered by three people – Vera Baboun, the Christian mayor of Bethlehem, Qustandi Shomali, a professor at Bethlehem University, and Sami Awad, executive director of the Holy Land Trust.

What is most curious about this lie is that there is a city in the West Bank – Qalqilya – that is surrounded by a wall – with good reason. It was the source of repeated terror attacks during the Second Intifada.

Why have so many Christian organizations described Bethlehem – and not Qalqilya – as being surrounded by a wall? Why lie about Bethlehem and not just tell the truth about Qalqilya?

The answer is obvious. Jesus was not born in Qalqilya, but in Bethlehem. And by telling the world that Israel has put a wall completely around the city of Christ's birth, these Christians are portraying the Jewish state and its supporters as blocking the incarnation of God in the Holy Land.

This is part of a lethal narrative offered to Evangelical Protestants by the good folks at Bethlehem Bible College.

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Why is this narrative gaining traction?

The ongoing demonization of Israel – and the support it receives in the West – is a logical consequence of various manifestations of supersessionism or the notion that the Jewish people no longer have a role to play in the course of human history and should just go away.

There are multiple types of supersessionism manifesting themselves here. There's Islamic supersessionism, Christian supersessionism and secular supersessionism – all of which encourage people to view Jews as a disconfirming anachronistic "other" that they "haven't managed to convert" to their religion or worldview.

Christians and Muslims want Jews to convert to their faith, and secular supersessionists want Jews to abandon their insistence on remaining a people and maintaining their sovereign state in favor of some universal identity.

For the people afflicted with these supersessionisms, the Jews are simply not supposed to be around. They are a fossil people who should have disappeared. For these people, the notion that Jews have found a viable and enduring response to the human condition is simply anathema. And yet the Jewish people endure and achieve success.

Not only does the success of the Jewish people and their state reveal Israel's enemies and rivals to be failures and mediocrities, it also disconfirms the utopian supersessionisms they have embraced.

For these people, the success of the Jewish state, and its increased effectiveness at promoting the welfare of the Jewish people, is an intolerable contradiction to their supersessionist beliefs. Ideologues, both religious and secular, will do whatever they must to protect their own toxic brand of supersessionism, no matter how disfiguring their actions are to themselves and to the people around them.

They will protect their supersessionist doctrines at all cost, even if it means saying hateful things about Jews, publishing hateful texts designed to enrage Jews, ignoring Islamist violence against Christians while pretending to promote human rights, or even inviting a bunch of people to the Holy Land, charging them \$250 a pop, and then lying to them about Israel building a wall around the city of Christ's birth.

Dexter Van Zile is Christian Media Analyst for the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA). His opinions are his own.

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